



LETTER FROM JOHN PAUL II
TO THE FATHER JUAN M. LASSO DE LA VEGA, FOR THE THIRD CENTENARY
OF THE BIRTH OF SAINT ALFONSO MARIA DE' LIGUORI

To the Reverend Father JUAN M. LASSO de la VEGA
Superior General of the Congregation of the Supreme Redeemer

1. The three-time centenary of the birth of Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori (September 27, 1696) is a reason for intensified thanksgiving to the Lord for the "copiosa redemptio", whose announcement to the abandoned and especially to the poor constituted the secret of the life of the holy Doctor. At the same time, it stimulates all the Redemptionists to renew their loyalty to the charism, updating it with courage and confidence in the light of the challenges that the Church is facing on the threshold of the third millennium.

As I already had the opportunity to do on the second centenary of the death of s. Alfonso, it is with great joy that today I join all the Redemptionists in the "current memory of a saint who was a teacher of wisdom in his time and with the example of life and with the teaching continues to illuminate, as reflected light of Christ, light of the nations, the path of the people of God" (John Paul II, *Spiritus Domini*: AAS 79 [1987] 1365).

In that circumstance, connecting myself to what was stated by my Predecessors, after recalling the fundamental features of the Alfonsian proposal on a spiritual, moral and pastoral level, I wanted to recall "the wishes of a great father for his inheritance" expressed "in his life, in his pastoral action and in his writings: fidelity to Christ and his Gospel, fidelity to the Church and his mission in the world, fidelity to man and to our time, fidelity to the charisma of your Institute" (*Ivi*, I. c., 1374).

What I said then deserves to be taken up and further developed in the perspective of the forthcoming third millennium, which calls for a renewed impetus for evangelization from the whole Church, nourished by sincere conversion at the personal, community and social level.

2. The life and teaching of s. Alfonso is, in this regard, a valuable stimulus. From the moment of his "conversion" in 1723, he lived without reservation the evangelizing anxiety, according to the words of the apostle Paul: "It is not a boast for me to preach the gospel; it is a duty for me: woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9, 16). This apostolic tension s. Alfonso also indicated as a fundamental characteristic and specific intent of his Congregation. The vitality and dynamism of the Redemptionist Community, throughout its two centuries of history, are rooted in fidelity to missionary dynamism. It was an eloquent witness, among others, Gennaro Maria Sarnelli (1702-1744) by me recently enrolled in the issue of the Blessed. It is in this perspective that the entire Congregation and the individual religious must continue to walk: the need for the Gospel in the world is even stronger today.

It is necessary to announce with force the fullness of meaning that Christ opens to the life of man, the unshaverable foundation that offers to values, the new hope that he introduces into our history. It is a preaching that must be embodied in the concreteness of the challenges that humanity today has to face and on which its own future depends. Only in this way can that civilization of love that is desired by all take shape.

3. The forms of this announcement must be constantly renewed in the light of the possibilities and needs of the different contexts. This renewal is made more urgent today by the rapidness of social and cultural evolution. This is particularly true for the "popular mission", which in these two centuries has marked the redemptionist preaching. Fidelity to the fundamental Alfonsian indications must merge with the courage of appropriate adjustments so that this apostolic method can continue to respond to the expectations of the People of God.

We must also make use of the other modern means by which it is possible to bring the truth to the men and women of today. Among the aspects that strike in the work of s. Alfonso there is his commitment to the press: the number of his writings, the succession of editions and translations, the ability to speak in simple language and accessible to all even the most challenging truths of faith and morality have spread his teaching in all strata of the Christian people. It is precisely from this example that today's Redemptionists must be stimulated to an increasingly competent use of all the means of social communication, while remaining faithful to a simple, substantial, clear style.

The announcement is authentic if, following the pedagogy of Christ, it materializes in the patient accompaniment of the consciousness of each one in the gradual path towards the true and the good. S. Alfonso strongly testifies that the frankness of preaching must be welcomed by a father and patience by a doctor - especially in the sacrament of reconciliation - so that every person can open himself to the action of Christ the Savior. Loyalty to the Founder asks in a particular way from the Redemptionists this capacity and this commitment, indispensable for that "general mobilization of consciences and common ethical effort" that I never tire of indicating as a solution to even the most serious problems, such as those concerning life (John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 95).

4. The deepening of moral theology is placed in this perspective. S. Alfonso did his best to bridge the separation between faith and life in all strata of God's people. The practicality of the Founder must continue to stimulate his children in their pastoral work, especially in the renewal of the sacrament of Reconciliation. It is never necessary to stop at the sole enunciation of the principles, but to illuminate everyday life with them, so as to allow the conscience of every baptized one a safe path. This Alfonsian practicality demands essentiality and concreteness, in response to the questions that actually matter to the people, in fidelity to the Gospel and to the Living Tradition in the Church. It pushes the maturation of consciousnesses capable of illuminating with the wisdom of the Spirit the complexity of the different situations of life.

With s. Alfonso it is necessary to reiterate the centrality of Christ as a mystery of the Father's mercy throughout the pastoral care. The Redentorists must never tire of announcing the "copiosa redenptio", that is, the infinite love with which God in Christ bends towards humanity, always starting with those who most need to be healed and liberated, because they are most marked by the nefarious consequences of sin. May it apply to today's children what the Founder said about himself and his companions: "We speak of nothing but the passion of the Redeemer, in order to leave the souls bound to Jesus Christ" (Sant'Alfonso Maria de' Liguori, *Opere*, vol. III, Turin 1847, 289). May the pastoral commitment of the entire Congregation continue to lead the people to the encounter with the crucified Christ, that is, with "the love he has shown us on the cross" (*Practice of loving Jesus Christ*: Ascetical Works, vol. 1, Rome 1933, 5).

5. For this reason, we must never tire of proclaiming divine mercy. The call of s. Alfonso: "We must be persuaded that the conversions made for the sole fear of divine punishment are of short duration... if the holy love of God does not enter the heart, he will hardly persevere". Therefore "the main commitment of the preacher" must be "to leave in every sermon that makes his inflamed auditors of holy love" (*Operas*, vol. III, Turin, 1847, 288).

From this conversion centered on love springs the constant tension to holiness. By experiencing the intensity of the mercy with which God bends towards man, to heal and free him, s. Alfonso manages to make everyone, even the most humble and the poorest, rediscover the call and the path of holiness: "The religious as a religious, the secular as a secular, the priest as a priest, the married as a husband, the merchant as a merchant, the soldier as a soldier, and so speaking of every other state" (*Practice of loving Jesus Christ*, cit., 79). At the same time, he gives this holiness a clear evangelizing tension that leads to taking charge of one's environment.

The commitment to the promotion of a laity who is increasingly aware of dignity and baptismal responsibilities is essential for a Church that wants to respond to the challenges of the third millennium. The Redemptionists have always been in deep communion with the people. Today, on the part of the laity, especially of young people, the requests for greater participation in the life and mission of the consecrated are stronger. They have already found a first answer in the indications decided by the last general chapter of the Congregation. It is a path on which to proceed with courage, even in respect of the specificity of both secular and religious life.

6. S. Alfonso never tires of insisting on the need for fidelity to the choices and ways in which the Redeemer was the gospel of God among us. In the primitive rules of the Congregation, the "following example" of the Redeemer is affirmed as a fundamental law. The Word incarnate shares our condition, the presence and experience of God is made for us, he then stands as a frank and determined annunciation, up to the cross and resurrection. The Spirit continues to guide the Church on the same path (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 8). S. Alfonso asks his children to testify in a clearer and more decisive way the need to continue on the same paths of Christ: incarnation and sharing, transparent testimony, frankness and significance of annunciation, generous participation in the stripping of the Cross, are essential to anyone who wants to evangelize with apostolic effectiveness.

Above all, it is necessary to remain faithful to the choice of the Founder for the abandoned. It was precisely from this choice that the Congregation was born in November 1732. It was a radical choice in favor of those whom the pastoral care itself relegated to the margins: the world of the abandoned became the world of s. Alfonso The world of every Redemptionist must remain, as the result of a continuous discernment in the heart of the different ecclesial situations in order to be able to respond promptly to the urgencies that are taking place.

All this is meaningful to the entire people of God in the commitment of new evangelization and conversion to be intensified in preparation for the third millennium. Faced with the old and new situations of abandonment, the Church must continue the gesture of the good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to safety and goes in search of the lost sheep (cf. *Lc* 15, 4-7).

7. Such a commitment is impossible without constant spiritual renewal. S. Alfonso did not tire of repeating it with tones full of deep love and trust: "Who is called to the Congregation of the SS. Redeemer will never be a true follower of Jesus Christ, nor will he ever become a saint, if he does not fulfill the purpose of his vocation and does not have the spirit of the Institute, which is to save the most deprived souls of spiritual help, as are the poor people of the countryside. This was already the intent of the coming of the Redeemer, who protested: Spiritus Domini . . . unxit me evangelise pauperibus" (*Operas*, vol. IV, Turin 1847, 429-430). And for this reason he trusted in the powerful intercession of Mary, to whom he had entrusted himself and his Congregation.

I willingly make my own the words and prayer of the Founder, trusting that his example inspires not only to the Redemptionists, but to all the people of God a more vivid longing for the fullness of holiness in the generous service to the brothers.

With these wishes I impart to you and to the entire Congregation, as a pledge of constant affection, a special Apostolic Blessing.

From Castel Gandolfo, September 24, 1996.

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