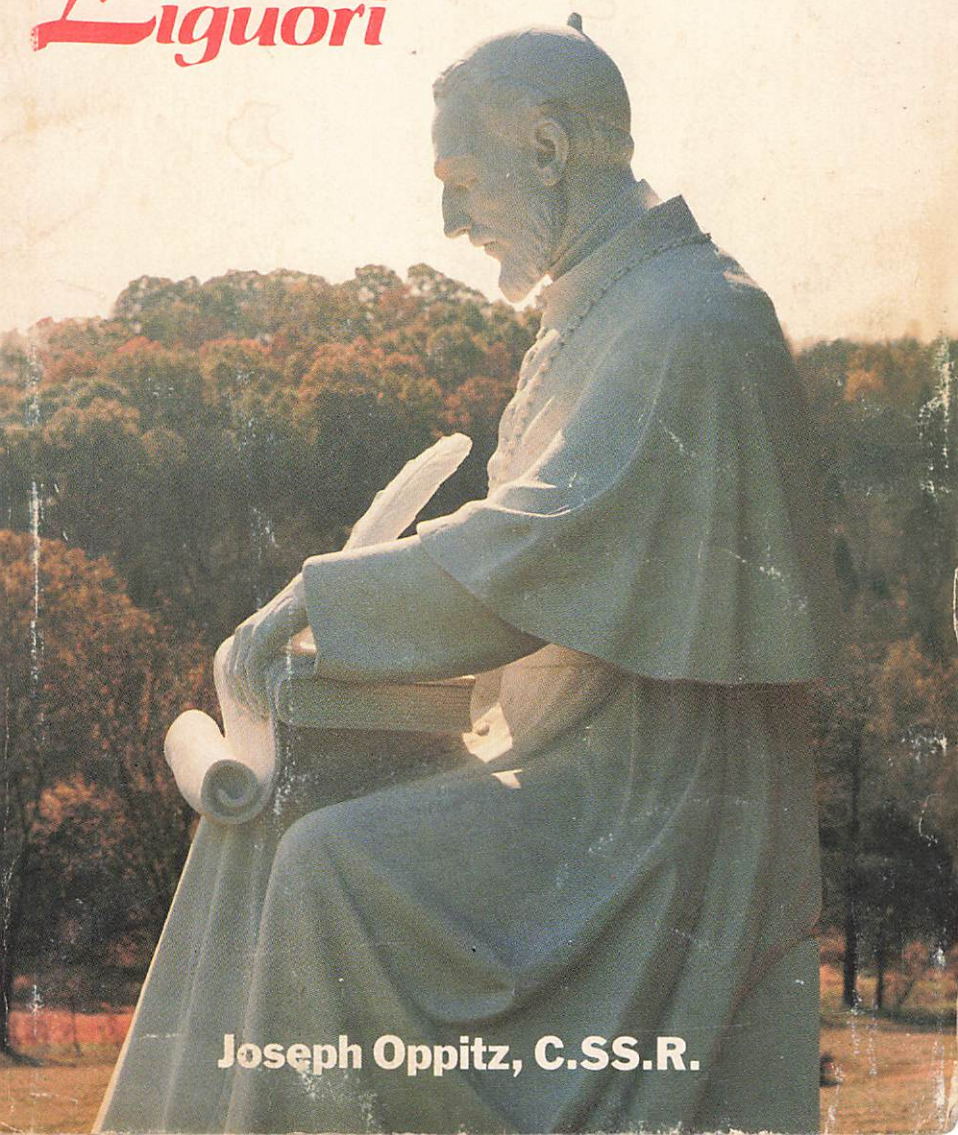


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



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8.

*Physical Aches
and Pains*

What a lovely feast the Annunciation is! What a wonderful day for our human race when the Son of God took on our humanity! The Brother and I have just finished reading a biography of Saint Teresa of Avila, or rather he had been reading it to me, a little each day, since I can hardly read at all. Teresa is certainly one of the greatest champions of the humanity of Christ. All my life I have had a special place in my heart for this lovely woman. In fact, if you look through all the letters I wrote, you will see that I usually signed off with: "Yours in Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and Teresa." Of course, Mary has always been my Number One Mama, but Teresa surely was my Second Mama. Listening to Teresa's biography, I was surprised to see how often incidents in her life reminded me once again of dear Celeste. May she rest in peace!

There are many things in Teresa's life, over and above her devotion to Christ's humanity, which appealed to me; for example,

her dedication to the Eucharist, her doctrine on prayer, her sense of the Church, and her unflinching orthodoxy. However, I think that I related most of all to her attitude toward suffering and the cross. I still chuckle every time I recall two incidents in her life. The first was during a long period of dryness and spiritual desolation when she cried out to the Lord: "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, then thanks be to God I am not your enemy." That is the kind of intimacy with the Lord I have been trying to acquire all these eighty-four years. Then there was the time when she had an unusually long period of consolation, peace, and contentment. She was so shocked at this that she began to wonder if the Lord was angry with her or if he had forgotten her.

The problem of suffering, pain, and the cross is one of the most difficult problems with which we Christians have to wrestle. I know that I have been wrestling with it for many years. Some of my friends tease me by reminding me that I am only getting what I have asked for all these years. They are referring to something in a small booklet of prayers for the fourteen Stations of the Cross I wrote many years ago. The last line in each of the fourteen prayers is: "Grant that I may love thee always and then do with me whatever thou wilt." My friends point out that over and over again I have given God a free hand to do with me *whatever* he wished, and yet, as soon as some suffering comes I so easily fall into depression and begin to complain, if not to him then at least to everybody else. It is true, this little prayer is one of the most difficult to say if you really mean what you are saying. It could be that on the very day you assure God that you want to give him an absolutely free hand, he might just be in the market for a victim soul to carry some special cross for the redemption of a poor sinner who is too weak to carry the cross himself. That is the kind of spirituality that has kept me relatively sane during all these years of suffering: I can actually endure this cross for someone else's spiritual benefit.

Even as a child I was bothered by the twofold cross of poor sight and recurring bouts of asthma. At times, the latter were so severe that my family worried that I might strangle to death in my struggle for air. Frail child that I was, this was a heavy cross to bear; as I grew older, it became even heavier for one who was a compulsive worker. Taking it easy, even for health reasons, was something I always found hard to do. I know that some of the doctors have said that I am not the world's best patient.

Yet, the illnesses of my childhood were but a drop in the bucket compared to the flood of physical calamities that caught up with me in my fifties and have continued to swamp me these last thirty years.

If I had to set a date, I would say that my real agony in the garden, health-wise, started in my mid-fifties. What began as a simple catarrh, a congestion of the nose, throat, and chest, wound up as a serious blockage of the lungs with accompanying pains in the chest. Then came the constant headaches and fevers. By the way, those of you who suffer from headaches might be interested in one of my remedies. Right here on my desk is the flat, roundish piece of stone which one of the students found for me in those memorable vineyards of Ciorani.

I have kept that stone on my desk for years. When the headaches are severe, I soak the stone in cool water and apply it to my head at the temples so as to ease those throbbing pains which seem to be determined to split my head open. It reminds me of a swinging pendulum of pain, crashing back and forth from one temple to the other. At times I could not write for days on end and could just about sign my name on the more important documents that came across my desk.

When I was 66, the doctors had just about given up; they told me quite frankly that I was mortally ill and should prepare to meet my Maker. I am sure it was not the doctors who pulled me through that crisis. In all probability, the good nuns were to blame for that. I say

blame because I was prepared to die and would truly have been happy to have departed this life even then. Mind you, the fact that I did not die does not mean that I was cured. By no means. You can imagine my shock when, later that same year, the Holy Father made me bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths, despite all my protestations of poor health. Yes, 1762 was a year of surprises.

Most bishops rule their diocese and direct its administration from the episcopal throne and the chancery office. I spent most of my thirteen years as diocesan bishop either in a wheelchair or a bed. Even when I could stumble around the diocese I had to use two canes or else be supported on either side by two stout clerics. My diocese was at a rather high elevation in the hills northeast of Naples where the winters can be brutally damp and cold. Each winter I would wind up in bed for a month at a time, struggling with the asthma or the recurring rheumatic arthritis. Winters always were a time of special agony for me.

In the years '66 through '68, I was anointed and received the Viaticum at least once, and sometimes twice a year. In '67 malaria was added to my litany of maladies. The fevers had me out of my head for weeks on end. The poor doctors did not know what to do next. They tried hot compresses and cold compresses; then they started to bleed me again; then came the purges with all sorts of herbs and foul-smelling concoctions. When the fevers went away, the sciatica took over. It seemed to have settled in my hips and my back — all of this in addition to the rheumatism which had already twisted and tortured both legs and spine.

As I look back, I would have to say that 1769 was the year that my wretched health dealt me the unkindest blow of all. I say this because for one whole year I could not celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass at all. You have no idea what a cross that is for a priest. Before that happened I had to give up saying the Divine Office because of my poor vision; now I was deprived of the consolation of saying Mass. God help me; I was pretty near despair that year.

Besides all that, there was the embarrassment of having the clergy and the laity, who came to the bishop's house on business, see their bishop lying in bed or strapped to a chair, his body twisted and deformed like some hideous gnome. As often as not I had to be wheeled out of the room in the middle of an interview with some *monsignore* or *barone* because I would be gagging on the blood which hemorrhaged from my lungs during most of that year.

The medical profession was at a loss as to how to explain my survival. Thank God the doctors of my diocese were good and compassionate men; in their pity they even stopped charging me for their services. Years before, I had written to all the Superiors in my Congregation that we would sell even our books and chalices to take care of our sick, but this was not necessary in St. Agatha's. The medical men there were veritable saints. I know for certain that my constant need for their professional care made them even greater saints; perhaps it would be better to call them martyrs of patience, as they surely needed patience with my decaying body. God bless them all wherever they are today! Most of the time I could not see their faces as I was so bent in two with the sciatica and arthritis. Indeed, I was beginning to wear a raw and livid hole in my chest with the pointed bone of my chin. Every once in a while I would see a teardrop fall on my coverlet, so tender was the love and pity of those medical men.

About eight years ago, I think it was in 1772, even my heart began to rebel at the burden it had to carry. In the middle of the night I would cry out in pain at the terrible tightness and the dagger-like stabs of pain in my chest. The doctors called it "irregular heart palpitation" and finally decided that it was a kind of repetitive heart failure. I suppose the gradual filling of the lungs, plus the internal bleeding, was more than my heart could handle, and so, it too began to lie down on the job along with the rest of my vital organs. In 1773 I almost died again! One night I heard the clergy of my household holding a whispered discussion of the

names of the *monsignori* who were waiting in line to jump into my episcopal boots at my demise.

How can I ever give a rational explanation to you of the pope's refusal to accept my resignation? Like the old lady in the Gospel, I kept banging at the door of the master of the household, but like the master in the Gospel parable, the Holy Father kept saying: "Go away and leave me alone. Stop bothering me." However, perseverance always wins. In 1775, the pope broke down and permitted me to resign my See. I was as ecstatic as any dying man could be, and I begged God to let me live long enough to be carried back to my beloved Pagani so that I could die among my Redemptorist confreres. He granted my wish and then some.

Here it is five years later and this old curmudgeon goes on and on. The students like to give me birthday parties. Of course, they do all the partying while I must sit and watch. At each party I solemnly assure them that this particular one will absolutely, positively be my last. Do you know what they do then? They laugh and laugh! I suppose they have a right to laugh since I have been predicting my final departure for the last thirty years. The young students insist that I will live to be one hundred. Please God, let them be wrong!

Before I end this section, which has been one long tale of woe, let me tell you a funny story about my Pagani homecoming. Remember how I told you that I was practically bent in half? Well, during the first few weeks back in Pagani I was in such pain that they could not get me into bed. I had to sleep strapped in my wheelchair, and even awake my eyes saw nothing but my feet and the floor. Finally, the pain eased a bit and they decided to put me into bed. It took several Brothers and students to lift me from the chair and maneuver me into the bed. As soon as I slid onto the mattress I let out a blood-curdling shriek: "Ah, what have you idiots done?" Well, the poor fellows stood there petrified. They thought that perhaps they had broken my spinal column or maybe

torn open the dried ulcers on my body. Heh, heh, heh! What happened was simply this: When they put me flat on the bed, I saw for the first time, the outlandish job they had done in decorating and gilding the ceiling of my cell so as to make it more worthy of a retired bishop of the Church. *Stupidoni!* What a good waste of money all to honor nothing more than an episcopal skeleton almost ready for burial. I ranted and raged for at least five minutes, so much so that they were afraid I would have a heart attack or a stroke. I guess their hearts were in the right place; they really meant well! That night, as I lay there squinting at the baroque monstrosity of a ceiling, I decided that I had better get to Villani for forgiveness for my temper tantrum over something so ridiculous. But the look on their faces when I screamed was truly hilarious. Now I can laugh about the whole thing, but the times of joy and laughter during these years of suffering are few and far between. I do not think I could have carried the cross for so long had it not been for prayer. In fact, the thought just struck me that I have not told you anything about my views on prayer. We shall never get safely through this life or into the next life of eternal happiness without prayer. But I shall save some thoughts about that for my next entry.

I have written this whole section a few lines at a time and some I dictated to the Brother or one of the students. If it has been slightly disconnected it is because that is the way my thoughts are in these twilight years. It is time for bed and I shall have to lie beneath that awful ceiling again. Thank God, I cannot see it clearly and won't have to contemplate that mediocre art. It is enough to give a person nightmares. *Good-night!*