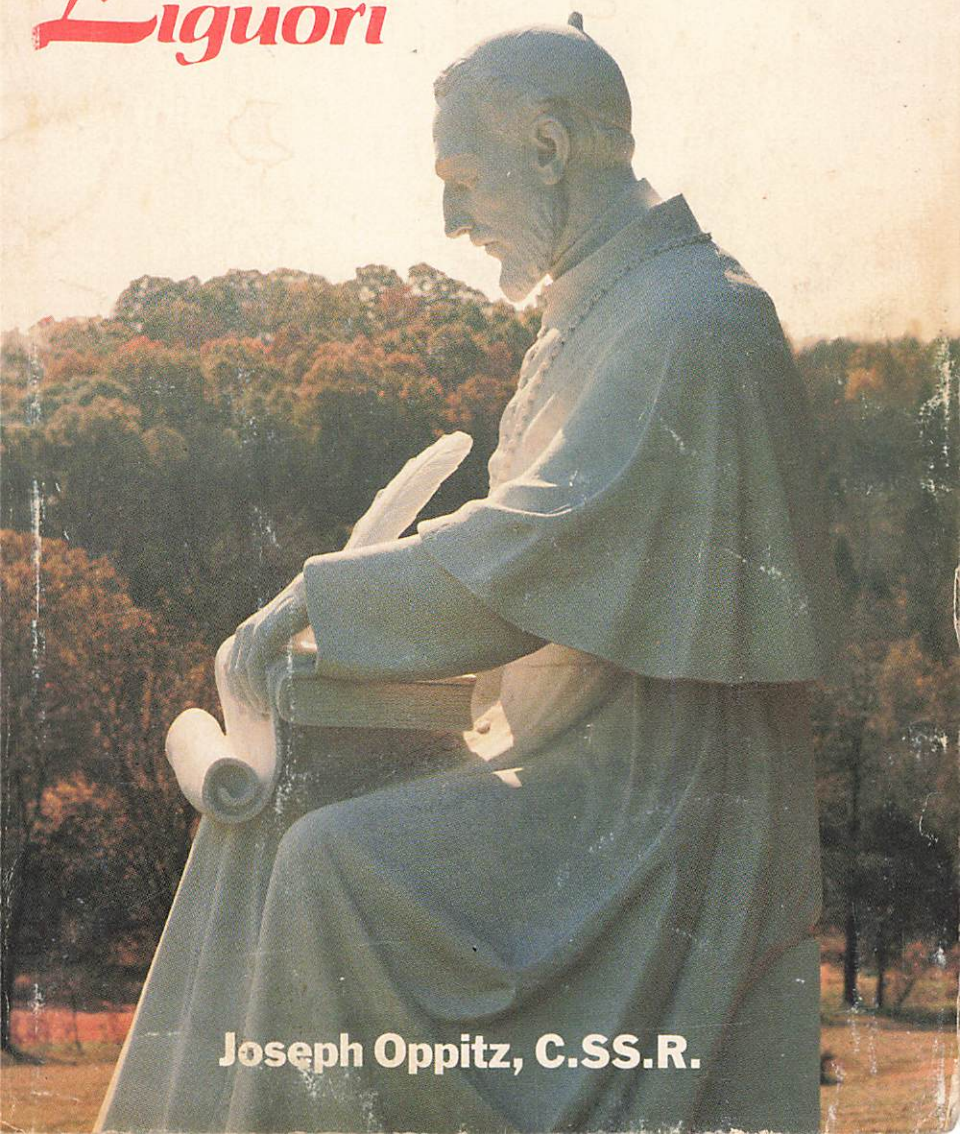


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



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December 20, 1779
Five days until Christmas

5.

Getting the Institute Started

They all thought I was dying the other night, but here I am again. The doctors did bleed me once more; they say it takes down the pressure in my head. They've bled me for years.

Looking at these notes, I see that I am supposed to tell you about the part Celeste played in my life and that of the Congregation. As I told you, it was Falcoia who brought Celeste and me together. Just as their mutual love of Christ united Francis and Claire, De Sales and Jane Chantal, Teresa and John of the Cross, so, too, it was our mutual love of Jesus and of his poor and abandoned that united Celeste and myself. I recall reminding her of this after she had written me an angry letter about the Falcoia affair. I told her, "Celeste, don't you ever use language like that on me again. Our love for each other in Christ is too deep for that kind of thing." Angry letters were rather exceptional. I have most of her letters around here somewhere, even after all these years. Most of the time our relationship was cordial and amiable.

It was October 3, 1731, the feast of Saint Francis, when Jesus and Celeste put the finger on me. That day, after Communion, Celeste had another of her revelations. This time my name was central in the scenario which Jesus unfolded for her. Within days she got word to me that Jesus had indicated that he wanted Alfonso Liguori for a very special job. I was thunderstruck. "What job?" I demanded. Her response, as usual, was rather long and complicated but it all boiled down to this: Alfonso Liguori was to start a male religious institute for the evangelization of the poor. Little did I know that I would be getting into this kind of predicament when just a year or two before I had put my seal of approval on her visions about the women's institute. Now she had me over the proverbial barrel; in no way could I get out of this situation.

As you probably know, it does not take long for word of visions and revelations to get around. Pretty soon Liguori and his crazy nun were the topic in clerical and religious recreation rooms all over Naples. The battle lines began to form immediately. Should I trust this latest *lume* of Celeste and sail out into uncharted waters in a new institute with all the risks that it implied, or should I stay with the Propaganda where my work was both secure and successful? I was shocked at the number of those who tried to stop me from taking the route of Celeste's revelations. Matthew Ripa was furious at the thought that I would be leaving the Chinese College group. My uncle, Canon Gizzio, was in a rage. I can still recall his exact words: "It is not God who is calling you to this new work but the fantasies of an unbalanced nun!" My answer was swift and to the point: "My life is guided, not by visions and revelations, but by the Gospel!" In my corner I had my friend, Pagano, the Oratorian, plus Manulio, the Jesuit Provincial, Cutica, the Vincentian, and the biggest gun of all, Louis Fiorillo, the Dominican. His reputation as scholar, saint, and man of great prudence made him a special ally. It had been Gizzio and Torni who insisted that I contact Fiorillo and abide by his decision. They were certain that

he would be able to talk me out of trying to establish yet another men's institute. What a surprise they got! Their advice boomeranged on them when Fiorillo sided with me and Celeste. At first he asked me to keep his name out of it, but to push ahead with the project nonetheless. Later it became impossible to conceal the name of this secret advisor.

The opposition was muted, if not completely silenced, by Fiorillo's affirmation of my new project. Poor Gizzio and Torni felt wounded and betrayed. In time, they backed off somewhat. Matthew Ripa, however, would not budge an inch. The men of the Propaganda tried to flatter me into believing that I was their best preacher and that their work would suffer terribly without me. That, of course, was nonsense! Papa, as usual, was my strongest opponent. I have already told you about that terrible scene in bed so I won't repeat it again. At this point, both Pagano and Fiorillo insisted that I take Falcoia as my full-time spiritual director. I guess they sensed that the ship I was about to launch would need a helmsman with a heavy hand. And so, with Falcoia's approval, and much to the delight of Celeste, I packed a few bags and moved to Scala. There, on November 9, 1732, I and a few hearty companions began the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. Our first home was an abandoned hospice on the property of the nuns. Celeste was just a stone's throw away.

Even now I wonder how I ever got through that awful year of 1732. Everybody was pushing me and pulling me in all directions. Even the Lord and his blessed Mother got into the push and pull. One day, while I was in the pulpit at Foggia, I and the whole audience saw the image of Mary in the so-called "Old Icon" begin to move. Had it been only myself, I would have worried about hallucinations. But the whole crowd saw the movement. I do not think they heard the wonderful things Mary said to me. I am not going to tell you *that* secret. When I returned to Scala and told Celeste and Falcoia what had happened, they both took it as a sign

from the Lord and Mary that I should move on with the new project. Then, as if that were not strange enough, Jesus himself began to do stranger things in the chapel at Scala. Not once, but at least five times, everyone in the nuns' chapel on September 16, 18, and 25, and again on November 6 and 7, saw what we called "the miracle of the Host." During the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the white Host would suddenly turn blood red and there, against the red background, we saw a miniature of the hill of Calvary with the crosses, a lance and sponge, and above the central cross the symbolic eye of the Trinity. This miniature was so distinct that one of my first companions, Vito Curzio, our first Brother, quickly drew outlines of what we saw. He then put them into a primitive sketch in wet plaster on the side of the oven he was repairing in the makeshift kitchen in the *Casa Anastasio*. That was the name of our little hospice. The last time I visited Scala you could still see his sketch on the side of the oven. Incidentally, you don't have to go to Scala to see it because we made what we saw in the Host the official seal of our Congregation. We added only the words of Psalm 130: "With Him is Plentiful Redemption." This text sums up the whole heart of our preaching.

Before I leave the topic of visions and revelations, I will tell you a secret that I have kept until just recently. I had a few other *lumi* of my own at Scala. Just down the road a bit were two empty caves, both with an outstanding view of the Amalfi Coast and the Mediterranean Sea glistening below the silver olive trees of the slopes. I used to sneak off to one of these caves as often as I could to pray and to get a bit of peace and quiet away from the nuns, who were always searching for me, as well as from some of my hyperactive confreres. More than once my Mama Maria spoke to me there! Unless she had consoled and strengthened me, I probably would have given up the whole Redemptorist project since, despite all the heavenly phenomena, things were not moving along as heavenly as I had hoped.

My first companions at Scala were all enthusiasts and great idealists. Their names were Caesar Sportelli, John Mazzini, Peter Romano, John Donato, Vincent Mannarini, Sylvester Tosquez, and Vito Curzio. They did not arrive at the same time. Only three had shown up at the appointed time, but we went ahead with the initial plans. The new bishop, Monsignor Santoro, was most kind in letting us use his cathedral for our inaugural ceremony. Little by little, the others began to dribble in. Another good prospect, Januarius Sarnelli, joined us a few months later.

Yes, they were all enthusiasts and idealists, and you know how easily such people get discouraged. That is exactly what happened. Practically all of these men were from better-off families and almost all were professional men. Therefore, the transition from fine homes, servants, and luxuries to our new lifestyle was not an easy one. Our *Casa Anastasio* was little better than a stone barn; the food was wretched and the social and cultural ways of the mountain folk lacked the etiquette and the amenities that we had taken for granted in Naples.

After the formal swearing in ceremonies there was a kind of brief and blissful honeymoon period. But then the in-fighting began. Most of us had been diocesan priests with little or no experience of community life and religious rules. Therefore, I insisted that we let Falcoia be the director of the project. Besides his vast experience, he also had influential friends and political connections in Rome as well as in Naples. We could use a bit of his clout if we were going to get the pope's and the king's approval. But Tosquez and Mannarini were not happy with Falcoia. Other disagreements also arose. Donato did not want Divine Office in common; I and Celeste did. Celeste wanted us men to wear a red, white, and blue habit, similar to that of the nuns. That, of course, was ridiculous and I opposed it with vigor. Imagine us missionaries, decked out in red, white, and blue, riding through the mountains on our donkeys. The *Americani* across the ocean would

have loved that as I hear that their new flag is made up of those three colors.

Still other battles were emerging, with the troops again taking sides. Celeste and Tosquez were all for absolute poverty while I was against that from the start. I told dear Celeste that if we were to dedicate ourselves to the poor and actually live among them in the countryside, there was no way in which I would permit my men to be a material drain on those people by a mediant type of poverty. Those poor folk had hardly enough bread and cheese for themselves and their children without having to worry about feeding us. No, no, no! Absolutely no living off the poor. If the local bishops and the *baroni* wanted our spiritual services, let them provide stipends or annuities and the material means for our support. I was, am, and always will be, hard-nosed about this poverty thing. Personal poverty — *Si!* but Corporate, mendicant poverty — *No!*

The type of apostolic work and the locale of that work also became topics for intramural squabbling. Some, especially bull-headed Mannarini, had their hearts set on teaching in schools. Such work is a fine thing and needed in the country areas, but I say let somebody else be the teachers. We are, first and foremost, preachers of the Word, evangelizers in the strict sense of that word. I reminded them that Jesus, in speaking to Celeste about our Institute, had used the Scripture text: "He has sent me to evangelize the poor." This was to be the core theme of our whole project. And this is precisely what I had in mind all along — a group of apostolic missionaries who would preach the Word of Redemption to the poor and the spiritually abandoned out in the country places. But Mannarini was so wedded to the idea of schools that he finally packed his bags and left us. He started his own Institute on the other side of the valley in the village of Tramonti. Good luck to him!

The final confrontation was over the location of our houses. My own feeling was that the missionary house should be so located

that we could be right there among the poor country people. On this I was unbending. I saw this as an integral part of my missionary strategy. Only on rare occasions did I accept a city place so that we could have a stable financial income for the benefit of the missionaries out in the country who, more than once, were on the brink of starvation. Things were so bad at one point that I even had to make an exception to my rule of no begging. I did permit some of the Brothers, like Gerard Majella, to go on mendicant tours. But I repeat, those were the rare exceptions.

So much for the battles! I hope, dear reader, that you are not scandalized at all this contention. It is, after all, proof that the Church and its religious orders and congregations have both divine and human elements at the same time, and I might add, often living together under the same roof.

The upshot of all this battling and carping was that, despite the hallelujahs and the hosannas of November 9, 1732, the day of our commitment, by Easter of 1733 there were just myself and Vito Curzio left at Scala; the others had abandoned ship for one reason or another. Talk about depression! I was almost ready to quit! It was only Falcoia's strong hand that kept me from volunteering for the foreign missions at the Cape of Good Hope. I had been toying with the idea of the foreign missions for a while and I guess the depression and discouragement only added fuel to the fire. Thank God for old Falcoia! Indeed, at that point I even took a vow not to abandon the project, come what may.

I suppose that God was simply trying my patience because he not only pulled me out of the pits but he also began to pile on the consolations. That, of course, is his usual way of acting. Sarnelli and Sportelli, who had been delayed, finally arrived. Soon there was a new candidate almost every month. In no time, our four tiny rooms in the *Casa Anastasio* were crowded and we had to begin to look for larger accommodations. One day, out of the blue, we were invited to a place called *Villa degli Schiavi* and were offered a

foundation there. I jumped at it, despite Falcoia's hesitancy, because it seemed to be an ideal spot for a mission house, right at the corner of four different dioceses. Since the bishop and the town dignitaries guaranteed a fixed annuity for us, we moved in as quickly as possible. With so many capable young men wanting to join us, I decided that the Villa would not only make a great mission house but would also serve as our first real novitiate. With Falcoia's approval, I became the first novice master.

The Villa worked out well but only for a short time. Very soon the locals began to welch on their financial agreement and, in the midst of all sorts of calumnies, we had to pull out.

Many a day our stomachs were growling so loud we could hardly hear ourselves preach. I was not going to put up with that kind of lack of fidelity to what they had promised us. This sad business did teach me a good lesson about contracts with bishops and barons, a lesson we would need in the next few years when we were swamped with requests for our apostolic work.

Falcoia and I had to make some hard-nosed decisions as to where we could do our best work with the personnel we had. Thus, by 1737 we had closed the foundations at Scala and the Villa. On the other hand, we opened two spiritual powerhouses, one at a small town called Ciorani, and the other at Pagani. Too bad you cannot see my gray hair and wrinkles; I owe most of them to Ciorani and Pagani. The Baron Sarnelli, father of Januarius, owned a good part of the Ciorani Valley. It was Januarius' brother, a diocesan priest, who persuaded me to move into Ciorani. Lucky for Ciorani that I had no idea of the grief the Sarnellis would cause me. I would probably have rejected the whole deal. For years and years we had to haggle with the Sarnellis over money and the property, plus the fixed income which they had promised me from the Sarnelli vineyards. I still have an occasional nightmare in which I dream about grapes, vineyards, broken winepresses, and wicked lawyers.

In Pagani, the opposition came not from the laity but from some of the clergy and religious of the area. They were afraid that we would be cutting into their stipends and collections. A well-meaning friend of ours gave them the handle for that accusation when he tried to organize a fund raiser for us without getting my permission. When I think about all the trouble I have had over buildings, property, and money, I marvel at how fortunate Jesus was during his short, three-year apostolate since he obviously did not have to wrestle with these damnable brick-and-mortar distractions. Thank God I had the suave Sportelli and the calming influence of Mazzini to smooth the ruffled feathers in Pagani. That whole period was enough to drive a person to drink.

One thing we did not have to spend money on was advertising. I never ceased to be amazed at the verbal news networks which the country people of southern Italy have developed to perfection over the centuries. We would hardly finish a mission in one hamlet or village when six other places in the mountains would have already heard about our preaching, our conversions, our healing of enmities, our kindness in the confessional, and our special love for the poor.

I must say, in all honesty, that old Falcoia and I really had a good thing going in the Redemptorist preaching apostolate. He and I had both experienced the best and the worst of the various mission-preaching groups in the kingdom. My own criticism of these groups was that they had no full-time commitment to a unified and permanent preaching apostolate. Priests signed up for as much or as little preaching as they wished. It was a very sporadic thing. Besides that, each plugged his own theological themes, often colored by his own personal idiosyncrasies in both content and style of preaching. There was no fixed lifestyle and certainly no community sharing. I actually knew one missionary who carted around his own gourmet food and drink. By and large, there was a great unevenness in both theology and spirituality. Even the best of

the groups never seemed able to forge any strong ideological, moral, or social links among the membership.

These are a few of the things Falcoia and I tried to remedy with our system. We formed a tightly knit apostolic community of missionaries, men dedicated primarily to the preaching of the Word of God among the poor; men who shared a common ideal, a common theology and spirituality, plus a uniform lifestyle. Of course, we also wanted our men to be deeply prayerful and contemplative in spirit. To this end, Falcoia spent most of his time wrestling with the proper formulation of a Rule which would express these ideas. Meanwhile, I was out in the countryside working out the practical aspects of our pastoral work. Celeste and I were in 100 per cent agreement that, for Redemptorists, the imitation and following of Christ must mean a following of the Redeemer precisely in his preaching of the Good News to the poor and abandoned, the little ones of his kingdom.

I believed then, and I still strongly believe, that our mission methodology had something unique about it. I wrote that very thing to Cardinal Spinelli and again to Pope Benedict XIV. Our nearness to the people, our popular style of preaching, our theological expertise with the fundamental truths, and our compassion in the confessional — all these things made people flock to us and we responded with a total availability.

I think the novices and seminarians who were crowding into Iliceto and Pagani grew tired of hearing me repeat the phrase “quality apostles” in every conference I gave them, but that is what I demanded. Everything in our lives — community, vows, contemplative spirit, the vow and oath of perseverance (something I put in on purpose to keep Neapolitan mamas and papas from stealing many a good man away from us) — everything had one purpose, namely, to produce quality apostles of the Word.

Well, the Brother is here with my hot chocolate — a bit earlier than usual — so I shall have to stop. I will enjoy my snack tonight

as a little celebration over all the good things that God allowed Falcoia and me to do for his Church these many years. Perhaps I shall even indulge myself and nibble on a few of the *dolci* which the nuns keep sending me. I shall have a private party in memory of Falcoia. The dear old man has been dead these thirty-seven years, but he is still very much with me. Sometimes, in the evening, I go out and sit under the lemon trees and there the two of us whisper together about the old days. The Brother has told the community that I am always talking to myself. Little does he know! I am really having an old man's conversation with many old friends who have beat me into eternity. These young people today would not understand this sort of thing. By the way, did I tell you that when Falcoia died he left me his favorite picture of the Madonna Maria? Good-night, and may the angels be with us all.