

### 3. FRIEND OF THE POOR

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#### **Gospel Reading:**

John 15:14-16

*You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants[a] any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.*

#### **The Gospel of the Lord**

I have made many pilgrimages to Scala, Italy, the small village where St Alphonsus founded the CSsR. On one of those occasions, I climbed the mountains above Scala to the little church of Santa Maria dei Monti. This was an area more level than the mountain which I had climbed. There is much grass for pasturing sheep and goats.

This was where Saint Alphonsus encountered the shepherds. After talking to them he discovered that they were not receiving any pastoral care from the Church. They were abandoned by the Church. St Alphonsus immediately set out to teach them, to hear their confessions, and to encourage them to receive communion. But it did not stop there. He returned from the mountain a converted man. The simple humble shepherds had converted him! He decided to establish a Congregation of missionaries that would reach

out to the most abandoned and care for them. You could say a Congregation to shepherd the abandoned shepherds!

But let's pause there and explore what's happening. Do you notice the two-way movement? Not just a one-way street with Alphonsus going to the poor, with Alphonsus converting them, or Alphonsus preaching to them. At the same time, the very same shepherds were helping to convert him! Their stories touched a sensitive nerve in Alphonsus, the nerve of compassion. As Jesus had compassion on the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd, as we heard in our Gospel text.

Let's unpack it further. It is a two-way dynamic. What Alphonsus did for the shepherds -- and what they did for him. The topic of my homily is, Alphonsus -- "friend of the poor". Friendship is never a one-way street. The love and respect of friends is mutual, it is reciprocal, it works both ways. Friends give and receive each other's gifts. To say that Alphonsus was a friend of the poor is to say that he gave the poor the dignity of equals. In Romans 12:16 St Paul says, "do not be condescending but make real friends with the poor." (Jerusalem Bible)

Let's take it a bit further. When he ministered to the poor, Alphonsus was not converting them to the Church. He was converting the Church to them!! Yes! Remember, they had not abandoned the Church -- the Church had abandoned them. There were so many priests in Naples living a comfortable and privileged life. They had all the luxuries and benefits of the clerical life. They were perfect examples of what Pope Francis calls the rot of clericalism. We all know the famous words of Pope Francis that priests and ministers of the Gospel must take on the smell of the sheep. That's exactly what St Alphonsus did.

He did not go to them and say, come back to Church. Indirectly he was saying: "The Church, through me, is coming back to you." He was saying, "I, Father Alfonso de Liguori, as an ordained priest in the Church, am asking your forgiveness that the Church abandoned you. Through me, the Church is coming back to you." And for this purpose, he founded a new congregation.

Many years later the Redemptorist Congregation, after one of our general chapters, focused on an interesting theme: *Evangelizare pauperes, et a pauperibus evangelizari*. To evangelise the poor and to be evangelized BY the poor.

It works both ways, just like friendship. Each friend has a gift to bring to the relationship. There's no place here for what is called "professional distance". This is not a lawyer-client relationship, or doctor-patient one. Ironically, Alphonsus had actually been a lawyer first. Later he became a priest. But even that implied keeping a distance. It was not until he climbed that steep mountain, that he found his humanity again, or rather, the gift of compassion through his humanity, which led him to found a Congregation that would follow in his footsteps.

For me, fidelity to the Redemptorist charism implies direct movement towards people who, in each period of history, find themselves abandoned by or alienated by the Church or within the Church. To walk in the footsteps of Alphonsus is to befriend all who have left the Church, or who feel they have been driven away by the Church. It may not be the shepherds on the hills above Scala anymore. But there are people who feel abandoned. Pope Francis himself has named a few: gay people, people who are divorced, people who are divorced and remarried. Women in many contexts feel alienated by

the Church. Youth sometimes feel abandoned. The disabled often feel not enough is done for them. Homeless migrants. The list goes on.

Let me give a personal testimony. When I was ordained, I was first sent to Cape Town to work in one of the poor peripheral parishes which the Redemptorists cared for. In my first month of ordination, I baptised a tiny baby that had just been born in the hospital. It was not expected to live. The baby died 3 hours later. For the funeral, the father carried the little white coffin walking up the road from the church to the cemetery. Afterwards I wanted to go to their home with them for the usual after-funeral gathering. Do you know what the man said to me? "Father, we are too poor to have a priest in our house!" ... too poor to have a priest in our house...!! I did not accept that excuse and went with them to their home. It was a tiny tin shack built on the sand. They lit their kerosene stove and boiled a kettle as I sat on the edge of a bed while the fleas crawled up and bit my ankles, leaving an itch for many days. But I never forgot those words: We are too poor to have a priest in our house.... How sad that the poor sometimes do not feel that a priest, or an official minister of the Church, can be their friend!

To be inspired by Alphonsus as "friend" of the poor is to be sensitive to any persons on the periphery, out on the edge, where the ordinary pastoral and sacramental ministry of the Church fails to reach. May we continue to find ways to ask forgiveness of the poor and those abandoned by the Church! And may such forgiveness and reconciliation truly lead us to friendship with the poor that is mutually enriching!