

Moral principles connected to the world

23 March 2021

Message at the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori Doctor Ecclesiae

Pope Francis

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To the Reverend Fr. Michael Brehl, C.Ss.R., Superior General of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer and Moderator General of the Alphonsianum Academy

One hundred and fifty years ago, on 23 March 1871, Pius IX proclaimed Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori Doctor of the Church.

The Bull of proclamation of Saint Alphonsus as Doctor illustrates the specific nature of his moral and spiritual offering, known how to show “the sure way in the tangle of contrasting opinions of rigourism and laxity” [1: Pope Pius IX, *Acta Sancta Sedis*, vol. VI, Typis Polyglottae Officinae S. C. De Propaganda Fidei, Rome 1871, 318.].

One hundred and fifty years after this joyous event, the message of Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, patron of confessors and moralists, and model for the whole of the outbound missionary Church, still vigorously indicates the high road for bringing consciences to the welcoming face of the Father, since “the salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy” [2: *Evangelii Gaudium* 112].

Listening to reality

The Alphonsian theological approach was born from listening to and accepting the weaknesses of the men and women who were most abandoned spiritually. The Holy Doctor, formed according to a rigourist moral mentality, converted to “benignity” through listening to reality.

The missionary experience in the existential peripheries of his time, the search for those far away and listening to confessions, the founding and guidance of the nascent Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, and in addition the responsibilities as bishop of a particular Church, led him to become a father and master of mercy, certain that “God’s paradise is the heart of man” [3: A. De' Liguori, “The Way to Converse with God” in *Ascetical Works* vol. 1., C.Ss.R., Roma 1933, 316.].

The gradual conversion towards a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry, capable of closeness to the people, of being able to accompany their steps, to share in their real life even in the midst of great limits and challenges, drove Alphonsus to review, not without effort, even the theological and juridical grounding he had received in the years of his formation; initially marked by a certain rigour, it then turned into a merciful, dynamic approach, an evangelising dynamism able to act by attraction.

In theological disputes, preferring reason to authority, he did not stop at the theoretical formulation of principles, but rather allowed himself to be interrogated by life itself. Advocate of the least, the frail and those discarded by the society of his time, he defended the rights of all, especially the most abandoned and the poor. This approach led him to the final decision to place himself at the service of consciences that sought, even amid a thousand difficulties, the right thing to do, faithful to God’s call to holiness.

Saint Alphonsus, then, was neither lax nor strict. He was a realist in the true Christian sense, because he understood clearly that “at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others” [4: *Evangelii Gaudium* 177].

The proclamation of the Gospel in a rapidly changing society demands the courage to listen to reality, to “educate consciences to think in a different way, in contrast to the past” [5: *Ibid.*, 221.].

Every pastoral action has its roots in the salvific encounter with God in life, is born of listening to life, and is nurtured by a theological reflection able to take on board the questions posed by people and to indicate viable paths. Based on the example of Alphonsus, I invite moral theologians, missionaries and confessors to enter into a living relationship with the people of God, and to look at existence from their angle, to understand the real difficulties they encounter and to help heal wounds, because only true fraternity is “capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does” [6: *Evangelii Gaudium* 92].

True to the Gospel, may Christian moral teaching called to proclaim, deepen and teach, always be a response to “the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others” (EG 39). Moral theology cannot reflect only on the formulation of principles, of rules, but needs to be proactive about the reality that exceeds any idea [7: *Evangelii Gaudium* 231]. This is a priority [8: *Evangelii Gaudium* 34-39], since the mere knowledge of theoretical principles, as Saint Alphonsus himself reminds us, is not enough to accompany and sustain consciences in the discernment of the good that is to be done. It is necessary for knowledge to become practice through listening to and receiving the least, the frail and those regarded as rejects by society.

Mature consciences for an adult Church

Following the example of Saint Alphonsus Maria de’ Liguori, renewer of moral theology, [9: Cf. Pope John Paul II, “*Spiritus Domini*”, in *Enchiridium Vatican*, vol. 10, Ed. Dehoniane, Bologna 1989, p. 1420 [cf. AAS79 (1987) pp. 1367-1368].] it becomes desirable and therefore necessary to walk alongside, accompany and support those most deprived of spiritual aid on the path towards redemption. Evangelical radicalism should not be set against human weakness. It is always necessary to find a way that does not distance but rather brings hearts closer to God, as Alphonsus did with his spiritual and moral teaching. This is because “the great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care” [10: *Evangelii Gaudium* 200].

Like Saint Alphonsus, we are called to go towards the people as an apostolic community that follows the Redeemer among the abandoned. This reaching out to those without spiritual aid helps to overcome the individualistic ethos and to promote a moral maturity capable of choosing the true good. By forming responsible and merciful consciences we will have an adult Church capable of responding constructively to social fragilities, in view of the kingdom of heaven.

Reaching out towards the most fragile makes it possible to combat “the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest” in which “human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded”, giving rise to the “throwaway culture”. [11: *Evangelii Gaudium* 53].

In these times, society is facing countless challenges: the pandemic and work in the post-Covid world, the care that is to be guaranteed to all, the defence of life, input from artificial intelligence, the protection of creation, the anti-democratic threat, and the urgency of brotherhood. Woe to us if, in this evangelising effort, we were to separate “the cry of the poor” [12: Cf. *Laudato si’*, no. 49.] from “the cry of the earth” [13: Pope Francis, “Progettare passi coraggiosi per meglio rispondere alle attese del popolo di Dio. Discorso di sua santità Papa Francesco” in *Studia Moralia*, 57/1 (2019), 13-16.].

Alphonsus de’ Liguori, master and patron of confessors and moralists, offered constructive answers to the challenges of the society of his time, through popular evangelisation, indicating a style of moral theology capable of holding together the need for the Gospel and human fragility.

I invite you to follow the example of the Holy Doctor and to approach seriously, at the level of moral theology, “the cry of God who asks us all: ‘Where is your brother?’ (Gen 4: 9). Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? Where is the brother and sister who you are killing each day in clandestine warehouses, in rings of prostitution, in children used for begging, in exploiting undocumented labour?” [14: *Evangelii Gaudium* 211].

Faced with epochal changes such as the present one, there is a real risk of making the rights of the strong dominant, forgetting those most in need.

The formation of consciences for good seems to be an indispensable goal for every Christian. Giving space to consciences – the place where God’s voice resounds – so that they can carry out their personal discernment in the reality of life [15: *Amoris Laetitia* 37] is a formative task to which we must remain faithful. The attitude of the Samaritan (Lk 10:33-35), as I have indicated in *Fratelli tutti*, spurs us in this direction.

Moral theology must not be afraid to take up the cry of the least of the earth and make it its own. The dignity of the fragile is a moral duty that cannot be evaded or postponed. It is necessary to testify that right always means solidarity.

I invite you, as Saint Alphonsus did, to go towards the fragile brothers and sisters of our society. This entails the development of a moral theological reflection and pastoral action, capable of being committed to the common good, which has its root in the proclamation of the kerygma, which has a decisive role in the defence of life,

towards creation and brotherhood.

On this special occasion I encourage the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer and the Pontifical Alphonsianum Academy, as its expression and centre of high theological and apostolic formation, to enter into constructive dialogue with all the demands of every culture [16: Querida Amazonia, no. 36.], to seek apostolic, moral and spiritual answers in favour of human fragility, in the knowledge that dialogue is *marturya*.

May Saint Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori and Our Lady of Perpetual Help always be your travelling companions.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 23 March 2021.

Francis