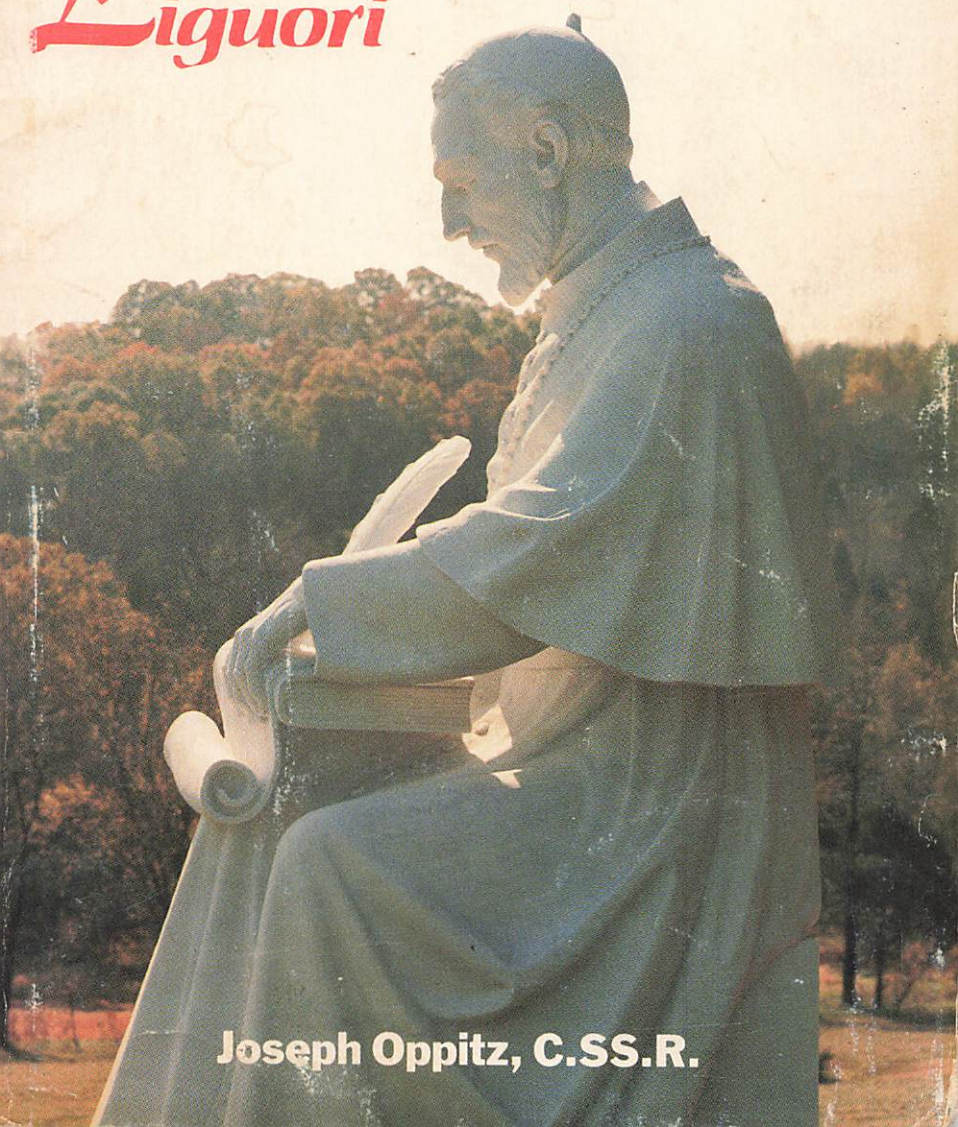


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



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October 15, 1779
Feast of Saint Teresa

2.

My Father, The Captain of the Ship

What a morning! Letters to read and letters to write. Practically every Redemptorist from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic is writing to me with advice as to how to keep the king happy so that we can finally get his royal approval for our Rule. Just this August, the king was good to us in giving his *placeat* to at least the external government of the Institute which I started back in 1732. So you see, we have been waiting many a year for his royal approval. If you knew the sweat and tears it cost me to get the pope's approval back in '49, you would sympathize with me now, as the king's ministers are slowly but surely driving me crazy with their "stress this" and "drop that."

Getting back to these memoirs is really a pleasant diversion. I believe I ended my reminiscing with something about Papa. Ah, yes, Papa! What a complex person he was. In some ways he was the typical military martinet. He was almost as proud of his warship as he was of his home and his noble ancestry. These were

three of the Big Four in his life. The fourth was his piety, of which I shall tell you later.

Mama and Papa were born in the same year, 1670. They married when they were twenty-five, she, a convent-trained maiden, and he, a dashing naval cadet. My father proceeded to produce eight little Liguoris in ten years with, of course, my mother's loving and obedient cooperation. Whenever he was at home, Papa ran our house with the same stern and *absolutistic* qualities with which he ran his warship, but mother was always there, "on the bridge," as it were, to soften his tirades and to help us ride out the storms of his wrath. Since he was at sea for long periods at a time, we did get frequent "grace periods" between his periodic military-domestic maneuvers.

As the firstborn male child, I was singled out as the special target of his paternal demands. Unless you are Italian, you cannot really appreciate what the privileges and the burdens of primogeniture really mean. I must say that as a teenager I got to know more about the burdens than the privileges. There were many days when I, like the biblical Esau, would have been glad to sell my birthright for even less than the proverbial mess of pottage. Later on, when I was in my twenties and did finally decide to renounce my primogeniture privileges in favor of young Hercules, I thought my father would have a stroke on the spot. I am sure they must have heard his screaming all the way over on the Isle of Capri. You see, while I was still in baby clothes Papa had already planned my whole career. I was to marry into money and nobility, preferably blood nobility. With continual asthma and frail health, I would not sustain a military career and so I was to become a successful lawyer. And finally, the plan included my fathering another brood of ambitious Liguoris — all for the honor and glory of that illustrious name.

However, I am happy to tell you that I not only inherited my father's blood and name, I likewise inherited a large dose of his

stubbornness, which is probably why we both had high blood pressure. As I look back now, I see a whole pattern of both minor and major skirmishes between the Captain and myself. The minor skirmishes were usually about my education and social life, and the latter included his manipulating to marry me off. The major skirmishes came later when he did all in his power to block my priestly and religious vocation.

The education which he planned for me, right up to the university level, involved a gruelling schedule of studies. All the humanities were done at home with hired tutors. By the time I was twelve I had already plowed through Latin, Greek, French, music, math, Italian poetry, and a sizable dose of Cartesian philosophy. Fencing and the military arts were thrown in as a bonus, but I strenuously objected to these as I had no intention of entering a military career — even if the Lord gave me a sudden miracle of better health. My father was not happy about my attitude toward the career he loved.

My core tutor was a Calabrese cleric with a Calabrese temper. His name was Dominic Bonaccia. I must admit that he was an excellent teacher though a tough taskmaster, which is probably why the Captain hired him. There he was — breakfast, dinner, and supper, and all the hours in between. If I did manage to escape him now and then, my father was the first to hear of it the minute he returned from his trips at sea. I remember one of those rare free evenings when I had the misfortune of returning home rather late after an even rarer evening of card playing. My father, in a rage, was waiting for me in my room. He had thrown packs of cards all over the floor and now stood there screaming: “So these are your teachers now!” Good old Papa, he always was a master of the melodramatic.

Music got the largest part of my time. Have you ever known a Neapolitan who did not love music? Well, we were Neapolitan to the core. My father used to lock me up in the music room with the harpsichord for three hours each day. Sometimes he would get

involved in business elsewhere and go off with the key in his pocket. Then the hours became four and five. Despite all that, I never lost my love for music. Until very recently, when my fingers got arthritic, I enjoyed entertaining the theology students and novices with an impromptu concert now and then. I also took great delight in composing popular spiritual *canzioni* for use in my apostolic work in the slums of Naples. Later on, in the mountains, I taught some of these songs to the goatherders and the shepherds. These people, with their homemade flutes and their bagpipes made of goat bladders, were quick to pick up my simple and singable melodies. Indeed, just recently one of my missionaries told me that they are still playing and singing my Christmas carols all through the Mezzogiorno. My own favorite was a lovely piece called *Tu Scende dalle Stelle*. I believe that one is the favorite of the poor peasants, too. In their poverty, they find it easy to identify with a God who came down from heaven to be born in a lowly cave. Many of my simple friends up in the mountains are born, live, and die in the caves.

While Papa was quite successful in making me an intellectual sophisticate, he was not successful in his role of matchmaker. Would you believe that he tried to arrange a marriage for me with a distant cousin, Teresa Liguori, while we both were still minors? That family was also of the nobility and, since there was no male child in the family, my father saw a chance not only for a fat dowry but also for a fat inheritance — all for the benefit of his little “Fonsy.” (That was his affectionate name for me; I hated it.) This brought another of our skirmishes out into the open. However, unfortunately for Papa’s plans, while he was about his marriage-manipulating, the girl’s mother conceived and bore a male child. All the plans went out the window. I was delighted.

I certainly had not been wild about the idea of marriage and neither was sweet Teresa. So we both sighed in relief when her

baby brother came along. Like myself, Teresa had plans of her own. Shortly after this engagement fiasco she went off to a Carmelite convent where she died a very holy, if premature, death. Though we both were certainly too young to have been in love, I do, after all these years, remember her with affection. I was delighted some years later when her Carmelite superiors asked me to write a short biography of this dear girl for the edification of her Carmelite family. There is a saying that only the good die young. Here I am pushing eighty-four; so what does that say about me?

The Captain was not one to give up easily! A few years later he tried again. The game plan was substantially the same — rich and titled girl. Only this time I was a bit older and a bit more stubborn. Besides, by this time I was into a severe bout of scrupulosity about things of the flesh; I was scared to death of the opposite sex. My scruples were so bad that I hardly even looked the young lady in the face when Papa forced me to social events at which she was present. That was when I began my trick of taking my glasses off whenever she was around, a trick I also used at the opera. Without my glasses I was practically blind. The poor girl became scared of me and finally said: "How can I ever marry a man who won't even look me in the face?" That ended that! Ah, well, she became a member of our family anyhow as my sister married into that family some years later.

Scrupulosity is a terrible affliction, and I can say from personal experience that sexual scrupulosity is the worst form of all. The reason should be obvious. There is just no running away from one's own body; it is there with you morning, noon, and night. My teen years were a real torture. Somewhere along the line I think that Mama, in training us, had overstepped that thin line between a tender conscience and a scrupulous conscience. As an aged moralist, I am tempted to blame it all on her own convent training. Of one thing I am sure: We children inherited a rigid morality from somebody. The last time I saw my brother, Cajetan, he reminded

me with a laugh of how, during our teen years, I would have him tie my hands with ropes at night lest perchance I should happen to touch myself during sleep. Now that is scrupulosity to the *nth* degree! What craziness we practiced in the name of sanctity! There were days when I was truly convinced that I was almost damned. At one point I even gave serious thought to a quick death as the only solution for that awful anguish. This miserable condition continued until I fell under the strong hands of Thomas Falcoia, the best spiritual director I ever had. I do not say that he cured me totally; I wonder if there ever will be a total cure for this affliction. However, as you can see from a reading of my *Moral Theology*, he certainly taught me how to surmount the scruples. So much for that sad state of my life.

Looking back over what I have just written about my father's marriage machinations, it occurs to me that you might get the wrong impression of my father. He was not totally worldly, ambitious, and self-centered. I must admit that as I grew older I did worry about these facets of his personality and I told him as much. However, deep down there was a solid piety that balanced out many of his faults. When I was a boy I visited his warship in the harbor and was surprised at the deliberate poverty of his cabin; it was as bare as the cell of a Camoldolese monk except for four miniature statues of the suffering Christ, which sat on a shelf near his bed. Come to think of it, I believe that after he died I donated those statues to our Redemptorist community at Ciorani.

Papa was also a great devotee of the lay retreat movement which, at that time, was under the control of the Jesuits and the Vincentians. Every year he would haul me, as his companion, to the Lenten retreats for men. It was at one of these Vincentian retreats that my real conversion took place. I think it was in 1722, which would have made me twenty-six years old. Not that I was an immoral roustabout! My scrupulosity kept me from that. But there was a period in my early twenties when I felt that I was drifting into

a kind of moral lukewarmness, what with the social whirl of the opera and the theatrical comedies into which Papa was constantly pushing me. At one of these retreats I went so far as to make a private vow not to marry. The great preacher of the Vincentians, Father Cutica, gave me his permission to do so. Naturally, we kept that a secret from my father. He was not yet ready for that kind of shock.

Another thing that kept me on the straight and narrow was my membership in all sorts of confraternities. They were really religious clubs, organized for the youth of our day. As early as the age of nine I belonged to one that was specifically for the sons of the nobility. As I grew older I graduated to more adult groups which were usually divided according to the professions; for example, I belonged to one that was restricted to lawyers and law students. These confraternities were a great idea! They combined prayer, catechesis, and a broad spiritual guidance with picnics in the countryside and other forms of good, clean fun. They also did a certain amount of apostolic work which was in proportion to our age and our ability. As a young lawyer, I did my apostolic work in the famous Hospital for Incurables; that was just a euphemistic name for the hospital whose patients were suffering the horrors of venereal disease — at least that was true of the majority. I not only helped the patients in their spiritual needs by praying with them and helping them prepare for death, but I also aided the overworked staff in bathing and bandaging the sick. If I had ten *scudi* for every hospital bed that I made, I could have retired for life at an early age. I was also a member of another confraternity whose main work was the spiritual care of prisoners condemned to death.

Coming from the affluent and well-protected lifestyle of the nobility, these confraternity experiences certainly initiated me into the poverty, the heartbreak, and the overall seriousness of life among the less fortunate folk of our town. They knew of the Neapolitan *la dolce vita* only by hearsay. I think that my work with

the sick and the dying had a lot to do with some of the spiritual books that I produced later in life, for example, the *Preparation for Death*. Many a night I sat at the bedside of a person for whom death was not just some abstract and far-off possibility but rather a real and a foul-breathed certainty. Even now I am still amazed at how easy it was for the nobility to isolate themselves from the anxiety and tragedy that stalked the streets of Naples all around us. At any rate, I hope that the Church continues these apostolic organizations for young people. Incidentally, it was from these very organizations that I gathered many of my first companions when I started the Redemptorists in 1732.

Back to Papa! Sad to say, our skirmishes grew into first-class battles when he found out that my career plans did not agree with his. Almost every time he was in port I seemed to set off his short fuse and there would be a mammoth explosion over one thing or another. I recall one day when I was rash enough to chide him in public. He turned suddenly and, in the presence of a whole room full of guests, slapped me in the face. All I had said was: "You never know when to leave off once you get started." I was not a child at the time; this happened when I was already in my twenties. Another time, when I refused to accompany him to one of the frequent receptions for the royalty of the kingdom, he bellowed at me: "I can't stand the sight of you any longer. I wish to God he would take either you or me out of this world." That is what you call "heavy stuff," even for a Neapolitan Papa! There were times when he and I did not talk to each other for days on end. Mind you, I am not saying that he was always the bad guy! I could be just as childish and willful as he. Poor Mama would get frantic with the two of us — trying to smooth his ruffled feathers one day and pleading with me to unlock my door and come to dinner another day. No wonder Mama got prematurely gray.

Anger was not the only weapon my father used on his domestic crew. He was a master manipulator and knew how to pull out all the

stops, even the sweeter ones when necessary. He could be, alternately, the "cunning serpent" or the "gentle dove." Even now I can recall the day when my father found out that I would be leaving Naples for good. The time had come for me to start my new religious institute and move out into the mountains to work for the poor and abandoned. Crestfallen, he came into my room, threw himself on the bed beside me, and there, in bed, embraced me for three solid hours, weeping and moaning, "Fonsy, Fonsy, do not abandon me; why are you leaving me?" I can honestly say, and I have repeated this to others many times, that those three hours were the worst hours of my life. I was on the verge of giving up my vocation for the sake of my brokenhearted father, who was literally smothering me with physical tenderness and emotional pressure. That took place when I was already in my thirties. Can you imagine such a thing happening with today's parents and children?

I had already compromised with him more than once in the face of such tactics. This time, however, neither tears nor threats worked. Earlier I had given up my desire to join my spiritual director, Pagano, in the Oratorians and became a simple diocesan priest instead — just to please my father. For the sake of peace in the family, I had even agreed to do my theology studies living at home and attending the seminary only as a day student for particular classes. But no more! It took all of thirty-six years, but "daddy's little boy" was finally going to do his own thing — or better, the Lord's thing. I had finally become a free person. Better late than never!

I think I had better take a break at this point. I am truly worn out, so you will have to forgive me if I rest a bit! Good-night to all of you.