

was to proclaim the message of the Gospel, so that all who heard him might understand; and the power and efficacy of his preaching derived wholly and entirely from his very close union with God. Beloved sons, it is such an example that our own times need most of all. For it is especially by their own personal sanctity of life that heralds of the word of God must bear witness to the truth. Nor is there any other way by which priests and religious can truly become 'the salt of the earth and the light of the world' " (AAS 59, 1967 p. 962).

RELEVANCE OF THE TEACHING OF ST. ALPHONSUS*

In a circular letter of March 15, 1971 to all the members of his Congregation, Father Amaral explained the value of the works of St. Alphonsus, and his relevance in the Church today as a writer, moralist, and missionary. The following are extracts from the letter of Father Amaral:

1. LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST.

To live a Christian life means to make Christ the center of one's existence. St. Alphonsus makes Christ the center of his whole life and work. His one great concern is to induce all men to love the Saviour, as he so often repeats in his circular letters addressed to his spiritual sons.

The love of St. Alphonsus for Jesus Christ is, above all, devotion to the Person of the Saviour, with whom he strives to live in a most intimate and true friendship, as is evident from his prayers and affections, coming forth from a heart all on fire with love. His love is a continuous contemplation of the Mystery of Christ in all its aspects. The natural result of this contemplation is imitation of Our Lord; but for St. Alphonsus imitation of Christ's virtues was not principally a form of devotion or an ascetical method; rather it was the fruit of union with the Savior, a demand of love.

Some of the ways in which St. Alphonsus expressed his love for Christ may no longer appear attractive to Christians

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of today. But in what constitutes the essence of Christian living, namely, in union of friendship with the Savior, St. Alphonsus gives an example that ever remains true and authentic: this forms the enduring part of his teaching; on this score, his books are of real value today, especially his most characteristic work entitled: "Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ."

2. TO JESUS THROUGH MARY.

This aspect of the teaching of St. Alphonsus is the one which perhaps has given rise to the greatest mistrust, in these days of ecumenism when everything is suspected that smacks of exaggerated devotion to the Blessed Virgin or of too enthusiastic praise of her privileges. St. Alphonsus is a passionate lover of Mary; but he is so because he finds in her arms Jesus Christ, because she is the Mother of God, the Mother of grace and salvation.

3. THE GREAT MEANS OF PRAYER.

It seems that in these our days following the Vatican Council men have rediscovered the fundamental importance of prayer in the economy of salvation. On this point, St. Alphonsus will forever remain a practical teacher. He went to the sources; in the Gospel and in the rest of the New Testament he found the key to the problem of persevering in the love of God. That key is found in the precept of Christ and of the Apostles: Pray without ceasing! This led the Saint to coin the phrase which condenses his teaching on prayer and which will outlive all changes of tastes and systems of spirituality: "He who prays will be saved; he who does not pray will be lost."

4. ST. ALPHONSUS, MORALIST.

To help Christians know the obstacles they must overcome and the forces of evil they must struggle against to lead a Christian life; to teach them how to make the sacrament of Penance a meeting and reconciliation with Christ and the beginning of a new life of grace; to put into the hands of confessors a most useful instrument for guiding souls toward Christian perfection — were the purposes St. Alphonsus kept over in mind when writing his moral works.

Twenty-one years have not yet passed since St. Alphonsus was officially proclaimed "Patron of confessors and moralists" (Brief: "Consueverunt omni tempore" April 26, 1950), and this precisely by reason of his moral works and the doctrine they

contain. Have such works outgrown their usefulness? Has the doctrine become antiquated?

We cannot demand more from the moral teaching of St. Alphonsus than what it was possible for him to give in his day; we must not judge it with the critical eyes of those who have been protagonists or witnesses of the magnificent renewal of moral theology in our days; nor can we pretend to find in the moral doctrine of St. Alphonsus an explicit solution for the problems proper to our modern civilization, problems which in his times did not exist, or if they did, they did not possess the serious and urgent character they now have. What we must look for in St. Alphonsus is above all the spirit of all men, his great pastoral charity. We should not separate our Saint's moral works from his spiritual ones; in his times, moral theology was conceived and organized in a way different from today; but substantially, today's moral theology and that of two centuries ago have the same objective: to lead men to God by a life conformable to the Gospel.

St. Alphonsus is not the austere and unattractive Saint that some people imagine; on the contrary, he has all the warmth of heart of a native of southern Italy and is at times exuberantly emotional. He was a prudent and well-balanced man, always avoiding extremes. In his teaching and in practice he takes into account the reality of the Incarnation: without disfiguring the divine life nor minimizing the Gospel precepts, he appeals to God's condescension with human frailty. Therefore for him there is neither exaggerated rigorism nor convenient liberalism.

St. Alphonsus does not wish to terrify sinners with constant threats of eternal punishment, nor does he wish to offer them too soft, and comfortable a carpet (Daniel Rops). In practice, he tried with kind ways to obtain the triumph of grace; and thus he was able to glory in the fact that he had never sent away a penitent without absolution, that is, he had never barred to anyone access to holy Communion, the fountain of Christian life. In hearing confessions, the Saint was not chiefly concerned with applying to some determined person an abstract law or a theoretical principle: rather with true charity, he considered the actual situation of the penitent, with a view to find a solution for a real, human problem. The so-called moral system of St. Alphonsus is based on these principles; its foundation is prudence, which is a Christian virtue and is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

5. MISSIONARY PASTORAL MINISTRY

The missionary zeal of St. Alphonsus was the fruit of his burning love for Christ and the way in which to show it effectively; it is characterized by his searching for the practical and the essential as well as for the most adequate means for enabling all men, by preference the most poor and spiritually abandoned, to live a Christian life. Missions are to be considered from this point of view; as the most suitable means for helping Christians, as individuals as well as a people or group, to live in accordance with the Gospel.

And what else is the purpose of the pastoral ministry? Methods may change, missions, as a method, may not prove productive of good in certain circumstances. But the purpose St. Alphonsus proposed to himself in his missionary activity cannot change. Since his main concern was the conversion of the faithful and their perseverance in the love of God, St. Alphonsus tried to provide for them many efficacious helps to do so: such as, prayer, various devotions, frequent reception of the sacraments and pious associations.

St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787): Born near Naples, Italy; bishop of Agatha of the Goths (1762-1775); founder of the Redemptorists; in addition to his principal work, *"Theologiae Moralis*, wrote on prayer, the spiritual life, and doctrinal subjects in response to controversy; canonized, 1939; proclaimed Doctor of the Church, 1841; named patron of confessors and moralists, 1950.