

8. BISHOP FOR THE MOST ABANDONED

By Archbishop Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R. (Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan, CANADA)

Gospel Reading:

Mt. 9:35-37

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few".

The Gospel of the Lord

Let me begin by sharing my delight at being asked to share in this novena to St. Alphonsus, founder of the Redemptorist Congregation. In my more than 14 years now as a bishop, I have felt the distance that being a bishop necessarily creates for any religious who accepts such a ministry of leadership. I suggest to you that as it has been for me, so also for St. Alphonsus: he was never far from the call and inspiration that stirred him to become a priest, one who had a particular concern for the poorest and most abandoned of souls.

In putting these thoughts together, I must express gratitude to Father Théodule Rey-Mermet. His biography of St. Alphonsus, which he sub-titled "Tireless Worker for the Most Abandoned", itself took much of its material from Father Antonio Mario Tannoia, Alphonsus' first biographer.

There were many markers that gave shape and contour to Alphonsus' vocation. One that stands out occurred during the sabbatical that his spiritual director Bishop Thomas Falcoia prescribed for him, after he had worn himself out responding to the needs of the poor and abandoned in the city of Naples. "Spend some time in the country air of Scala", Falcoia commanded. "And while you're there, please meet a Sister Marie Celeste who is a spiritual daughter of mine." What ensued changed Alphonsus' life ever thereafter.

This gospel passage relates how the abandoned captured Jesus' heart. They had the same effect on Alphonsus Liguori. St. Alphonsus had what today we would call "a charismatic personality." Gifted in many ways, as writer, speaker, musician, artist, architect, lawyer, scholar, he was the sort of person that many of his contemporaries wanted to follow. He was a leader. As often happens with leaders, some of his followers were quick to join his side, only to find in time that the demands of the enterprise are much greater than their ability to respond. This also was true of Jesus. A personality such as Alphonsus' generates its own dynamism, and his name was on the lips of many as they observed his words and actions. So it is little wonder that in many influential circles, Alphonsus' name was raised when the conversation turned to those who might be named as a bishop. No doubt, there were many who spoke to Alphonsus' face in this way.

Before I get too far into this, I feel the need to point out the nature of episcopal ministry in the Kingdom of Naples in the 1700s. Now, to quote a Redemptorist confrere who often quoted this line to me, "a text without a context is a pretext". I found a great disparity between what Rey-Mermet describes as the Church in Alphonsus' day, compared to what we see today,

at least in my Canadian context, but I suspect this will apply to most of you as well. In trying to grasp the life situation in Alphonsus' time and place, a number of elements stood out for me in reading Rey-Mermet's Part Four:

Bishop Liguori:

1. Italy (not yet a unified country) was very Catholic, where Church and State occupied the same arena. For example, kings and princes would propose names of candidates to be named as bishops or cardinals. Furthermore, the Church had jails and prisons, as also did the civil governments of the day.
2. Catholic identity was largely cultural. All persons were baptized and practiced their faith with a modicum of devotion, but the consistency of practice and the depth of piety varied widely.
3. There were many who chose to enter the priesthood or religious life. The Kingdom of Naples of his time, made up of "the Two Sicilies", had many small dioceses, 147 to be exact. The king of Naples nominated bishops for 22 of them; the Holy See provided for the other 125.
4. Dioceses were small, with disproportionate numbers of priests and religious. The Kingdom of Naples, which covered southern Italy, had 4.5 million people. These were found in 186 dioceses and prelacies. 81 of these served less than 10,000 inhabitants each. St. Alphonsus' diocese, Saint Agatha of the Goths, had about 40,000 people. He had more than one priest per 100 faithful.

In such a context, we can easily imagine the state of the clergy in the kingdom of Naples of his day. This could likely be said of the clergy in other places as well in that era: the esprit de corps among clergy was deplorable. This was certainly true of priests, but could also be said of bishops. In short

there were too many clerics, and many of them struggled to make a living from the small and insignificant responsibilities that they held. Many gave in to unworthy pursuits, and living a life of leisure and distraction, earning whatever sustenance they could from whatever source of revenue they could find. As for Alphonsus, he had no interest in becoming a bishop. Far from it, he was horrified at the thought. In his understanding, a bishop's very soul was in peril because of the preoccupations and lifestyle of bishops, as he had come to view this during his initial years of ministry to the most abandoned.

In the year 1747, when Alphonsus would have been 51 years old, King Charles of Naples wished to make him the Archbishop of Palermo. It was only by the most earnest entreaties that he was able to escape this assignment. This did not deflect further speculation that he would make a fine bishop, and so the Holy Father himself appointed him as the bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths in 1762. This time his refusal was not accepted by Pope Clement XIII.

Being himself a firm believer in the virtue of obedience, when the Pope insisted on his appointment, Alphonsus felt constrained to accept. The wheels were now put in motion. As was the custom of the day, he went with two companions to Rome where he paid expected visits and homage to the higher Roman clergy, and was subjected to a theological exam of sorts, which he earnestly hoped he would fail. He also made a pilgrimage to the Holy House of Loreto, which pilgrimage gave evidence of his deep and sincere devotion to Our Lord, the Blessed Mother, and the mission of the Catholic Church.

He was ordained a bishop on Sunday June 20th in the chapel of the Most Holy Savior in the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, by the laying

on of hands by Cardinal Ferdinando Rossi, principal consecrator. Shortly thereafter he headed to his new charge, passing through Naples where he met several dignitaries before heading to St. Agatha of the Goths. This was a very small Neapolitan diocese, lying a few miles off the road that runs from Naples to Capua. Here he was the shepherd for 40,000 uninstructed people, 400 mostly indifferent and sometimes scandalous secular priests, and seventeen more or less relaxed religious houses to look after, in a field so overgrown with weeds that they seemed the only crop. There he wept and prayed and spent days and nights in unremitting labour for thirteen years, holding on to a fervent desire to return to his Redemptorist confreres, who were his first love.

What characterized his ministry as bishop?

The ministry of a bishop is unlike that of a priest. While all three levels of the sacrament of Holy Orders – deacon, priest and bishop – derive from the same commission of Jesus to the early Christian community, there is enough variance among these orders that the candidate for each may lose touch with his initial inspiration as he adjusts to new challenges and responsibilities. While this is true, as we read the life of St. Alphonsus, we should take note that nothing was lost of his initial zeal in becoming a priest and a missionary to the poor and abandoned. I suggest five ways in which this was manifested in his episcopal ministry.

1. *He expressed a deep commitment to the poor and abandoned.* Alphonsus was always attentive to the poor, the uneducated, people whose lives were simple but who needed the Word of God and the Church's sacraments to assure them of God's love and care. This was a challenge to those who surrounded him, who felt that he should live a more dignified life than he

in fact displayed. He made himself available to everyone who wished an audience with him, in search of his presence or counsel, regardless of their own state in life. More than once, persons in their need and destitution would lash out at him, cursing the bishop for their own sorry lot in life. Alphonsus would not respond in his own defense in such cases, while his assistants thought he should, in defense of his office if not his person. In the year 1763-1764, there was a famine in the land that was exacerbated by the laws and customs of the time, which allowed land-owners to hold onto their much-needed produce while they awaited conditions that would allow them to get a higher price for their produce. While calling on rich land-owners to open their warehouses for the needs of the poor, Alphonsus himself had his staff open his residence's stores of food, and to buy as much as possible with their meagre resources to meet the need of the many who came to the door for relief. He saw the income he received from his offices as not for this own use and luxury, but as belonging rightfully to the poor and needy. In February of that year, a mob of the hungry decided that the mayor of the town was responsible for their sorry fate. They stormed his residence, but only after he escaped and fled to Bishop Liguori's residence for refuge. Alphonsus went to the door to meet the crowd, and offered his own life to spare the mayor, whom he said was not responsible for their sorry fate. He then took what was left in his own larder and the seminary and give this to the hungry crowd. Meanwhile, Alphonsus' own health was deteriorating.

2. He believed in the power of the preached word to touch the hearts of listeners. Alphonsus persisted in his conviction that good preaching, in simple language that all could understand, is necessary for all, especially those who knew little about the gospel or the benefits of salvation. As he began his ministry in the diocese, he had other preachers including Redemptorists join

him in preaching a diocesan-wide mission. Once he had settled in his mind that this retirement was imminent, he called on missionaries to repeat this experience throughout the diocese. At one point, having heard that many Masses and spiritual exercises were celebrated in the diocese without the benefit of an instructive and well-prepared but simple homily, he decreed that such sermons be delivered at every Mass throughout the diocese.

3. *He reformed the clergy, including bishops, and the culture of clericalism.* Alphonsus saw the need for this well before becoming a bishop himself. Tannoia, Alphonsus' first biographer, tells it this way: "As he travelled through the provinces, Alphonsus deplored the indolence of many bishops who enjoyed the properties of their churches without assuming the responsibility of their episcopal duties. Wishing to be of service to them by awakening in them the zeal pertaining to their position, he summarized their obligations in a little book which was as slim in size as it was weighty in substance. He sent it to all the bishops of Italy." This booklet was titled *Useful Reflections for Bishops on How to Govern Their Churches Well*. He wrote it in 1744, 18 years before he himself became a bishop. This was not the first such book to be written for bishops. But his was noted for its brevity. In the Introduction, he wrote: "There is no lack of books dealing at length on the duties of prelates in the government of their churches. I have observed, however, in the course of twenty years of missions, that much information does not reach the bishops. Solely for the desire of the glory of Christ, I have briefly noted in these few pages a few important reflections that may be of considerable use to bishops in carrying out the principal duties of their office: the seminary, the ordinands, religious and parish priests, the bishop's residence, and the nuns. I have also offered suggestions about the best means to sanctify one's flock: prayer, good example, residence, pastoral

visits, the missions, the synod, prudence in seeking counsel, willingness to give audiences, and courage in correction. These duties and these means of sanctification are contained in two brief chapters, in the hope that, through divine goodness, these poor pages, which do not even deserve to be read if their author's worth is considered, will at least be read and considered for their brevity."

I focus on this little book by Alphonsus because obviously, when he himself was made a bishop, he was called upon by his conscience to behave in ministry as he had counselled bishops before him. These were for the most part good men, but Alphonsus believed their time and energies were wasted in petty quibbling on matters of little consequence to the salvation of souls. Alphonsus expressed the conviction that a holy and zealous bishop could change people, if he realizes that this is his responsibility. "The mitre is a great weight on a bishop's conscience", he stated. Responsibility belongs to the responsible. He carried this thought over to all bodies in a diocese. On the diocesan level, he contended that "the sanctification of the people depends on the bishops." In the parishes, "the progress or ruin of the faithful depends on the parish priest". In monasteries, "observance or relaxation depend on the superiors and confessors". In the seminaries, "a good rector, good professors, and mature, spiritual and firm prefects" were needed to have good seminarians. Speaking of seminaries, 12 years later (in 1756) he published another work, "Regulations for the Seminaries". Again, he hoped bishops would read its 43 pages of practical advice for the bishop, the rector and the prefect. Father Rey-Mermet points out that one reflection stands out in his advice to bishops. Quoting the Council of Trent, Alphonsus underlines the bishop's most important duty as "preaching personally," more so than presiding at Mass or ordaining priests. The placing of the book of gospels on

the bishop's head at his ordination is not a mere ceremony, for people will be more moved by the voice of their shepherd than of other pastors.

4. *He lived a simplicity of life that expressed his view of himself as a servant and not served.* This was evidenced in many ways. In the custom of the day, a bishop would not ride on the saddle of a horse, but in a carriage. As Alphonsus was making ready for his taking office in St. Agatha of the Goths, the question arose of a carriage. Alphonsus was very careful about his manner of transportation, as he didn't want to give a wrong impression to his clergy or scandal to his people. As he considered his options in this regard, he settled on what turned out to be a buggy pulled by donkeys rather than a horse-drawn carriage. Even this he sold in the famine of 1763-64, so as to buy more food for the needy and destitute. There is also a well-known instance of the cassock that he preferred to wear most of the time, that identified him as a poor and needy priest rather than the bishop of a diocese. As he called in on a fellow bishop one day dressed in this way, the servant who met him at the door paid little attention to his request to meet with the local bishop. When finally the servant announced Alphonsus' presence to his master, the local bishop was apologetic that Alphonsus did not receive the attention and honour that was his due. On his many travels, as Alphonsus and his assistants were offered hospitality in the residences of bishops or other dignitaries, Alphonsus would inspect the sleeping quarters to see that his attendants received the better bed for sleeping, while he insisted that his straw mattress on the floor was sufficient for himself.

5. *He saw the need for reform at many levels of Church life;* In reading the many incidents of his ministry as a bishop, Alphonsus exemplified what in our day we would call "speaking truth to power". This was true both in his

dealing with prelates, as already spoken of in his pamphlet on how bishops should conduct their affairs, as well as his admonitions to civic leaders. In 1775, Alphonsus' letter of resignation was accepted, for reasons of his ill health. At the same time, it was recognized that in contrast to some bishops of his day, he ruled his diocese from his sick bed better than others who enjoyed good health and fortunes. Ever solicitous for the well-being of his diocese, he wished to retract his retirement when he heard who was to be named as his replacement. There was a four-years hiatus before that bishop took office in St. Agatha, by which time he had become very accustomed to life in the imperial city of Naples. He had no power to do so by then, so he resigned himself to return to the Redemptorist community that he loved so well. He was deeply joyful to return to his confreres, as they were also to have him back among them. While no longer the superior general, he was designated the "director" until death. His last mortal efforts were spent in trying to return the Congregation to a legal and real unity. He died on August 1st, 1787, trusting that all things are in God's provident hands.

In conclusion, I am grateful for the model of bishop that St. Alphonsus is for me personally. Like Alphonsus and many of my contemporaries in the episcopacy, my nomination as bishop came as a surprise and a shock. I am encouraged by Alphonsus' vision of episcopal ministry, as well as his understanding of the needs and the blessings of the Church. I believe Alphonsus was a man before his time, if only because he saw Church ministry, all Church ministry, in terms of service, self-denial, and the needs of the poor and marginalized. This was also Jesus Christ's firm teaching to the twelve and to all who would follow after them.