

St. Alphonsus Liguori

*Bishop ~ Founder ~ Theologian ~ Artist ~
Musician ~ Doctor of the Church ~ Saint*

Who was St. Alphonsus?

Alphonsus Mary Liguori was born a century too late, but one could use the phrase “Renaissance man” to describe him. He developed and shared a huge range of talents, using them for the good of the people of the church.

He began life in a family of minor nobility, near Naples, Italy in September, 1696. He had pious parents, and was the eldest child in the family. His parents, especially his mother, paid a great deal of attention to the religious formation of their children.

As a youth, Alphonsus showed great talent in music, architecture, drawing and painting. His gift for music was nurtured and he received the best training under Gaetano Greco, who also taught Durante and Pergolesi. He continued to compose and play music for the rest of his life. Some of his hymns became classics and Italians sing them to this day. The most famous is *Tu Scende Dalle Stelle*, a Christmas hymn.

His father was ambitious and had plans for his eldest son. (As was the custom of the time, the second son didn't have anything to inherit and he became a Benedictine monk.) Alphonsus was destined for the law, and as a young teen began his studies. (This was the typical age at the time.) At seventeen, he graduated. He began his career and also took part in the social life of his class, attending the opera and gambling at cards. At the same time, he volunteered to care for the sick in a hospital. (Only the poorest went to a hospital. Anyone with money was cared for at home.)

Alphonsus continued to develop his faith life, attending retreats and taking part in sodalities. Then he lost a huge legal case and felt publicly humiliated. This was not the reason he gave up the practice of law, but it coincided with his dissatisfaction with his career. When he announced that he wanted to be a priest, his father was furious. He had pinned his hopes for family advancement on this brilliant son. Alphonsus was insistent and began theology studies.

Alphonsus was ordained in 1726 and joined a fairly corrupt local clergy. (Many men were ordained so that they could avoid paying taxes on their businesses. They never had any intention of saying mass or hearing confessions.) Alphonsus continued to live with his own family and looked for the work he was meant to do.



Alphonsus was completely committed to pastoral ministry among the people. He began to work among the urban poor, providing sacraments and adult education. During this time, he began to write. His first work was a set of simple meditations for the people with whom he worked. Eventually he wrote a number of other books, including one which popularized prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. (Alphonsus' promotion of this method of prayer had an enormous impact on parish and personal spirituality over the following two centuries.)

Alphonsus next gathered around him some other priests interested in missionary activities among those who lacked pastoral care. Many founders of religious orders set out to begin a new foundation. Alphonsus backed into this role. The association of priests he began needed more organization, and eventually it became the Redemptorists (the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer or C.S.S.R.) For the next thirty years, Alphonsus worked as the head of this order, as well as continuing to write. He also became famous as a preacher and retreat director and was in great demand.

At the same time that he developed his talents as a spiritual writer and preacher, Alphonsus continued other pursuits. Besides composing music, he also painted and produced engravings. He saw all of his artistic efforts as different ways to proclaim the gospel. He also embarked on the development of his moral theology. The work he produced was the foundation for this entire field into the 1960s. The college which bears his name in Rome is still a center for teaching and writing about moral theology in the Roman Catholic church.

Alphonsus' health began to decline, and he decreased his activities. Then, to his dismay, the Pope insisted that he become the bishop of the diocese of St. Agatha of the Goths. Alphonsus refused initially, but the Pope commanded him and he obeyed. This period of his life, although he was in his sixties, was one of the most productive. He continued to write as he attended to the needs in his diocese. During his career he had given a great deal of advice to bishops about how to encourage priests to do their jobs and how to minister to the people. He now put his own advice into practice, trying to get a corrupt clergy to honor their ordination. He also rebuilt the seminary formation for priests from the ground up. In contrast to some bishops of his day, he was insistent that he live in his diocese and visit the parishes.

Alphonsus' health suffered as he aged. He became so crippled that he couldn't raise his head to drink from a cup or glass. He finally retired as bishop in 1775 and returned to his congregation. In 1778 he published the last of his 111 written works. His final years were marked by more turmoil in the order he had founded and his increasing frailty. He died on August 1, 1787. That anniversary, August 1, is celebrated as his feast day.



A portrait of the Blessed Virgin Mary painted by Alphonsus.

What is a patron saint?

Most Christian institutions are put under the 'patronage' of some saint or another. The custom goes back to the earliest church, as it developed in the Roman world. In ancient Rome, everything in society was based on patron/client relationships. One could do nothing if one didn't have a powerful patron to intercede. For example, if one needed to go to court to get something resolved, the patron went and argued for the client.

As early Christians became martyrs, the living Christians believed that those who had died were then able to intercede in the 'court of heaven.' So, Christians asked the martyrs to be their patrons in heaven. Out of this grew the idea of a "Christian name" (that of a saint). When people were baptized, they were given the name of the patron chosen for them. Eventually, when the church could be public, places were also put under the patronage of a saint. Particular saints have also been chosen to be patrons of groups of people. For example, because Alphonsus was greatly crippled in his older years, he is the patron saint of arthritis sufferers. (He is also the patron saint of confessors and theologians because of his lifelong work in moral theology.)

Continuing in the faith of the early church, we still believe in the communion of saints, praying with them as we celebrate the Eucharist and invoking their presence and prayers at every baptism. In addition, we celebrate their feasts. This keeps their example in front of us and reminds us that they continue to pray for us in the presence of God.

What did Alphonsus write?

The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ is the work which most reflects Alphonsus' approach and theology. A quick walk through the chapter titles tell us something about his approach and emphasis. "How much Jesus Christ deserves our love...." "How much Jesus Christ deserves to be loved by us because of the love he has shown us in instituting the Most Sacred Sacrament of the altar...." "On the great confidence we must have in the love that Jesus Christ has shown us....."

Alphonsus placed a huge importance on prayer. He worked tirelessly to help the ordinary person to develop his or her prayer life. Take one example of his guidance on prayer: **Jesus, my love, I am determined to love you as much as I can, and I want to become a saint. I want to become a saint to give you pleasure and to love you greatly in this life and the next. I can do nothing by myself, but you can do all things; and I know that you want me to become a saint.**

Central to prayer was an appreciation of the sacraments of the church, especially the Eucharist. From *The Holy Eucharist*: **He has loved us to the greatest degree... This love has induced him also to remain with us in the Holy Sacrament as on a throne of love. He remains there under the appearance of a small piece of bread...so that it seems that he performs no other office than that of loving men and women.**

Love makes us desire the constant presence of the one we love. It is this love and this desire that makes Jesus Christ reside with us in the Most Holy Sacrament. It seems too short a time to this loving Savior to have been only thirty-three years with us on earth; therefore, to show his desire of being constantly with us he thought it right to perform the greatest of all miracles in the institution of the Holy Eucharist.

One of Alphonsus' most famous works is *The Glories of Mary*. He had a tremendous devotion to Mary and encouraged others to ask her to pray for them so that they could grow closer to the Lord. **She wishes us always to seek her and invoke her aid, not as if she were begging of us these honors and marks of veneration (for they are in no way proportioned to her**

merit) but she desires them that, by such means, our confidence and devotion may be increased, and that so she may be able to give us greater succor and comfort.

She, in the exercise of her mercy, knows not how to act differently from God: as he flies at once to the assistance of those who beg his aid, faithful to his promise, Ask, and you shall receive, so Mary, whenever she is invoked, is at once ready to assist him who prays to her.

Nor should the multitude of our sins diminish our confidence that Mary will grant our petitions when we cast ourselves at her feet. She is the mother of mercy: but mercy would not be needed did none exist who require it.

It isn't easy to quote from a discourse on moral theology, but Alphonsus' approach can be summarized. He emphasized God's mercy above all. (In his ministry, he was renowned as a confessor, gentle with penitents.) He emphasized the use of conscience - that people should form their own moral lives and not just mindlessly follow rules. This does not mean that the rules don't matter, but that one should follow the moral path knowingly and not blindly. He was practical. He wasn't interested in speculating about scenarios but helping everyday people live the life of Christ. And he saw the importance of eternal truth while recognizing that changing circumstances raise new questions which require moral answers.

In addition to 111 books, Alphonsus left a great wealth of letters. When one glances through them, one sees a normal man, concerned with everyday practicalities. One example is a letter written to his younger brother after he (reluctantly) accepted the order to be ordained a bishop. His brother was thrilled by the prestige. Alphonsus was more concerned with other matters, including the expense. He asked his brother to help out. ***My dear brother, I have been so stunned by this command of the Holy Father the Pope to accept my appointment as bishop under obedience, that I don't know where I am at the thought....***

Please realize that I shall require a considerable sum of money....Now, as regards a carriage, yes, certainly, I shall have to buy one. First, I must find out if the late bishop has left one that could be used; I should be able to get it cheaply. In the meantime, do not buy the carriage of the Marquis Valva for the moment until I find out the position in the diocese. If the late bishop's carriage is not suitable, I shall take the marquis'.

I know you are delighted but all I can do is shed tears. How could I have expected to accept a bishopric in my old age? But blessed be the will of God who wishes to make a martyr out of me in these last years of my life. I can't sleep, I have lost my appetite, and I am almost stupid when I realize that the Pope never issues such obediences but has nevertheless done it to me.

Like all the saints, St. Alphonsus was not always perfect, nor beatifically happy. (His last years were particularly difficult.) But he knew the one thing that all saints know: the call of all Christians is to follow the Lord and find the way to live our lives

in service of the Kingdom of God. He spent his life using his varied talents in that quest. He shows us one way to be holy and left a legacy of work to help us on the path.

What is a Doctor of the Church?

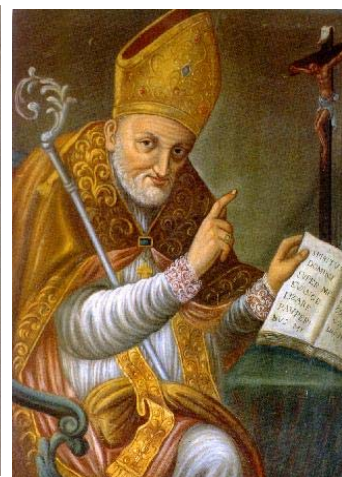
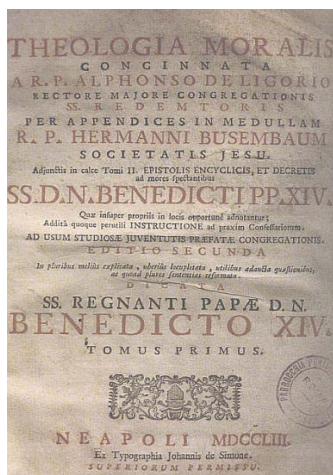
There are thousands and thousands of saints whose names we know - and millions whose names are no longer remembered. But there are only thirty three doctors of the church.

The word 'doctor' doesn't mean 'physician' as we usually use it, but comes from the Latin word for 'teacher.'

A doctor of the church is considered to be someone whose writing and teaching is useful for all Christians in all ages. Some of the doctors wrote and taught about almost everything. (St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas are two examples.) Others are known for their expertise and influence in one or another field. Alphonsus is known for his moral theology and also for his spiritual writings, especially about Mary and about personal spirituality.

To 'accompany' Alphonsus in our church building, there are other doctors commemorated. The eight statues above the columns in the nave of the church represent early Christian doctors: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, St. Athanasius, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, and St. Jerome.

Traditionally only men were considered for this honor, but this changed in the twentieth century and three women have been named as doctors. One of them, Teresa of Avila, is also depicted in our church, on the high altar.



Saint Alphonsus' Method of Meditation

"Mental prayer is the lantern that lights our journey to eternity."

St. Alphonsus devised this short outline of meditation from years of experience working with poor, uneducated people. This explains its simple style and its ease in adapting to anyone's personal style of prayer. Yet it follows a basic psychological and spiritual pattern founded on centuries of Christian and eastern experience of meditation.

Preparation

- Set aside fifteen minutes for your meditation.
- Find a quiet place to pray.
- Sit or kneel comfortably.
- Close your eyes.
- Gently turn your thoughts to God's presence within you.

- Open your heart to God's loving company.
- Begin conversing with God:

***My God, I believe you are here with me.
I love you with all my heart.***

Say the Hail Mary or a brief personal litany:

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me.

Good Saint Joseph, pray for me.

Saint (your patron or favorite saint),

pray for me.

or a mantra type prayer, such as

Lord Jesus, mercy.

Meditation

- To stimulate your spirit, read a few verses from Scripture (such as the gospel for the day) or a short passage from a spiritual book.
- Meditate for a few minutes on any thought that strikes you during the reading; that is, think for a short time on what the reading teaches you.
- Consider your own life through the lens of this teaching. Does the reading prompt you to make a specific, positive change in your life?

But remember, you think only so that you may pray well. "The thinking is the needle which draws after it the golden thread of acts of love, prayers of petition, and resolutions. The thread is more important than the needle."

Most of your time in meditation should therefore be spent in making acts of love, prayers of petition, and resolutions, such as the following examples:

1. Acts of love

- Tell God of your love, even if it seems cold at times.
- Pray for the grace to know God as your most intimate and delightful companion.

2. Prayers of Petition

- In meditation, make many petitions, asking God for the graces you need.
- Ask God to remove from your life any obstacle that separates you from others or divides you against yourself, for these basically separate you from God.
- Ask God to direct every step of your journey on earth so that at the moment of death you will gladly run to meet your beloved.

3. Resolutions

- Saint Teresa of Avila wrote, "The progress of a soul does not consist in thinking much of God, but in loving him, and this love is gained by resolving to do much for him."
- At the close of your meditation, make one practical resolution that you can and intend to keep today.

Conclusion

Complete your meditation with three short acts:

- Thank God for whatever lights you have received.
- Renew your resolution to do a particular good or avoid some fault.
- Ask Jesus and Mary to carry you in their hearts this day and help you fulfill your resolution.

Modified from *Catholic Prayers and Devotions*, copyright © 1999, Liguori Publications.