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**REDEMPTORIST NORTH AMERICAN SECRETARIAT FOR PARTNERSHIP IN MISSION**

**INITIAL FORMATION SESSION #6**

**THEME: ALPHONSUS AND DEVOTION TO MARY**

Time Frame: 90 minutes

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**CENTRE OF BEAUTY:**

- ☐ Mission Cross
- ☐ Cloth
- ☐ Icon or picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help
- ☐ Candle
- ☐ Bible

**HANDOUTS:**

- ☐ Prayer of St. Alphonsus to the Holy Spirit (attached)
- ☐ @A Novena of Madonnas@ (prayer service, adapted from Terry Moran)
- ☐ ASt. Alphonsus and Mary the Mother of God@ by Fr. Michael Brehl (attached)

**MATERIALS:**

- ☐ Name Tags (if needed)
- ☐ Pens/pencils
- ☐ Paper
- ☐ Flip Chart
- ☐ Markers

**NOTES:**

In preparation for this session, participants might read ASt. Alphonsus and Mary the Mother of God@ by Fr. Michael Brehl (attached). Several reflection questions are posed at the conclusion of the article.

## SATURDAY MORNING OR WEEKDAY EVENING SESSION

### GATHERING and WELCOME

**ExperienceB** Pray together the prayer service AA Novena of Madonnas,@ which prayerfully presents nine images of Mary which were precious to St. Alphonsus.

**ReflectionB** Ask the participants:

1. St. Alphonsus wrote and spoke of Mary as his mother. How do you name or relate to Mary in your own life?
1. As we prayed together, which images of Mary spoke most powerfully to you?
2. What is it about this image that attracts you?

Invite the participants to share the image and what it said to them. When everyone has shared, there can be some discussion or conversation on the various images or on the place of Marian devotion in our lives and in the Church.

**GeneralizationB** St. Alphonsus was very much known for his devotion to Mary and for his writings about her. The most famous of these writings concerning Mary is his book, *The Glories of Mary*, which is still in print today. One chapter of this book, that of AMary as Mother,@ was distributed in preparation for this session, along with several reflection questions. Discuss the chapter, using the reflection questions, if they are helpful. They are:

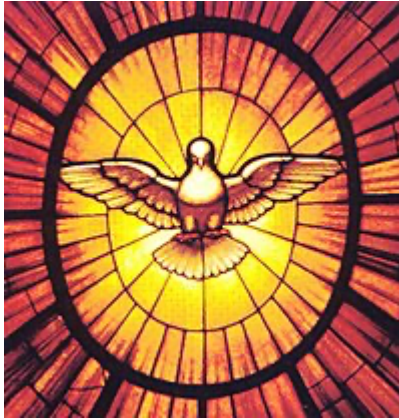
1. As you read this article, what do you think was Alphonsus= relationship with Mary?
2. Alphonsus readily moves between his writing about Mary and prayer to her. What insight does this give you into how he wants us to relate to Mary?
3. Alphonsus writes, AShe, our most loving mother, was always and wholly united to the divine will.@ How is Mary a model of discernment and discipleship for people of our day?
4. Alphonsus saw Mary as a model for us in facing life=s sorrows as well as life=s joys. Do you see Mary in this way? Is she a model at all for you as you travel life=s journey?

**Action:** Name one thing that you will take home with you from tonight=s session.

**PrayerB** APrayer of St. Alphonsus to the Holy Spirit@ (attached)

## Social Time

### PRAYER OF ST. ALPHONSUS TO THE HOLY SPIRIT



**L.** You are **fire**;  
**R.** enkindle in me your love.

**L.** You are **light**;  
**R.** enlighten my mind with the knowledge of eternal things.

**L.** You are the **Dove**;  
**R.** give me innocence of life.

**L.** You are the gentle **Breeze**;  
**R.** disperse the storms of my passions.

**L.** You are the **Tongue**;  
**R.** Teach me how to bless you always.

**L.** You are the **Cloud**;  
**R.** shelter me under the shadow of your protection.

**L.** You are the **Giver** of all heavenly gifts;  
**R.** animate me,

**L.** I beseech you, with your **grace**;  
**R.** sanctify me

**L.** with your **charity**;  
**R.** enlighten me

**L.** with your **wisdom**;  
**R.** adopt me by your goodness as your child, and save me in your infinite mercy;  
so that I may ever **bless** you, **praise** you, and **love** you;  
first during this life on earth, and then in heaven for all eternity.

Amen.

*St. Alphonsus Liguori*

**ST. ALPHONSUS AND MARY, THE MOTHER OF GOD**  
**by FR. MICHAEL BREHL, CSsR**

**Introduction:**

It has been said that the story of each vocation is very different from one person to another, but all have one point in common: the gentle and decisive intervention of Mary. However, among the saints there are some for whom this relationship with Mary, the mother of Jesus, is lived much more intensely. There are some for whom their relationship with Mary is much more of a son or daughter with a mother. Among these ‘Marian saints’, we can certainly number St. Alphonsus. This in no way diminishes the absolute centrality of the person of Jesus Christ in his spirituality, theology, and morality. His very centre is distinctly ‘Christological’.

St. Alphonsus believed that since God has given us Jesus through Mary, then the surest way for us to come to Jesus is through Mary. In fact, Alphonsus is so thoroughly ‘Marian’ because he is so completely ‘Christological’. This is the first and fundamental basis on which we can speak of St. Alphonsus and Mary.

**1. The Family Life, Culture, Education of Alphonsus**

At the time of Alphonsus’ childhood and adolescence, there were 214 Sanctuaries dedicated to Mary in Naples. The co-patron of the City of Naples was Our Lady of Carmel, the “Brown Madonna”.

The parents of Alphonsus lived and breathed in this Marian culture – and it marked their son. Alphonsus was born at their ‘country’ residence of Marianella. He was baptized at Santa Maria delle Vergini at his mother’s insistence, and he was consecrated to Mary, receiving ‘Maria’ as his second of nine names.

Alphonsus was raised to pray before various statues and images of Mary, especially, to pray the rosary. Graduating in 1713 from the University in Naples, he professed the ‘blood oath’ to defend the Marian privilege of the Immaculate Conception. For him, this was not a mere formality. Years later, he renewed the oath he had taken so solemnly at the age of 16, and he wrote of the significance of this act in *The Glories of Mary*.

From 1715, he became a member of the pious Congregation of S. Maria della Misericordia, and also the Congregation of the Visitation. In August 1723, the ‘Year of his Conversion’, after losing the case concerning Amatrice, and after participating in both the Novena and then the Octave of the Assumption, he decided to abandon the ‘world’, and consecrate his life to God, leaving his sword, the sign of his nobility, at the altar in the church of the

Madonna della Mercede. Again, years later, looking on the image of the Madonna della Mercede, he said that 'It was she who took me from the world and made me enter the clerical state'.

As a young cleric, he became a member of the 'Company of Santa Maria succurre miseris' – the help of the miserable. In 1729-1730, he came to the small shrine of Santa Maria dei Monti above Scala, where he could read the mysteries of the Redemption in the Madonna with the child in one arm and the bible in the other. Here he received the inspiration for his missionary project.

Of course, we also know of the many extraordinary experiences of Mary which marked his life: the appearances of Mary, and her words in the grotto at Scala; the experiences in Foggia, Amalfi, Castel S. Giorgio, Arienzo, and many other places.

In 1762, while in Rome to be ordained Bishop, he made a pilgrimage to Loreto – as far as we know, it was the only formal pilgrimage he made.

In 1787, as he was dying in Pagani, he held an image of Mary in his hands. At the sound of the Angelus, he breathed his last.

There can be no doubt of the love that Alphonsus bore for Mary, the mother of Jesus. His life was marked by her constant presence. He knew her as his own mother. If further proof of this relationship were required, we have only to look at his writings on Mary, his prayers, his paintings, his songs.

But always, this love for Mary was lived in the context of Jesus Christ as the absolute centre of his life. He believed and witnessed to the fact that there is no Marian theology or spirituality apart from Christology. It is Jesus who is central, and from whom Marian devotion takes its meaning.

## **2. Marian devotion in the culture of the time**

It is important to remember that in the context of the popular piety of 18th century Naples, the Blessed Virgin Mary held a very important place – the 214 sanctuaries to her in the city itself testifies to this, as do the devotions, especially the rosary and the scapular, and the art and music. However, something was changing.

Among the educated classes, including certain ecclesiastical authorities and theologians, there was a growing anti-Marian sentiment. This was due to the impact of the enlightenment, the growing influence of the Jansenist spirit and theology, and what were perceived as the Marian excesses of the pre-reformation age which some maintained put Mary in the 'place of Christ'.

The growing influence of Jansenist spirituality criticized the popular devotion to Mary for excessive sentimentalism, and an erroneous trust in Mary's power to protect and save. Those influenced by the Jansenist theology were especially provoked by the 'misguided and pernicious' title of Mary as 'our hope'. Another title that evoked the anger of the Jansenist or Rigorist school was Mary as the 'Mother of Mercy'. This school of spirituality was also totally against the 'dangerous' doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as an affront to the divine justice faced with the common depravity of all human nature. It is in this climate that Alphonsus continued not only to practice his personal living and life-giving Marian spirituality, but he zealously promoted it for all people as a sure way to Jesus Christ, plentiful redemption, and a moral Christian life.

For Alphonsus, Marian devotion was not just a personal or aesthetic choice, but a clear option for an orthodox theology of mercy and grace, leading to communion with Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

### **3. Mary in Art, Literature and Music**

In the Neapolitan culture at the time of Alphonsus, Mary was most often pictured as a regal, powerful and distant figure. She was placed on a pedestal. Certainly, she was a model to be emulated, especially by the upper classes, in her culture, beauty, chastity, etc. But she was presented as somewhat remote from the everyday experience of ordinary people, especially the poor. Images and statues of Mary were usually crowned, robed in splendour, even with a sceptre. This was the image of the Queen – like the 'Infanta' of the Spanish Royal Family, or the great Catholic Queen, Isabel.

Hymns were usually sung to her in Latin, and with complicated musical settings. We can think of some of the 'Ave Marias' which we continue to use in concerts today. As a model, the emphasis was placed on images of 'courtly love', chastity, obedience, passivity.

Alphonsus develops a very different approach to Mary. Consider his own paintings of her: she is portrayed as a young girl, in peasant dress, with a gentle smile. Not a court portrait for sure. Or the paintings he commissioned and used on the missions, like the *Divina Pastora*, a large copy of which hangs in the Monastery of Sant'Agata, his gift to the Nuns. In this painting, Mary is wearing a straw hat, as is her Son, the Redeemer. They are surrounded by sheep. She is a shepherd – exercising a mission and ministry – and she seems to be delighted that she is leading the sheep to her Son who is playing with them.

Think of the hymns that Alphonsus writes, in Neapolitan or Italian, and which could be and still are sung by ordinary people: lullabies for the baby, 'Tu scendi dalle stelle', really a hymn addressed to Jesus in which Mary plays a major part, 'O Bella Mia Speranza', which flies in the face of the Jansenist reservations about hope – and communicates to ordinary people a sense of hope-filled optimism.

The peasants and poor then, as now, often experienced that those who love them have no power to help them, and those who have power do not love them. Alphonsus presents Mary, and the Redeemer, as those who love them and have power to help them. This is revolutionary. A Madonna who is a shepherdess, close to the sheep, the smell of the sheep on her dress and apron – This is a powerful symbol of a woman in mission and ministry usually reserved to men. A mother who sings a lullaby to her son who shivers in the cold. A young girl who receives the Holy Spirit without full understanding of all that this will mean...

#### **4. Alphonsus and a theology and spirituality of Mary**

In this presentation, I cannot fully develop the theology and spirituality of Mary which Alphonsus presents in quite many books, sermons, treatises, as well as in his prayers and art. So, briefly, I would like to underline some elements of his Marian spirituality which I think are still relevant today. I'll begin by examining the titles for Mary which he used most frequently.

##### **a. Preferred titles for Mary:**

###### *i. Mother*

Above all, Alphonsus relates to Mary as 'Mother'. This is the word he uses whenever he addresses her. He was deeply aware that when Jesus entrusted Mary to the beloved disciple from the cross, he was first of all entrusting the disciple to his mother. Alphonsus realized that Jesus was mandating Mary with a mission – to become the mother of all believers. She is a missionary. And it is her maternal care which provides the framework for all Marian devotion.

This emphasis of Alphonsus finds an echo in Pope Francis. Fr. Majorano spoke of this similarity in an interview earlier this year. This particular emphasis on the mission entrusted to Mary from the cross finds explicit mention in *Evangelii Gaudium* (#285-286). Pope Francis affirms that there is a "Marian style to the Church's work of evangelization. Whenever we look to Mary we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness." (EG 288).

Is it any wonder that when he visited Naples, Francis made reference to The Glories of Mary with respect and affection.

###### *ii. 'Mother of Mercy'*

After the simple name of 'Mother', and intimately connected with it, Alphonsus prays to Mary as 'Mother of Mercy'. This title is found throughout his writing, on practically every page of *The Glories of Mary*, and in so many of his sermons and prayers. As a mother, it is not possible for Mary to be anything other than 'mother of mercy'. Her one desire is to

communicate God's mercy and redemption to all. As some have written commenting on Alphonsus, in Mary, the justice of God and the compassion/mercy of God meet.

For Alphonsus, as Mother of Mercy, Mary is not only concerned for our souls – but she also points us to the corporal works of mercy, and care for whole persons – body and soul. Alphonsus belonged to the Misericordiella – a pious congregation to care for the poor, to visit the sick, to accompany those about condemned to die.

Alphonsus recounts many 'esempi', stories of the mercy of Mary for the abandoned poor. And he bases the first part of his Glories of Mary as a commentary on the Salve Regina, mater Misericordiae. The mercy of Mary flows from her mandate to be our Mother, the mother of all believers, a mission entrusted to her on the cross. As sons and daughters of such a mother, we are called to the works of Mercy ourselves.

Perhaps it is an act of Providence that the Holy Father has proclaimed an extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy as we are honouring Mother of Perpetual Help. This is truly a 'Redemptorist' opportunity, and for us, a 'Marian' opportunity as well.

### *iii. 'Mary, our Hope'*

It seems that no other title for Mary could arouse the anger of the Jansenist and Rigorist School as much as this one – Mary, our Hope. With such a pessimistic view of human nature, and the conviction that only a few would be saved, for them it was heresy to speak of Mary as our hope. Christ is our only hope, and even then it is best not to be presumptuous as those who will be saved is already determined, and there is no hope for others.

For this reason, when Alphonsus chose the frontispiece for The Glories of Mary, a picture of Mary with the words 'spes nostra' – 'our hope', he was making a clear statement of his conviction that God's redemption is plentiful, for everyone. And that God's mercy has no limits. Mary becomes for us a sign of this hope – O bella mia speranza.

Alphonsus' hope is not presumptuous, but he is convinced that God gives everyone the grace to pray, and that everyone who prays will receive the grace necessary for salvation. Just as a mother never despairs of her children, so God never closes the door to us. And Mary is a sign and guarantee of this hope for each one of us.

### *iv. Immaculate Conception*

As you are all aware, Alphonsus dedicated his new Institute to the patronage of the Immaculate Conception. He was convinced of this unique privilege of Mary, granted to prepare her to be a fitting temple of the Holy Spirit and Mother of God. But he also believed that this privilege is granted to her as a sign of hope for us – what she has received from

the beginning is what we also hope to receive – copiosa redemptio, plentiful redemption. For Mary, the grace of redemption prevented her from falling. For us, the grace of redemption can raise us up after the fall.

The Immaculate Conception clearly demonstrates what God can do with our fragile and wounded human nature. For Mary is redeemed as surely as we are. Again, the Jansenists and Rigorists cried out against the Immaculate Conception. Human nature is hopelessly depraved, and all are doomed. Alphonsus could not accept this pessimistic view of humanity, nor this limited notion of God's grace and mercy.

In his spirited defense and treatment of the Immaculate Conception, Alphonsus defended two very important principles of Catholic orthodoxy – the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful; and the ever present action of the Holy Spirit guiding the Church in doctrine and worship. Revelation is not a static moment in time, long past. Rather, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church, and the People of God, through faith and popular piety, doctrine and worship.

v. *'Help of the Miserable'*

I think that it was no accident that Alphonsus transferred to the pious association of S. Maria, *succurre miserabilis* when he was accepted as a cleric for the Archdiocese of Naples. Through this association, he continued the very practical and concrete actions of help, of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, for the abandoned and the poor.

In his writings, he often refers to Mary as the Help of the miserable and the poor. Was God providentially preparing us through this experience of Alphonsus to accept the Icon of Perpetual Help? Alphonsus never knew this devotion and Icon personally – unless he happened to visit St. Matthew's while in Rome for his episcopal ordination. But the Icon of Perpetual Help certainly embodies all these mysteries of motherhood, mercy, redemption, hope, tenderness, and perpetual help.

vi. *Madonna of Ransom*

We cannot forget that Alphonsus left his sword at the feet of the Madonna della mercede – the Madonna of Ransom, of Redemption, of Mercy. In this gesture, we catch up a glimpse of the project and promise of the Institute he would found. From the very beginning, Mary has marked his life, his dreams, his mission, and ours.

vii. *Queen of Apostles*

Alphonsus did honour Mary as his queen, and he believed that she transformed what it means to be queen. After all, his commentary on the *Salve Regina* invoked her under this title. But he goes on to underline that true royal dignity is found in service. Mary is that

queen who has the power to help the poor, and who knows and loves the poor. They are abandoned no longer. As Queen of Apostles she seeks them out, and accompanies every mission .

**b. Works of Alphonsus on Mary:**

Alphonsus wrote many works addressed to Mary, or about Mary. As he writes in the preface to the Glories of Mary, and repeats on several occasions, “There are those who protest that they have a great love for the Blessed Mother, but they do not speak of her often, and they do not speak with her daily. Such shows little proof of love.” This could certainly not be said of Alphonsus! Even in those works which are not dedicated especially to Mary, there is scarcely a page without a prayer, a reference, or an example invoking her presence. However, the context in which Alphonsus speaks and writes about her is the context of his Christo-centric theology, spirituality, morality, and devotion. Jesus Christ always is at the centre.

Two good examples of this Christo-centric Mariology are the Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin, and The Glories of Mary. Both of these works, among the most popular writings of Alphonsus, are dedicated to Jesus Christ:

“My most loving Redeemer and Lord Jesus Christ, I, your unworthy servant, know how much pleasure anyone gives you who strives to praise and glorify your most holy Mother. You love her so tenderly. I know how much you desire to see her known and loved by everybody. And so I have resolved to publish this book which treats of her glories. I do not know to whom I could better dedicate it than to you, who have her glory so much at heart.”

Alphonsus intends his Marian prayers and writings to increase the confidence that his readers have in God’s copiosa redemptio, to deepen their love and devotion for the Mother of Jesus, to correct the errors and exaggerations of the Jansenists and Rigorists, and to provide preachers with thoughtful reflections to help them not only talk about Mary, but to speak to her, and so to move others to a greater love and confidence in her.

Among his most popular works about Mary are the following:

- i. Prayers to the Blessed Virgin for every day of the week
- ii. Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin Mary
- iii. The Glories of Mary

However, Alphonsus also wrote many other smaller treatises, sermons, letters, and articles in larger works. As well, he often writes a thought about Mary or a prayer to her in his works such as the Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ.

## **5. Alphonsus and pastoral practice with Mary**

For Alphonsus, all his prayer, writing, devotion and practice is essentially missionary. So, it is no wonder that he understands Mary as the first and greatest missionary who must accompany his Redemptorists on every mission. He believes that she has the power to attract the most hardened sinners to God and God's divine mercy. He compares her to Ruth, who gleaned the fields of all the wheat that the harvesters have passed over. He believes that for Mary, no person can be overlooked – no matter how sinful, humble, poor, abandoned, uneducated or bitter.

### **Mary as the missionary**

As I stated above, in his understanding of Mary as the missionary disciple par excellence, Alphonsus prepares the way for a more mature Mariology. This Mariology finds an echo in the writings of Pope Francis, especially in *Evangelii Gaudium*. In Brazil, you know that Mary, *nossa Mãe Aparecida*, has accompanied the Redemptorist missionaries through the length and breadth of this country. As well, Mother of Perpetual Help, in all other countries across America Latina, and indeed in every continent, – has proven to be the most effective missionary presence announcing copiosa redemptio for all, but especially for the abandoned poor.

On this note, I think that I will conclude this presentation. Thank you for your kind attention. I have very much enjoyed preparing for this meeting. The invitation to speak about Mary and Alphonsus has given me the opportunity to read again the writings of our founder, and to immerse myself once more in his spirit of filial devotion to her, and with her, to Jesus the Redeemer.

In the Spirit of our Founder, it is very important that during this Jubilee Year of Perpetual Help, we not only speak about Mary, explaining the Icon and tradition. It is most important that we speak with Mary, and teach and invite others to do the same. She is not only our model, but also our helper, our intercessor, our friend, and above all, our Mother.

Our Constitution 32 beautifully captures this spirit, which I hope will animate our year of celebration:

Let them take the Blessed Virgin Mary as their model and helper. For she went on her pilgrim way in faith, and embraced with her whole heart the saving will of God. She dedicated herself completely as a handmaid of the Lord to the person of her Son and to his work, and thus served the mystery of redemption. Indeed she still serves it, as the

perpetual help of God's people in Christ. Therefore, let them relate to her as a mother with all the love and veneration they owe her as sons...

**Fr. Michael Brehl CSsR (Superior General of the Redemptorists)**

**FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:**

1. As you read this article, what do you think was Alphonsus's relationship with Mary?
2. Alphonsus used many titles for Mary. What titles are dear to your heart, or meaningful for you?
3. Alphonsus readily moves between his writing about Mary and prayer to her. What insight does this give you into how he wants us to relate to Mary?
4. Alphonsus writes, "She, our most loving mother, was always and wholly united to the divine will." How is Mary a model of discernment and discipleship for people of our day?
5. Alphonsus saw Mary as a model for us in facing life's sorrows as well as life's joys. Do you see Mary in this way? Is she a model at all for you as you travel life's journey? Is she a model for you in mission?