

6. PROLIFIC WRITER & THINKER

By Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. (Cape Town, SOUTH AFRICA)

Gospel Reading:

Mt. 13: 52

Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from the storeroom things both new and old.

The Gospel of the Lord

1. Alphonsus, prolific writer and thinker.

The young Alphonsus was well equipped to become a significant **writer**. As the son of a nobleman, his liberal education and his professional legal training stood him in good stead for a life among books.

The young Alphonsus was well equipped to become a significant **religious** writer. His own personal religious commitment, his experience both as a layman and as a priest, especially among the most needy, helped him to address the **real** pastoral issues around him. His years of itinerant mission preaching and his founding of an apostolic religious community, all impelled him to reflect deeply on the great issues facing the Church of his day.

For many years Alphonsus concentrated on the preaching of Parish Missions, an obvious pastoral means of reaching those who were largely left behind by the ordinary ministry of the local church. As a result of his own intense prayer life, his passion for getting to the **root** of the problems of the Church and indeed the example of his friend and fellow Redemptorist, Fr. Gennaro Sarnelli, he took up his pen.

Alphonsus had penned some short works early on in his ministry most famously, his “Visits to the Blessed Sacrament”, written to help his students in their devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. But he was over 50 years of age when he devoted himself to writing as a main feature of his ministry.

When Alphonsus was in his mid-sixties he wrote to a friend saying “it has been almost forty years that I have been studying moral theology, and I am always finding something new”. And to another correspondent he wrote “Moral theology is an endless black hole. I never stop reading and I never stop finding new things”. His first attempt at publishing a book on moral theology was his “Annotations to the Kernal (Medulla) of Moral Theology by Fr. H. Busenbaum, S.J.” (1748). Alphonsus found **his own voice** in the first edition of his own Moral Theology (1755). He worked ceaselessly to revise and upgrade this book, publishing nine editions in his lifetime. For such a monumental contribution to moral theology, he was eventually made a Doctor of the Church in 1871.

The enduring value of Alphonsus’ work in moral theology was to move the focus from the straitjacket of harsh **rigorism** (**Jansenism**) to the benign and compassionate **gentleness of Gospel morality**. It was a struggle which has benefited the whole Church.

While Alphonsus’ Moral Theology had enormous influence on the development of pastoral sensitivity in the confessional and revealed profound insights into the heart of New Testament morality, most people know Alphonsus for his more personal and more devotional writings. Nothing will displace his authority in morals, but his warm **spirituality** quickly wins our hearts and minds. I myself have edited several editions of his short but influential book: “Praying to God as a Friend”. I have already mentioned his

much used "Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and to Our Lady". Many will be familiar (especially during Lent) with his "Stations of the Cross".

The Centenary Edition of Alphonsus' ascetical writings runs to 24 volumes. I limit myself here to highlight just three of them. Firstly, "The Glories of Mary" is a beautiful meditation on the Marian prayer, "Hail, Holy Queen". This book made a major contribution both to devotional life and to Marian theology. Secondly, "Prayer, the Great Means of Salvation" has helped millions of people to take the first steps in prayer in the knowledge of its supreme importance in daily life. Thirdly, "The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ" shows how Christianity, at its best, is an experience of love, human and divine.

While preoccupied with his ministries of preaching and writing (up to 110 publications), to say nothing of guiding his new Religious Congregation, Alphonsus was acutely aware of the overriding **philosophical** issues in his 18th century world. He was living through a philosophical era known to history as **the Enlightenment**. The Enlightenment was characterised by the dominance of reason and individualism and the rejection of authority, and tradition. Many Enlightenment figures adopted a hostile and polemical attitude to the Church and Alphonsus was drawn into many a controversy in print. To this end, he published five major **apologetic** works, the most significant of which he called "The Truth of the Faith". He also published a book on the teachings of the Council of Trent and one on the history of heresies.

Some people will know St Alphonsus only through his hymns. His Eucharistic hymn "O Bread of Heaven" is still a popular choice at Mass or during Benediction. Some of his Marian hymns are also still in use in

English: "Look down O Mother Mary", O Mother Blest" and "Hail to the Queen of Heaven". As recently as 2017 a beautiful book "O God of loveliness" collected much of the poetry of St Alphonsus, was edited and published by an Australian confrere, Fr Patrick Corbett. Alphonsus was enthusiastic in using his many talents in his zeal for the glory of God and the spiritual growth of the faithful.

2. What, then is the relevance of St Alphonsus' example to the charism of the Redemptorists today?

It seems to me that it would be too easy to set up Alphonsus as the gold standard for all Redemptorists today or to expect the Congregation he founded to operate at the intensity we see in the founder. In any case, few of us would have the sheer energy, enthusiasm and perseverance shown by Alphonsus. Few of us, also, would come within reach of his heroic sanctity!

I suspect that Alphonsus would rather have us explore the **secret** of all his prodigious achievements. I am referring, of course, to his interior life, that life of his which is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). The one thing that is totally consistent throughout Alphonsus' long life (he died aged 91) is the inner dialogue of love with God in his prayer, meditation and contemplation. Alphonsus was utterly faithful to the call to be still and know God, to let God speak to him, to let Jesus live His life in him, to receive grace answering grace, to abide in God.

Naturally, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer **tries** to be faithful to the charism of Alphonsus in ways suited to our times. This Global on-line Novena is itself an example of the imaginative and creative expression of the same charism which Alphonsus lived. But, it is this **contemplative dimension** of the life of the Congregation which remains the source of

all missionary effort. Each confrere and each community is called to a prayerful, contemplative stance out of which flows apostolic grace. This is put attractively in our rule of life (cf. Constitution 23) when it acknowledges that we choose **the person of Christ** as the centre of our lives and that we strive day by day to enter into personal union with him.

As for pastoral innovations, Alphonsus himself accepted the highly personal ministry of his friend Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli who devoted himself to the spiritual and material care of the prostitutes of Naples. Alphonsus also welcomed, as authentic aspects of the charism, the pastoral adaptations which St Clement Hofbauer had to make in the northern European context. Indeed, if Redemptorists today fail to address the contemporary world in contemporary ways, they would surely not be acting in line with the spirit of their holy founder.

3. Finally, what is the relevance of St Alphonsus in the everyday life of Christians?

Pope Benedict XVI tells us: "I have often affirmed my conviction that the most convincing demonstration of the truth of the Christian faith...**are the saints** and the **beauty** that the faith has generated". These words address the reality that argument and debate of themselves rarely touch the heart. The **quality** of a Christian's life has more compelling effects than tracts or treatises.

Actually getting to know a person who radiates integrity, decency, respect, attentiveness, is an experience which shapes us profoundly.

Just last month Pope Francis wrote to an American Jesuit (Fr. James Martin) who has a ministry to the LGBT community. The Pope commended

Fr. Martin for reflecting “God’s style” in his delicate work. By “God’s style” Pope Francis said he meant “closeness, compassion and tenderness”. These are very qualities that shine out in Alphonsus’ life and ministry.

Alphonsus always tried to remain close to the people and often acknowledged how the people he met, especially the poorest, helped him: “I learned far more (he said) from hearing confessions than from reading books”. This closeness touched the compassionate heart of Alphonsus and led to a gentleness and a tenderness which the people found so attractive.

The abiding contribution of Alphonsus to moral theology was to carve out **a path between rigorism and laxity**. In this he shows us how to find our way through perplexing situations which we confront on a daily basis. His way into moral theology was through a careful consideration of **conscience**, stressing its priority in practical decisions.

For most of us, of course, the spiritual insights and the devotional helps which he shares are of immediate and daily relevance.

The more we know of the life and works of St Alphonsus, the more we see God’s style in his life. We can see this style in the lives of saints but most clearly in the life and ministry of **Jesus**. It is a style which we ourselves can **consciously adopt** in all our relationships, even those which might be fraught. We will not fail if we try to remain close to people and treat them with compassion and tenderness.

St Alphonsus, in the vast range of his writings, is like the householder who brings out of his storeroom of knowledge and insight, things both new and old.

The last word -like the first word- is one of love, “not our love for God but God’s love for us when he sent his Son” (1 John 4:10).