

1. APOSTLE OF THE LOVE OF GOD

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Gospel Reading:

John (3:11, 14-17)

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen... And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

The Gospel of the Lord

Brothers and sisters in Christ our Redeemer, Greetings from the Church of St. Alphonsus in Rome. Welcome to this first day of the Novena in honour of St. Alphonsus Maria Liguori, great apostle of the Love of God! A special word of gratitude to the Redemptorist Province of Bangalore for making this international Novena possible!

The gospel passage we just heard was always close to the heart of Alphonsus: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." To understand how and why Alphonsus became such an Apostle of the Love of God, it's good to know something of his background.

Alphonsus Liguori was born in Naples, Italy on September 27, 1696. This year, he would be 325 years old! He was the eldest son in a large family with 8 children. His parents were deeply religious and passed this faith on to all their children.

His father, Don Giuseppe, was a captain in the Royal Navy. He was often away from home for long periods. In his cabin on the ship, Don Giuseppe kept four statues of the Passion of Jesus Christ, to which he was very devoted. He also made a real commitment to several societies serving the abandoned poor in Naples, and Alphonsus often accompanied his father in charitable works.

Alphonsus' mother, Donna Anna Caterina, had been raised in a monastery after the early death of her mother. She was very prayerful, as she had been taught by the nuns. From his mother, Alphonsus learned the value of daily mental prayer and spiritual direction, as well as a gentle, kind heart. Alphonsus said that his mother showed him by example the tender, merciful love of God for everyone.

A gifted student, Alphonsus received an excellent education. Prepared in both civil and canon law, he was destined for a brilliant career in the legal profession. However, Alphonsus also longed to give his life in service of God and neighbour. After ten successful years as a lawyer, he lost a very important case. It is now clear that bribery and political interference at the highest level determined the outcome, and not the justice of the case itself.

This event provided the catalyst which led to Alphonsus' definitive decision to abandon the legal profession and begin studies for the priesthood. At the age of 27, he was accepted as a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Naples, and was finally ordained at the age of 30. At that time, he was a 'late vocation'.

Soon, Alphonsus became known and sought after as a gifted preacher – and an Apostle of the Love of God. People from all the social classes thronged to the Churches where he was preaching. There was something different about his sermons. He spoke about God in simple language and explained the Scriptures in a way that everyone could understand – rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Those who heard him were often moved to tears. What was the difference in his preaching? Why did he have such a powerful impact on people?

I believe that the answer can be found in today's gospel passage. Like Jesus, Alphonsus spoke about what he knew personally. He witnessed to what he had experienced in his own life. Through his daily prayer, especially in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, he encountered Jesus Christ as a real and living person, the Son of God who loved him and gave his life for him. And so his life was filled with the joy of the Gospel. Jesus was his friend and his Redeemer. This was the God whom Alphonsus preached, a God he knew personally.

Meditating on the passion, Alphonsus became convinced that only the love of God could explain the death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death was not about punishment, or paying the debt that we human beings owe to God for our sins. Alphonsus knew that Jesus freely gave his life for us to show the lengths to which God's love will go to save us...

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

For Alphonsus, this experience of God's love in Jesus became the deepest meaning of his life, and the centre of all his preaching, teaching and writing and even his conversation.

Alphonsus knew that God loved him in spite of his sinfulness – and Alphonsus was very conscious of his sinfulness – in spite of this, God loved him, and Jesus gave his life for him. And Alphonsus loved God in return.

This love of God that Alphonsus experienced compelled him to preach to others. And so he became the apostle of the love of God. He wanted nothing more than to share with others this love he had found in God. Above all, Alphonsus shared this message especially with the abandoned and the poor who are so often on the margins of society – and yet they are specially loved by God. Alphonsus understood from his own experience that the whole Christian life is a mystery of love.

Out of love for humanity the Word becomes flesh in the womb of Mary so that Jesus can share our human nature, and speak to us as one friend speaks to another. The mystery of the Incarnation is the mystery of closeness, of friendship, of love. Jesus becomes our brother so that he can become our Redeemer.

The mystery of the Cross is a mystery of Love. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”. Jesus gives his life for us to show us just how far God’s love will go to save us from ourselves, from hatred and division, from jealousy and sin.

In the mystery of the Eucharist, Love bids Jesus to remain with us always. In the Eucharist, in Communion, Jesus unites himself so fully to us that his flesh becomes our flesh, and his blood stirs in our veins. No wonder Alphonsus encouraged frequent communion, Eucharistic adoration, and visits to the Blessed Sacrament. The Eucharist is the ‘fire of God’s love’ which warms our cold hearts.

At the foot of the Cross, Jesus gave us his mother to be our mother – to walk with us always and to teach us to live as one family... Mary, our Mother of Perpetual Help, is a gift of God's love so that we will never walk alone as we journey through life. No wonder Alphonsus promoted devotion to Mary and loved her so tenderly! She was his constant companion and sign of God's love.

These mysteries of Redemption become the four pillars of the spirituality of St. Alphonsus and of every Redemptorist: Incarnation, Passion and Cross, Eucharist and Mary – because they are the four great mysteries of God's love.

During this novena, may St. Alphonsus help us to experience for ourselves the love of God. Following his example, we ask Mary, our Mother, to unite our hearts to hers. Mary, after your son, Jesus, you became the first missionary of God's love. United with you, and following the example of Alphonsus, may we also become apostles of the love of God today.