

ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI

In order to approach the person and the works of St Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787) in a correct manner, it is necessary to weave different approaches, given the richness of his personality and the diverse fields of his activity. For Redemptorists, since it is of prime importance to be connected with their founder, it is essential to grasp the fundamental intent, because on that depends the specificity of the Congregation.

The journey of Alphonsus as founder began in 1723, when after unjustly losing a law case (concerning the feud of Amatrice), he decided to leave the court and dedicate himself totally to Christ. He experienced Christ as the meaning of his life and a sure foundation of values. The choice for the priesthood and his ordination in December 1726 caused him move to the world of the poor. He became the advocate of their right to the truth (evangelization) and to holiness (the sacraments, beginning with reconciliation). The decisive step arose from the experience of the struggles of the abandoned, those that he came across in the rural areas of southern Italy. He decided to dedicate himself totally to their evangelization to 'continue' the plentiful redemption of Christ. Thus, this group of men who gathered in Scala in 1732, with the pontifical approval in 1749, would be called Redemptorists.

The manner of defining the profile of the community was not very smooth. Alphonsus was soon abandoned by some of his first companions. But he knew how to remain faithful to his fundamental intention, enriching it with the contribution of those who shared with him in the birth of this new community. Maria Celeste Crostarosa contributed her project of a 'memorial' community; Mgr Thomas Falcoia helped with his experience of religious life and a strong missionary yearning, particularly towards the Orient; Gennaro Sarnelli brought his tireless and creative dedication to the poor, especially in the social dimension.

Alphonsus was convinced of the specificity of his own community, vis-a-vis other missionary institutes. At the conclusion of this complex process of elaboration of the norms, he synthesised his 'intention' in these terms: 'to follow the example of our common Saviour Jesus Christ, to dedicate themselves principally... to help the rural towns of the countryside most destitute of spiritual support.' They will be like other missionary institutes, 'but with an absolute distinctiveness to always situate their churches and houses outside the areas of inhabitation and in the midst of the dioceses, so as to be ready to travel with greater readiness for the missions in the countryside; and to be present more easily for the convenience of the poor people who rush to hear the divine word and receive the sacraments in their churches' (*Spicilegium Historicum* 16 [1968] 385).

To follow the example of the Redeemer must be understood in the perspective of participation and renewal: it requires continuing the kenotic mercy of Christ, i.e. his incarnating himself so as to share in our condition of weakness; his actions which witness to the experience of God's love; his unceasing reaching out to those in need of truth and healing. All this is left to the guidance of the Spirit who leads the Church on the very path of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8).

From the 1740s, the radical dedication to the abandoned transformed Alphonsus into a writer as he strove to lead them in the journey to holiness. Therefore, he was concerned with the formation of the clergy, especially in the field of moral theology and evangelization. He became, as John Paul II has written, 'the renovator of moral theology', succeeding in indicating the way for 'a correct balance between rigorism and liberty', synthesising with these 'memorable words: 'it is not necessary to impose anything on people under pain of grave sin unless the reason is evident... Considering the fragility of the present human condition, it is not always true that the narrowest way is the safest way to direct souls; we see that the Church forbids both excessive liberty and excessive rigour' (*Spiritus Domini*, in AAS 79 [1987] 1367-1368).

From 1762-75, Alphonsus was the bishop of Sant'Agata dei Goti, but he continued, at the same time, his task of writing and of animating the Redemptorist community. He died in Pagani on 1 August 1787. He was canonized by Gregory XVI on 26 May 1839. He was declared Doctor of the Church by Pius XI on 23 March 1871, and the Patron of Confessors and Moralists by Pius XII on 26 April 1950.

The fidelity of Redemptorists to the Alphonsian intent is thus expressed in the present Constitutions: 'Preference for situations where there is pastoral need, that is, for evangelization in the strict sense together with the choice in favour of the poor is the very reason why the Congregation exists in the Church, and is the badge of its fidelity to the vocation it has received.' Such a task must concern itself with 'the liberation and salvation of the whole human person. The members have the duty of preaching the Gospel explicitly and of showing solidarity with the poor by promoting their fundamental rights to justice and freedom. The means employed must be effective and at the same time consistent with the Gospel' (Const. 5).

All this is possible only through an unceasing journey (exodus), on the level of the community and every single confrere. The steps are the same as that of the Founder: discernment of the abandoned, incarnating in their midst, unconditional dedication to their evangelization. In this manner, Redemptorists seek to remind the entire Church of the need to constantly plan its pastoral presence and action from a missionary perspective. Sharing in the difficulties of the abandoned, they are stimulated, like Alphonsus, to outline a proposal of Christian life, beginning from human fragility, in a manner in which all can rediscover and respond to the universal call to holiness.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Rey-Mermet, Th.: *Il Santo del Secolo dei Lumi*. Alfonso De Liguori (1696-1787), Rome. 1983, 147-543

Chiovaro, F. (ed): *The History of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, Vol. I/1. Rome. 1993 (particularly pp431-475);

Majorano, S.: 'Il popolo chiave pastorale di S. Alfonso', in *Spicilegium Historicum C.Ss.R.* 45 (1997) 71-89.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The shared memory of the Founder is a motive for hope and of conversion for Redemptorists. We must ask ourselves how do we participate in the development of this shared memory.
2. The specificity of the charism, so alive in the consciousness of Alphonsus, needs to be constantly re-expressed in the light of different contexts and the signs of the times. It is necessary to ask if the memory of Alphonsus stimulates us to a passion for the poor, to a life-long engagement with evangelization.

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