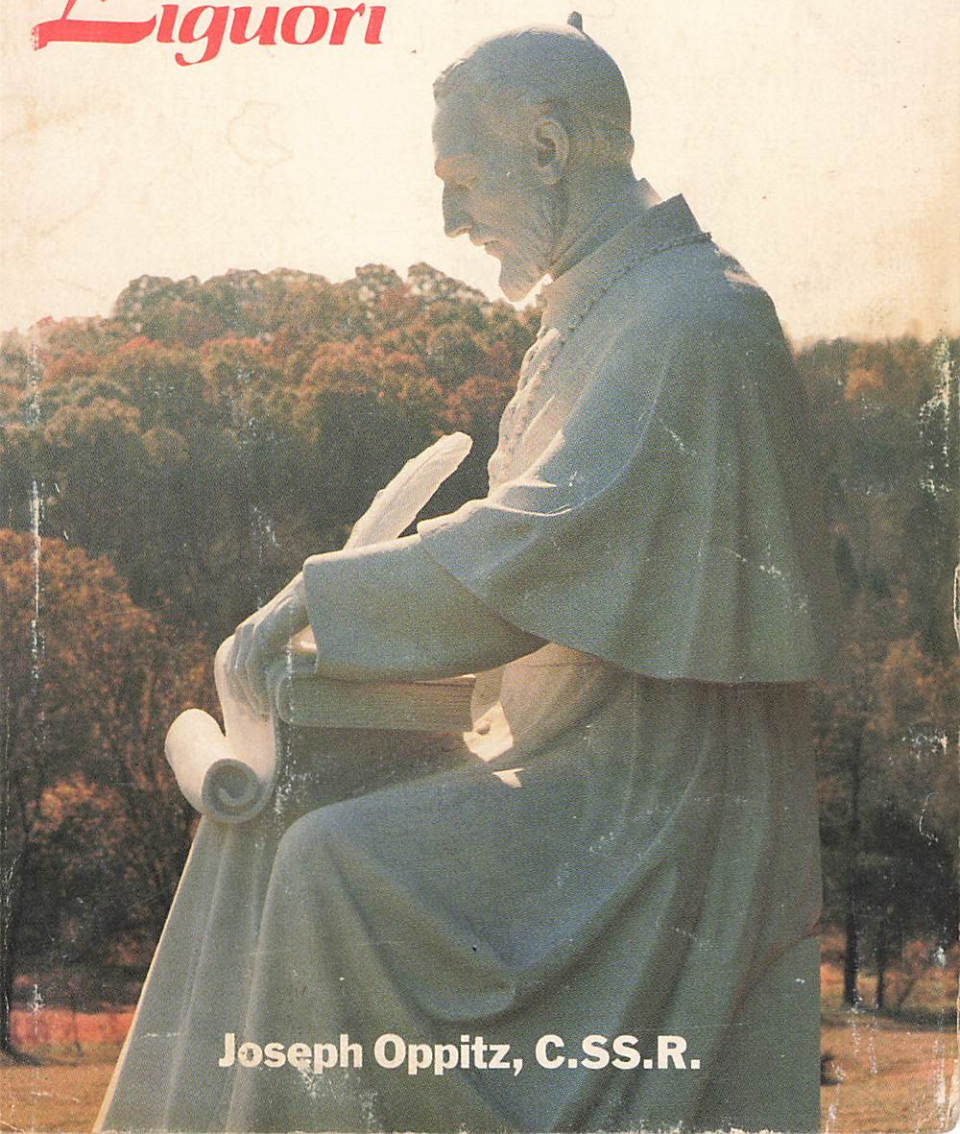


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



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6.

The Great Renewal

Poor me! This last year has not been a happy one for Alfonso Liguori. Perhaps 1780 shall treat me a little better, though I doubt it. What is worse, I have the sneaky feeling that my own confreres are deceiving me. My Vicar, Villani, has entrusted the whole royal approbation affair to the young crowd and they simply will not give me a straight answer, even when I am well enough to attend one of their meetings. Villani tells me that I am becoming a suspicious and grumpy old man. Maybe so! But half the time I cannot even hear when they do condescend to talk to me; I am almost stone deaf now! And how can I plow through the mounds of documents they drop at my door? My sight gets worse every day. From what I do see and hear, it seems that the king is constantly demanding more changes in the Rule. Fathers Majone and Leggio keep assuring me that the changes are minor and are really improvements. I doubt it! I am uneasy all the time. Perhaps getting back to these memoirs will take my mind off these terrible forebodings.

I read somewhere that to be religious means to live at the heart of the Church. That is true! I would add, however, that to be at the

heart of the Church one must also know what is happening in the world. We Redemptorists might resemble the Carthusians in the quality of our contemplative prayer, but our lifestyle must *not* be that of the hermits, cut off from the world. I argued many times with Celeste about this very thing. In the beginning she wanted to set up two classes of Redemptorists: those who would be missionaries and those who would be hermits. I would not hear of it! Throughout my life I have always tried to keep up with what was happening in both the Church and the world. I might add that I have always tried to make a contribution to both.

When I was in my prime, there were those who whispered behind my back that I was a compulsive activist. Some of the more pious insisted that I had taken a vow never to waste a moment of time. You shall have to wait till judgment day to find out about that. I am not telling. But vow or no vow, I have always felt that there is just so much to be done for God, his Church, and his world, that we simply cannot waste time merely talking about the problems of the Church and the world. We must act! No one could ever say to me the Scripture-words: "Why do you stand here idle all day?" Jesus sends us out for the harvest, not for perpetual picnics. And so I worked!

Let us begin with the Church. Despite the fact that priests and religious were all but falling over each other in Naples and its suburbs, the condition of the Church in the kingdom was not healthy. The farther you moved out into the countryside, the worse it got. Not long ago I discovered a letter I had written to Cardinal Castelli back in 1744. He had asked me for some ideas as to what kind of man the Church needed in the new pope. This is what I wrote:

Among the bishops there are so few who possess true zeal for souls. Almost all the Orders are in a condition of decay, and one could even omit the word "almost." The secular clergy are even

worse off. A general reform of the clergy is indispensable for remedying the great corruption of the laity.

My basic message to the good cardinal was that they had better elect a saint as the new pope. As you can see, I always believe in calling a spade a spade, even when dealing with the hierarchy. Healthy criticism of the Church is surely not a sin when it is for the benefit of Christ's work here on earth. Of course, it ought to be done with both love and respect. I think some of my own Redemptorist confreres were shocked when I wrote a book especially for bishops, reminding them of their serious role in the Church and their obligation to be leaders in holiness. At that time I myself was not yet a bishop and writing that book took a lot of what Falcoia's Jewish friends in Rome would call "chutzpah."

I also went after the laxity of the ordinary clergy in no uncertain terms. If you can find a copy of the book I wrote for the clergy you will see what I mean. The book is called *The Selva*, with the subtitle, *On the Dignity and Duties of the Priest*. The gross ignorance of the clergy was abysmal, especially in the area of moral theology. Only God knows how much harm they were doing in the Sacrament of Penance, that is, if and when they even bothered to hear confessions. I will admit that I have always been a stickler on the need for quality confessors.

When I was bishop of Saint Agatha's, I had a battle royal with some of the lay trustees of the cathedral on this very point. It seems that they had acquired the right to pick the Lenten preachers but they made the mistake of presuming that the priest of their choice would automatically receive faculties for hearing confessions. They were surprised when I told them that I would not give faculties to any priest unless I knew him to be competent. For this reason I wished to interview the man they had chosen. Both the laymen and the priest they had chosen balked at that. The laymen were so angry with me that they threatened to go ahead and hire

him anyway. My answer was: "Very well, gentlemen, you may have your Lenten preacher but you will not have a confessor!" I felt so strongly about this that when some of them began talking about appealing to the Holy Father I told them quite frankly: "Even if the Holy Father himself should tell me to give this man faculties, I would say: 'Your Holiness, you may give him faculties but I will never do so without knowledge of his fitness for this serious responsibility of hearing sacramental confessions.' "

Let's face it: The harm done in this particular sacrament has eternal consequences. I, for one, will not stand by and see sinners leave the confessional worse off than when they entered, thanks to the incompetence of some ignorant priest. Fortunately, the matter never got to the Holy Father; but even for him I would not go against my conscience in this delicate matter of quality confessors. I have heard people say that all you need for this sacrament is holiness. That is simply not true! Solid knowledge of moral theology, which itself takes in so many other sciences, is a must for the good confessor. I know from my personal experience on the missions that many folks have stopped going to this sacrament because of the mistakes of unqualified confessors. It was specifically for such priests that I wrote three eminently practical works on how to hear confessions: *The Confessors' Praxis* (1748), *The Instruction and Practice for a Confessor* (1757), and finally, *The Confessor of Country People* (1763). Pardon me for spending so much time on this but it has always been one of my pet peeves.

I get almost as vehement over some of the atrocious preaching that goes on in the Church today. The poor laity come to church expecting to hear the Word of God explained to them in popular and simple terms and what do they get but frothy and frivolous pomposity on the one hand, and insipid pabulum on the other. Much of the problem is due to the fact that a number of priests stop studying the day after they are ordained. Back in the 40s, or was it the 50s, I put together a book on preaching. I liked it so much that I

sent a complimentary copy to every bishop in the kingdom and to all the Major Superiors as well. I urged all of them to read it and then have all their priests read it in the hope that at least some of them might improve. "Who knows," I wrote, "perhaps even those terrible Lenten preachers might be converted to good preaching." Later I published a book of *Sunday Sermons* as still another aid for the pulpit babblers. I laugh now when I recall how the young men of my Congregation were in fear and trembled at the thought that I might be in the audience while they were preaching. They all knew that one evening I called one of our young Redemptorist professors right out of the pulpit in the middle of his sermon. He was way over the heads of the poor people sitting there bored to death by all his academic erudition.

Finally, I tried to do something concrete for the local clergy on practically every mission I ever preached. I tried to gather them together for a kind of crash course in spirituality and moral theology. I also attempted to get them to form some kind of support group so they would continue to grow in both knowledge and holiness after the mission ended. I have heard that some of these clergy support groups are still functioning well. Thanks be to God and his Blessed Mother.

I did my best with still another problem we had in the kingdom. We had women religious galore — in convents, monasteries, and conservatories, the last, a kind of convent for women of the upper class. Recently, someone told me that there are fifteen to twenty thousand women religious in the kingdom alone. Sad to say, we had quantity but in many cases not quality. It was not that the women were not fit for convent life but, rather, having entered they were left practically abandoned with little help for their spiritual growth. Since I started my Congregation for the benefit of the most abandoned, I felt some obligation toward these good women who were left spiritually abandoned by the very Church they had come to serve.

A perennial problem for women religious is that there are so few good spiritual directors and confessors available for them. Let's face it: Many of the average diocesan clergy have little understanding of or patience with the spiritual problems that are peculiar to all religious, what with the vows, community life, obedience to superiors, and such. Second, and tragically, many clergymen are unfamiliar with ascetical and mystical theology. Indeed, some seem to get a kind of spiritual acrophobia when a contemplative nun begins talking about the fifth or the sixth rung of Saint Theresa's spiritual ladder. Third, the direction of sisters is often time-consuming. I should know! Scattered around the kingdom should be hundreds of letters which I wrote in my spiritual direction of nuns. True, spiritual direction is not an easy task but it does have its rewards. I think that I learned as much from those women as they learned from me. And I know for sure that the success of my other apostolic works was due to the prayers and sacrifices of those religious women. Let's be honest: Their personal affection and their loving concern for me was a great consolation, especially in those dark days of the thirties when everything seemed to be falling apart in my new project.

I have to tell you a funny one! I don't know how the nuns found out about my sweet tooth, but they were forever sending me all sorts of candies. At times I suspected that it was a kind of spiritual bribery. Indeed, I recall one case in which I said as much. One day, a gigantic box of our famed Italian *dolci* arrived, along with an accompanying note asking for a number of special permissions. I wrote to the Sisters: "Even if you send me the whole convent dipped in chocolate, I will not give you permission." They thought that was hilarious and I found out much later that they were still reading my letter to their friends for laughs.

Probably the best thing I ever did for women religious was my book I wrote almost twenty years ago called *The True Spouse*. It contains source material for reflection and meditation. In short

order, it became a best seller among the nuns. If I were I to write it today I would have to modify a few things because in the last twenty years there has been a noticeable improvement in convent life. Over the years I have been delighted to see how many of my Redemptorist confreres have shown a truly brotherly love and care in directing sisters and nuns. I am thinking especially of my two pioneer companions, Sportelli and Sarnelli.

What shall I say about my efforts for the laity? So many were like sheep without a shepherd; it is a wonder that many of them did not go over to the Turks or the Muslims. The attitude of the Neapolitan Church toward the poor, who were the vast majority throughout the Mezzogiorno, was not a happy one. The ownership of most of the land in the kingdom was split between the Church and the barons. I once read that ecclesiastics, who made up 40% of the population, controlled one-third of the land. Moreover, we were flooded with mendicant religious who were also a drain on the poor. As a bishop I tried to do something in my own diocese about the social and economic inequalities that were so obvious. My earlier book, *The Duties and Obligations of Bishops*, certainly complained loudly enough about the absentee bishops who were not present to the poor — physically, spiritually, or emotionally. It was the poor who worked many of the rich ecclesiastical lands. I reminded these successors of the apostles about Christ's own preferential love of the poor. The *baroni*, those wealthy landlords who each controlled a miniature kingdom and who were the economic and political powers of Italy, also heard from me more than once. Whenever I preached a mission, I made it a point to try to reach these men, together with the other local powers-that-be, with special conferences. I am still convinced that the leaders of any territory, large or small, exercise not only political, economic, and social control but they also exercise religious and spiritual power over the workers who depend on them in so many ways. I used to say that the spiritual quality of the people will be as good or

as bad as the spiritual quality of the local *barone* himself. The trouble was that we had so many absentee barons, just as we had absentee bishops.

Some of the *baroni*, though nominally Catholic, never attended church, much less a mission. And even the ones who did, lived their lives as Catholics only at a surface level. They were, as one wag put it, baptized Catholic more by aspersion than by immersion. Some of these gentlemen in my diocese got special letters from "yours truly" when I felt that I had to take their consciences to task.

While I was concerned with the social and economic poverty of the people (during the famine I sold practically everything in the bishop's house that was movable, including my own pectoral cross), my primary concern was their spiritual poverty. In this I took second place to none. Two years from now, in 1782, we shall be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. That was, is, and shall be for a long time, my greatest gift to the spiritually poor. From the beginning I was careful to make it clear right in the Rule that we must give a preferential option for the poor whenever there is a choice of ministries. And so we did! We preached to them, we catechized them, we brought them into our own houses for retreats, and we brought the work of God to their hamlets and, indeed, into their huts and caves. Before I started my project, most missionaries ran what they called the "central mission." This meant that the people had to travel to a central location, something many of them could not do since they did not even own a donkey. We Redemptorists, on the other hand, would go to the people wherever they were: We stayed with them until the very last person had been reached. This was part of my system. Nor was there any time limit to my missions. The work of the Sacrament of Penance often kept us in a place for weeks on end. My policy was that the priests would not depart until the last confession was heard. In the confessional is where you reap the real fruit of all the preaching. It

is there that you can feel the copious redemption pouring all over the sinner.

Some of the less pastoral bishops complained that missions produced no lasting results. I would agree with that if you just rush in and preach nothing but hell and damnation and then rush out again. I often told my men: "You will never make a lasting conversion with fear alone. You must preach love." In my own way, I made sure that the fruits of the mission would be long-lasting. I insisted on having a special period of preaching called "The Renewal." We would return to the same place where we had given the mission — usually within six months to a year — and do a spiritual follow-up on the earlier mission work. Even during the mission itself, I would set aside the last four days for "The Exercises of the Devout Life." During these days we taught the people how to make mental prayer and left them with practical devotions and concrete rules of life. In this way we tried to guarantee the parishioners' perseverance in the good resolutions of the mission. It was also easy enough for us to have a periodic check-up on all of this since our houses were within easy traveling distance from the areas we served. Thus, the laity could keep in contact with us and we with them. Most of our monasteries became centers of prayer and of spiritual direction; in a word, they were each a kind of perpetual mission. In Ciorani, for example, our retreats were so crowded that the poor novices had to sleep on the floor from time to time. The Lord blessed our work abundantly, indeed!

I do not know how many pens I wore out and how much ink I used up in writing all sorts of spiritual tracts and pamphlets to help the laity live the Christian life to the full. I began my devotional works with *The Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* in 1750. I would have liked to put that book in the hands of every Christian in the world. During the same year I worked on my *Glories of Mary*. In 1758, I published the *Preparation for Death*, and a year later

followed that up with *The Great Means of Salvation*, a compendium of the best theology of prayer. If you want to read a book which will tell you what the Christian life is all about, see if you can get a copy of my work called *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*. This book is the heart and soul of everything I ever wrote. It is a down-to-earth commentary on Saint Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 13. I have often told my friends that if my *Moral Theology* was my gift to the clergy, *The Practice* is my gift to every Christian. Indeed, I will go further to say that what I have written in *The Practice* is the soul and spirit which should animate my *Moral*.

I hesitate to write about my outreach to the secular world since I tend to be a bit cynical on that subject. True, we Italians, and most of the countries of Europe, were ruled by people who called themselves "Christian Princes" and "Most Catholic Majesties." Many were Christian and Catholic in name only. Indeed, some of the "Catholic Majesties" gave the Church a harder time than its enemies did. Joseph of Austria was forever meddling in Church affairs; I believe they even nicknamed him "the sacristan." In France there was a whole series of anti-papal potentates who thrived on an aggressive Regalism and anti-Curialism. France was the breeding ground of the Deists, Masons, and Free Thinkers, most of whose leaders were born and died in my time.

And then there were the constant wars. I used to tell the students in history class at Pagani that one really needed a scorecard to keep up with all the Wars of Succession — Spanish, Austrian, Polish, etc. Kings and queens appeared and disappeared every few years. We had peace treaties by the dozens but what a joke they were. Peace treaties meant that somebody was getting a nice slice of someone else's territory, that is, until someone stronger came along to take still another and perhaps a bigger slice. We had The Peace of Utrecht, The Peace of Vienna, The Peace of Rastatt, The Peace of Paris. Yet there was no peace.

And while the kings and princes were getting too big for their lace britches, the bourgeoisie were being successfully propagandized by the Tollands, the Tyndals, the Rousseaus, and the Voltaires. The seeds of the downfall of both Church and State were being sown in long furrows that reached down from France and Germany right into our beloved Italy. By the 50s, people were already talking about "The Enlightenment" in Pisa and Bologna. Would you believe that some of the crown heads were so stupid that they actually cultivated the very movements which will probably topple their thrones by the end of this century? Mark my words: When you combine license of the intellect with libertinism in morals, you had better expect an explosion sooner or later. I tried to warn both pope and king with a small work called *A Brief Dissertation Against the Errors of Modern Unbelievers, Now Called Materialists and Deists*. In it I went after those learned authors who were gradually corrupting our university and college students — men like Spinoza, Hobbes, Bayle, Rousseau, and Voltaire. I also added a few pamphlets along the same line. My pen was my sword! Later, when I discovered that one of the publishers of this ugly material was right here in Naples importing these foreign poisons for his own profit, I appealed to His Majesty to put an end to this flood of corruption, both for his own good and the good of the Church. I think I did a bit of good in this area, but it was probably too little, too late — it was like shutting the barn door after the horses had escaped.

Of course, using the secular powers to sit on abuses can boomerang against the Church, especially if the State feels that there are abuses within the Church. I think that is what happened in the case of the suppression of the Jesuits. Now that I am older and wiser, I can see that it was sheer political power and royal clout that forced a weak and vacillating pope into amputating that healthy and strong arm of the Body of Christ, the Society of Jesus. Poor Clement XIV! Little did I dream that I, who had so often defended

the powers of the Holy See, would ever use that same pen to express my disagreement with his plan to suppress the Jesuits. I begged him with all the eloquence I could muster not to do that horrendous thing. However, he would not listen, and on July 21, 1773, he took up his pen and wrote the Society out of existence. Poor Holy Father! After the terrible deed, he went into severe depression and twelve months to the very day he signed that tragic document, he died.

Perhaps you have been listening to the tongue-waggers among my confreres and may have heard all the talk about me and my supposed bilocation at the death of Clement XIV. They claimed that I was sitting here in my chair at Pagani in a kind of trance, while at the same time I was seen in Rome at the deathbed of the pope, easing his troubled soul into eternity. If it happened, it just shows you how omnipotent the Lord really is. But if you are waiting for me to let you in on *that* secret, you will have a long wait. I'm not talking!

Let me conclude this section which is already too long. As the heartbreaks of the Church and the world continued to grow, so did my prayers and penances for both. I was ecstatic when the rumor came down from France that Voltaire had returned to the Church.

In fact, I even sat down and wrote the crusty old heretic a congratulatory letter, but sad to say, his conversion had not taken place at all. The poor old pagan died just two years ago, in 1778. May he rest in peace — though I have my doubts because of all the harm he has done.

Speaking of resting in peace, I am very tired now. So with the help of good Brother Illardi, I shall haul these weary bones off to rest, though I doubt if it shall be a peaceful rest. The peaceful nights are few and far between when you get to be eighty-four and are hurting from head to toe. But I shall say good-night anyhow, and hope for the best.