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THE REDEMPTORISTINE NUNS
AND THE BEATIFICATION
OF THEIR FOUNDRRESS
BL. MARIA CELESTE CROSTAROSA¹

1. – *Preparations for the Beatification*; 2. – *The Celebration of the Beatification in the various monasteries*

The great event of the beatification of Maria Celeste Crostarosa on June 18, 2016 was for the Redemptoristine Nuns from all over the world, living in 42 units (thriving convents as well as small groups or single sisters in nursing homes), the fulfilment of long nurtured hopes and fervent prayers.

The beatification occurred at a critical time in the history of the Order: many convents are diminished to a small number of elderly sisters, vocations are rare in several parts of the world, other courageous sisters struggle with the birth pangs of new foundations in very poor areas such as Angola or the Ukraine.

But were the two days of celebration in Foggia more than a joyful event with thanksgiving and sisterly meetings and exchange?

Yes, they have certainly a greater and long lasting meaning for the Order. Besides deep gratitude, the first effect was the increased feeling of unity and belonging, when we met sisters from different countries at the premises of the beatification, the well-prepared area outside the Santuario *Madre di Dio Incoronata* near Foggia. This feeling was later strengthened in the garden of the Redemptoristine convent, where we took our collation, and on the second day around the thanksgiving mass and the dinner that followed in the seminary. The greater spontaneity (different from the atmosphere of International assemblies) of the event and the great number of participants were a won-

¹ This text is a summary of the reports of 20 Redemptoristine communities, sent to the author. These reports were very different; some very detailed others very short. The lack of answers from some communities is probably due to their situation. Some information was taken from different websites of O.Ss.R. and C.Ss.R communities.

derful gift. The problem of the multitude of languages could not impede the shared joy, expressed by smiles and monosyllable conversations. Often the few words of a foreign language were sufficient to keep a conversation flowing and enabled meetings of sisters who knew one another until then only by name, or by letters and emails.

Therefore, the thanksgiving ceremonies during the two Eucharist celebrations and the evening prayer near the shrine of Blessed Maria Celeste gained a profound meaning, expressed in the multilingual joyful participation. We thanked God for His great gift of our dear M. Maria Celeste and as well for the great gift of belonging to such a wonderful group of sisters, old and young, alert or worn out by a long life in the Order, but all united in the same spirit.²² For the elderly sisters of small communities it was comforting to recognize the considerable number of younger sisters with their enthusiasm, a sure sign that our Order is not dying, even if some monasteries, especially in the Western world, have to accept the fate of the grain of wheat.

1. – *Preparations for the Beatification*

For contemplative sisters, the spiritual preparations were essential. But only a few communities reported about these preparations.

In *Dublin* the community is praying over many years at the midday prayers special prayers taken from the writings of M. Maria Celeste.

During the month preceding the beatification, the community of St. Restitut prayed a rosary every day.

The communities of *Madrid* and *Kezmarok* prayed a novena during the days preceding the beatification.

In *Bielsko-Biala* the sisters meditated at the 14th of each month on texts of Maria Celeste and sang a special hymn in her honour on the 18th of every month.

Several communities had conferences reflecting on texts of M. Maria Celeste already some time before the beatification.

The announcement of the beatification aroused phantasy and special skills in a lot of communities, as the following examples show:

Some sisters in *Bielsko-Biala* and *Vranov* wrote icons of Maria Celeste, also of Maria Celeste together with St. Alphonsus.

² More than 90 Redemptoristines from all over the world were present.

Music is a wonderful means to express joy and veneration:

In *Bielsko-Biala* a special mass and a solemn Akathyst were composed by Sr. Marija Slepchenko. Besides this, the sisters published a CD with hymns, used by them during the Mass.

In *Scala* Sr. Stefania Santoro composed a song, using key words from the writings of M. Maria Celeste:

MARIA CELESTE, MEMORIA VIVENTE³

1) Come aquila innamorata del Signor,
ti ha rapito lo splendore del tuo Sol,
il tuo cuore è diventato fiamma viva di carità,
per mirare la grandezza del Suo amor.

*Maria Celeste, beata sei tu,
memoria vivente di Cristo Gesù,
memoria vivente di Cristo Gesù.*

2) Fatta eco del Suo volere dici a noi,
la divina volontà sia gioia in voi,
sempre unite al Padre, al Figlio e allo Spirito d'amor,
siamo tutte una in Cristo Redentor.

The sisters of *Buga* composed four songs in Latino style on M. Maria Celeste.

Sr. Moira Quinn of *Beacon* wrote a hymn, based on texts of Maria Celeste, for the Thanksgiving Mass:⁴

A living mem'ry of Jesus the Christ: Blessed Celeste!

In the Redeemer you made us one,
with joy and gladness God's Intent is done,
Echoing His will, let us sing as one: Alleluia!

A living mem'ry of Jesus the Christ: Blessed Celeste!

Fashioned by His hands, He imprints our soul,
with goodness, mercy, we are made whole,
An image of You, a portrait unfolds: Alleluia!

For the Thanksgiving celebration in the Japanese monastery of *Chino* Sr. Mary Magdalene Yoneta composed the music for the Mass and trained a choir for the performance.

Sr. M. Christiane Kammerlocher from the community at

³ The whole song has six verses

⁴ The hymn comprises four verses.

Oberbronn proved her poetic talent and her deep familiarity with the spirituality of M. Maria Celeste by writing 18 prayers, based on thoughts of our foundress. Here follows one example in the original French language:

Soleil éternel

O Jésus soleil divin
 Tu ne fais qu'un avec ta source lumineuse,
 Le Père !
 « Reflet de son existence
 Rayonnement de sa gloire ! »
 Source de lumière, ta Parole,
 Source de chaleur, ton amour.
 Dans tes rayons multiples
 se reflètent comme en l'arc-en-ciel
 Toutes tes perfections.
 Toute ta plénitude.
 Beauté, splendeur, majesté,
 Gloire pour toute la terre !
 O Jésus, Soleil éternel et divin
 qui pénètre toute chose
 jusqu'en son ultime profondeur...
 Qui fait briller l'esprit au cœur de la matière
 En ce noyau secret de l'atome qui « sait »
 Fais que j'ouvre tout grand les volets de mon cœur
 Par le désir et la prière
 afin que mes yeux voient
 et que mon cœur en soit brûlé...
 O Toi, Soleil qui n'a pas de couchant
 Amour éternel !

Our Canadian sisters in Ste. Thérèse fashioned very nice rosaries, the olive wood beads decorated with pictures of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the merciful Jesus, St. Alphonsus and Bl. Maria Celeste.

Several communities shaped prayer cards or bookmarks with a picture of M. M. Celeste, a prayer and involved small relics, made from clothes, for instance the sisters of Chino. The official texts for their Mass and the Vespers had been translated into Japanese through the collaboration of the four Redemptoristine monasteries of the country.

Even some artists of the Redemptorist Congregation were inspired by the beatification. Fr. Jan Haen, C.Ss.R., from the St. Clement Province gave the sisters of *Wittem* a painting.

The extremely gifted Icon writer, Br Massimiliano Mura CSsR, a student from the Roman Province, presented an Icon of Blessed Maria Celeste Crostarosa OSsR to the *Clapham* community.

For the Brazilian monastery of *Itu* a Redemptorist seminarian prepared a hymn for the celebrations.

The communities also gave reports about more practical preparations:

The sisters of the community of *Foggia* were in a special way affected by the preparations, in the planning of the whole event together with the diocese. They adapted their chapel. The preserved body of M. Maria Celeste in former times could only be seen and venerated in a glass shrine in a small room near the enclosure. From the chapel the view of the shrine was covered by a memorial plate. This has been replaced by a glass window, so that Blessed Maria Celeste can now be seen from the chapel too.

The community of *Scala* launched two very special initiatives in preparation for the beatification, to make M. Maria Celeste more known and cherished. With the permission of the local bishop, Archbishop Orazio Soricelli, groups of 4 sisters, taking turns, visited once a week the 11 main parishes of the diocese during the month of April and May. With the help of three power point presentations they shared the Life of M. Maria Celeste, told by a nun; the Charism of the Redemptoristines and its relevance for today's world; a Typical Day in the Monastery, comprising prayer, work and different activities with the laity. They invited people to take part in the events, organized in the monastery and/or the celebration of the beatification at Foggia.

On the 7th and 8th May 2016 the sisters organized with the help of the Redemptorists a symposium, headed by the archbishop, dealing with the person and spirituality of M. Maria Celeste, as well as with other persons entwined with her life and with the historical circumstances of her time. Several university teachers, Redemptorists and some of the sisters presented the lectures.

A lot of communities were occupied with producing editions of new publications, and using other social media outlets to communicate the good news, before and after the beatification. Several communities also used their webpages for the announcement of the beatification and

for information on M. Maria Celeste.

Videos from the communities of *Scala*, *Cebu* and *Beacon* can be found on YouTube, prior to and after the Beatification.

The sisters of *Legazpi* announced the beatification with a huge tarpaulin in front of their monastery as soon as the event was officially announced. They also gave an introduction on M. Maria Celeste and her spirituality at a diocesan meeting of contemplatives.

The sisters of *Itu* published a special magazine, composed by the Redemptorists of the São Paulo Province, and gave an interview to a radio station and another one for the Redemptorist magazine.

The community of *San Cristobal* mentioned media interest, without giving details.

The sisters of *Madrid* also reported announcements by the media without details.

The Redemptoristines of the *Liguori* monastery published an article in the monthly “Liguorian” of the Redemptorists, and created prayer booklets for their associates and people joining them during the mass.

The sisters of *Ste. Thérèse* also used Catholic magazines and the diocesan newspaper to announce the beatification. The community of *Chino* also did the same.

The French monasteries of *St. Restitut* and *Oberbronn* cooperated in publishing an article for the French contemplatives in *Lien des Contemplatives*, and sent announcements to the Parish and Diocesan bulletin.

Besides using their website, the community of *Bielsko-Biala* announced the beatification and launched details on M. Maria Celeste through radio interviews as well as by articles in 6 different papers of the local and national press.

The bishop of Fada, Msgr. Pierre Claver Malgo, wrote the invitation to join in the joy of the beatification of our sisters of *Diabo*.

In *Dublin*, the sisters had already used prayers taken from the writings of M. Maria Celeste for a long time. For the celebrations of the beatification in their monastery, for widespread distribution and for their own use they now shaped a booklet with revised prayers and several new additions, printed on good quality paper, tastefully embellished with illustrations from the monastery archives together with icons written by the current community.

Sr. Gabrielle Fox from the same community published an article in the magazine *Reality* of the Irish Redemptorists, introducing

Blessed Maria Celeste and her spirituality and emphasizing in a remarkable way the meaning of this spirituality for people, especially for women of today:

CELESTE'S SPIRITUALITY AND ITS MESSAGE ... One of the principle marks of the spirituality of Celeste is the 'Viva Memoria,' that is the call of each person to be in himself/herself a true and authentic living image of Christ, called to reflect and make Him present in our thoughts (having the mind of Christ), – conscious that each word must speak of Christ and in our attitudes to all, especially those who exist on the margins and periphery of life in our world today. Each one of us can find inspiration in Celeste and her mission is a topical one. This is especially true of women who have a strong sense of their own dignity. They can find in her a companion as they search for new forms which help them to express and realise better the dignity of woman in the Church and in society. ... [Celeste's] is a spirituality of everyday life, lived in communion with Christ, the Redeemer. It should radiate and go forth from us, imparting a contemplative dimension to the reality of the life of every Christian. Contemplation does not mean flight but rather commitment to finding the presence of the God of love in each event of every day.

Contemplation is the response to a call: a call from him who has no voice, and yet who speaks in everything that is, and in the depths of my own being: for we ourselves are words of his. Celeste invites us to understand that we are co-responsible together with Christ in giving real hope and genuine human dignity to each other, especially to those who feel oppressed. She was convinced that there is no Christian community, and much less any religious community, if we are not living the transparent memory of Christ, the Saviour. Her desire for us all was that we make Christ present in our world.

SPIRITUALITY IN DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD Celeste calls us today into dialogue with the world. The call is to ever deeper communion with God, but at the same time actualised and demonstrated most effectively in our communion with others, in a mission that stems from listening to their needs and involves every dimension of existence but especially to the abandoned and the poor.⁵

The Redemptoristines of the Austrian monastery in Ried

⁵ Sr. GABRIELLE FOX, O.Ss.R., *The Mystic who Remembered*, in *Realty*, July/August 2016, 29-30.

wrote a biography of M. Maria Celeste for the diocesan newspaper and the monthly magazine *Klemensblatt* of the Austrian Redemptorists; after their thanksgiving celebration, they also launched reports for the media of the diocese.

The sisters of *Lauterach* wrote a report for Kathpress, the catholic news service and informed their friends and benefactors by a similar report in their autumn newsletter.

The Redemptoristines of the *Beacon* community published a new edition of the book *The Mystic Who Remembered*, written by Fr. J. Oppitz, C.Ss.R.

The community of *Kezmarok* has already published the writings of M. M. Celeste in Slovak. They created a novena to the *Blessed M. Maria Celeste* and another one with the *Blessed M. Maria Celeste*.

A similar novena in Polish was published by the sisters of *Bielsko-Biala*.

The community of *Buga* fashioned booklets, using an article from the *Viva Memoria* magazine Nr. 36 "Jesus and Celeste" and a Spanish translation from the French "Prier 15 jours avec Marie Céleste Crostarosa" and "Maria Celeste, woman and prophet, free and loving."

In addition to all these activities the communities of *Beacon*, *Dublin*, *St. Restitut* (and probably other ones who have not reported this detail) created special booklets for the celebration of the Thanksgiving Mass and the Vespers, using the official texts, already published beforehand for translation.

The Redemptoristines prepared not only themselves for the beatification. Their associates, who in many countries were already familiar with M. Maria Celeste by regular conferences given to them by the sisters, were invited to take part in the celebrations.

The nuns of *Bielsko-Biala* gave during the previous year special conferences to the associates, they as well as the communities of *Kezmarok*, *Scala*, *Ried*, *Madrid* and the *Latin-American* monasteries promulgated invitations for the beatification and were accompanied to Foggia by groups of lay associates, friends and family members.

2. – *The Celebration of the Beatification in the various monasteries*

Many communities were represented by one or more sisters at

the beatification in Foggia, while the sisters remaining at home in their respective monasteries followed the ceremony by the beforehand published internet link. For some countries this was a challenge because of the time differences.

Several communities celebrated a special Mass on the day of the beatification, others chose the next day or another appropriate date.

The sisters of *Ste. Thérèse* reported that albeit getting up very early to follow the ceremony in Foggia by the internet, they spent the whole day in a festive atmosphere, which was enhanced by the decoration of the monastery. They celebrated solemn Vespers with the texts used for the same purpose in Foggia. One day later, at the first Mass of their novena for the feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the celebrant used the texts of the beatification Mass.

The Redemptoristines took part in a joint celebration at *San Cristobal* at the shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, on the premises of the Redemptorists, organized to close the jubilee year of Perpetual Help and commemorate the beatification of Mother Mary Celeste on June 18.

In *Liguori* a Redemptorist celebrated the Mass for the sisters on the day of the beatification.

The sisters of *Beacon* had prepared a special liturgy for the solemn Mass on June 18.

For the Redemptoristine sisters in *Wittem* the Provincial of the St. Clement Province, Fr. Johannes Römelt, C.Ss.R., together with other confreres celebrated the feast mass on the day of the beatification in their monastery. In his homily, he reminded the sisters of the task given to them by their foundress:

*By the apostolate of prayer we pray in the name of the whole Church for all the people of God, for our fathers and brothers of the Redemptorist Congregation, but especially for the poor, the lonely, the abandoned and for all whom nobody remembers and for whom no one prays. That is our essential task.*⁶

After the Mass the sisters provided in their monastery a reception for all participants. Later the community shared a festive meal with the Redemptorists and the associates.

In *Itu* the sisters held a special Lauds service on the day of the

⁶ Quotation from the homepage of the St. Clement Province, translated from Dutch by the author.

beatification, prepared by Br. Maciel, C.Ss.R., vice novice director of the São Paulo Province. From the 26th to the 28th they began preparing themselves and their friends for this great event by the celebration of festive triduum Masses, followed by a solemn thanksgiving Mass at the 29th, presided by Fr. Rogiéro Gomez, C.Ss.R., Provincial of the São Paulo Province.

Many friends of the Redemptoristines in *Madrid* joined them for two festive Masses at June 18 and 19.

In *Ried*, at the Mass on June 19th, in the chapel of the monastery, P. Franz Hauser, C.Ss.R., gave in his homily a survey on the life and spirituality of Blessed Maria Celeste and of her importance for today.

The Bishop of Fada celebrated a solemn Mass for the sisters of *Diabo* at Sunday, June 19th.

The community of *Oberbronn* invited their associates and the religious of other Orders and Congregations to celebrate the beatification with a solemn Mass at June 18th. This was presided by their Bishop, Msgr. Raffin, who emphasized in his homily that Bl. Maria Celeste was ahead of her time in her profound knowledge of Holy Scripture.

In *Madrid* the Archbishop, Msgr. Carlos Osoro, presided the Thanksgiving Mass in the monastery on the 3rd July. A great number of friends, religious and Redemptorists shared the joy of the sisters.

For the community in *Chino* the solemn Thanksgiving Mass was the highlight of all their preparations. Bishop Umemura of the Yokohama Diocese presided over the Eucharist and gave the homily. 7 priests, some of them Redemptorists, concelebrated. 5 sisters of the community of Kamakura (one of them already in her 90s) were not afraid to undertake the journey to be present, also as representatives of the other two Japanese monasteries of *Saito* and *Nagasaki*. More than 100 people were gathered in the chapel and afterwards for the lunch. On a video recording of the Mass, taken by a friend of the community, it is interesting to observe that some of the sisters were sitting amidst the wider community, while others preferred to stay in a separated part of the chapel.

The *Dublin* community postponed the celebration of the beatification to the following weekend, inviting friends, parishioners and other contemplative sisters of the city for a solemn triduum to the chapel and Faith Center of the monastery. On Friday, July 1st,

Vespers were sung, using a special booklet with translations from the texts taken from the Vespers ceremony in Foggia. On Saturday, July 2nd, the sisters sang the mass of Blessed Maria Celeste, composed by Sr. Marija Slepchenko. Since the Saturday Mass is always the mass for the local parish, it was a good opportunity to introduce the regular participants to the life and spirituality of Bl. Maria Celeste. The celebrant, Fr. Brendan McConvery, C.Ss.R., spoke about her in his homily. Later, after refreshments were served in the monastery's Faith Center, an extended conference on the history of the Order and the Dublin monastery was presented. After the solemn Mass on Sunday, July 3rd, there was an opportunity to venerate the relic of the Blessed, and the faithful were once more invited to some refreshments, this time served in the small garden of the monastery's Retreat area. The great number of participants in all three celebrations showed a great interest for all topics as well as showing their support and friendship with the Redemptoristine community.

The new installed Bishop of Linz/Austria, Msgr. Manfred Scheuer, celebrated the solemn thanksgiving Mass with the Redemptoristines in *Ried* on 10th July. In his extended homily, he pointed out the importance of the charism of the Order for the Church and world in our time:

The charism of the Redemptoristines has a contemplative and active dimension: the contemplation of salvation and mercy, and the active apostolate in the service of the mission for the Gospel. The goal is to become "contemplativus in action". Human activity is understood as cooperation with divine grace. ... Cooperation with the kingdom of God takes a suffering and an active dimension in the concrete irreconciliation of the present world and society. In the concrete, unreconciled world, salvation is also realized by means of compassionate substitution and expiation.⁷

The feast of Blessed Maria Celeste Crostarosa is to be celebrated at the 11th September. As this year the date was on a Sunday, the celebration of the feast had to be anticipated or moved to the following Monday. The Redemptoristines celebrated this first feast of their foundress with joy, preparing solemn liturgies.

In *Kezmarok*, the sisters prayed a novena before September 11,

⁷ Taken from a manuscript of the sisters of Ried, translated from German by the author.

and celebrated a solemn Eucharist on the 10th singing the Akathyst during evening prayer. Later the participants were invited to a photo presentation of Bl. Maria Celeste and her spirituality as well as one on the beatification in Foggia, afterwards some refreshments were served to them. On the 14th September, the anniversary of Bl. Maria Celeste's death, the celebrant, a Redemptorist, gave a fervent homily to the sisters and all the faithful, encouraging them to follow Maria Celeste's spiritual determination. After this Mass the people had the opportunity to venerate the relic of Bl. Maria Celeste.

Bishop, Msgr. Pierre-Yves Michel, celebrated in *St. Restitut* a Thanksgiving Mass with the Redemptoristines on the 17th September.

In *Ste. Thérèse* the Bishop himself celebrated the Mass on the first feast day of Bl. Maria Celeste at 11th September with the texts of the Mass of the beatification. The sisters will have further conferences on Bl. Maria Celeste with a Redemptorist of Ste.-Anne-de Beaupré.

The Redemptoristines in *Beacon* chose the first feast of Bl. Maria Celeste as the appropriate date for their associates to renew their commitments.

The Redemptorists of the St. Clement Health Center in *Liguori*, prepared for their neighbours, the Redemptoristines a solemn Vesper Service on September 11, with texts of Bl. Maria Celeste and with her relic, giving all participants an opportunity for veneration. Afterwards they shared a delicious dinner.

In *Dublin* the sisters celebrated the first feast day of Bl. Maria Celeste on Saturday, 10th September, using once more the solemn liturgy, composed by Sr. Maria Slepchenko.

This long enumeration of activities and festivities hints at the greater and long lasting meaning of the beatification of Maria Celeste Crostarosa for the nuns of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer as well as for the whole Church.

I see several very important effects:

1. –The preparations have brought about closer cooperation between certain monasteries, not always in practical work, but surely in an increased feeling of co-responsibility.

The connection with the Redemptorists and their help in the preparations of the events has proved that we belong to a wonderful religious family, where we sisters are more aware of our part in it.

We are most grateful to our confreres who were so eager to promote the beatification of Maria Celeste Crostarosa. Without the work of the Fathers Marrazzo, Majorano, Lage and the encouragement of all the members of the C.Ss.R. Secretariat for the O.Ss.R. and of all General Superiors of the recent decades we Redemptoristines would not have been able to celebrate this significant event.

2. – The meaning of Bl. Maria Celeste and her charism has become more familiar to a greater group of people in the Church, through their personal attendance in the joy-filled celebrations more so than by written testimonies of any kind. The internet, which makes it possible to take part in such events, is very helpful for this end.

3. – The great interest of the local bishops, shown by their participations in the festivities and their homilies will encourage the sisters to see and appreciate their role in the Church and to take up their service more courageously.

Modern means of communication offer a lot of possibilities to connect with people and to take part in their lives without leaving the enclosure. Our monasteries and our parlours are more and more to become places of welcome for all people who seek God. People, having become familiar with Blessed Maria Celeste's spirituality, will recognize anew the value of the Eucharist and Holy Scripture.

Blessed Maria Celeste Crostarosa certainly would agree with St. John Paul II, who once said: "*Saints do not demand applause from us, but want us to follow them.*"