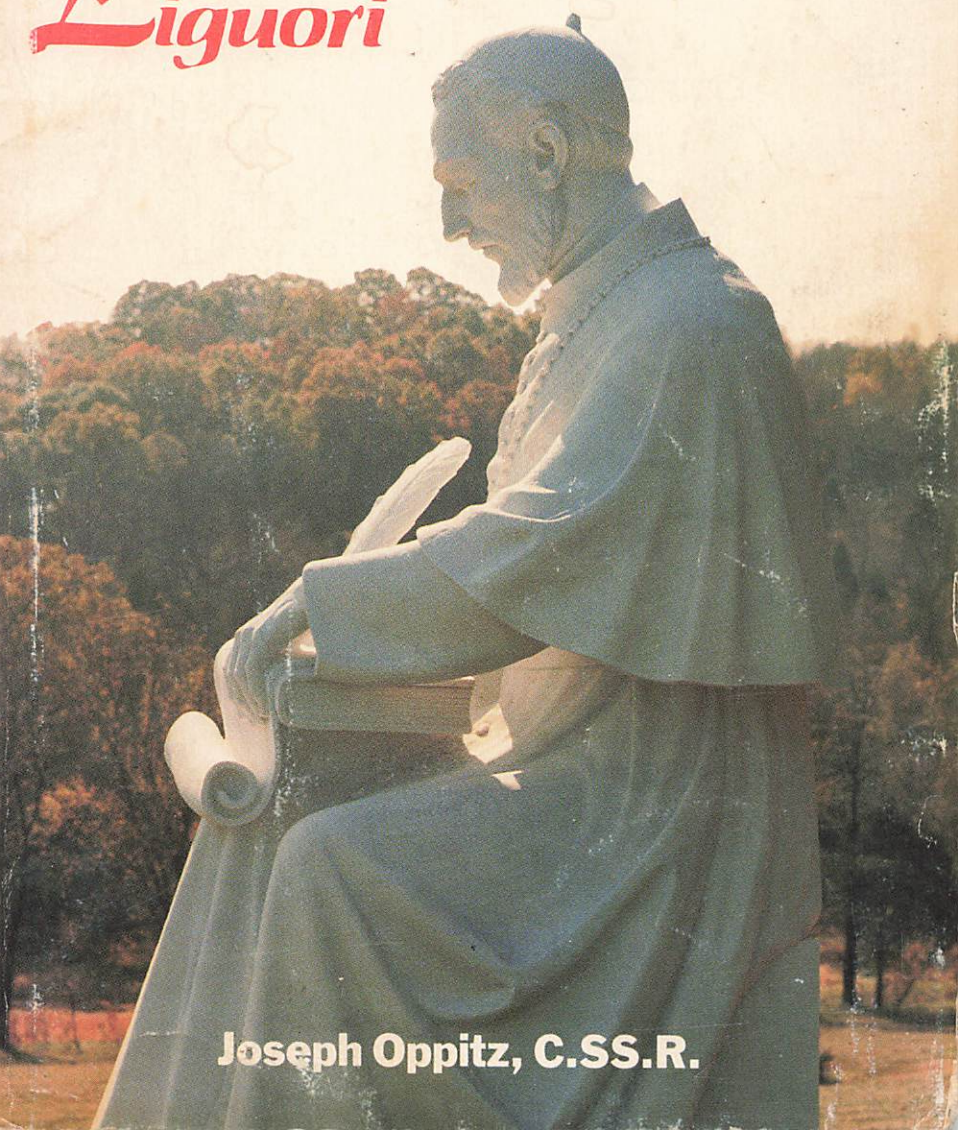


Autumn Memoirs of St. Alphonsus Liguori



Joseph Oppitz, C.S.S.R.

Foreword

When Vatican Council II asked all religious orders and congregations to research their roots and the spirit of their founders, I was one of a team who began to search into the life and writings of Saint Alphonsus Liguori, the founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, popularly known as the Redemptorists.

Saint Alphonsus was born in 1696 and died in 1787. His life can be divided into two stages. For thirty years he lived as a layman in the social and intellectual ambient of the eighteenth-century Neapolitan nobility. His middle and late years were spent among the poor and marginal people of Italy's southern mountains, first as a priest and missionary, later as a religious superior and bishop.

Alphonsus was canonized in 1839 and later declared a Doctor of the Church and Patron of Confessors. These honors were given him because of his outstanding contributions to ascetical and moral theology. His writings and the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer were his greatest gifts to the Church and the world, gifts which still enrich us today.

The year 1987 marks the 200th anniversary of the death of this unique man. With that in mind, some of my friends asked me to write a short, popular, and inexpensive book on the life of this very human saint. This book is my response to that request. I have called this work the *Autumn Memoirs of Saint Alphonsus Liguori*. *Autumn* because I have him writing from his wheelchair at the age of 84. *Memoirs* because I pictured him as meandering down memory lane with you, the reader.

The word *memoir*, however, needs further clarification. Let me tell you at the very start that Alphonsus did *not* actually write these memoirs. I wrote them. I adopted the memoir style because my friends kept telling me that there was no need for another weighty historical biography of this saint. I chose the memoir style because I wanted to give you an intimate and personal peek into the heart and soul of this extraordinary person. I wanted to capture both the thought and the feeling behind the bare chronological events of his life — events which are themselves often quite complex. (I hasten to assure you that all the historical dates, facts, and events spoken of in this book are scrupulously accurate. You will find an exact chronology of Alphonsus Liguori's life in the appendix of this book.)

One of the charms of the memoir style is that it lends itself to a special kind of intimacy and informality. To convey this intimate flavor, throughout the text I have used the Italian version of Alphonsus' name: Alfonso Liguori. Anyone who has lived and worked with the elderly will appreciate the free-flowing and meandering style of this old Neapolitan, sitting under the lemon trees, remembering the persons and places of eighty-four years of yesterdays. Some of his memories are sweet, some are bittersweet. But beneath them all burns a very human and tender heart.

Many years ago, as a Redemptorist novice, I was obliged to read several works of Saint Alphonsus and to learn about his spirit. I

must confess, however, that it has been during these last eighteen years of research that I have really come to know this man on a deeply human and personal level. This is what I hope to share with you. I would not have attempted the intimate literary form of the memoir if I did not feel in contact with him at a deeper level than the abstract concept and the pure historical event. His own writings — especially his letters, his scholarly works, his poetry, his music — plus the witness of his friends and those not so friendly to him, have made me feel a profound empathy with both his laughter and his tears.

As you read this book, I hope that you, too, will begin to feel this empathy, that you will really get to know Alfonso at his best and, at times, at his worst. Laugh and cry along with him, and you shall be richer for the experience. As he would say in his native Italian: *Così spero, così sia*. . . . So do I hope, so may it be!

Joseph W. Oppitz, C.S.S.R.

1.

My Earliest Roots

My name is Alfonso Liguori. Today is my birthday! Years ago, when I was still able to run around in four or five directions at the same time, my friends used to tell me that I ought to write my memoirs. I would laugh and say that I would do just that — when and if I ever became one of those venerable ancients confined to a wheelchair with lots of time on his hands. Well, here I sit, confined to a homemade wheelchair. An ancient, yes; I am eighty-three today! I was born back in 1696. So many, many things have happened since then. It is strange; when I look back I can recall so many distant events in detail. Yet, now that I am old I can seldom remember what I had for my breakfast.

These days I am no longer running around in four directions at the same time. Indeed, it would be nice if I could run in even one direction, but my running days are over and, for that matter, so are my walking days. Every evening when the heat of the day cools a bit, one of the “Serving Brothers” of my religious Congregation takes his turn pushing my creaky carriage around the courtyard,

with me hanging on for dear life. It's not that I don't fit in the chair (I never was fat), but it's just that my body is so bent and twisted. I really look like some animated pretzel or perhaps like a crippled and gnarled gnome. That is why I keep slipping out of the chair. Today, Brother is threatening to tie me into the wheelchair with a rope.

What was I going to tell you? Oh yes. Now that I have all the time in the world, maybe the writing of my memoirs is not such a bad idea after all. Perhaps you will enjoy reading about all the wonderful things that have happened to me over the years. There were many crazy things that happened too! If these memoirs make you happy, then I shall be happy also. After all, there is very little pleasurable work that I can do anymore, decrepit as I am. Even as a child my eyes were bad, but now there are many days when I cannot even read my breviary. Preaching and traveling are out of the question, and I did so love both. Sometimes I am in such pain with my arthritis of the spine that I cannot even say Holy Mass for weeks and months on end. So what is this half-blind and thoroughly crippled "has been" to do? Yes, I shall write my memoirs for you, for all of you. If you should read my original copy, I hope there will be some handwriting expert handy to decipher my wobbly script as my writing is not what it used to be in the old days. So, if you get weary, rest awhile and I shall do the same whenever my eyes, fingers, and head grow weary — something that happens more frequently every day. Still, if I do hold up, only the Lord knows how many pages I shall fill for you. Eighty-three years can make a mountain of memories.

Writing was always one of my great passions. I did not count my books, but one of the young students who sits and reads to me each afternoon tells me that I have written over one hundred and eleven works; that must include my smaller dissertations. Most of them seem to have gotten a good reception. My chief publisher, Remondini of Venice, could tell you more about that, as he handled most

of my books and, I dare say, made a tidy sum of ducats in the process. At times, I suspected that he deliberately took advantage of my passion for writing, and more so of my passion for truth, by getting me all riled up over the latest rumor to come down across the Alps, knowing that I would race for my pen to refute some Frenchman or German and, of course, fatten up Remondini's coffers at the same time. One of my favorite expressions as a young and zealous controversialist was "I, too, have pen and ink." But I see that I am already getting ahead of myself. That is the way it is with us old folks! Please be patient with my literary meanderings.

My name, Alfonso Liguori, should tell you that my homeland is *la bell' Italia*. I was blest in being born in one of the loveliest spots in all Italy. I am referring, of course, to that flower of the Campagna, the emerald of the Mezzogiorno, the lovely city of Naples. I take it that you may have heard the expression: "See Naples and die!" It is true, there is no place like it in the world. Naturally, I am just a bit prejudiced.

In this beautiful city by the bay, my family owned two choice pieces of property. We owned a townhouse in the center city plus a suburban villa in a real garden spot high on the hillside. The country house was at Marianella, an elegant little suburb with a superb view no matter which direction you looked. On a clear day, my little brothers and sisters (there were seven of them), used to make believe that they could see Papa, standing on the bridge of his ship, as the royal fleet came into port. He was a Captain in the Royal Navy. My eyes were never that good, but it is true; we did have a sweeping view of the harbor.

I shall tell you about my mother first. For her, I have only tender and loving feelings, whereas for my father my feelings, even after eighty-three years, are still quite mixed. Some might say that I had a love-hate relationship with him. Hate may be too strong a word. Besides, how does one evaluate with equity the adolescent feel-

ings of so many years ago? He and I were both men of strong emotions. I suppose we were very much alike in many ways since we seemed to be constantly squabbling in the days of my youth. But back to Mama!

My mother was a sweet and gentle soul named Anna Caterina. Her maiden name was Cavalieri, and if you know any romance languages at all, that will tip you off to the fact that I had both Spanish and Italian blood in my veins. Her ancestors sailed over from Spain to Italy years back. Cavalieri was but the Italian version of *Caballero*! If you had known Mama, you would understand what that combination of blood could do for one's whole personality and, indeed, for one's spirituality.

She was a dainty and genteel lady and her convent education showed in more ways than one. She ran our home like a miniature monastery and we children were like little postulants and novices being trained in the ways of sanctity: morning prayers, spiritual reading sessions (she loved the lives of the saints), noon prayers, evening prayers, examinations of conscience, plus all sorts of assorted mortifications and penances suited to our age. Her sewing room became a regular classroom for catechism, hymn singing, and other religious exercises. If she allowed us to have our baby-like penances and mortifications, her own were far from minor ones: severe fasts, little prickly chains, and even regular scourgings of her lovely body. Sometimes at night the swish-swish of her rope whip could be heard through the wall. That was a scary sound for the smaller *bambini*. Even as a little child I found myself wondering whether the other children in our neighborhood had mothers who scourged themselves. It was something I never could quite understand with my child's mind. Looking back from this perspective of old age, I am sure that some of my adolescent fear of the flesh came from my dear Mama. Yes, I would have to say that she was religiously austere, a quality not too common among the ladies of the nobility these days! We Liguoris were not of the

so-called "blood nobility." We belonged to what they called the "titled nobility." All this meant was that someone along the line of our ancestors had done a special favor for The Crown and had been rewarded with a title.

I hope you will not be shocked at our penitential lifestyle even in the midst of all our wealth and luxury. You must remember that Mama and all of us children were people of our own time, just as you are of yours. In our day, scourging of oneself, even to blood, and all the other gory penances which we performed were perfectly normal for the Christian in search of holiness. We little Liguoris learned our ascetical lessons well. My poor brother, Tony, died young, a real martyr of corporal penances. He joined the Benedictines of the Monte Cassino group here in Naples as "Father Benedict." He became Novice-Master and probably passed on to his own novices the deeply penitential spirit which he practiced even at home. He was just forty when he died. Even my baby brother, Cajetan, who became a diocesan priest but stayed at home with Mama and Papa, lived a veritable hermit's life of penance and austerity. Nor were my baby sisters exempt from the rigors of Mama's training. Two of them went off to a convent before their adolescent years had begun. They both suffered an early death after severe physical, and in one case mental, breakdowns.

I suppose that, at the time, we children were so much in love with Mama and had such a tremendous sense of awe at her own ascetical lifestyle, we scarcely thought about the injurious effects of some of the more rigorous practices on our little minds and hearts, not to mention our frail bodies. In retrospect, I am now in great wonder at some of the wounds that her type of religiosity left on us during those growing years. From this vantage point of old age I look back on so much early sickness and dying in our family, and not just physical dying but, even sadder, emotional sickness and dying. With the passing of time and many tears, some of us did

recover from such a fearful way of holiness to a greater or lesser degree, but some did not. I do remember Mama and my dead brothers and sisters with bittersweet memories but, all in all, with love. There is an old saying to the effect that you have to accept the sweet with the sour and that is surely true in most of the families I have known, including the Liguoris.

I meant to tell you before that my youngest brother (he had the funny name of Hercules) and my sister, Teresa, the baby of the family, were the only two children who did not wind up in the priesthood or religious life. They both married. Indeed, Hercules married twice! Oh yes, I also forgot to mention that two of my sisters were twins but one of them, little Magdalene, died as a baby so we hardly got to know her.

Such a spiritual track record of three priests and two nuns in one family may seem strange to you, but had you been a neighbor of the Liguori-Cavalieri clan you would not be surprised at all. Our house always seemed to be a kind of clerical-religious boarding house where priests and bishops popped in and out for both spiritual and temporal refreshment at my mother's table. Would you believe it, practically all of them were blood relatives of my Mama and Papa . . . a bloodline of saintly celibates as long as your arm. One of the holiest bishops of that time was my mother's uncle, Emilio Cavalieri, bishop of Troia. He was ordained at twenty-four and consecrated bishop at thirty. A kind of boy-wonder! He was also my favorite uncle and we grew even closer when he was one of the few willing to take a strong stand against my father when he tried to sabotage my vocation to the priesthood and religious life.

There was another bishop in the family, this one on the Liguori side, Dominic Liguori. Even my own spiritual director of many years was a relative of Mama's. His name was Thomas Pagano, an Oratorian. Still another uncle was rector of the seminary at Naples, the brilliant Canon Gizzio. Our two families were a good mixture

of Church and State. If you were a Cavalieri you were almost expected to become either a cleric or a lawyer. The Liguori clan favored the military life, with the clerical vocation running a close second. And speaking of the military life, that brings me to my father.

However, since I am overly tired already, and since the Brother has arrived with my evening hot chocolate and is already grumbling about my keeping him waiting, I shall have to leave Papa for another entry. . . .