

ST. ALPHONSUS AS CONFESSOR

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The centenary of St. Alphonsus' Doctorate recalls another honour which the Church conferred on the saint twenty years ago, when Pius XII issued a Brief declaring St. Alphonsus the official heavenly Patron of moralists and confessors. St. Joseph Cafasso, a moral professor and a noted confessor of St. John Bosco's time, used to say to his students: "You need have no fear of judgment if you can tell God that you always followed St. Liguori." The priest who follows St. Alphonsus makes no compromise with sin, but he has infinite compassion and understanding for every sinner. In the spiritual guidance of souls, he follows the saint's golden mean between the laxity which never rouses the sinner from his vice, and the rigorism which drives him to despair. In this article, written principally for the benefit of priests, we shall touch on three aspects of St. Alphonsus as a confessor.

THE SAINT'S ESTEEM FOR THE WORK OF THE CONFESSIONAL

One day, when he was bishop, Alphonsus said to a young subdeacon: "Get yourself ready. I will soon make you a priest and confessor." "Monsignore", replied the young man, "I have not the least desire to be a confessor." "Then why receive Holy Orders?" asked the bishop. "You have no desire to work for the salvation of souls; neither have I any desire to confer the priesthood on you."

He would allow no one to be presented for a benefice or a parish unless he was a competent confessor. For the sake of his priests he himself made a summary of his larger Moral Theology in three small volumes entitled the "Homo Apostolicus", and a one volume compendium of the latter which he called "The Confessor of Country People", as well as a still smaller book to which he gave the title "The Practical Confessor". Soon one or other of these books could be found in every rectory. Weekly moral conferences were held at the bishop's house. But the saint would say to his priests: "Con-

fessors must bear in mind that approbation of the bishop does not suffice. . . they must also have the approbation of Jesus Christ, who at the hour of death will examine whether they have fulfilled their duties well or ill. And if a confessor is to exercise his office aright, he must not cease to study moral theology, which is an extensive and difficult science."

For the training of confessors in his own Institute, he chose only professors who were mature in age, judgment and experience. Because, as he said, "they are training young men who are soon to be judges, whose decision will be beyond appeal."

This independent and responsible training of confessors was characteristic of the saint. Later, in making him one of her Doctors, the Church would pay him the unique compliment of saying that priests might safely follow his opinions without even examining his reasons; but he did not wish his own students to be trained in this easy way. He wrote his Moral Theology principally for his own missionaries and he said to them: "I have written this book with so much labour only for your sakes, that you may have a safe guide. . . I do not say that my opinions must be followed," but I beg you at least to read what I have written." Again he writes: I have embraced a number of opinions contrary to the opinions of Jesuit authors, as well as to those of Dominicans, Franciscans, Carmelites and Theatines. I follow only my conscience, and when reason convinces me, I pay little attention to moralists." He was referring, of course, only to matters on which the Church had not spoken. For him, a decision of the Church closed the question.

In the Rule of his Institute we find these words, going back to the saint's day: "The members of the Congregation shall think nothing more important than the hearing of confessions, for there is no work better calculated to promote the glory of God and the salvation of souls. The more each devotes himself to this work with great zeal, the more will he show himself to be an excellent missionary and a very faithful follower of Jesus Christ. . . Everyone, as a true son of this holy institute, driven as by a hunger for souls and burning with a great longing to aid them, shall make little account of any inconvenience, hardship or toil." And the saint, quoting St. Pius V, writes in his "Selva" for priests: "Give us fit confessors, and surely the whole of Christianity will be reformed."

In these days of Renewal, despite some divergent opinions, our zeal for the confessional will not diminish, if we listen to the voice of Vatican II. The Council stresses the importance of

frequent confession; it reminds pastors "how much the sacrament of penance contributes to developing the christian life and they should therefore make themselves available to hear the confessions of the faithful". (Decree on Bishops, no 30, 2.) Priests are more than once reminded of the importance of this sacrament, especially in this passage: "They are joined with the intention and love of Christ when they administer the sacraments. Such is especially the case when they show themselves entirely and always ready to perform the office of the sacrament of penance as often as the faithful reasonably request it." (Ministry and Life of Priests, no. 13.)

THE SAINT'S MILDNESS AND CHARITY WITH HIS PENITENTS

When the Redemptorists first began their work in France and Belgium, Jansenism was still rampant and priests were afraid to go into the confessionals. The Sons of St. Alphonsus gave the clergy many lectures on the principles of St. Alphonsus and soon priests were everywhere saying that now they could hear confessions with an easy conscience.

Pope Leo XIII called St. Alphonsus "the most brilliant of moralists, and the mildest." The saint was surely making a true estimate of himself when he said in one of his letters: "you know that my greatest fault has always been to be too easy." Though educated in the rigid school, priestly experience quickly taught Alphonsus to abandon probabiliorism. He was a lawyer, yet anything but a legalist. He acted more like a criminal lawyer who does his utmost to prove the accused "not guilty." He would brand nothing as a mortal sin unless this was clear from scripture or from the teaching of the Church. Always souls were his first consideration. He agreed with the estimate of him made by a certain priest: "a man of sound doctrine, detached from all prejudices of schools and a friend of right reason."

His impartiality as well as his prudence can be seen in this quotation: "It is true that in my first edition I adopted, on the faith of a number of authors, opinions which are hardly well established: but on further examination I have retracted or amended them. I have rejected a number of opinions held by Busembaum and other probabilist authors, so that I am considered as rather rigid. But I find no difficulty in approving of opinions, which seem to me to be sufficiently probable. I

believe with St. Antoninus, that to do otherwise would be to lead souls to eternal ruin. . . . I follow the counsel of St. John Chrysostom: 'Be gentle with your neighbour, austere to your self.' "

One example from his Theology shows how clearly he distinguished between the strong stand taken by the preacher and the more mild action of the confessor. He discusses the common practice of immodest dresses that revealed womens' breasts. "Though I have often spoken strongly against such practices on the missions, now as a moral theologian I must speak *secundum veritatem* and I cannot say that it is in itself a mortal sin."

He also proposes the case of a young man who comes to confess but who lacks necessary instruction. Should he be sent away till he is properly instructed? The saint answers that it is better to instruct him there and then and absolve him.

With sinners he was always kindness and patience itself. He says: "The more heavily a soul is enslaved by vice, the more necessary it is to use gentleness to free it from its chains." He understood well that basic principle of pastoral charity expressed admirably in these words of St. Jane de Chantal: "The longer I live, the more I realise how necessary it is to use mildness to gain entrance into hearts and to persuade them to fulfill their duty to God." He even suggests to confessors by many examples the very expressions to use in order to give the penitent courage and confidence.

Critics of St. Alphonsus have sometimes censured the immense number of questions proposed in his theology. They forget that he was covering the whole field of possible moral action and that he was writing, often in summary form, for priests who were innocent of the very elements of theology. Far from intending that the confessor should plague his penitent with questions, he gives very clear directions that will rule such conduct out. For example, he warns of the danger of rendering the sacrament odious, of asking questions that may result in a wrong and sacrilegious answer, of suggesting evil where it does not exist. He knows the value of good faith, that the conscience of the penitent, if he is sincere, is the immediate index of his guilt; that only formal sin offends God etc. Experienced missionaries trained in his theology have never had trouble in this matter of questioning. Indeed it is almost a tradition with us that the longest mission, confession, takes little more than five minutes.

The saint covers in charitable detail all classes of penitents: the ignorant, the conscienceless, relapsing and habitual sinners, those in occasions, the sick and the dying, prisoners and criminals condemned to death, those tormented by the devil, the scrupulous, the devout and the young. He counsels confessors to avoid invalid confessions by directing the sorrow of the devout to the sins of their past life, and the sorrow of the young to real faults against their parents. For all he lays down this rule: "the gold of charity, the honey of mildness and the prudence of the wise."

PRUDENT CARE IN PROTECTING THE PENITENT FROM FUTURE SIN

The love of Jesus Christ, frequent Holy Communion, the practice of prayer and the protection of the Blessed Virgin... these were the means by which the saint strove to keep his penitents in the grace and love of God. But he knew that this would easily come to nothing if he could not protect them against voluntary occasions of sin. On this point he was strict almost to the point of ruthlessness. "If you wish to avoid sin, you must avoid the occasion or at least render its danger remote." Here he allowed no speculative opinions but only solidly practical ones. His penitents were not to be treated as "guinea pigs" for some academic theory; it was souls not bodies that were at stake. Commenting on this strictness of St. Alphonsus, St. Joseph Cafasso says: "This is a very slippery terrain. Opinions that look sound in theory are often disastrous in practice."

For those who sin through weakness, St. Alphonsus knew that the sacraments are the best remedy and he would not keep them away. But for those who sin through voluntary occasions, the occasion must be attended to or there can only be chronic relapse. Here, he says, is where so many confessors fail in their duty to their penitents.

It is true that the circumstances of our day render the safeguards of St. Alphonsus' time virtually impossible in many instances, but the need for practical remedies is still the same. The perennial principles of St. Alphonsus are still valid to-day. Their application will vary according to circumstances. For this task we need the supernatural prudence of the Holy Spirit, which is what made St. Alphonsus the great moralist and confessor he was. May he obtain this for the priests of to-day, through the prayers of the Mother of Good Counsel.