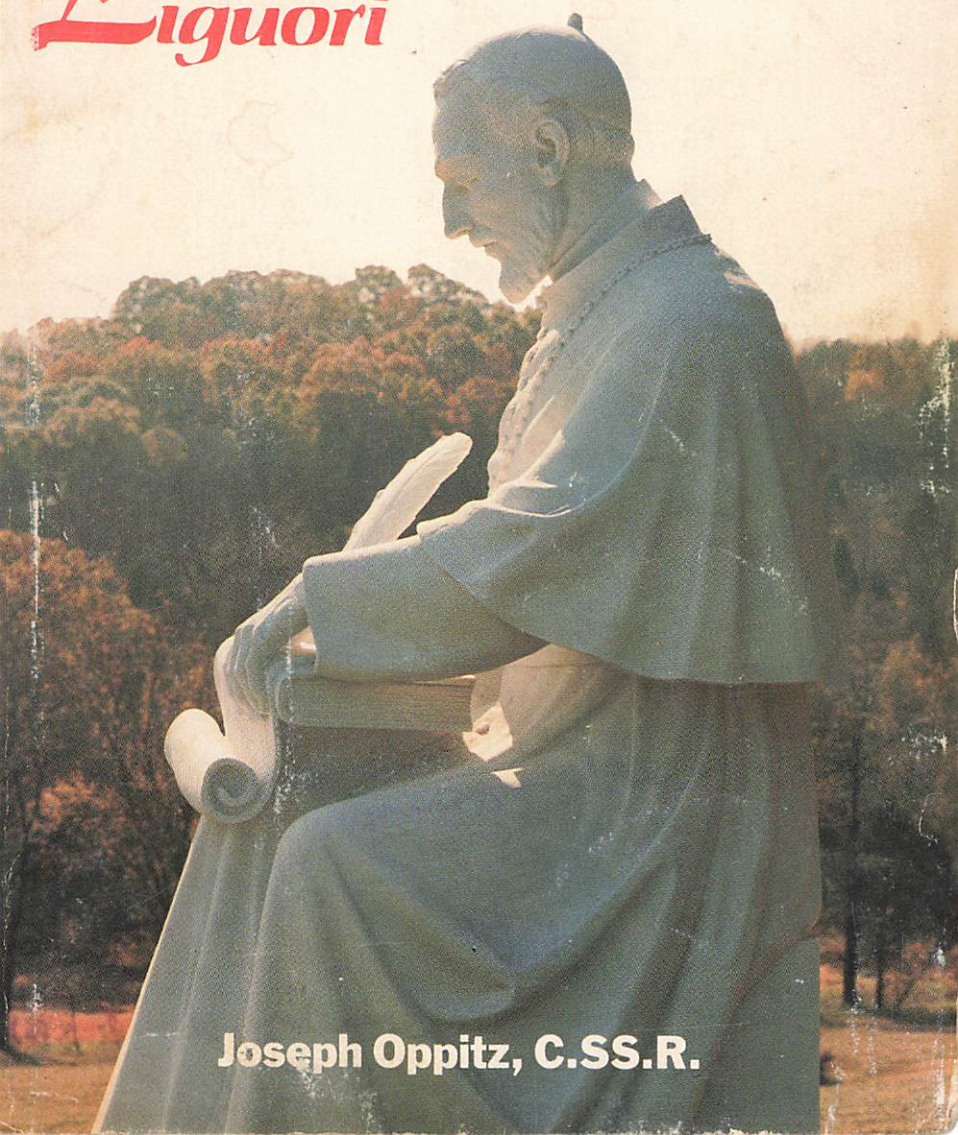


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



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3.

The Great Work Begins

I have already told you that my father had decided on a law career for me since he felt that I was too fragile for the military. By the time I was sixteen, going on seventeen, I had already been awarded degrees in both Civil and Church Law. Now they began to call me the wonder boy! At my graduation I looked, for all the world, like a child dressed up for a costume party. I remember how some of them tittered as I stumbled down the aisle with my lawyer's gown dragging behind me. Besides being young, I was then, and still am, rather on the short side.

I received my degrees in 1713. The laughing stopped when I got down to work. But now my tender, and at times scrupulous, conscience began to anguish over all the possible loopholes in Italian law. As you know, Italy has been an occupied land for centuries, and still is! Greeks, Lombards, Normans, Germans, and most recently the Austrians — all have come and gone, but they left behind a veritable mountain of laws. The result has been that

we Italians, the perennial survivors, have been left with what amounts to a legal Tower of Babel. But Papa had trained me to be a perfectionist and so, as Caesar once said: "I came, I saw, and I conquered." Yes, I conquered! Never lost a case! Then came 1723 and I fell flat on my face . . . and not because I tripped on my gown.

Because of my growing reputation as a lawyer, a real legal plum fell into my lap. The litigation was between the Duke of Gravina and the Lord of Tuscany. It involved over 600,000 *ducats*, a sizable sum back then. The dispute was primarily over a land inheritance. I worked on that case for months, burning the midnight oil many a night. There seemed to be a doubt as to whether the case should be tried under an older feudal law or under a more recent set of laws. To make a long story short, I opted for the older process as the proper legal forum for the trial.

Finally, the big day came. The court was packed. I presented what I thought was a brilliant case. Sad to say, not only the opposing lawyer but even the judge himself disagreed with my choice of the older feudal law and I lost the case. My friend and former teacher, Judge Caravita, tried to console me. "After all," he said, "even the gods nod now and then." But I had nodded so badly! Perhaps I just had too many other things on my mind during those days of tension with my father. Or maybe my heart really was not in a law career at all. Nonetheless, the truth is that I was humiliated. For three days I locked myself in my room, refusing to talk to anyone. Poor Mama did not know what to do this time. Then suddenly it dawned on me: If losing one single case could so shatter me, maybe I was beginning to take on all those qualities of ambition, prestige, and worldly honor which were so characteristic of the society in which we were living. And once more I asked myself whether I really would be happy in that kind of world. At any rate, the bottom line to this whole affair was: *Addio Tridunali!* Good-bye courtroom! And I meant it!

As I re-read what I have written, it all sounds very sudden and very melodramatic, doesn't it? To be honest with you, my legal dropout was not really all that sudden. I think the lost case was just the final straw that broke the camel's back. With each year of my legal practice, I was becoming more and more disillusioned and had all but made up my mind to enter the priesthood. My conscience was having a hard time surviving in what was often an atmosphere of dishonest manipulation of witnesses, of outright bribery, and even of perjury — all simply to win. I am certain that some of my lawyer companions believed with all their heart that the end justified the means, the end being success. With my high ideals I really don't think that I would have survived much longer in that ambient.

Just to show how high my ideals were, I will let you read seven rules which I drew up for myself when I first started out in law. In my naïveté, I thought that other lawyers would be interested in them, too. What a fool's paradise I was living in. It was only recently, when I was cleaning out an old trunk of mine, that I stumbled on these seven rules for lawyers. Here they are:

1. No lawyer should take what he knows to be an unjust case, one which is injurious to honor or to one's conscience.
2. Never defend even a just case by an unjust means. Be truthful, be straightforward, use solid arguments, and always be respectful in court.
3. Study the case thoroughly so as to be able to present it in the best possible way. Do it with as much care as if it were your own interests that were at stake.
4. Ask God's help, who is the chief promoter of justice.
5. If the matter is beyond your talents or the necessary preparation is too much for you, don't accept the case.
6. If a lawyer loses a case or injures a client through negligence or incompetence, he is bound to make restitution. The same is true if he causes the client needless expense.

7. Justice and uprightness should be the lawyer's constant companion and the apple of his eye.

I don't know how it is where you live, dear reader, but now that I am older and wiser, I do not think that too many lawyers in the Kingdom of Naples will be standing in line to get copies of my seven rules.

Where was I? Oh yes, my new career! I am happy to say that "Good-bye courtroom," soon became "Hello priesthood and religious life." Now the Lord began a little pushing of his own. We Italians have a funny word, *lume*. It can mean anything from a simple interior inspiration to an honest-to-God, supernatural vision. It was shortly after the courtroom disaster that I began to have a few interesting *lumi* of my own. Initially, they were just quiet, interior inspirations, probably a logical follow-up on the retreats I had made. But all of a sudden I began to feel like Paul on the road to Damascus. Here is what happened. After my final exit from the courtroom, I had time on my hands and so I threw myself into the work of my confraternity for the sick and the poor. The first major *lume* happened as I was winding up a particularly tiring day at the Hospital for Incurables. Lo and behold, there, by the bedside of a real down-and-outer, the floor began to tremble and I distinctly heard the words: "Leave the world and give yourself to me." My first reaction was to wonder if the fevers that had attacked me a few years ago were returning again. But even in my worst fevers I had not heard voices. The same thing was repeated again, later that same evening, just as I was walking down the steep steps at the hospital's front entrance. The message was the same and the voice was absolutely clear and vibrant. In utter fear and confusion, I ran to a nearby church, Our Lady of Ransom, and threw myself at the feet of the Madonna. Kneeling there in the dark, covered with a cold sweat, I most distinctly heard the same words all over again: "Leave the world and give yourself to me!" By this time I knew who was speaking to me and what the words

meant. Immediately, I stood up, took off my sword (that symbol of honor and prestige so dear to the Liguoris), and placed it on the altar — a symbol of my renunciation of all the wealth and pomp of my life up to that point. Then and there I vowed to follow wherever the Lord would lead me.

I had to act at once. After all, by that time I was already twenty-eight. With all my illnesses — my weak eyes, recurring migraines, and chronic asthma — how many more good years could I count on to be able to follow the Lord? The immediate problem, of course, was breaking the news to Papa. When I finally confronted the Captain, his answer was, “I wish to God you were dead!” Not a very affirmative response to say the least. It was this kind of borderline cursing of his own flesh and blood which made my blood run cold. For many years I have struggled with that great enigma, namely, how Papa, and myself for that matter, could seem to live at two levels of life at the same time; piety on the one hand, and almost a pagan naturalism on the other. It is a frightening thought! Maybe it is a lifelong contest that we all must struggle with until the day we die. I just don’t know! At any rate, my father finally agreed to a kind of peace treaty between us, my mother being the principal negotiator of that, and eventually, though quite ungraciously, gave his consent to his “little Fonsy’s” plans to follow that insistent voice of the Lord.

I will not bore you with a drawn-out narration of my four short years as a clerical student. I lived at home most of the time and attended the seminary as a part-time student, as I have already told you. Actually, although that was Papa’s idea it was a good one since I was much older than the little fellows in the seminary. Also, since I had had many of the courses which they were studying, I was able to accelerate my curriculum by a few years. I received my clerical cassock in 1723. Poor Papa wept with shame when I walked into the house for the first time in my dreary black and slightly faded second-hand cassock. In 1724 I received the tonsure

and the four minor orders. A year later came the subdiaconate and in 1726 the diaconate and the priesthood. It had been a true crash course!

All through my seminary days I was hoping that I could be ordained by my uncle, Bishop Cavalieri, but he died that very year. I think I missed him almost as much as Mama did (you recall that he was her brother). However, Mama's sorrow was soon turned into ecstasy on the day of my ordination. If I live to be one hundred, I shall never forget her tears of joy that mingled with my own when I gave her and my father my first priestly blessing. Sad to say, Papa was still not reconciled to my priestly vocation and kept whatever emotions he was feeling at my first Mass stoically under control. I do not believe that he really became reconciled to my being a priest until he heard my first sermon. That seemed to win him over. After that he characteristically began to plan an ecclesiastical career for his priestly Fonsy. Some years later, when the king nominated me to be the Archbishop of Palermo, I suspected that Papa's manipulation was back at work again. Much to my father's disgust and disappointment, I turned down the bishopric. It caught up with me in my old age, but being bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths was a far cry from Palermo.

As a seminarian, and then as a young priest, I made the mistake of driving myself right to the edge of complete exhaustion. Back in 1724 I had signed up with one of the most fervent missionary associations in Naples. It was called "The Congregation of the Missions," or more simply "The Propaganda." There were several other similar groups for seminarians and priests in and around the city. These groups were composed of the flower of the Neapolitan clergy and were known for their piety and learning. Unfortunately, however, these zealous clergy were in the minority. The main apostolic problem was that too few priests were expected to do too much. If my memory serves me correctly, I think there were about 56,000 secular priests in the Kingdom of Naples. Sad

to say, many were just simple "Mass-priests" who lived at home with their families and thrived quite comfortably on some rich benefice. Papa arranged just such a benefice for my brother, Cajetan. Cajetan was in charge of the "treasury of St. Januarius" at the Cathedral. (Januarius is the saint whose blood usually liquifies each year on his feast day; if it does not, we Neapolitans expect big trouble that year.) Papa tried to get a special benefice for me when I was ordained, but I would not hear of it. Besides, I was already getting an annual stipend from my job as a sort of councilman at the wardency of Portanova.

Seeing how much work there was to be done for the poor of the slums of Naples and its suburbs, I threw myself into the apostolic fray and was in seventh heaven. In general, the Propaganda concentrated on Naples and its immediate environs, though I do remember a few delightful trips to the offshore islands such as Procida. I wish I could count how many apostolic techniques I learned from the Fathers of the Apostolic Missions. My special friend and mentor was Canon Julio Tornì. He loved me like a son. In fact, when I finally left Naples to do my special thing in the mountains with the goatherders and the shepherds, he was almost as heartbroken as my father and, along with many men of the Propaganda, tried to talk me out of my new project.

Before I take you up into the mountains, I must tell you about the brainchild to which I gave birth in the slums of Naples. The poverty of the slums kept many of the poor away from church so I concluded that if they would not or could not come to the church, the church would go to them. That is how I started a whole series of what we called "evening chapels." Actually, they were storefront chapels where the simple folk gathered at night to learn about the Lord and then praise him in song and prayer. These chapels became so popular that we had a couple dozen running at the same time. Since neither I nor my friends were able to bilocate at that point, we trained a fine group of laymen — butchers, barbers,

dentists, fishmongers — who became the backbone of that great work. But a funny thing happened; we almost got into trouble with both Church and State. Someone turned us in to both the cardinal and the royal vice-gerent for running secret and subversive nocturnal meetings. The poor cardinal must have thought the Masons had come to town, while the viceroy worried that we were Deists in disguise, come down from France to undermine the government. It took all my powers of persuasion to convince them otherwise. Thank God they permitted the evening chapels to continue. As far as I know, they are still going strong after all these years.

Just as I hated the social whirl of my father's society, so now I really loved the apostolic whirl of which I was a full-fledged member. My new associates were truly the beautiful people of the Lord, men like Torni, Gizzio, Sarnelli, Sportelli, and Ripa. Most of them were from rather wealthy families, but had torn themselves away from the luxury and the snobbery of high society so as to find a more meaningful life working with the poor.

One of the most colorful of these apostles was Matthew Ripa. He had gone to China while I was still a *ragazzo* of thirteen. After many years, he returned to Naples to establish a spiritual center to acquaint the Church in Italy with the spiritual needs of the abandoned people of China and to recruit missionaries for that pagan country. It so happened that a few of my friends had already moved into his Chinese College. The stories they told me about this man drew me to him like a magnet. In 1729 I made the momentuous decision to move out of my parents house and to take up residence at the Chinese College as a boarder. Living there with so many dynamic, spiritual personalities was an exhilarating experience, yet, strange to say, it was during this period that the Lord sent me a first-class dark night of the soul. I remember running to Jesus but he refused to hear me. I turned to Mary and she, too, seemed not to listen. Out of sheer loyalty to my friends, I did continue with my

mission work and my other spiritual work, even though I was dragging myself from one day to the next. I still do not know how to describe those dark days; there seemed to be an overall feeling of uselessness and a kind of perpetual doubt as to whether this work I was doing was really the answer to: "Leave the world and give yourself to me." The desolation was something I would not wish on my worst enemies.

Finally, in 1730, my friends pressured me into taking a much needed vacation, something I had not done for years. Strange how stupid we can be in taking care of the gift of the Lord which is our own body. My newest friend and auxiliary spiritual director was Thomas Falcoia, whom I met at the Chinese College; he practically gave me an obedience to get out of Naples for a while and enjoy the sun and the sea of the Amalfi coast. So off I went, along with five of my friends — Panza, Popora, Jorio, Mannarini, and Mazzini. Due to a sudden change in the weather and a fluke in our transportation plans, we wound up in the hills high above Amalfi at a little town called Scala. From there we climbed another four miles higher to a rustic and long-abandoned hermitage with a dilapidated chapel dedicated to *Our Lady of the Mountains*.

What a view! From one side you could see the blue Mediterranean far below, and from the other a grand view of the purple Appenines off in the distance. What stole my heart was not the view but, rather, a weather-beaten statue of the Blessed Mother, my Number One Mama. This statue was called *Our Lady of the Mountains*. The unique thing about her, and that which appealed to me instantly, was that she holds her *Bambino* in one arm and the Bible in the other. I suppose the reason I fell in love with her on the spot was that this statue sums up the apostolic spirituality so dear to my heart, namely, a spirituality based on the Word Incarnate, Jesus himself, and on his dynamic mission described in the Gospels.

The goatherders and the shepherds were the soul of hospitality

to us six hungry priests. Many a night we sat with them on some rocky ledge beneath the stars overhead and the glittering lights of Amalfi below, and shared their black bread and their sour goat cheese. Some of them, indeed most, had not seen six priests in one and the same place during their whole lives. A good number certainly had not talked to a priest in years. So, after the bread and cheese we would tell them stories about Jesus and then sing them to sleep with Mary songs.

Day by day I felt my strength returning as we climbed the rocky slopes of Scala, Tramonti, and Ravello. Off and on we dropped into Scala to visit the old Cathedral and pray before its miraculous Holy Cross. Bishop Guerriero was an amiable host. I had already preached in his neighborhood with some of the men from Propaganda, so now he signed me up to preach during the Octave of Corpus Christi as well as to preach the September novena of the Holy Cross. I was delighted with both offers and accepted quite willingly.

When we finally packed our knapsacks and left *Santa Maria dei Monti* at the end of July, 1730, I felt like a new man. The only trouble was that I was returning to Naples with a troubled conscience. What right did I have to go back to Naples, where there were literally hundreds of priests and monasteries of religious, one-hundred-odd churches and chapels, and two-hundred pious confraternities, when I had just lived with and shared bread and cheese with mountain people who had not seen a priest or the inside of a church for years? I had thought that the *lazzaroni* of the slums of Naples were the most spiritually abandoned but, my God, I never dreamed that there was a place so close to Naples and yet so far, so very far, from God and his Church. These goatherders, woodcutters, and charcoal burners were the most spiritually abandoned people I had ever seen. My heart was breaking all the way home. Deep within me, my conscience kept telling me that here was the answer to the Lord's plea: "Leave the world and give

yourself to me.” But what about the work in Naples; what about my commitment to the Propaganda? On the other hand, the voices of the poor of Scala calling out to me as I departed: “Come back to us, Father Liguori, come back,” surely seemed like an echo of: “Give yourself to me.” The least I could do would be to pray and consult and then wait for a signal from the Lord. The Lord’s signal was not long in coming. While I was anguishing over what to do about the poor up in the mountains, the Lord was already drawing a blueprint for me. The blueprint was delivered at the hands of Thomas Falcoia and a unique little nun named Marie Celeste Crostarosa.

Oh my goodness! I have completely forgotten the time and here comes Brother with his medicine bottles again. You know what is probably in them, don’t you? Sleeping tonics — that is what they are! I have not been able to get a good night’s sleep for years. Now the doctors here in Pagani are making a fortune on me, in conspiracy, of course, with the druggists! But what can I do? Father Villani is running my Redemptorist Congregation now, and I have promised him that I would obey the Brothers, the doctors, and the nurses as if I were obeying Villani himself. So I shall have to obey the Brother and take my medicine and then go to bed. Good-night for now. Pleasant dreams! I will continue this story tomorrow if I am still alive.