

Homily of Fr. Ivel Mendanha CSsR — Feast of St. Alphonsus

I would like to quote the famous words with which Pope Saint John Paul II described the contribution of Saint Alphonsus to the people of his time. His Holiness Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *Spiritus Domini*, when describing the simple people to whom Alphonsus' apostolic mission and enthusiasm were directed, emphasized that the saint oriented his entire life so that this category of human beings could feel they were an integral part of the Church, that they could have the sense of *being Church* in their understanding and living of the Gospel:

“Saint Alphonsus became an intimate friend of the people — of the insignificant ones, of the inhabitants of the poorest districts of the capital of the Kingdom of Naples, of the humble and simple folk, of artisans, and above all of country people. This sense of closeness to the people characterizes the whole life of the saint, as missionary, founder, bishop, and author. It was for these people that Alphonsus would rethink the style of preaching, catechesis, and teaching on moral and spiritual life.”

The Alphonsian goal, modelled on that of the Apostles, was to build the Church through forms and methods adapted to the culture of the place, proclaiming the love and mercy of Christ who became man in order to draw every human person back to God's original plan of love and justice.

Pope Leo XIV, speaking to the Redemptorist bishops and the General Council in a private audience on June 26, 2025, said:

“Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, encountering misery in the most neglected districts of eighteenth-century Naples, had renounced a comfortable life and a promising career in order to embrace the mission of bringing the Gospel to the very least in society.”

These words of two popes place the life of Saint Alphonsus in the context of a true missionary of hope, following in the footsteps of the Redeemer. Saint Alphonsus thus becomes, for all of us in the Redemptorist family — especially in this year of mission — a model to imitate in our own life as missionaries of hope in the footsteps of the Redeemer.

Born in 1696 as the firstborn of a noble family and having every means to receive an excellent education and embark on a successful career, he chose to become a lawyer and excelled brilliantly in the field. He was a genius of his time, knowledgeable in art and painting, music and composition, astronomy and history, the Greek and Latin classics, as well as rhetoric. And yet he abandoned the world of civil law and financial gain to become a zealous priest.

It was while resting in the hills of Scala that he had a profound experience of the abandonment suffered by poor, simple shepherds, and goatherds, forsaken by the Church. He felt called to be the presence of the Church — the presence of the Lord's love — for these poor and simple people, and so he founded the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer so that, following the example of the Redeemer, the Redemptorists might proclaim the Good News of God's extraordinary love to all, especially to the poor and abandoned.

Saint Alphonsus used all his talents and energies, his abilities and the blessings God had given him, for the sole purpose of ensuring that the poor and abandoned could hear the Good News — through preaching and writing, through art and music, through the presence of the Redemptorists living among them. In every sense of the word, he was truly a *Missionary of Hope in the footsteps of the Redeemer*.

Some of the important aspects of the spirituality of Saint Alphonsus that make him different from all others — and so relevant for us today in these difficult times — and that we, as missionaries of hope, are called to make our own, are:

- **The universal call to holiness** — that all are called to be holy, each one of us, and that the love of God is for everyone without exception, regardless of anything.
- **Love as the essence of holiness** — it is not we who love first, but God who loves us and desires that we be saved through His love.
- **Jesus as the Way to holiness** — He is the way, the truth, and the life of holiness, through His very love. Whoever lives in Jesus, the Way, is certain to be filled with the holiness of God.
- **The need to be united with Jesus** — seeking daily to detach ourselves from anything that prevents us from being one with Him, from selfishness and from sin.
- **Prayer as a simple yet most effective means to reach holiness** — not merely reciting prayers but opening one's heart and speaking with God as with a friend, a daily conversation with a loving God.

Saint Alphonsus proposed a *spirituality of the heart* — the heart of God united with our own — an affective spirituality and at the same time a practical spirituality for daily life. No matter our path in life, we can all walk the way of simplicity with love for God.

Finally, Saint Alphonsus chose to offer the Church a middle path between, on the one hand, the rigorism of spiritual and moral life that reduced people to fear, terror, and alienation from God, and on the other hand, total laxity in which one could do whatever one pleased — instead choosing a middle way rooted in love. When one experiences the love of the Lord, one is ready to give everything to the Lord of Love and to live the Lord's call in the Gospel out of love and for love.

On the feast of Saint Alphonsus, let us renew our commitment to the God of love. We are grateful recipients of His love, and we respond with that same love by going out constantly in the missionary spirit so essential to our way of life as Redemptorists today, and as God's people toward all who are in need of love and mercy, tenderness and kindness — in our homes, in our neighbourhoods, in the Church, and beyond. Amen.