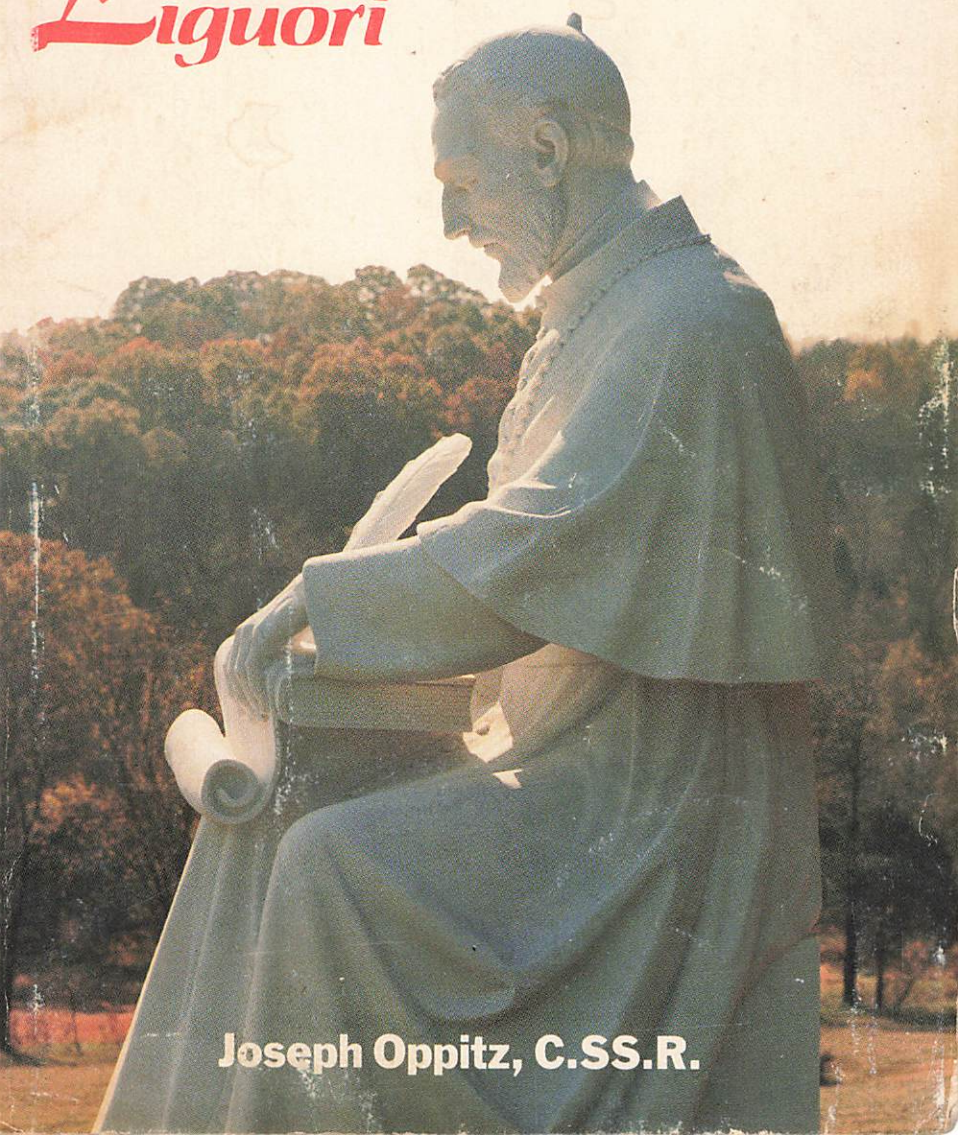


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



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Feast of Francis de Sales

7.

A Memo on My Moral Theology

I don't know where the time goes! Another new year and already January is half over. If I live to be 100, and I hope I won't, this last year will be a year I will never forget. And so far, the prospects for a happier new year do not look so great.

Even in my dreams I am beginning to see the faces of Fathers de Paola, Majone, and Leggio, my dear confreres who are driving me crazy with their Roman machinations. My poor Congregation has really come on hard times. We are split into factions from Rome all the way down to Sicily. To show you how bad things have gotten: They are already planning an assembly here in Pagani for the springtime and the rumor is that they want a complete change of the administration so as to put new blood in along with the revised Rule. I hate the very idea of another General Assembly. In some ways they do more harm than good. In fact, back in '64 I simply walked out on the whole bunch of them. Would you believe that even back then there was a plot to get rid of me? They went so far as to challenge the validity of my being Rector Major and a diocesan

bishop at the same time. My friend, the pope, put an end to that discussion in short order and I remained on both jobs.

The trouble with large assemblies, with delegates from all over the kingdom, is that you just have too many people. The large numbers make good communication almost impossible. Then, too, there is always some "lightweight" elected as a delegate: one whose opinion would not even be considered outside the Chapter walls, but the moment he steps inside the assembly room he suddenly thinks that he is Solomon and with one negative vote can destroy the work of weeks and months. Ah me, maybe I am not as egalitarian as I should be. Some have been saying that but that's the way it goes when you get old and opinionated.

Before I walked out of the Chapter of '64, I told them that someday they would kill the Congregation due to the constant multiplication of laws. Well, here we are, sixteen years later and it looks as if my prophecy is going to come true. These young fellows are not only multiplying laws, they are also subtracting and dividing. Terrible nit-pickers! While they try to keep the king happy by adding things, and coddling up to his ministers by subtracting things, they are succeeding in only one thing: namely, they are making the Holy Father more and more angry. Woe is me!

But why don't we change the subject? I feel my blood pressure rising just writing about this tragic year. And I did hope that these memoirs would be amiable and congenial reading. Why don't I tell you about my work in moral theology? That is one of my favorite topics. Moral theology has always been the apple of my eye.

The last time they carried me over to the students' side of the house, a clever young fellow asked me what was the most difficult thing I ever did in my whole life. That is a very good question. Ask it about your own life and you may come up with some interesting answers. After mulling over the question, I answered that it would have to be a toss-up between my thirteen years as a bishop, and the thirty years I spent writing and then defending my books and

articles on moral theology. Maybe a distinction would be in order here: On the psychological level, being a bishop was the most difficult thing for me since it was the last thing I wanted in this life; on the level of intensive hard work, it was my moral theology that caused me the most trouble.

Let me begin by saying that all my moral writings were the fruit of deep personal suffering. Recently I was re-reading a spiritual diary I had written as a young man and would you believe that you can still see the tear stains on some of the pages? Thanks to the Jansenists, who made salvation something reserved for a small number of the elect, and that equally pessimistic doctrine of the Dominican, Báñez, about the sufficient but ineffectual grace (both of which doctrines I had drummed into me as a boy), I lived in terror of damnation and saw mortal sin lurking in every decision I had to make. If and when I had doubts (and I had many) I was told that I had to play it safe by always following the stricter moral opinion, even when there were better opinions in favor of a more benign decision. That, in a nutshell, is what I call moral rigorism.

I spent many years struggling to free myself from such terrible doctrines. Later, when I was a missionary, I experienced the ravages of rigorism in the souls of the poor country people who were truly ignorant of many of the fundamental truths about God, and who, when they sincerely tried to find him, were turned away by some raving rigoristic cleric. You would think that our God was some merciless Oriental Potentate rather than a God of love and compassion. Some of these rigoristic missionaries went about the countryside screaming threatening truths and thundering forth damnation for two solid weeks. Then they would leave the petrified peasants in a state of despair.

Now, does this make any sense? Where, in the teaching of Jesus, will you ever find such a perverse theology of salvation? All of my preaching and writing begins and ends with the Gospel message: God is love! A moral theology built on the authentic Gospel

message will be a far cry from a stoical morality built on duty and obligation, both deduced from some cosmic law of nature.

My practical problem was that, writing in the ambient of my own time, I had to work within the broad framework of the traditional casuistry, and at the same time try to free moral theology from its legalistic rigorism and from the primacy it gave to external authority. My primary concern was the human person and human conscience rather than a world of essences, natures, and laws. This meant that I had to convince people not only of God's love for them but also of their own God-given capacity to respond to his love in freedom and with initiative and trust in their own sincere conscience decisions. For me, the place where God and the human person meet is in that persuasive decision of conscience which moves one to say yes to the Lord and his loving plan.

It was my deep respect for conscience, even the inculpably erroneous conscience of the person who is sincerely trying to do good — and so many of my goatherder friends were in that condition — that got me into trouble with the rigorists and legalists. They were more interested in the objective demands of law and in multiplying commands and precepts. Mind you, I am not a laxist, one who will grab at any farfetched loophole or unfounded opinion to let you out of the law, but I insist that before any law can be binding in conscience it must be interiorized and promulgated within personal conscience. What does that mean? It means that the moral commands of both God and his Church must somehow be made interiorly clear to a person and seen as obligatory before moral obligation actively takes over. After all, we were created by God in freedom, and our freedom remains in peaceful possession until a law becomes personally interiorized and thus recognized as binding here and now. Let me assure you that it is often very difficult to make some of the laws of the Church interiorly clear to peoples' consciences, considering the little time

we have in the pulpit and confessional on the one hand, and on the other the terrible moral ignorance of folks who have been spiritually abandoned for years. I will give you a very earthy and humorous example: I recall all the deception over marriage dowries and the other prenuptial agreements that went on in our land. Now, I do not believe that many of the fathers and fathers-in-law who tried to outdo each other in deceptions really thought of that common practice as sinful lying. Most moralists would agree that, in the *objective order* (that is, apart from the ignorance and the less-than-perfect cultural practices of our milieu), what they were doing was wrong and reprehensible in terms of at least one Commandment: Thou shalt not lie! But they really did not conceive that as lying. At times, when I thought there was some hope of success, I used to confront the consciences of some of these papas, but more often than not I would leave them in their simple ignorance as long as the deception had nothing to do with the essentials of the marriage. The practice was especially rampant when there was a question of marrying off an older and less comely daughter. The difficulty of correcting peoples' consciences is multiplied when too many legal imperatives are laid upon their weak consciences at once. Besides, I had done a lot of studying of Saint Thomas Aquinas and I certainly agreed with him that doubtful laws do not bind in conscience as long as they remain truly doubtful. I feel that many of the uneducated are easily confused and become truly doubtful about the meaning of certain laws or at least about their application in certain unusual cases, especially when you have opinions on both sides of the scales of freedom versus obligation.

My pastoral experience with situations like these led me to the practical conclusion that, at times, people should be left at peace — call it “good faith,” if you will — when it becomes clear that even with the best of intentions they do not understand something and in good conscience are unable to interiorize it at the level of

conscience decision-making. Technically, we have always used the words "invincibly ignorant" or "invincibly and inculpably erroneous consciences" for such cases. Let me say that the error may be due not only to simple ignorance but also to serious emotional stress and mental confusion and other such roadblocks to knowledge and freedom. Now you see why I wore myself out preaching, teaching, and writing. People must first be educated to the Good News of God's love for them and their need to love him and their neighbor in return, and then, in good time they will learn to grasp the demands of God's and the Church's laws. In this context of human weakness and moral ignorance, I often think of Jesus, in the Gospels, telling his friends: "I have many things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now." Saint Paul also had a similar piece of advice to the effect that when people are weak and immature they must be fed with pabulum, but as they grow in strength, then and then only are they ready for more solid food.

When the rigorists saw the general direction my moral was taking, they were furious. They began their attack with a lot of name-calling. I was amazed to see that, all of a sudden, I had become "an enemy of the sound morals of Jesus Christ," "a purveyor of lax opinions," "an author of frivolous and unsustainable opinions," and so on. Name-calling, of course, is never a successful argument, is it? My greatest opponent in this whole controversy was a Dominican named Vincent Patuzzi. By the strangest of coincidences, both he and I were using the same Venetian publishing house, Remondini. Patuzzi had a slight edge on me there since he himself lived in Venice and could rush his articles into print while I had to endure the delays of long-distance delivery. In his favor, I must admit that for all his invective he was a pious and zealous priest and theologian. His problem was that he was married to moral rigorism heart and soul. In his fiery enthusiasm he did all in his power to refute me in writing, and when the writing did not work he connived to have my books banned. I

remember that at one point I had to go to the extreme of having elaborate plans made to smuggle 200 copies of my books into the kingdom *via* a parish priest over on the Adriatic coast, well away from the eyes of the border patrols. He was a fine priest named Scipio Savatelli; he must surely be dead by now since he was quite elderly even then. May he rest in peace! Naturally, the more they tried to ban my books the more eager people were to read them, a lesson book banners never seem to learn.

The long-distance dialogue between Patuzzi and myself went on for three years. I think it ended shortly after I told him that to refute me he would also have to refute his eminent Dominican confrere, Saint Thomas Aquinas. In one sense, I was quite grateful for his prolonged opposition for it made me formulate and clarify in exact words the whole heart of my system. I called my moral system *equiprobabilism*. In reality, my system was a moderate and sensible probabilism, one which avoided a bare-faced laxism on the one hand, and a rigoristic probabilism on the other. The main reason I used the new term *equiprobabilism* was that I was frightened to death at the possibility that our little Institute would be suppressed along with the Jesuits since they had been identified, rightly or wrongly, with a lax probabilism. Even the word “probabilism” was a dirty word to the royal censors.

Poor reader, I hope all of this has not confused you too much; if it has, I shall just have to leave you in inculpable ignorance. I realize that I am beginning to sound like a classroom professor. But maybe I can un-confuse you a bit by giving you the main tenets of my system of *equiprobabilism* in one short paragraph. Let me at least try!

When two opposite opinions, pro and con, law versus freedom, are equally, or almost equally, probable, then you have a strict doubt. But doubtful laws do not bind. Therefore, you may follow an equally probable opinion in favor of freedom even in the face of an equally probable opinion in favor of the law. And the same is

true if the opinion in favor of the law is just slightly more probable. After all, freedom is the gift of God and surely is in possession until a clearly binding law takes over.

Patuzzi and his cohorts of the rigorist brigade insisted, on the contrary, that in the face of a real doubt you are still obliged to follow the opinion in favor of the law, and this even when they admit the law to be doubtful. Good heavens! In answering this I wrote to him: "If souls are saved by preaching God's laws, they also may be lost by putting them under a yoke which not even God has imposed. Excessive rigorism is to be reckoned with as well as excessive liberality. However, for my part, if I were to write that between two opinions, both equally probable, a person is always obliged to follow the more severe, I myself would be afraid of sinning seriously."

In summary, my dear reader, I was simply trying to strike a meaningful balance between moral action in accord with general norms and clear laws, and a necessary and healthy leeway for individual freedom and initiative — at the level of conscience — in the face of doubtful laws which, because they are doubtful, ought not to be called laws at all.

Ah well, I think that is enough of that! The troubled moral waters of those days are now relatively calm. I am happy to say that my position has been vindicated and approved by no less an authority than the Holy Father himself. That is one bit of consolation I have in these terrible trials of my old age. Nowadays, my troubles come not from Dominicans or Jesuits but from my own confreres and their continual conniving at the Royal Court over my Rule. God's will be done!

The clock down the corridor has just chimed 10 P.M. and I can tell you that there is nothing doubtful or even probable about the fact that in the next few minutes my door will be flying open, the Brother will swoop me out of this chair, and I will be bundled off to bed like a helpless child. So be it! *Buona notte! Dormite bene!*