

ECCLESIOLOGY OF ALPHONSUS

A general article on the Church is easily available in any dictionary of theology. Elsewhere in this volume there is an article on 'Church' from a Redemptorist perspective. My focus in this article is on the Alphonsian perspective on the Church. I want to tackle the question: What did the Church mean for Alphonsus. And what must it mean for his followers today?

In our day, the Church would be primarily the people whom God calls and gathers together from every part of the earth. By faith and Baptism, they become members of the Body of Christ and they are built up by his Word. They experience forgiveness (cf. Mt 16:15-19), are unified in Christ and sanctified in the Spirit. Secondly, the visible Church on earth is a pilgrim Church. On its pilgrim way the Church is in communion with the Church in glory and awaits its full manifestation at the end of time. The pilgrim Church, to which we belong, has its hierarchical constitution (bishops, priests and deacons), but is primarily the people of God who have a mission to preach the good news to the whole world.

What Did the Church Mean to Alphonsus?

Alphonsus would be quite comfortable with our notion of the Church as the 'People of God'. But whereas, we would like the term 'People of God' to encompass a group of living people in whose midst we are, Alphonsus would enlarge upon the term so as to incorporate the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, so that truly the 'People of God' are in communion with those who have gone before us in the faith. This was because Alphonsus looked upon the Church as People of God but from an aspect wherein they needed powerful intercessors for their salvation.

Alphonsus saw the Church as God's people, called to conversion. Just as all have the means of powerful intercession, all have access to means of salvation – especially prayer and the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation. Whether we speak of intercession or means of salvation, these terms have much to do with the 'affective' practices Alphonsus inculcated in the faithful in their devotion to God. For example, Alphonsus would envision the Church as God's house, where Jesus is the prisoner of love in the tabernacle awaiting, calling and welcoming those who come to visit him (cf. opening prayer in *Visits*). The house has its prominence from the one who dwells in it. It is the place of encounter with God in prayer and the sacraments.

Alphonsus advocated a 'popular' Church, one where the majority of people were poor, illiterate and most abandoned in terms of pastoral care. That is why he insisted that in conducting parish missions, the word of God must be preached in the remotest villages. The preachers are to use a popular and apostolic style and, with the celebration of the sacraments, give the people an opportunity to experience the compassion of God.

The visible Church is hierarchically constituted but is in pilgrimage to the heavenly Church. As visible Church there is a need to work in collaboration with the hierarchy. Alphonsus always considered it of utmost importance to be sent by the local Ordinary. The missionary would bring the special faculties of the popular mission to the local Church. Thus, while respecting the rigid hierarchical ordering of the post-reformation Church these faculties were made more easily available by the missionary to the people who needed them. With Alphonsus' views on moral theology (equiprobabilism) and on the extraordinary signs of repentance these special faculties could be made even more accessible to the abandoned. The Church of heaven would always be in perspective (and hence the emphasis on the last things – *Sic transit gloria mundi* – only the heavenly/eternal lasts). The call through the Crib, Cross and Sacrament is to respond to love and journey to the heavenly.

Pastoral Application

Alphonsus was aware of the Ignatian concept of *sentire cum ecclesia* – to be in one mind/to feel with the Church. Being faithful and obedient to the official Church's teachings and discipline, Alphonsus built up his spirituality for the marginalized, making the salvation intended by the Church more easily available. His goal was that all could be in communion with the Church, including those guilty of grave sin such as blasphemy, which was so common at that time.

His strategy was eirenic. Without opposing anyone or anything blindly, he recognized what was true in what was being said, but pointed out that the truth lay beyond what had been said. His arguments about the need and usefulness of the popular missions, the validity of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary are obvious examples. He was logical, but 'logic', as Newman has said, 'does not really prove; it enables us to join issues with others; it suggests ideas; it opens views; it maps out for us lines of thought; it verifies negatively...' And Alphonsus would see a certain 'truth even in fables, myths and legends of popular piety (e.g. the moving of the House of BVM by angels to Loreto).

Fidelity to her mission and commitment to the cause of the poor, following the example of Jesus, are non-negotiables in Church's pastoral ministry. Alphonsus was fully aware of this and his pastoral priorities were determined by this awareness. There is a sound balance of scripture, liturgy and devotions in Alphonsian spirituality.

Returning to the roots and reading the signs of the times are necessary for the growth of every Religious Congregation, as it continues to find its place in the history of God's ongoing story of salvation. The Redemptorist Constitution 1 says that the Congregation shares the mandate given to the Church. This is done by following Christ and continuing his mission of evangelization. Alphonsus' approach was 'popular' so that the abandoned majority with whom he worked could be incorporated, slowly but steadily, into the mainstream and be led on the path to salvation. In all this, the affective compassion of Jesus characterized Alphonsus' dealings especially towards the most abandoned. I would suggest that this was Alphonsus' notion of the Church as mediated through his spirituality, moral theology, preaching and in the *vita devota*. His evident bias was towards the most abandoned. Fidelity to his spirituality demands following his example and strategy.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Abeyasingha, N.: 'Alphonsus' Perspective in the Post Vatican II Church', in *Review For Religious*, 62,4, 2003.

De Liguori, Alphonsus: *Preaching: The Exercises of the Missions, Various Counsels*, Ed. By Eugene Grim, Brooklyn, Redemptorist Frs, 1980.

Hill, E.: 'Church' in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Eds. J.A Komonchak et al, Bangalore., T.P.I., 1993;

Puthenpura, G.: *Spirituality of the Proclamation of the Word – An Alphonsian Perspective*, Bangalore, St Peter's Pontifical Institute, 2002.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. We are custodians of many churches and chapels. Do we really make these places of encounter with the Lord who dwells there? Do the faithful, especially the abandoned experience in these places the love of the Crib, Cross and Tabernacle?

2. Are our various ministries aimed at reviving the Church or re-forming it? Whatever we do, in whose interest is it done?
3. Do we maintain the spirit of *sentire cum ecclesia* in our attitude to and interpretations of Church's teachings?
4. In our ministries do we empower *all* people within the Church, even those illiterate and powerless and persecuted and excluded – or do we tend to form a parallel Church of the elite?

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