



CAPTIVATING COMPASSION

St. Alphonsus for Our Times



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St. Alphonsus for Our Times

Reflections from the Global Online Novena to
St. Alphonsus by world- renowned Redemptorists

Redemptorist Media Center, INDIA

AUGUST 2021

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FOREWORD

In the year 1865, Pope Pius IX handed over the icon of Mother of Perpetual Help to the Redemptorists and gave a mandate in the following words: “Make Her known throughout the world.” True to the command received, till today the Redemptorists all over the world continue to care for the icon and promote love for Mother of Perpetual Help. In similar lines, marking 150th anniversary of declaring St. Alphonsus Maria De Liguori as the Doctor of the Church, in order to make **him** known, Redemptorist Media Centre, Bangalore has undertaken an initiative in the form of “Global online Novena to St. Alphonsus.” This Global Novena to St. Alphonsus consisted of themes highlighting a few significant and important aspects from the life and activity of St. Alphonsus Maria De Liguori as reflected and presented by many Redemptorist Confreres from all over the world. As the RMC collates and presents these talks in the form of an Ebook as a tribute to the founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists), I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the RMC team for this wonderful initiative and also thank every speaker including Fr. Michael Brehl C.Ss.R., our Superior General for their rich and inspiring reflections on the given theme. May the life and legacy of St. Alphonsus Maria De Liguori continue to inspire and challenge us.

Fr. Edward Joseph C.Ss.R.,

Provincial Superior,

Province of Bangalore,

1st August 2021.

1. APOSTLE OF THE LOVE OF GOD

By Michael Brehl, C.Ss.R. (Rome, ITALY)

Gospel Reading:

John (3:11, 14-17)

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen... And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’

The Gospel of the Lord

Brothers and sisters in Christ our Redeemer, Greetings from the Church of St. Alphonsus in Rome. Welcome to this first day of the Novena in honour of St. Alphonsus Maria Liguori, great apostle of the Love of God! A special word of gratitude to the Redemptorist Province of Bangalore for making this international Novena possible!

The gospel passage we just heard was always close to the heart of Alphonsus: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” To understand how and why Alphonsus became such an Apostle of the Love of God, it’s good to know something of his background.

Alphonsus Liguori was born in Naples, Italy on September 27, 1696. This year, he would be 325 years old! He was the eldest son in a large family with 8 children. His parents were deeply religious and passed this faith on to all their children.

His father, Don Giuseppe, was a captain in the Royal Navy. He was often away from home for long periods. In his cabin on the ship, Don Giuseppe kept four statues of the Passion of Jesus Christ, to which he was very devoted. He also made a real commitment to several societies serving the abandoned poor in Naples, and Alphonsus often accompanied his father in charitable works.

Alphonsus' mother, Donna Anna Caterina, had been raised in a monastery after the early death of her mother. She was very prayerful, as she had been taught by the nuns. From his mother, Alphonsus learned the value of daily mental prayer and spiritual direction, as well as a gentle, kind heart. Alphonsus said that his mother showed him by example the tender, merciful love of God for everyone.

A gifted student, Alphonsus received an excellent education. Prepared in both civil and canon law, he was destined for a brilliant career in the legal profession. However, Alphonsus also longed to give his life in service of God and neighbour. After ten successful years as a lawyer, he lost a very important case. It is now clear that bribery and political interference at the highest level determined the outcome, and not the justice of the case itself.

This event provided the catalyst which led to Alphonsus' definitive decision to abandon the legal profession and begin studies for the priesthood. At the age of 27, he was accepted as a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Naples, and was finally ordained at the age of 30. At that time, he was a 'late vocation'.

Soon, Alphonsus became known and sought after as a gifted preacher – and an Apostle of the Love of God. People from all the social classes thronged to the Churches where he was preaching. There was something different about his sermons. He spoke about God in simple language and explained the Scriptures in a way that everyone could understand – rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Those who heard him were often moved to tears. What was the difference in his preaching? Why did he have such a powerful impact on people?

I believe that the answer can be found in today's gospel passage. Like Jesus, Alphonsus spoke about what he knew personally. He witnessed to what he had experienced in his own life. Through his daily prayer, especially in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, he encountered Jesus Christ as a real and living person, the Son of God who loved him and gave his life for him. And so his life was filled with the joy of the Gospel. Jesus was his friend and his Redeemer. This was the God whom Alphonsus preached, a God he knew personally.

Meditating on the passion, Alphonsus became convinced that only the love of God could explain the death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' death was not about punishment, or paying the debt that we human beings owe to God for our sins. Alphonsus knew that Jesus freely gave his life for us to show the lengths to which God's love will go to save us...

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

For Alphonsus, this experience of God's love in Jesus became the deepest meaning of his life, and the centre of all his preaching, teaching and writing and even his conversation.

Alphonsus knew that God loved him in spite of his sinfulness – and Alphonsus was very conscious of his sinfulness – in spite of this, God loved him, and Jesus gave his life for him. And Alphonsus loved God in return.

This love of God that Alphonsus experienced compelled him to preach to others. And so he became the apostle of the love of God. He wanted nothing more than to share with others this love he had found in God. Above all, Alphonsus shared this message especially with the abandoned and the poor who are so often on the margins of society – and yet they are specially loved by God. Alphonsus understood from his own experience that the whole Christian life is a mystery of love.

Out of love for humanity the Word becomes flesh in the womb of Mary so that Jesus can share our human nature, and speak to us as one friend speaks to another. The mystery of the Incarnation is the mystery of closeness, of friendship, of love. Jesus becomes our brother so that he can become our Redeemer.

The mystery of the Cross is a mystery of Love. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”. Jesus gives his life for us to show us just how far God’s love will go to save us from ourselves, from hatred and division, from jealousy and sin.

In the mystery of the Eucharist, Love bids Jesus to remain with us always. In the Eucharist, in Communion, Jesus unites himself so fully to us that his flesh becomes our flesh, and his blood stirs in our veins. No wonder Alphonsus encouraged frequent communion, Eucharistic adoration, and visits to the Blessed Sacrament. The Eucharist is the ‘fire of God’s love’ which warms our cold hearts.

At the foot of the Cross, Jesus gave us his mother to be our mother – to walk with us always and to teach us to live as one family... Mary, our Mother of Perpetual Help, is a gift of God's love so that we will never walk alone as we journey through life. No wonder Alphonsus promoted devotion to Mary and loved her so tenderly! She was his constant companion and sign of God's love.

These mysteries of Redemption become the four pillars of the spirituality of St. Alphonsus and of every Redemptorist: Incarnation, Passion and Cross, Eucharist and Mary – because they are the four great mysteries of God's love.

During this novena, may St. Alphonsus help us to experience for ourselves the love of God. Following his example, we ask Mary, our Mother, to unite our hearts to hers. Mary, after your son, Jesus, you became the first missionary of God's love. United with you, and following the example of Alphonsus, may we also become apostles of the love of God today.

2. ARTIST & MUSICIAN FOR THE GOOD NEWS

By Kevin O'Neil, C.Ss.R. (Baltimore, USA)

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 150

Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

The Gospel of the Lord

These two brief passages of Scripture offer a background for our theme for today: Saint Alphonsus: artist and musician. The only thing we could add to psalm 150 is: “Praise him with paint and brush; praise him with pen and

ink.” St. Alphonsus could meditate for hours on these brief lines from St. John’s Gospel, that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. It was his own heartfelt sense of God’s love that not only moved Alphonsus to love God in return but to try, by any means, to tell others of God’s love. Today we focus in particular on Alphonsus’ use of art and music.

Like many children of the nobility in the 17th and 18th centuries, Alphonsus Liguori’s education included training in art and music. And while his skill could have simply been a badge of honor to point to his family’s social status or something to impress people about himself, Alphonsus used his talents in art and music to preach the Gospel, and did so in a very creative way. He used the arts to reach poor people who could not read but who would see his art, distributed at parish missions, or sing his music, learning the depths of God’s love for them in the process.



When St. Alphonsus preached, in the 18th century, some spiritualities of his day presented God as distant and not overly concerned with the people of the world. God was seen as one whose majesty required people to grovel before him. In response to these spiritualities, St. Alphonsus spoke of a God who was crazily in love with us—whose love was unreasonable—and who drew near to us. He once put these words on the lips of God: “As long as I have loved myself, I have loved you. As long as I have been God, I have loved you.” In other words, “I have always loved you.” But Alphonsus also conveyed this message through his art and music.

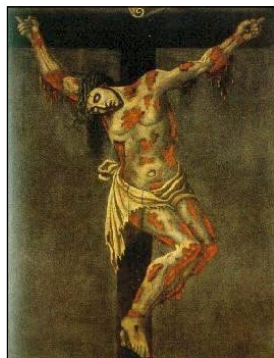
For example, in one sketch, Alphonsus presents Jesus like a pudgy little Neapolitan baby. And in this work, Jesus is fishing for hearts. What a



far cry from a distant, vengeful God. Not only does Jesus look like a cute Italian baby that people might have seen in their own home or next door, but this baby Jesus is looking for us, fishing for our hearts. Similarly, Alphonsus' images of Mary make her look like a poor southern Italian woman. In one image Mary wears the hat of a shepherdess while Jesus reaches out to sheep, seemingly to play with them. People could relate to and speak to Jesus and

Mary in prayer because they would identify with them through Alphonsus' artwork.

At a time when there was great emphasis in some circles on limits on the grace of God, that salvation was for the few, Alphonsus preached the plentiful love of God, plentiful Redemption. His words and images told the poor who were used to being left out, who often experienced a scarcity of the goods of this world, that there was no scarcity of God's love and grace for them. In this painting of the crucifixion, the arms of Jesus seem a bit elongated,



as if Jesus is trying to stretch out his arms to embrace all who would come to him. This painting of the crucified Jesus might startle us with all the blood on the body of Jesus—realistic, I'm sure—but Alphonsus wanted people to see how much God loved us; that no suffering was too much because of God's love for us. So, Alphonsus' artwork was done not to hang in museums but to be seen and to live in the imagination, especially of the poor, so that they might know God's closeness to them; that they might know God's love for them, and that they might lift their minds and hearts in love of God.

And it wasn't only with his artwork that Alphonsus preached a God of Loveliness. He used music to teach and to raise the minds, hearts, and the voices of the faithful in prayer and praise to God. The lyrics of the most popular Christmas song in Italy to this day were composed by St. Alphonsus. Listen to a few lines from the song, *Tu scendi dalle stelle* or *You come down from the heavens*. The people who have sung this hymn for well over two hundred years have sung of God's love for them. The lyrics read:

You come down from the stars

Oh, King of the heavens.

At the time of Saint Alphonsus, the heavens were viewed as this place of perfect order. Yet God doesn't choose to stay there, but rather comes to us. How? The song continues:

And you come in a cave

In the cold, in the frost. . . .

Oh, my Divine Baby

I see you trembling here

Oh, Blessed God . . .

How much it costs You,

Dear chosen one, little infant,

This dire poverty,

Makes me love You more,

Since Love made You

poor now

So, the hymn tells the story of God's love, the love that moved God to become human in Jesus. But not only does Jesus come into the world, he comes to us

St. Alphonsus had a great devotion to the Eucharist. And in another song, *O fiore, felici voi*, or "Oh, you happy flowers," he offers the image of a person standing in a church where possibly the Blessed Sacrament is exposed in a monstrance. The peasant sings of how happy the flowers on the altar are to be in the presence of Jesus; then, how happy the candles are to burn in the presence of Jesus; then how lucky the monstrance is to hold Jesus. And then, the singer says to flowers, the candles, and to the monstrance: "But how much happier than you am I when my beloved comes full of love into my heart." What a consolation this song would be to anyone who thought of God as far away; to sing of a God who longs to dwell in their hearts.

I don't know of your experience, but it is certainly mine that music sometimes touches the heart in ways that mere words cannot. In one and the same instance, these songs of St. Alphonsus tell us of God's love, how precious we are to God, and move us to sing back of our love for God: *In Tu scendi dalle stelle*, Alphonsus says that seeing God's poverty in becoming human makes him, Alphonsus, love God all the more. And he hopes that we will do the same.

What is your experience of hearing the Good News and praying through music and art? Is there a particular work of art, religious or otherwise, that moves you to a love of God? That helps you realize God's immense love for you? What music opens your heart in love of God? Is it a hymn, some other song with lyrics, or simply an instrumental piece that stirs your heart?

I remember the Mass of Christian Burial for my mother over ten years ago. We processed up the aisle singing: "Be not afraid, I go before you always.

Come, follow me, and I will give you rest.” At a time of deep grief for my family and me, that music and those words brought great comfort and moved me to praise and thank God.

Comfort because I heard those words as spoken to my mother: “Don’t be afraid, I’m with you; come and rest.” And words of thanks to God, that she was at peace. I think too of a man who battled addictions in his life. Whenever I asked him how he was he’d say: “Better than I deserve.” He said that there was one song that described his journey and relationship with God: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.” That hymn told the man’s story of sin and grace; a grace and love that were stronger than any transgressions in his life.

The English Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins, once wrote that “earth is charged with the grandeur of God.” Isn’t that true! There are signs of the love and presence of God all around us: in nature, in literature, in the goodness of one another. So many ways in which the divine touches our hearts in surprising and unexpected ways—a beautiful sunrise, the birth of a child, the last words of a loved one – all of which might move our hearts to a deeper sense of the presence and love of God and move us to lift our hearts in love as well. St. Alphonsus, preacher, author, artist, musician, and doctor of prayer, opened his heart to be filled with the plentiful love of God and sought all means possible to convey that love through his preaching, art, and music, as well as through his writings. And he did so in order that we might know God’s love and raise our voices in love and praise of God.

Alphonsus’ creativity with art and music ought to encourage his sons today, the Redemptorists, to read the signs of the times and to seek similar creative

ways to preach the Gospel so that it might reach those on the periphery, those who might not appear in churches but might come across their efforts at evangelization through social media or other means. It requires an attentiveness to the times in which we live and how best to respond and to preach.

As baptized Christians, we might all follow Alphonsus' example and preach the Gospel through our words and actions, perhaps through art and music or whatever means are available to us—all so that we might witness to God's boundless love.

In these days, we honor Alphonsus for who he was, but more importantly because through him, through his words, through his art, and through his music, he allows our hearts to be touched by the God of Loveliness and offers us ways to return God's love through prayer and to witness to God's love and to share it with others. St. Alphonsus Liguori. Pray for us.

3. FRIEND OF THE POOR

By Larry Kaufmann, C.Ss.R. (Cape Town, SOUTH AFRICA)

Gospel Reading:

John 15:14-16

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants[a] any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

The Gospel of the Lord

I have made many pilgrimages to Scala, Italy, the small village where St Alphonsus founded the CSsR. On one of those occasions, I climbed the mountains above Scala to the little church of Santa Maria dei Monti. This was an area more level than the mountain which I had climbed. There is much grass for pasturing sheep and goats.

This was where Saint Alphonsus encountered the shepherds. After talking to them he discovered that they were not receiving any pastoral care from the Church. They were abandoned by the Church. St Alphonsus immediately set out to teach them, to hear their confessions, and to encourage them to receive communion. But it did not stop there. He returned from the mountain a converted man. The simple humble shepherds had converted him! He decided to establish a Congregation of missionaries that would reach

out to the most abandoned and care for them. You could say a Congregation to shepherd the abandoned shepherds!

But let's pause there and explore what's happening. Do you notice the two-way movement? Not just a one-way street with Alphonsus going to the poor, with Alphonsus converting them, or Alphonsus preaching to them. At the same time, the very same shepherds were helping to convert him! Their stories touched a sensitive nerve in Alphonsus, the nerve of compassion. As Jesus had compassion on the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd, as we heard in our Gospel text.

Let's unpack it further. It is a two-way dynamic. What Alphonsus did for the shepherds -- and what they did for him. The topic of my homily is, Alphonsus -- "friend of the poor". Friendship is never a one-way street. The love and respect of friends is mutual, it is reciprocal, it works both ways. Friends give and receive each other's gifts. To say that Alphonsus was a friend of the poor is to say that he gave the poor the dignity of equals. In Romans 12:16 St Paul says, "do not be condescending but make real friends with the poor." (Jerusalem Bible)

Let's take it a bit further. When he ministered to the poor, Alphonsus was not converting them to the Church. He was converting the Church to them!! Yes! Remember, they had not abandoned the Church -- the Church had abandoned them. There were so many priests in Naples living a comfortable and privileged life. They had all the luxuries and benefits of the clerical life. They were perfect examples of what Pope Francis calls the rot of clericalism. We all know the famous words of Pope Francis that priests and ministers of the Gospel must take on the smell of the sheep. That's exactly what St Alphonsus did.

He did not go to them and say, come back to Church. Indirectly he was saying: “The Church, through me, is coming back to you.” He was saying, “I, Father Alfonso de Liguori, as an ordained priest in the Church, am asking your forgiveness that the Church abandoned you. Through me, the Church is coming back to you.” And for this purpose, he founded a new congregation.

Many years later the Redemptorist Congregation, after one of our general chapters, focused on an interesting theme: *Evangelizare pauperes, et a pauperibus evangelizari*. To evangelise the poor and to be evangelized BY the poor.

It works both ways, just like friendship. Each friend has a gift to bring to the relationship. There’s no place here for what is called “professional distance”. This is not a lawyer-client relationship, or doctor-patient one. Ironically, Alphonsus had actually been a lawyer first. Later he became a priest. But even that implied keeping a distance. It was not until he climbed that steep mountain, that he found his humanity again, or rather, the gift of compassion through his humanity, which led him to found a Congregation that would follow in his footsteps.

For me, fidelity to the Redemptorist charism implies direct movement towards people who, in each period of history, find themselves abandoned by or alienated by the Church or within the Church. To walk in the footsteps of Alphonsus is to befriend all who have left the Church, or who feel they have been driven away by the Church. It may not be the shepherds on the hills above Scala anymore. But there are people who feel abandoned. Pope Francis himself has named a few: gay people, people who are divorced, people who are divorced and remarried. Women in many contexts feel alienated by

the Church. Youth sometimes feel abandoned. The disabled often feel not enough is done for them. Homeless migrants. The list goes on.

Let me give a personal testimony. When I was ordained, I was first sent to Cape Town to work in one of the poor peripheral parishes which the Redemptorists cared for. In my first month of ordination, I baptised a tiny baby that had just been born in the hospital. It was not expected to live. The baby died 3 hours later. For the funeral, the father carried the little white coffin walking up the road from the church to the cemetery. Afterwards I wanted to go to their home with them for the usual after-funeral gathering. Do you know what the man said to me? “Father, we are too poor to have a priest in our house!” ... too poor to have a priest in our house...!! I did not accept that excuse and went with them to their home. It was a tiny tin shack built on the sand. They lit their kerosene stove and boiled a kettle as I sat on the edge of a bed while the fleas crawled up and bit my ankles, leaving an itch for many days. But I never forgot those words: We are too poor to have a priest in our house.... How sad that the poor sometimes do not feel that a priest, or an official minister of the Church, can be their friend!

To be inspired by Alphonsus as “friend” of the poor is to be sensitive to any persons on the periphery, out on the edge, where the ordinary pastoral and sacramental ministry of the Church fails to reach. May we continue to find ways to ask forgiveness of the poor and those abandoned by the Church! And may such forgiveness and reconciliation truly lead us to friendship with the poor that is mutually enriching!

4. DOCTOR OF PRAYER

By Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R. (Baltimore, USA)

Gospel Reading:

Mt 11:28-29

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

The Gospel of the Lord

St. Alphonsus Liguori, the Founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, also known as the Redemptorists lived from 1696 to 1787. He was an artist, a musician, and a poet. He wrote over a hundred works. He is a doctor of the Church, the patron saint of confessors and moral theologians. And he is also known as the great doctor of prayer.

St. Alphonsus believed that *prayer was the great means of salvation*. That was the title of one of his works. And he also wrote a wonderful little book called *How to Converse with God Always and Familiarly With a Friend*. For St. Alphonsus, nothing could be easier than prayer. Prayer is not merely a human action, it's also a divine action because it requires grace, because authentic prayer requires faith (belief in God), and faith is a gift of God. It's an infused virtue - a theological virtue, along with hope and charity.

So for St. Alphonsus, in his preaching, prayer was at the center. He says this, “What profit is there in sermons, meditations, and all other means pointed

out by the masters of the spiritual life, if we forget to pray?” And he says this, “And I repeat, as I will repeat as long as I live, that our whole salvation depends on prayer. And therefore all authors, their books; all preachers, in their sermons; all confessors, in their instructions to their penitents; should not inculcate anything more strongly than continual prayer.”

For St. Alphonsus, prayer was the easiest thing in the world, because God’s grace was plentiful. God’s grace is abundant! God gives everyone the grace to pray. And he says, “If you pray. If you pray from the heart, if you really believe, and you talk to God from your heart, you will be saved! And if you don’t pray, you will be damned.” By that I mean, that you will one day experience the fullness of life, you will one day see God face to face; but if you don’t pray, you will have to spend eternity trying to fill a big hole in your soul - with all sorts of things, created things - pleasures, power, possessions... but in the end, that hole in your soul, can only be filled by God. *If you pray you will be saved.*

Prayer for St. Alphonsus was nothing more than simply talking to God as a friend - sharing with God your most intimate thoughts, needs and desires. We often think about what heaven could be like for us, but *what is paradise like for God?* One of the great lines in his treatise on *How to Talk with God*, he says, “Paradise for God is the human heart.” God wants to dwell within our hearts, and He wants us to dwell in His heart. There are three great marks of friendship:

1. Benevolence: actively seeking the other person’s well-being
2. Reciprocity: meaning it’s got to be a two-way street; one person cannot just be a friend, both have to want it.

3. Mutual Indwelling: you carry your friend within your heart and *vice versa*

Well, Jesus says, “I no longer call you slaves or servants, I call you friends.” He wants to be our friend. He actively seeks our well-being. He wants us to love Him just as much as He loves us. And He wants us to dwell within His heart, so that He can dwell within our hearts. And what do friends do? Well, they share their innermost thoughts and desires and feelings with each other. That’s the mark of an intimate friend. Self-disclosure and loving attention. Also, they visit one another, they spend time with one another! And that’s why one of the very first works that Alphonsus published was a little book called the *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*. Because God entered our world, and became one of us. He gave himself completely to us to the point of dying for us. He became nourishment for us in the Eucharist, and a source of hope. He dwells in the transformed Bread which rests in the Tabernacle, and awaits us to come and visit Him...even if it’s for a few moments... to talk to Him... to gaze upon Him... to allow Him to dwell within our hearts - *The Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*.

Remember the types of prayer - there’s **vocal prayer**, i.e., prayer that we talk to God out loud and there’s **mental prayer**, i.e., prayer where we use words to talk to God but in the quiet of our minds, and there’s **contemplation**, i.e., wordless prayer. Probably, one of the most telling achievements of St. Alphonsus was the idea that mental prayer or meditation is morally necessary for salvation. That means if we do not talk to God using words in the quiet of our hearts, in the quiet of our minds, it will be very difficult for us to find our way to God.

In a time when mental prayer was left for religious and priests and the rest of the faithful were, more or less, told to just engage in receiving the sacraments

and using their private devotions and vocal prayers, St. Alphonsus basically said, “No! This prayer with words in the quiet of our hearts is something everyone could do. Everyone had to do in order to nurture that intimate relationship with God!” He wanted us to be able to pray always. What he did was, he developed a very simple method of mental prayer that people could easily remember.

We could use a 3-4-3 step method to remember St. Alphonsus’ method. For him, mental prayer has a beginning (3), a middle (4) and an end (3). We sit before the Blessed Sacrament, or we sit before an icon, or we sit in the quiet of our room before a lit candle and we say 3 things in the beginning:

1. “Lord, I believe in You!” (**Act of Faith**)
2. “Lord, have mercy on me!” (**Act of Contrition**)
3. “Lord, give me light!” (**Request for Enlightenment**)

Then we move to the body or the middle of mental prayer.

1. Reflection: Here St. Alphonsus suggests that we use a book of spiritual reading or we meditate or think about the last things (Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell), or the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and we think about how these mysteries of faith reflect on us. We put ourselves there before, we see our own death, we see our judgement before God; we see ourselves in heaven or even possibly in hell; and we see ourselves at the Foot of the Cross as Jesus Himself looks upon us and sheds his Blood for us.

2. Affection: From that reflection we then move to what Alphonsus calls affection. We share with God our deepest feelings, our affections. We tell Him how much we love Him because He died for us. We tell Him how

much we long for Him. Because we want to be with Him. We want to see Him face to face. We want to go to heaven.

3. Petition: Then we go to our petitions - we get in touch with what we really need and really desire. Because we are God's children, we should bring all of our needs - those which are physical, psychological and intellectual; those which are spiritual and those which are social. We lay out all our needs before God - after all, the Our Father is just a list of petitions. And then we say, "Lord, these are my needs." And hopefully, we'll get in touch with what our deepest need is. And our deepest need is God! To have God dwell within our hearts and souls. We continue by saying, "But Lord, Thy will be done"

4. Resolution: St. Alphonsus was very practical and he did not want our faith to be somewhere up in the air floating around. He wanted us to do something concrete. So in the next step we ask, "Lord, what is it You want me to do?" Usually, in the moment of quiet (remember silence is permeating this entire process, because God speaks to us in silence) we ask, "What concrete actions must I take this day? Do You want me to speak to someone? Do You want me to spend more time in prayer? Do You want me to concentrate more on my family and my work? What is it that You want me to do?" So we make a resolution.

Then, after this period of mental prayer, which could last anywhere from fifteen to twenty minutes, extended to half-an-hour if necessary, we move to the 3-part conclusion, remember 3-4-3! In the conclusion we say:

1. "I thank you for the light you have given me" (**Thanksgiving**)
2. "Lord, help me to do what I said I would do" (**Request for grace to fulfil one's resolution**)

3. “Lord, help me to persevere” (**Request for grace of perseverance**)

So that's the 3-4-3 Alphonsian method of meditation:

1. Act of Faith
2. Act of Contrition
3. Request for Enlightenment

1. Reflection
2. Affection
3. Petition
4. Resolution

1. Thanksgiving
2. Grace for resolution
3. Grace for perseverance

What does this have to do with us today?

St. Alphonsus lived in the 18th century, a long time ago, but his teaching on prayer is timeless! We need to pray. Prayer is our ticket to heaven - prayer from the heart. God wishes to befriend you, He's not some force that's trying to manipulate us or control us, but He wishes to be our Friend! He wants to dwell within our hearts. He wants to live within us. He wants us to become part of Him. God became human, so that humanity might become divine. He wants us to visit Him, especially before the Blessed Sacrament. He wants us to talk with Him, to converse with Him!

And finally, St. Alphonsus wants us to *practice what he calls the practice of the presence of God*. To recognize that God is our companion throughout all of our life. That He is here! He goes before us to guide us, behind us to catch us when we fall, He's beside us to be our companion and walk with us on our journey, and He's within us.

So, my friends, if Alphonsus were alive today, he would say on behalf of the Lord, "Speak to me, my friend, tell me what's on your mind, come to me all you who labour and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest." May God bless us.

5. PATRON OF MORAL THEOLOGIANs

By Joaquim Parron, C.Ss.R. (Campo Grande, BRASIL)

Gospel Reading:

1 Jn 4:8-9

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him

The Gospel of the Lord

One of the most widely read Catholic authors, St. Alphonsus is the patron saint of confessors and moral theologians. In our time when Confession has fallen by the wayside for far too many Catholics, St. Alphonsus shows us how much we need God's love and mercy in this Sacrament.

He was born in 1696, in Naples, Italy. Although he was a very competent lawyer, he decided to give up everything to proclaim the love of God to all people. He became a priest and later founded the Congregation of the Redemptorists, with the intention to proclaim the love and mercy of God, especially to the poor.

His love for the Lord Jesus was very strong, and he used to pray: "My lover belongs to me and I to him. My God has given himself entirely to me, and I have given myself entirely to him. I am no longer my own, I belong entirely to my God." Alphonsus encountered the Lord in the poor. He started to write moral theology to help people understand the love of Jesus Christ. Jesus gave his life for us; He shed his blood for us!

St. Alphonsus' writings became a secure guide for priests to hear confessions. So, Pope Pius IX in 1871, made him a Doctor of the Church for his contribution to moral doctrine of the Church. St. Alphonsus was a brilliant moral theologian. He understood the teachings of the Church and called all souls in his care to live in accordance with God's will, but he also extended to the sinner the great mercy of Christ.

Even Pope Francis said, a few months ago, Saint Alphonsus was concerned with real people and their lives and their situation, and not just with principles or ideas.

St. Alphonsus never stopped saying that priests are visible signs of the infinite mercy of God who forgives, and enlightens the mind and heart of the sinner so that he may convert and change his life.

Finally, Pope Pius, the XII, in 1950, made him the Patron of Moral theologians and confessors.

He became a moral theologian of the just balance, between law and liberty, the law of God and the rights of human beings, authority and reason, and between grace and free will.

I would like to share with you a little story that will help you to understand the effect of his teaching.

Saint John Vianney, the famous Cure d'Ars, was a holy confessor. However, he was a rigorist regarding confession. He was tough with people. He felt himself obliged in conscience to defer many absolutions, his penitents, coming from afar and waiting days and even weeks for the forgiveness of God and the Church. Thus, the innkeepers of Ars made a good business because there were so many people in their hotels waiting for absolution.

His bishop, an enthusiastic follower of Alphonsus' teaching, made a recommendation to Fr. Vianney to read the works of Alphonsus. It became a revelation for Vianney, and transformed his entire pastoral practice of the sacrament of penance. There were no more delays for absolution. And there was no more good business for the innkeepers of the city.

Vianney said later: "Truly, how can I be so hard on people who have come from so far, who have made so many sacrifices, and who are often obliged to come here secretly?" From then on, he started to absolve everybody who confessed.

This is one of the many reasons why Alphonsus became the Patron of Moral Theologians. His teaching helped priests and people to understand the Love of God.

For us, we can learn with Alphonsus' theology, what the Gospel of John said in chapter 3, verse 17: "God sent his Son to us not to judge, but to save us through him." God bless you!

6. PROLIFIC WRITER & THINKER

By Sean Wales, C.Ss.R. (Cape Town, SOUTH AFRICA)

Gospel Reading:

Mt. 13: 52

Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from the storeroom things both new and old.

The Gospel of the Lord

1. Alphonsus, prolific writer and thinker.

The young Alphonsus was well equipped to become a significant **writer**. As the son of a nobleman, his liberal education and his professional legal training stood him in good stead for a life among books.

The young Alphonsus was well equipped to become a significant **religious** writer. His own personal religious commitment, his experience both as a layman and as a priest, especially among the most needy, helped him to address the **real** pastoral issues around him. His years of itinerant mission preaching and his founding of an apostolic religious community, all impelled him to reflect deeply on the great issues facing the Church of his day.

For many years Alphonsus concentrated on the preaching of Parish Missions, an obvious pastoral means of reaching those who were largely left behind by the ordinary ministry of the local church. As a result of his own intense prayer life, his passion for getting to the **root** of the problems of the Church and indeed the example of his friend and fellow Redemptorist, Fr. Gennaro Sarnelli, he took up his pen.

Alphonsus had penned some short works early on in his ministry most famously, his “Visits to the Blessed Sacrament”, written to help his students in their devotion to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. But he was over 50 years of age when he devoted himself to writing as a main feature of his ministry.

When Alphonsus was in his mid-sixties he wrote to a friend saying “it has been almost forty years that I have been studying moral theology, and I am always finding something new”. And to another correspondent he wrote “Moral theology is an endless black hole. I never stop reading and I never stop finding new things”. His first attempt at publishing a book on moral theology was his “Annotations to the Kernal (Medulla) of Moral Theology by Fr. H. Busenbaum, S.J.” (1748). Alphonsus found **his own voice** in the first edition of his own Moral Theology (1755). He worked ceaselessly to revise and upgrade this book, publishing nine editions in his lifetime. For such a monumental contribution to moral theology, he was eventually made a Doctor of the Church in 1871.

The enduring value of Alphonsus’ work in moral theology was to move the focus from the straitjacket of harsh **rigorism (Jansenism)** to the benign and compassionate **gentleness of Gospel morality**. It was a struggle which has benefited the whole Church.

While Alphonsus’ Moral Theology had enormous influence on the development of pastoral sensitivity in the confessional and revealed profound insights into the heart of New Testament morality, most people know Alphonsus for his more personal and more devotional writings. Nothing will displace his authority in morals, but his warm **spirituality** quickly wins our hearts and minds. I myself have edited several editions of his short but influential book: “Praying to God as a Friend”. I have already mentioned his

much used “Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and to Our Lady”. Many will be familiar (especially during Lent) with his “Stations of the Cross”.

The Centenary Edition of Alphonsus’ ascetical writings runs to 24 volumes. I limit myself here to highlight just three of them. Firstly, “The Glories of Mary” is a beautiful meditation on the Marian prayer, “Hail, Holy Queen”. This book made a major contribution both to devotional life and to Marian theology. Secondly, “Prayer, the Great Means of Salvation” has helped millions of people to take the first steps in prayer in the knowledge of its supreme importance in daily life. Thirdly, “The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ” shows how Christianity, at its best, is an experience of love, human and divine.

While preoccupied with his ministries of preaching and writing (up to 110 publications), to say nothing of guiding his new Religious Congregation, Alphonsus was acutely aware of the overriding **philosophical** issues in his 18th century world. He was living through a philosophical era known to history as **the Enlightenment**. The Enlightenment was characterised by the dominance of reason and individualism and the rejection of authority, and tradition. Many Enlightenment figures adopted a hostile and polemical attitude to the Church and Alphonsus was drawn into many a controversy in print. To this end, he published five major **apologetic** works, the most significant of which he called “The Truth of the Faith”. He also published a book on the teachings of the Council of Trent and one on the history of heresies.

Some people will know St Alphonsus only through his hymns. His Eucharistic hymn “O Bread of Heaven” is still a popular choice at Mass or during Benediction. Some of his Marian hymns are also still in use in

English: “Look down O Mother Mary”, O Mother Blest” and “Hail to the Queen of Heaven”. As recently as 2017 a beautiful book “O God of loveliness” collected much of the poetry of St Alphonsus, was edited and published by an Australian confrere, Fr Patrick Corbett. Alphonsus was enthusiastic in using his many talents in his zeal for the glory of God and the spiritual growth of the faithful.

2. What, then is the relevance of St Alphonsus’ example to the charism of the Redemptorists today?

It seems to me that it would be too easy to set up Alphonsus as the gold standard for all Redemptorists today or to expect the Congregation he founded to operate at the intensity we see in the founder. In any case, few of us would have the sheer energy, enthusiasm and perseverance shown by Alphonsus. Few of us, also, would come within reach of his heroic sanctity!

I suspect that Alphonsus would rather have us explore the **secret** of all his prodigious achievements. I am referring, of course, to his interior life, that life of his which is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). The one thing that is totally consistent throughout Alphonsus’ long life (he died aged 91) is the inner dialogue of love with God in his prayer, meditation and contemplation. Alphonsus was utterly faithful to the call to be still and know God, to let God speak to him, to let Jesus live His life in him, to receive grace answering grace, to abide in God.

Naturally, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer **tries** to be faithful to the charism of Alphonsus in ways suited to our times. This Global on-line Novena is itself an example of the imaginative and creative expression of the same charism which Alphonsus lived. But, it is this **contemplative dimension** of the life of the Congregation which remains the source of

all missionary effort. Each confrere and each community is called to a prayerful, contemplative stance out of which flows apostolic grace. This is put attractively in our rule of life (cf. Constitution 23) when it acknowledges that we choose **the person of Christ** as the centre of our lives and that we strive day by day to enter into personal union with him.

As for pastoral innovations, Alphonsus himself accepted the highly personal ministry of his friend Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli who devoted himself to the spiritual and material care of the prostitutes of Naples. Alphonsus also welcomed, as authentic aspects of the charism, the pastoral adaptations which St Clement Hofbauer had to make in the northern European context. Indeed, if Redemptorists today fail to address the contemporary world in contemporary ways, they would surely not be acting in line with the spirit of their holy founder.

3. Finally, what is the relevance of St Alphonsus in the everyday life of Christians?

Pope Benedict XVI tells us: “I have often affirmed my conviction that the most convincing demonstration of the truth of the Christian faith...**are the saints** and the **beauty** that the faith has generated”. These words address the reality that argument and debate of themselves rarely touch the heart. The **quality** of a Christian’s life has more compelling effects than tracts or treatises.

Actually getting to know a person who radiates integrity, decency, respect, attentiveness, is an experience which shapes us profoundly.

Just last month Pope Francis wrote to an American Jesuit (Fr. James Martin) who has a ministry to the LGBT community. The Pope commended

Fr. Martin for reflecting “God’s style” in his delicate work. By “God’s style” Pope Francis said he meant “closeness, compassion and tenderness”. These are very qualities that shine out in Alphonsus’ life and ministry.

Alphonsus always tried to remain close to the people and often acknowledged how the people he met, especially the poorest, helped him: “I learned far more (he said) from hearing confessions than from reading books”. This closeness touched the compassionate heart of Alphonsus and led to a gentleness and a tenderness which the people found so attractive.

The abiding contribution of Alphonsus to moral theology was to carve out **a path between rigorism and laxity**. In this he shows us how to find our way through perplexing situations which we confront on a daily basis. His way into moral theology was through a careful consideration of **conscience**, stressing its priority in practical decisions.

For most of us, of course, the spiritual insights and the devotional helps which he shares are of immediate and daily relevance.

The more we know of the life and works of St Alphonsus, the more we see God’s style in his life. We can see this style in the lives of saints but most clearly in the life and ministry of **Jesus**. It is a style which we ourselves can **consciously adopt** in all our relationships, even those which might be fraught. We will not fail if we try to remain close to people and treat them with compassion and tenderness.

St Alphonsus, in the vast range of his writings, is like the householder who brings out of his storeroom of knowledge and insight, things both new and old.

The last word -like the first word- is one of love, “not our love for God but God’s love for us when he sent his Son” (1 John 4:10).

7. PATRON OF CONFESSORS

By Raphael Gallagher, C.Ss.R. (Dublin, IRELAND)

Gospel Reading:

Mt. 13: 52

Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out from the storeroom things both new and old.

The Gospel of the Lord

Welcome to the Redemptorist Monastery in Limerick. Just over eighty years ago, three Irishmen left this house with a dream – to make a foundation of the Redemptorists in India. Eighty years later, an old Irishman is being welcomed into India by the wonderful Redemptorist Media Center. The wheel has come full circle. A shared passion still links the Redemptorists in India and here in Ireland. It includes faithfulness to our founder Saint Alphonsus.

What an extraordinary man he was. He was so gifted I could use these few minutes with a litany of his talents. I choose only one to concentrate on. Alphonsus is the patron of confessors in the church. Any priest can hear confessions, but the church has selected our founder to be the patron of priest confessors. A patron is meant to be a pattern, an outstanding example for any priest to follow in the sacrament of confession.

He wrote an important book on how to hear confessions. The simple style of his own words is far better than anything I could say. Here is what he wrote.

“Some priests only want to hear the confessions of devout people or people of social standing. If some poor person comes along, they reluctantly hear their confession and then send them away abruptly. As a result, it happens that a troubled person, who had made a great effort to go to confession, develops a hatred for the sacrament and is frightened to go again because of the bad-mannered reception and dismissal by the priest. Not confident of finding a priest to help them and give absolution, they fall into an immoral life and despair. Good confessors act differently. These good confessors realize that this sacrament was instituted for sinners more than for pious people. Indeed, the smaller sins do not need sacramental absolution to be forgiven. They can be wiped out in so many different ways.

That is why a confessor, full of mercy, should act in the following way. The deeper they find that a person has fallen into the swamp of sin, the greater is the love they will show in order to draw that person back to God. These are the sort of words he should use. Come on now, make a good confession. Say everything with a sense of freedom, do not be embarrassed about anything. It does not matter if you have not fully examined your conscience. I will help you. Just say thanks to God who has been waiting all this time for you. God certainly forgives you if you have the proper intention. Indeed, God is just waiting to forgive you”.

That is what Alphonsus himself wrote. I find his words to be simple and inspirational. Alphonsus founded the Redemptorists to spread the message that with Christ there is plentiful redemption. His views were not popular in his own lifetime. He seemed too soft, not insisting enough on rules and regulations. Convinced that no one needs redemption more than a hardened sinner, Alphonsus concentrates his attention on the needs of the sinner, not

on the control mechanisms that might make the priest feel powerful. A good confession is when the sinner comes out of confession smiling, and when Christ conveys his joy through the words of absolution from the priest.

That is why the church has made Alphonsus the patron of confessors. God wants sinners to return to him. Human rules and regulations can make the sinner's return to God like a long obstacle race. If God wants sinners to return to live in his love, we should not put obstacles in the way.

The challenge today is different to what Alphonsus faced. Many people have stopped going to confession. Why go to confession when you talk with God yourself? Pope Francis gave an interview a few years ago and he was asked. "Isn't it enough to repent and ask forgiveness on your own and sort out things with God that way?". His reply is again better than any answer I could give. This is what Pope Francis said.

"If you are not capable of talking to your brother about your mistakes, you will not be able to talk about them with God. You will end up confessing your sins into a mirror. We are social people. Our sins affect our sisters and brothers. Confessing to a priest is a way of putting my life into the hands and heart of someone else who, at that moment, acts in the name of Jesus. It is a way to be real and authentic; we face facts by looking at another person and not in the mirror. It is an encounter with the mercy of God Some confessors can be excessively curious ... their curiosity can be unhealthy ... a person going to confession needs to be listened to, not interrogated Confessionals should not be torture chambers".

That is what Pope Francis wrote. His direct style is quite like Alphonsus.

The numbers going to confession has dropped, and this decline has surely continued with the restrictions of the Covid pandemic. It has become practically very difficult to go to confession.

I am looking to the future. The church has made Alphonsus the patron of confessors to encourage priests to be kind fathers, welcoming and gentle with everyone. A test for someone who has just confessed their sins might be “I must do that again soon”. If the person does not feel like this, it may well be the fault of the priest. We have Alphonsus as patron of confessors, and we have a pope who is not afraid to be seen going to confession himself and can take his turn in hearing confessions.

You are doing the novena to Saint Alphonsus. I ask a favor from you. Petitions and thanksgivings are part of a novena. Put in a prayer of thanksgiving that the church has chosen our founder Alphonsus as the patron of confessors. Add a little prayer of petition for Redemptorist priests that we may be good confessors, worthy successors of our founder Alphonsus.

8. BISHOP FOR THE MOST ABANDONED

By Archbishop Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R. (Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan, CANADA)

Gospel Reading:

Mt. 9:35-37

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few".

The Gospel of the Lord

Let me begin by sharing my delight at being asked to share in this novena to St. Alphonsus, founder of the Redemptorist Congregation. In my more than 14 years now as a bishop, I have felt the distance that being a bishop necessarily creates for any religious who accepts such a ministry of leadership. I suggest to you that as it has been for me, so also for St. Alphonsus: he was never far from the call and inspiration that stirred him to become a priest, one who had a particular concern for the poorest and most abandoned of souls.

In putting these thoughts together, I must express gratitude to Father Théodule Rey-Mermet. His biography of St. Alphonsus, which he sub-titled "Tireless Worker for the Most Abandoned", itself took much of its material from Father Antonio Mario Tannoia, Alphonsus' first biographer.

There were many markers that gave shape and contour to Alphonsus' vocation. One that stands out occurred during the sabbatical that his spiritual director Bishop Thomas Falcoia prescribed for him, after he had worn himself out responding to the needs of the poor and abandoned in the city of Naples. "Spend some time in the country air of Scala", Falcoia commanded. "And while you're there, please meet a Sister Marie Celeste who is a spiritual daughter of mine." What ensued changed Alphonsus' life ever thereafter.

This gospel passage relates how the abandoned captured Jesus' heart. They had the same effect on Alphonsus Liguori. St. Alphonsus had what today we would call "a charismatic personality." Gifted in many ways, as writer, speaker, musician, artist, architect, lawyer, scholar, he was the sort of person that many of his contemporaries wanted to follow. He was a leader. As often happens with leaders, some of his followers were quick to join his side, only to find in time that the demands of the enterprise are much greater than their ability to respond. This also was true of Jesus. A personality such as Alphonsus' generates its own dynamism, and his name was on the lips of many as they observed his words and actions. So it is little wonder that in many influential circles, Alphonsus' name was raised when the conversation turned to those who might be named as a bishop. No doubt, there were many who spoke to Alphonsus' face in this way.

Before I get too far into this, I feel the need to point out the nature of episcopal ministry in the Kingdom of Naples in the 1700s. Now, to quote a Redemptorist confrere who often quoted this line to me, "a text without a context is a pretext". I found a great disparity between what Rey-Mermet describes as the Church in Alphonsus' day, compared to what we see today,

at least in my Canadian context, but I suspect this will apply to most of you as well. In trying to grasp the life situation in Alphonsus' time and place, a number of elements stood out for me in reading Rey-Mermet's Part Four:

Bishop Liguori:

1. Italy (not yet a unified country) was very Catholic, where Church and State occupied the same arena. For example, kings and princes would propose names of candidates to be named as bishops or cardinals. Furthermore, the Church had jails and prisons, as also did the civil governments of the day.
2. Catholic identity was largely cultural. All persons were baptized and practiced their faith with a modicum of devotion, but the consistency of practice and the depth of piety varied widely.
3. There were many who chose to enter the priesthood or religious life. The Kingdom of Naples of his time, made up of "the Two Sicilies", had many small dioceses, 147 to be exact. The king of Naples nominated bishops for 22 of them; the Holy See provided for the other 125.
4. Dioceses were small, with disproportionate numbers of priests and religious. The Kingdom of Naples, which covered southern Italy, had 4.5 million people. These were found in 186 dioceses and prelacies. 81 of these served less than 10,000 inhabitants each. St. Alphonsus' diocese, Saint Agatha of the Goths, had about 40,000 people. He had more than one priest per 100 faithful.

In such a context, we can easily imagine the state of the clergy in the kingdom of Naples of his day. This could likely be said of the clergy in other places as well in that era: the *esprit de corps* among clergy was deplorable. This was certainly true of priests, but could also be said of bishops. In short

there were too many clerics, and many of them struggled to make a living from the small and insignificant responsibilities that they held. Many gave in to unworthy pursuits, and living a life of leisure and distraction, earning whatever sustenance they could from whatever source of revenue they could find. As for Alphonsus, he had no interest in becoming a bishop. Far from it, he was horrified at the thought. In his understanding, a bishop's very soul was in peril because of the preoccupations and lifestyle of bishops, as he had come to view this during his initial years of ministry to the most abandoned.

In the year 1747, when Alphonsus would have been 51 years old, King Charles of Naples wished to make him the Archbishop of Palermo. It was only by the most earnest entreaties that he was able to escape this assignment. This did not deflect further speculation that he would make a fine bishop, and so the Holy Father himself appointed him as the bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths in 1762. This time his refusal was not accepted by Pope Clement XIII.

Being himself a firm believer in the virtue of obedience, when the Pope insisted on his appointment, Alphonsus felt constrained to accept. The wheels were now put in motion. As was the custom of the day, he went with two companions to Rome where he paid expected visits and homage to the higher Roman clergy, and was subjected to a theological exam of sorts, which he earnestly hoped he would fail. He also made a pilgrimage to the Holy House of Loreto, which pilgrimage gave evidence of his deep and sincere devotion to Our Lord, the Blessed Mother, and the mission of the Catholic Church.

He was ordained a bishop on Sunday June 20th in the chapel of the Most Holy Savior in the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, by the laying

on of hands by Cardinal Ferdinando Rossi, principal consecrator. Shortly thereafter he headed to his new charge, passing through Naples where he met several dignitaries before heading to St. Agatha of the Goths. This was a very small Neapolitan diocese, lying a few miles off the road that runs from Naples to Capua. Here he was the shepherd for 40,000 uninstructed people, 400 mostly indifferent and sometimes scandalous secular priests, and seventeen more or less relaxed religious houses to look after, in a field so overgrown with weeds that they seemed the only crop. There he wept and prayed and spent days and nights in unrelenting labour for thirteen years, holding on to a fervent desire to return to his Redemptorist confreres, who were his first love.

What characterized his ministry as bishop?

The ministry of a bishop is unlike that of a priest. While all three levels of the sacrament of Holy Orders – deacon, priest and bishop – derive from the same commission of Jesus to the early Christian community, there is enough variance among these orders that the candidate for each may lose touch with his initial inspiration as he adjusts to new challenges and responsibilities. While this is true, as we read the life of St. Alphonsus, we should take note that nothing was lost of his initial zeal in becoming a priest and a missionary to the poor and abandoned. I suggest five ways in which this was manifested in his episcopal ministry.

1. ***He expressed a deep commitment to the poor and abandoned.*** Alphonsus was always attentive to the poor, the uneducated, people whose lives were simple but who needed the Word of God and the Church's sacraments to assure them of God's love and care. This was a challenge to those who surrounded him, who felt that he should live a more dignified life than he

in fact displayed. He made himself available to everyone who wished an audience with him, in search of his presence or counsel, regardless of their own state in life. More than once, persons in their need and destitution would lash out at him, cursing the bishop for their own sorry lot in life. Alphonsus would not respond in his own defense in such cases, while his assistants thought he should, in defense of his office if not his person. In the year 1763-1764, there was a famine in the land that was exacerbated by the laws and customs of the time, which allowed land-owners to hold onto their much-needed produce while they awaited conditions that would allow them to get a higher price for their produce. While calling on rich land-owners to open their warehouses for the needs of the poor, Alphonsus himself had his staff open his residence's stores of food, and to buy as much as possible with their meagre resources to meet the need of the many who came to the door for relief. He saw the income he received from his offices as not for this own use and luxury, but as belonging rightfully to the poor and needy. In February of that year, a mob of the hungry decided that the mayor of the town was responsible for their sorry fate. They stormed his residence, but only after he escaped and fled to Bishop Liguori's residence for refuge. Alphonsus went to the door to meet the crowd, and offered his own life to spare the mayor, whom he said was not responsible for their sorry fate. He then took what was left in his own larder and the seminary and give this to the hungry crowd. Meanwhile, Alphonsus' own health was deteriorating.

2. *He believed in the power of the preached word to touch the hearts of listeners.* Alphonsus persisted in his conviction that good preaching, in simple language that all could understand, is necessary for all, especially those who knew little about the gospel or the benefits of salvation. As he began his ministry in the diocese, he had other preachers including Redemptorists join

him in preaching a diocesan-wide mission. Once he had settled in his mind that this retirement was imminent, he called on missionaries to repeat this experience throughout the diocese. At one point, having heard that many Masses and spiritual exercises were celebrated in the diocese without the benefit of an instructive and well-prepared but simple homily, he decreed that such sermons be delivered at every Mass throughout the diocese.

3. *He reformed the clergy, including bishops, and the culture of clericalism.* Alphonsus saw the need for this well before becoming a bishop himself. Tannoia, Alphonsus' first biographer, tells it this way: "As he travelled through the provinces, Alphonsus deplored the indolence of many bishops who enjoyed the properties of their churches without assuming the responsibility of their episcopal duties. Wishing to be of service to them by awakening in them the zeal pertaining to their position, he summarized their obligations in a little book which was as slim in size as it was weighty in substance. He sent it to all the bishops of Italy." This booklet was titled *Useful Reflections for Bishops on How to Govern Their Churches Well*. He wrote it in 1744, 18 years before he himself became a bishop. This was not the first such book to be written for bishops. But his was noted for its brevity. In the Introduction, he wrote: "There is no lack of books dealing at length on the duties of prelates in the government of their churches. I have observed, however, in the course of twenty years of missions, that much information does not reach the bishops. Solely for the desire of the glory of Christ, I have briefly noted in these few pages a few important reflections that may be of considerable use to bishops in carrying out the principal duties of their office: the seminary, the ordinands, religious and parish priests, the bishop's residence, and the nuns. I have also offered suggestions about the best means to sanctify one's flock: prayer, good example, residence, pastoral

visits, the missions, the synod, prudence in seeking counsel, willingness to give audiences, and courage in correction. These duties and these means of sanctification are contained in two brief chapters, in the hope that, through divine goodness, these poor pages, which do not even deserve to be read if their author's worth is considered, will at least be read and considered for their brevity."

I focus on this little book by Alphonsus because obviously, when he himself was made a bishop, he was called upon by his conscience to behave in ministry as he had counselled bishops before him. These were for the most part good men, but Alphonsus believed their time and energies were wasted in petty quibbling on matters of little consequence to the salvation of souls. Alphonsus expressed the conviction that a holy and zealous bishop could change people, if he realizes that this is his responsibility. "The mitre is a great weight on a bishop's conscience", he stated. Responsibility belongs to the responsible. He carried this thought over to all bodies in a diocese. On the diocesan level, he contended that "the sanctification of the people depends on the bishops." In the parishes, "the progress or ruin of the faithful depends on the parish priest". In monasteries, "observance or relaxation depend on the superiors and confessors". In the seminaries, "a good rector, good professors, and mature, spiritual and firm prefects" were needed to have good seminarians. Speaking of seminaries, 12 years later (in 1756) he published another work, "Regulations for the Seminaries". Again, he hoped bishops would read its 43 pages of practical advice for the bishop, the rector and the prefect. Father Rey-Mermet points out that one reflection stands out in his advice to bishops. Quoting the Council of Trent, Alphonsus underlines the bishop's most important duty as "preaching personally," more so than presiding at Mass or ordaining priests. The placing of the book of gospels on

the bishop's head at his ordination is not a mere ceremony, for people will be more moved by the voice of their shepherd than of other pastors.

4. *He lived a simplicity of life that expressed his view of himself as a servant and not served.* This was evidenced in many ways. In the custom of the day, a bishop would not ride on the saddle of a horse, but in a carriage. As Alphonsus was making ready for his taking office in St. Agatha of the Goths, the question arose of a carriage. Alphonsus was very careful about his manner of transportation, as he didn't want to give a wrong impression to his clergy or scandal to his people. As he considered his options in this regard, he settled on what turned out to be a buggy pulled by donkeys rather than a horse-drawn carriage. Even this he sold in the famine of 1763-64, so as to buy more food for the needy and destitute. There is also a well-known instance of the cassock that he preferred to wear most of the time, that identified him as a poor and needy priest rather than the bishop of a diocese. As he called in on a fellow bishop one day dressed in this way, the servant who met him at the door paid little attention to his request to meet with the local bishop. When finally the servant announced Alphonsus' presence to his master, the local bishop was apologetic that Alphonsus did not receive the attention and honour that was his due. On his many travels, as Alphonsus and his assistants were offered hospitality in the residences of bishops or other dignitaries, Alphonsus would inspect the sleeping quarters to see that his attendants received the better bed for sleeping, while he insisted that his straw mattress on the floor was sufficient for himself.

5. *He saw the need for reform at many levels of Church life;* In reading the many incidents of his ministry as a bishop, Alphonsus exemplified what in our day we would call "speaking truth to power". This was true both in his

dealing with prelates, as already spoken of in his pamphlet on how bishops should conduct their affairs, as well as his admonitions to civic leaders. In 1775, Alphonsus' letter of resignation was accepted, for reasons of his ill health. At the same time, it was recognized that in contrast to some bishops of his day, he ruled his diocese from his sick bed better than others who enjoyed good health and fortunes. Ever solicitous for the well-being of his diocese, he wished to retract his retirement when he heard who was to be named as his replacement. There was a four-years hiatus before that bishop took office in St. Agatha, by which time he had become very accustomed to life in the imperial city of Naples. He had no power to do so by then, so he resigned himself to return to the Redemptorist community that he loved so well. He was deeply joyful to return to his confreres, as they were also to have him back among them. While no longer the superior general, he was designated the "director" until death. His last mortal efforts were spent in trying to return the Congregation to a legal and real unity. He died on August 1st, 1787, trusting that all things are in God's provident hands.

In conclusion, I am grateful for the model of bishop that St. Alphonsus is for me personally. Like Alphonsus and many of my contemporaries in the episcopacy, my nomination as bishop came as a surprise and a shock. I am encouraged by Alphonsus' vision of episcopal ministry, as well as his understanding of the needs and the blessings of the Church. I believe Alphonsus was a man before his time, if only because he saw Church ministry, all Church ministry, in terms of service, self-denial, and the needs of the poor and marginalized. This was also Jesus Christ's firm teaching to the twelve and to all who would follow after them.

9. MOST ZEALOUS DOCTOR

By Juventius Andrade, C.Ss.R. (Bangalore, INDIA)

Scripture Reading:

Eph 3:16-21

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

The Word of the Lord

“Most Zealous Doctor of the Church”! What an eminent title given to St Alphonsus Maria de Liguori! And no, this was not a biased title given by his sons, the Redemptorists, to their Founding Father. Rather, it was given by the Universal Church, Holy Mother the Church - to Its illustrious son, St. Alphonsus.

You may ask: What does ‘Doctor of the Church’ mean? Certainly, not a medical doctor. What then is it? Even at a young age, St. Alphonsus was brilliant enough to have done a doctorate both in Civil Law and Church Law also known as Canon Law. But this title means so much more!

Doctor of the Universal Church (Latin: Doctor Ecclesiae Universalis)

This is a title given by the Catholic Church to those saints who are recognized as having made a significant contribution to theology or doctrine through their research, study, or writing. From the beginning of the Church, until now, only thirty-six persons have been proclaimed as Doctors of the Church.

What is interesting, is that since the year 1970, four women have been introduced into, what has sadly been, an exclusive male club. Female Doctors include Teresa of Ávila (known as Saint Teresa of Jesus) and Catherine of Siena announced by Pope Paul VI; Thérèse de Lisieux - "the Little Flower" proclaimed by Pope John Paul II; and Hildegard of Bingen included by Pope Benedict XVI.

In 1871, Pope Pius IX proclaimed St. Alphonsus as a Doctor of the Church. In doing so, the Church was acknowledging who he was, what he contributed and the difference that he made, especially in the field of Moral Theology. Besides being called "Most Zealous Doctor of the Church", later, in the year 1950, Pope Pius XII, proclaimed St. Alphonsus, the "Patron of Confessors and of Moral Theologians."

Why the title: Most Zealous Doctor?

It has been the practice of the Universal Church, in some instances, to attribute an adjective when someone is proclaimed a Doctor of the Church. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas is known as the Angelic Doctor.

When it came to St. Alphonsus, this adjective was chosen because of what was manifested in his life - his attitudes, his abilities, his evident virtues. Most likely, it was not so much on account of his accomplishments - which were many, but rather in what and in whom it was rooted in – the person of

the Redeemer. The source of St. Alphonsus' zeal was the Redeemer Himself. That Redeemer in whom is plentiful redemption. Plentiful as in more than we can ask for and greater than we can imagine as the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians highlighted for us.

St. Alphonsus was proclaimed not just a Zealous Doctor. Neither was he given the comparative form – the more Zealous Doctor. Instead, he was given its superlative form – Most Zealous Doctor of the Church!

So, how do we understand Zeal?

Language dictionaries define zeal as 'an enthusiastic fervour for or a devotion to a person, cause, ideal, goal or object'.

For Thomas Aquinas, zeal was "a necessary effect of love", being "the vehement movement of one who loves to secure the object of his love".

Zeal in the life of Jesus.

We can best understand zeal when we look at the life of Jesus. There is one instance when the word zeal is particularly applied to Him. It was in the fierce defence of His Father's House, the Temple, which had been made a market place. **John 2:17.** *His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me".* Here **Psalm 69:10** is being quoted. Zeal shines forth all through His way of life - His availability, his approachability, His passion for the people, which came straight from His heart.

Zeal and Fire.

Let me draw your attention to Luke 12:49-50. *"I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!"*

This is not the first time that we hear about this kind of fire in the Scriptures. Jesus was filled with a passion for the Reign of God and for the People of God, especially the poor and the marginalized. Jesus longed to set the world on fire with this passion. It is this fire which burned in the hearts of His disciples after His resurrection.

This is the fire brought by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In the Scriptures, ‘fire’ is a symbol for the passion for God and God’s people. This should mark the life and character of the Church and of every disciple. For the disciple of Jesus, therefore, there is no longer any room for apathy, a passive indifference to life or injustice, for status quo and for putting up with “things have to be always as they used to be”. The disciple on fire with the Gospel cannot sit on the fence, remain undecided, uninvolved or simply follow the crowd because it is easier.

Zeal in the writings of St Alphonsus.

I draw on some of the writings of St Alphonsus, which the Superior General of the Redemptorists, Fr. Michael Brehl, has highlighted in an article. It is no accident that Alphonsus in his very first sermon as a deacon – even before he was ordained a priest, preached on a related text from Isaiah.

It was April 1726, and the text called on God to set the world ablaze, on fire with a love which purifies. Alphonsus frequently returned to this theme, commenting specifically on the text from Luke 12:49-53. Alphonsus has written many books and one of his masterpieces is, ***The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ***. Alphonsus focuses on this desire of Jesus to set the world on fire, to receive the baptism for which he was sent, to transform the world by setting the hearts of his friends on fire, even at the cost of his life.

In his booklet, the great *Novena for Christmas*, St. Alphonsus begins with this text from Luke 12:49, reminding his readers that Jesus came to light a fire on the earth. He gave this wonderful title for Christmas calling it “the day of fire”.

So, St. Alphonsus developed moral theology and pastoral practice based on the mercy of God and on the formation of conscience in freedom. He was sometimes accused of being lax, of being a heretic. Personal insults were also hurled at him. But, St. Alphonsus, being on fire for the gospel and for the people, especially the abandoned and the poor, could not be deterred. He was not going to back off. He allowed the fire to be ablaze within him. In the end, St. Alphonsus was vindicated and he was recognized by the Church as well as by society as a saint and a great man of vision. His teaching has helped to heal many wounds in the Church.

Zeal in the life of St. Alphonsus - Prayer and Action.

Zeal was in the very heart of St. Alphonsus. All his talents were put at the service of his zeal for the Gospel. In fact, the Redemptorist Congregation was born of and grew out of that zeal and it was against this background and in this setting, that St. Alphonsus took a vow ‘never to lose a moment of time’. That explains how this zeal enabled him to be so prolific in several different fields of life.

In the Alphonsian and Redemptorist tradition, zeal addresses the interior reality of prayer as well as an outreach pastoral activity. It embraces the two-fold aspect of the love of God and the abandoned poor. Hence the Reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, relates how one experiences the height and the length, the breadth and the depth of God’s love, in ways that we cannot even imagine. It is this love which fosters within us, a burning fire and a

burning zeal. It is significant that St. Alphonsus is described both - as the Doctor of Prayer and the Most Zealous Doctor. It is this intense love that brings it all together.

True and False Zeal.

What does all this have to say to us? What does it mean for us, on this final day of the Novena? With zeal, true zeal, comes energy - positive energy, rooted in God and meant for God's people. It is an energy for goodness and for growth. But there could also be false or misguided zeal and that has energy too - but sadly, for destruction, devastation and violence. True zeal has its origin in God, the source of all good.

It is enough to see the life of St Paul in order to see the contrast. Before he met Christ, as Saul, he was obsessed with the destruction of Christians. But once he met Christ, he was transformed in his deepest core. He was rooted and grounded in Christ as expressed in the reading today.

I draw your attention to another reading: 2 Corinthians 5:13-14 *13 For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. Verse 14 is significant to our theme. 14 For the love of Christ urges us on...*

This deep sense of intimacy with God, expressed in prayer, kept the fire of zeal burning in Paul. Therefore, he was now able to resist evil from within himself, inside of himself and outside of himself.

Zeal and Fanaticism.

So then, while there is energy in both instances, there is a world of difference. Twisted zeal reveals its face in fanaticism. There is a clear distinction between zeal and fanaticism. A zealous person inspires one but a fanatic is merely a

rabble rouser. Zeal builds but fanaticism breaks and destroys. Zeal brings grace but fanaticism brings grief. Zeal is constructive while fanaticism is destructive. Zeal is flexible with situations not principles. Fanaticism is rigid with situations, even when watering down principles.

Zeal, true zeal is rooted in God, is outward looking, and committed to build the reign of God. While narcissism turns us inward, zeal really turns us outward and beyond ourselves. Zeal pulls us out of our comfort zone and moves us into the compassion zone. Zeal causes a holy discomfort and a divine disturbance.

Zeal: What about us?

What does zeal do? Zeal more than merely wanting to bring the people to the Church, strives to bring the Church to people. This was something that St. Alphonsus did constantly.

So, how do you see yourself? Zealous and enthusiastic or apathetic and indifferent? When do you find yourself deeply moved in your heart, so much so, that it wants to make you go out of yourself? When do you feel enthusiasm, a wonderful Greek word, *en theos*, meaning ‘in God’, so that you feel rooted in God and, therefore, urged to go out of yourself? What makes you find fire in your belly and energy in your heart so as to make a difference in the lives of those around and in society? When do you experience passion, that is shown in a Passion for God and Passion for all God’s people, the abandoned and especially the poor? It is when you experience this, that you begin to notice the stirrings and the expression of zeal within you. And not only just you, but all those around you will notice it and be energised by it. Authentic zeal is infectious and contagious in the best sense of the term.

The Apostle Paul, St. Alphonsus and Us: Zeal, Enthusiasm, Passion.

The Apostle Paul was rooted in Christ; gripped by His love; empowered by His grace and therefore, ministered untiringly. And what was true of St Paul was manifested in the life of St Alphonsus. What was manifested in the life of St Alphonsus, was recognised by the Universal Church. Thus, he was given that wonderful, superlative title: “Most Zealous Doctor of the Church.”

We have reflected today on not just to admire but also to follow Jesus and to be inspired by St. Alphonsus, so that ZEAL, this marvellous gift of God may be embraced by us and deepened within us. Through our Baptism, we have been immersed and soaked in the life of Jesus. He has come to cast a fire within us and would do that, we keep it blazing, with His grace. We need that ZEAL – that fire, that enthusiasm, that Passion for God and for God’s people to shine forth in and through us. So may it be in your life and in mine!

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