

# SAINT ALPHONSUS, AN EXEMPLARY PASTOR OF SOULS\*

*On the occasion of the solemn celebrations for the centenary of the proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de' Ligouri as Doctor of the Church, the Secretary of State, Cardinal Giovanni Villot, sent the following letter to Cardinal Corrado Ursi, Archbishop of Naples, the city to which the mortal remains of the "pastor animarum" have been transferred for the conclusion of the ceremonies.*

My Lord Cardinal,

On behalf of the Episcopate of Campania, Your Eminence informed His Holiness that the mortal remains of St. Alphonsus de' Ligouri, transported from Pagani, are in your city from 20 to 29 October to mark the solemn conclusion of the celebrations — which lasted till today — of the centenary of his proclamation as Doctor of the Church, which took place on 28 March 1871.

The Holy Father is glad to take this opportunity, according to the desire expressed, to propose again for general consideration the example of the great Pastor, the glory of the Church and in the pride of your generous land, for the purpose of stressing the teachings he still has to give our times, so much in need of certainties and norms for consistent human and christian action.

St. Alphonsus was really for all his long life a "pastor animarum". His figure shines forth in the history of the Church, in a particularly difficult period, because of his lofty sense of responsibility, supported by which he devoted his physical strength, his brilliant intellect, his gifts of human and Christian sensibility for the good souls, which was really the "suprema lex" for him. This light illuminates his work as a

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\* *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 November 1972.

tireless herald of the Word of God, in his preaching that conquered the learned and the humble, and in the writing of admirable works, in their simplicity, which were and still are widely read, thereby multiplying the efficacy of his apostolate without limits of time and space.

### MODEL FOR RENEWAL

From this zeal for the salvation of souls there also arose the Congregation of the Holy Redeemer, which he founded to provide those whom he saw neglected and deprived of adequate care, with the nourishment of God's Word and every spiritual assistance. He wished that his Religious should imitate the Divine Saviour, in the intimacy of prayer and liturgical life as well as in going from town to town to proclaim the Gospel in sermons and spiritual exercises.

It was pastoral zeal that made St. Alphonsus a theologian. When the rigorism of the Jansenists, reacting against moral laxity, prevented a living, personal relationship with God and a real interior peace for Christians of goodwill, the writings of the Saint aimed at clearing for the faithful, in their daily weakness, a way to the Father of mercies and to Christ the Redeemer. He deepened and renewed moral theology with the personal commitment of his faith, his zeal and his hard scientific work.

Today, too, in accordance with the instructions of Vatican II (cf. *Optatam totius*, 16), there is need of such a deepening and renewal. Therefore the St. Alphonsus celebrations offer the opportunity to turn our eyes upon this necessary process to obtain directives and indications, "particularly for present-day moral theology, which must carry out the grave task needed by the Church and the world.

### "GRACE OF THE SPIRIT"

a) St. Alphonsus, a theologian and pastor of souls, clearly saw the necessity of this renewal in his times, and courageously put into practice. Today, too, the study of moral theology must be constantly renewed: not in the sense of a "new" morality corresponding to the short-lived demands of the current situation, but in response to the requirements of the present condition of the Church and of mankind, adapted to the signs of the times.

It is really satisfying to see that moral theology today is trying to put into practice the recommendations of the Council. Today it is again more aware that it must be far more than an interpretation of a moral code or an exercise in casuistry, though it preserves their value, if well done. It tries to deal with the deepest reality of Christian life, vocation in Christ, and the acceptance of this vocation, both "graces" of the Redeemer, as the central theme of moral theology. In this way moral theology is brought back again to the doctrine of St. Paul, St. Augustine (*De Spiritu et littera*; P.L. 44, 199-246) and St. Thomas (*S. Th.* I-II, 106). For Thomas Aquinas, vocation in Christ, which he calls "grace of the Holy Spirit", is the principal element of the new law in Christ. The historical implementation of every day Christian morality is, consequently, not just "obedience" to moral precepts, but mainly "fruit" of the life-giving Spirit (cf. Jn. 15, 2-3; Gal. 5,22). On the other hand, vocation in Christ and the gift of the Spirit not only do not make it superfluous to seek models and norms for a Christian life in this world, but drive home awareness of Christian responsibility to find the best way of living, one's life, both personal and social, in a really human and Christian way.

### STIMULUS TO CONSCIENCE

b) Just as the theologico-moral work of St. Alphonsus was stamped by his personality and by his moral experience and conscience, so today the renewal demanded must be a continual stimulus to the conscience of the moralist. Moral experience enables the theologian to reflect about human and Christian morality, and is a prerequisite of his being able to make a contribution of his own to the solution of the moral problems of humanity, provided he tries to understand the mentality of modern man and personal and social problems, which imply moral questions of very great importance. Unfortunately, there are theologians who owing to the continual phase of evolution of the world and of man, sometimes seem to hesitate to continue their task in the Church and in the world. However, if moral theologians start from the Catholic doctrine and avail themselves of their own personal experience, well meditated, and of their faithful conscientiousness, and make the sincere attempt to understand modern man and his problems, moral theology can rightly find the right way to

the desired deepening and renewal. The Holy Father wishes to encourage moral theologians, and asks them to continue their conscientious and responsible study.

### SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

c) In his work of renewal, St. Alphonsus was sustained by a high sense of responsibility; thus moral theology must feel responsible to individuals, to society, to Church and to God. If it is to save the indispensable values of the human and Christian spirit, and of its tradition, it has the task of restating the results of the Christian and human commitments of the past for the present moment and for the future. In so doing it is necessary to avoid the twofold danger of not declaring clearly enough what God's will is and thereby imposing on men obligations that are not sufficiently justified as well as casting doubts on moral requirements that are fully justified. No one-sidedness in moral theology,—whether of rigorism or of liberality—equally arbitrary—leads to good but rather harms the real humanization and christianization of man and of society.

In the Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (cf. 15, 11; 40, 38; 42 ss; 57), Vatican II asks Christians—and therefore also moral theologians aware of their own responsibility—to help in this genuine humanization and christianization of humanity and of the world in their process of evolution. Moral theology, however, will realize that a perfect humanization—and therefore interpersonal love in the first place—is not possible without the reality of the Cross. It will also explain what is sometimes forgotten or denied, that is, religion also belongs to a full formation of mankind: that is, not only theoretical faith, but also prayer, meditation, worship. Without religion and the cross, just as without the strength of redeeming and liberating grace, humanization and human interpersonality are not fully realized, as real moral values.

### PLACE OF SACRED SCRIPTURES

d) St. Alphonsus also tried, in a difficult, scientific study, to bring into his own work what could be gathered from Christian experience in the past and from knowledge of the real situation of man in his time. In the same way moral theology today must be able to embrace all the elements it needs to carry out a valid reflection on spiritual life, inspired by faith.

In the first place it will have to be guided by Holy Scripture: there, it finds developed its primary theme, that is, "the high vocation of the faithful" in Christ (*Optatam totius*, 16). There, it discovers the riches of the mystery of Christ and the mystery of a theological anthropology that makes it understand the deep reality of Christian man. There, it finds the norms that summon the whole man: continual conversion, faith and love of the Father, the following of Christ, the life of man redeemed and reborn in faith and in the sacraments. There, it finds the fundamental values and attitudes — disinterested love, justice, desire to carry the cross, etc. — which selfish man would only be too glad not to know. There, it finds the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ himself paints the picture of the man of the kingdom of God. There, finally, it finds for example in St. Paul, the attempts of the first Christians to determine concrete moral norms for the community of the time.

Moral theology has the task of learning from the history of the moral ideas of the people of God, how numerous Christians, in the Holy Spirit, have succeeded in making themselves models of human life in the world and in the following of Christ. Here there is need of a human interpretation and a Christian discernment in order that the really human and Christian evaluations of the people of God in past centuries — and only these evaluations — may be preserved and become fruitful for the present day. The same procedure must be followed also with regard to the tendencies of the people of God today, where the Spirit of Christ is no less alive than before, although it cannot be denied that other influences are also felt.

### INTENSIFYING EFFORTS

The people of God is one alone, but hierarchically ordered. Consequently, it is understandable that moral theology should be particularly attentive to the words of those who, being Pastors, can say authentically what is the real spirit of the people of God. It will accept gratefully the word of the magisterial and pastoral office of the Church, as an essential element and an immediate and universal norm for the deepening and renewal of morals today.

Furthermore, this theology must endeavour to understand the man of today, and, as far as possible, the various people of different cultures. Without this effort, it could not really reach reality. It must therefore become familiar with the essential

knowledge of human sciences, and know exactly the sector of reality which it wishes to address, and also speak to men who have not the light of the Gospel. It must, together with the non-Christians, make the attempt to determine what solutions to contemporary human problems correspond best with the reality and dignity of man. (cf. (*Gaudium et spes*, 33, 40). Catholic moral theology, precisely because it is irradiated by the light of the Gospel, destined to illuminate all the nations, sets out to make a real contribution, acceptable to all men of goodwill; it is not, therefore, a normative morality for Catholics alone. That is also demanded by the traditional Catholic doctrine on the universal and perennial value of the so-called natural law, of which the Magisterium of the Church is the custodian and the authentic interpreter.

### HIERARCHICALLY ORDERED

e) Finally, and above all, the example of St. Alphonsus speaks of the necessity of intensifying efforts for a continual evangelization. As he used word of mouth and the pen to proclaim the Gospel, so today the bishops and their collaborators in the clergy must feel committed to an ever generous activity to spread the Kingdom of God, by means of preaching, adapted to the requirements of the time, and the religious instruction imparted to the various categories of persons, particularly adolescents and the young. They must use the instruments that the media of social communication placed at the disposal of the pastors of souls, on such a vast and multiple scale that they must stimulate talent and zeal for their modern utilization in today's overall apostolate. In this activity the better qualified and more open Catholic laity can offer efficacious cooperation.

With the fatherly good wishes that the centenary celebrations may offer pastors and moralists precious food for thought, along the lines indicated above, the Sovereign Pontiff invokes on all the powerful intercession of the Holy Doctor, and willingly imparts his special Apostolic Blessing.

I am glad to take advantage of the circumstance to express deep veneration for Your Eminence.

Devotedly in the Lord.

GIOVANNI Card. VILLOT