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November 2, 2008

All Souls' Day

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

**S**EPTEMBER 22, 1774 : Pope Clement XIV was dying. After having yielded to the pressure put on him to suppress the Jesuit order, he had been unable to recover his peace of mind. God, in His mercy, sent a Saint, Alphonsus de Liguori, then bishop of Saint Agatha of the Goths, to aid him in his final moments. But, at the very moment he was with the Pope in Rome, the holy bishop was in his diocese 200 kilometers away. It was a case of bilocation, an absolutely astonishing miracle, but one confirmed by eyewitnesses.

Alphonsus Maria de Liguori was born in Naples on September 27, 1696, the first-born in a family that would number seven children. His mother instructed them in the truths of the faith starting when the children were very young, and taught them to pray. The boy Alphonsus was graced with a keen intellect, a sharp memory, good reasoning, a heart open to all the noble sentiments, and a firm and energetic will. His father wanted him to be a lawyer. He progressed so quickly in his legal studies that, at the age of sixteen, he passed the doctoral exam in canon and civil law. The judges were astonished at the wisdom of his answers and the soundness of his replies.

As a lawyer, Alphonsus achieved one success after another, which gave him a thirst for worldly success and glory. However, he was tempted to abandon this path—the sight of the ruses and lies that too often distorted the most just cases was repellent to his honest nature. Faithful to prayer and charitable works, he maintained his purity of soul. Once a year, he went to a monastery to devote himself to spiritual exercises. He later recounted that these retreats had been especially helpful in detaching him from worldly goods and orienting him towards God. During Lent in 1722 in particular, the preacher recounted the motives that must lead the soul to devote itself entirely to God. He depicted in vivid detail the emptiness of the things of this world, and did not shrink from describing for his retreatants the eternal torments of hell, as revealed by JESUS. The light went on in young Alphonsus' mind—the vanities of this world disappeared like smoke! He vowed himself without reservation to the divine will and, a little while later, committed himself to celibacy.

In 1723, there was much talk in Naples of an important lawsuit brought by Duke Orsini against the Grandduke of Tuscany. Many lawyers coveted the case, but Orsini entrusted his defense to Alphonsus, who at

that point had never lost a lawsuit. On the appointed day, Alphonsus went to the bar and, with clarity, set forth his client's demands. All those in attendance were filled with admiration. But his adversary then produced a piece of evidence that had passed through Alphonsus' hands, that decisively crippled his argument. Alphonsus was floored—how could he have overlooked this text? The case lost, Alphonsus felt crushed with humiliation. However, three days later, a sudden clarity made him realize the reason for his absent-mindedness—God had blinded him in order to tear him away from the vanities of the world. Under the impulse of divine grace, he now repeated the phrase that he had spitefully muttered as he left the courtroom: “Courts, you will never see me again!” After a period of prayer and penitence, he perceived that God was calling him to the priestly state. After completing his formation, he was ordained a priest on December 21, 1726.

### *The priest's temptation*

Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, Don Alphonsus understood that action must be born from contemplation, love of neighbor from the love of God, apostolic zeal from the interior life, and that a priest's greatest temptation is the wish to set souls on fire without maintaining the divine fire in himself. So from the beginning of his priestly life, he compelled himself to do the daily exercises without which the interior life fades: mental prayer, holy Mass, the Divine Office, spiritual reading, and Marian devotion, especially the Rosary. Knowing that he needed to be guided, he gladly submitted his spiritual life to another person's counsel.

The young priest preached the Gospel to everyone, but most willingly to the poor. Brimming over with sacred knowledge yet unpretentious, he appeared in the pulpit with the authority of a man of God conveying to the people not his own doctrine, but that of the Master

Who had sent him. Moved with compassion by the religious ignorance of the rural folk, in November 1732 Don Alphonsus and several companions founded a new religious Institute that would be named the “Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer.” Filled with the overabundance of the Redemption Christ won on the Cross, the Redemptorists are devoted to preaching missions to the poor, so as to instruct them in the fundamental truths of the faith, and to enlighten them on *the* important matter.

In fact, Don Alphonsus would write: “One matter surpasses all others in importance – that of our eternal salvation; there lies our happiness or misery forever. It is impossible to escape this alternative: we will either be saved or lost forever, meriting an eternity of bliss or an eternity of torment, to live forever either happy or miserable” (*Way of Salvation [WS]*, Meditation I). The salvation of souls is at the center of the Church’s concerns, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in speaking to the bishops of Latin America: “Our Saviour *wishes all men to be saved and to reach the knowledge of truth* (I Tim 2 :4-6). This, and not anything else, is the purpose of the Church: the salvation of souls, one by one” (May 13, 2007). Again, Don Alphonsus wrote: “Amazing thing! There is no one who does not blush at being accused of negligence in the affairs of the world; and yet so many do not blush at neglecting the most important affair of all, that of eternity! ... Important affair, only affair, irreparable affair! Surely, the height of folly is to scorn the importance of eternal salvation, and the height of misfortune to lose one’s salvation. Any other disaster can be recovered from: if one loses money, one can earn more; if one loses a job, one can find another; and even if one loses one’s life, if one’s soul is saved nothing is lost. But he who is damned is lost forever. For one dies only once, and the soul, once lost, is lost forever” (*Preparation for Death [PD]*, Consideration XII).

### **Without waiting**

We must therefore prepare ourselves for death which can arrive at any moment. “We must be convinced that the moment of death is not the right time for putting our affairs in order to assure the great affair of our salvation. It is in advance that, in temporal affairs, the prudent ones of the world take all necessary measures for obtaining that gain, that post of honor, that marriage; and if it is a matter of bodily health, they do not wait a moment before applying the necessary remedies. What would you say of someone who, competing for an academic post, waited for the exam to start before beginning to study? ... That is exactly what the Christian is doing who waits until death is knocking at his door before settling the affairs of his conscience” (*PD*, Consideration X). Commenting on St. Paul’s words, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling* (Phil.

2 :12), Don Alphonsus wrote: “To save ourselves, we must fear damnation, moreover in such a way that we do not fear hell as much as we fear sin, for it is sin alone that can send us to hell. What does it mean to fear sin? It means fleeing dangerous situations, recommending oneself frequently to God, and taking all available means to remain in a state of grace. To act thus is to be saved; to act otherwise is to make one’s salvation a moral impossibility” (*WS*, Meditation VI).

The rural people who came to these missions eagerly received these holy truths and prepared themselves for the Sacrament of Penance. The missionaries, faithful ministers of reconciliation, spent long hours in the confessional, where, as true doctors of souls, they were able to comfort the afflicted. “The more deeply a soul is mired in evil,” Don Alphonsus said, “the more necessary it is to receive him well, in order to extract him from the claws of the enemy.” Listening to the penitent with patience and gentleness helps to dispose him to absolution, either immediately, or after a time of trial. Don Alphonsus imposed as sacramental penances pious exercises that were very simple, but of a nature to draw penitents away from sin and rekindle their fervor. Unburdened of their sins, these people then received holy Communion, and went to tell their happiness to others in the most remote hamlets, and so give glory to the mercy of God. “God cannot scorn those who come and cast themselves at His feet; no, He Himself invites them, and promises to receive them on the spot. *Return to Me*, says the Lord, *and I will receive you* (Jer. 3 :1). *Turn to Me ... and I will turn to you* (Zac. 1 :3). ... Oh! with what love and tenderness does God press to His heart the sinner that returns to Him. ... The Lord glories in showing mercy to sinners and forgiving them” (*PD*, Consideration XVI).

### **Plenteous redemption**

In contrast to the Jansenist rigorism that made of God a severe and merciless judge, Father Alphonsus, who had chosen for his motto “*Copiosa apud Eum redemptio: with Him is plenteous redemption*” (Ps. 129 [130]), stressed the goodness of JESUS and His love for all men. At the same time, he warned against those who, dismissing the thought of divine justice, preached only love. For divine love to be strong and lasting, it must be based on an integral faith—God is infinitely good, but also infinitely just. “Without doubt” he wrote, “the mercy of God is infinite, but the acts of this mercy, and thus the graces of pardon, have their limits. God is merciful, but He is also just. ... Mercy is promised to those who fear God and not to those who abuse His mercy. *And His mercy*, said the divine Mother, *is to those who fear Him* (Lk. 1 :50). The obstinate are threatened with His justice. As St. Augustine says, ‘if God is true to His promises, He is also true to His threats.’ It is not God,

but the devil that tempts you to sin by hoping in His mercy” (PD, Consideration XVII).

### **The most important**

But how can one imprint this correct view of God, at once both merciful and just, on souls? Faithfully echoing tradition, Alphonsus de Liguori replied: by daily prayer. He believed that loving God cannot be separated from meditating or making mental prayer, because it is in meditation that the soul gains knowledge of God and falls in love with Him. Therefore, his most important book, in his own view, is *The Great Means of Prayer*. In this work, Alphonsus explains that man, because of the consequences of original sin, is drawn to evil, and is incapable of always resisting sin by his own means alone. Only the grace of God makes it possible to observe all the commandments necessary for salvation. “Since they express man’s fundamental duties towards God and towards his neighbor, the Ten Commandments reveal, in their primordial content, grave obligations. They are fundamentally immutable, and they oblige always and everywhere. No one can dispense from them. ... What God commands He makes possible by His grace” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2072, 2082). But, as Saint Augustine says, “God desires to give His graces, but He gives them only to those who ask for them.” In contrast to those who say that observing the commandments is impossible in certain specific cases, the same Doctor replies, “the man who wishes to but cannot should realize that he does not yet fully wish to, and should pray for a will strong enough to fulfill the commandments.” This is why Saint Alphonsus wrote, “God does not refuse anyone the grace of prayer, through which one can obtain the help to overcome every concupiscence and every temptation. And I declare and repeat, and will always repeat as long as I live, that our entire salvation is found in just one thing: prayer.” From this comes the famous axiom that is repeated in the *Catechism*: “Those who pray are certainly saved; those who do not pray are certainly damned” (CCC 2744).

Some authors of the time, under the influence of Protestantism and Jansenism, tended to turn the faithful away from devotion to the Blessed Virgin MARY. Therefore, in 1750 Don Alphonsus published *The Glories of MARY* [GM], a commentary on the *Salve Regina*. In it, he enumerated the privileges of the Mother of God—all graces pass through MARY’s hands, and as a result, MARY is our necessary Mediatrix (cf. GM, ch. 5). In fact, just as MARY is the Mother of JESUS, God wishes her to be the Mother of every man redeemed by JESUS. Just as she carried JESUS in her womb, she carries us in her heart, until Christ is formed in us. “There can be no doubt that by the merits of JESUS, MARY was made the mediatrix of our salvation; not indeed a mediatrix of

justice, but of grace and intercession” (*ibid.*). In the missions, Don Alphonsus always wanted a sermon to be preached about the Virgin MARY, Mother of Mercy, and about the need for those who wish to persevere and be saved to have frequent recourse to her intercession. He wrote: “This was revealed by our Blessed Lady herself to St. Bridget, saying, ‘I am the Queen of Heaven and the Mother of Mercy; I am the joy of the just and the door through which sinners are brought to God. There is no sinner on earth so accursed as to be deprived of my mercy ... No one ... is so cast off by God that he will not return to Him, and enjoy His mercy, if he invokes my aid’ ... Let us remember that it is in order to save the greatest and most abandoned sinners, who recommend themselves to her, that MARY is made the Queen of Mercy” (GM, ch. 1).

### **To live with JESUS**

Assuming that all Christians are called to the sanctity that “consists in loving JESUS CHRIST, our God, our highest good, our Redeemer,” Alphonsus published several works that help us contemplate His life: *Christmas Novena*, *Reflections on the Passion*, *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*, and above all, *The Practice of the Love of JESUS CHRIST*. These works encourage the reader to detach his heart from all creatures, so as to unite it with the will of JESUS, so that thus transformed, one may exclaim with Saint Paul: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me* (Gal. 2 :20). In *The Way to Converse with God* and *Uniformity with God’s Will*, Alphonsus gives precious advice to help the soul live in the Lord’s presence, to speak with Him heart to heart, and accept from His loving hand all that happens to us. The Saint likewise wrote other works aimed to arouse the reader’s desire to sacrifice everything to follow JESUS more closely—the *Selva*, on the duties of the priestly soul, and the *Vera Sposa*, on the duties of those who have professed religious life. In the formation of young vocations, Saint Alphonsus insisted that students follow the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Faced with a diversity of opinions, he undertook to revise moral theology with such wisdom that in 1950, Pope Pius XII conferred on him the title “heavenly patron of all confessors and moralists.” In the face of rigorism, Alphonsus stated that the priest may not refuse absolution to a well-disposed penitent, meaning a penitent who is truly contrite and who has a firm resolution not to sin again. In the face of laxity, he did not allow souls to be admitted to the sacraments who were not determined, with the grace of God, to avoid all grave sin.

The young Redemptorist Congregation was not spared trials. In 1752, the King of the Two Sicilies, Charles III, ordered that the institute be stripped of its possessions, which were then handed over to the bishops. Later, Alphonsus himself was forced, due to the

intrigues of some of his sons, to resign his position and move away. Unruffled, he preached to his followers submission to the divine will: "The Lord," he said, "wants the Institute to prosper not through the favor or protection of princes, but through scorn, poverty, suffering, and persecution. When have you seen the works of God begin in the midst of approval? Saint Ignatius believed it boded well when he was informed of some new harassment or reversal."

In 1762, Father Alphonsus was named bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths, a small diocese near Naples. Despite the example of many prelates of his time, for whom the episcopate meant luxury and ostentation, he continued to lead a life of poverty and mortification. Thanks to his preaching, in a short time the entire episcopal city changed—Confession and Communion became more frequent, the churches were filled, and devotion to the Most Blessed Virgin grew in every heart. Concerned about the future of the diocese, he carefully examined candidates to the priesthood before laying hands on them. In an era when Church benefices attracted many who were ill equipped for ministry, his zeal led him to refuse unworthy candidates. The more or less general laxity of the era had resulted in a low point in religious fervor, even at the altar. One of Bishop de Liguori's main concerns was to reestablish everywhere the correct observance of religious rites. In fact, then as today, the glory of God calls for dignity in the observance of the divine mysteries. "The Mystery of the Eucharist is too great for anyone to permit himself to treat it according to his own whim, so that its sacredness and its universal ordering would be obscured ... it

is the right of all of Christ's faithful that the Liturgy, and in particular the celebration of Holy Mass, should truly be as the Church wishes" (Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* by the Congregation for Divine Worship, March 25, 2004, nos. 11 and 12).

### **Paralyzed for nineteen years**

In 1768, Bishop de Liguori was struck with an illness that spread to all the joints in his body. Soon the vertebrae in his neck folded over on themselves, forcing his chin to press strongly on his chest, resulting in a horrible wound and making breathing difficult. The Saint would remain crippled for the last nineteen years of his life. Despite this torture, no complaint was ever heard from him. Addressing the large crucifix in front of him, he exclaimed, "I thank you, Lord, for giving me a part in the sufferings You endured in Your nerves, when You were nailed to the Cross. I want to suffer, O my JESUS, as You would like and as much as You would like; only give me patience. Burn, cut, do not spare me here below, but spare me in eternity." In July 1775, Pius VI accepted his resignation as bishop. The last years of his life were spent writing and defending his religious congregation. In July 1787, Bishop de Liguori was close to death. At the moment when the holy Viaticum was brought to him, he exclaimed, "My JESUS, my JESUS, do not leave me!" On August 1, holding the crucifix and the image of MARY to his heart, he fell peacefully asleep in the Lord as the monastery bell rang the Angelus. He was declared a "Doctor of the Church" by Blessed Pius IX in 1871.

On the occasion of the bicentenary of his death, August 1, 1987, Pope John Paul II wrote, "The popularity which the Saint has long enjoyed can be ascribed to his desire for conciseness, clarity, simplicity, optimism and friendliness which, in the end, came down to gentleness. At the root of this love for people is his concern regarding salvation: to save himself and to save others, a salvation that was aimed at perfection, at holiness. The frame of reference of his pastoral activity did not exclude anyone: he wrote for everyone."

Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, obtain for us the grace of walking resolutely on the path to eternal salvation and of leading there as many souls as possible!

*Dom Antoine Marie*  
o.s.b.

*P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Camel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.*

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