

St. Alphonsus Liguori

BORN 1696; DIED 1787
BISHOP, FOUNDER,
AND DOCTOR OF THE
CHURCH
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 1

SOCIAL activists ARE sometimes advised to “think globally, act locally.” This phrase captures the breadth and the depth of St. Alphonsus Liguori, a man whose brilliance gave the Church major works of theology but who gave himself to bring God to the people he served, and to bring them to God.

Born at Marianella near Naples, Alphonsus was the oldest of eight children of a captain of the royal galleys of the kingdom of Naples, Guiseppe de' Ligouri. His Spanish mother, Anna Cavalieri, practiced an ascetical faith but was afflicted with scruples (an exaggerated consciousness of sinfulness). Alphonsus was brilliant from an early age and earned doctoral degrees in both civil and canon (church) law at the age of sixteen. He practiced law for several years and, during this period, was not very devout. Yet he guarded himself from serious sin and awaited an indication from God as to what direction his life should take. A visit to a hospital for incurably ill people when he was twenty-six, shortly after followed by a retreat, was the occasion for a vision in which he was given his vocation, a life completely given over to God. His father was unhappy with his decision to become a priest, but Alphonsus compromised with him only by agreeing not to enter a religious order. The deep conflict of those years may have been the cause of a breakdown



that brought him to the brink of death just before his ordination as a diocesan priest at the age of thirty.

His early years as a priest were devoted to recruiting and training lay catechists to work in the slums of Naples. This was also a period when he, like his mother, suffered from scrupulosity. He was also burdened with concern about the spiritual poverty of the poor both in Naples and in the nearby mountains of the Amalfi coast south of Naples. When Alphonsus was thirty-five, he and Sister Mary Celeste, a former Carmelite nun, founded the women's branch of the Congregation of the

Most Holy Redeemer (CSsR), usually called the Redemptoristines. Guided by Sister Mary Celeste's vision, he founded the men's order of Redemptorists the following year (there are about seven thousand Redemptorists today). He experienced difficulty right from the beginning, however, not only from internal divisions among the Redemptorists, but also from ongoing opposition from the prime minister of Spain, who had gained authority over the kingdom of Naples.

Alphonsus became a well-known preacher of missions — sermons preached over a period of several days intended to revive and strengthen the faith life of a community. He avoided the flowery, overwrought preaching style of his day, and instead focused on making sure that his sermons were well put together and understandable to even the least-educated people in his congregations. He was also much sought after to hear confessions since he treated everyone gently. He

preached throughout the kingdom of Naples and in Sicily for twenty-two years, beginning when he was thirty. He established the practice of returning to a mission area months afterward, to follow up and ensure that his work was successful.

As Alphonsus' health began to fail in his early fifties, he turned his energies to the branch of theology that works out the implications of revealed and natural law. *Moral Theology*, written to give pastors and confessors guidance in their work with penitents, was published when he was fifty-two and expanded several years later. At the time he lived, the French heresy Jansenism still deeply affected people. This was a puritanical heresy that taught that no one could resist temptation and that most people were unworthy to receive Holy Communion. It encouraged extreme forms of penance and scrupulosity, and attacked devotion to Jesus' Sacred Heart and to Our Lady. This heresy had already been a problem for nearly a hundred years. Alphonsus countered this heresy by emphasizing the love of God above all else. He was already revered as a saint, living continually in the presence of God and acting completely selflessly. In addition to *Moral Theology*, his written output over his lifetime included over one hundred works directed at every facet of Catholic living and to Catholics in every state of life. He wrote as a pastor, offering practical instruction in the Christian life, a balanced approach between law and liberty. Throughout his life he struggled to maintain his own spiritual balance, since he still had to fight against scrupulosity.

At sixty-six, Alphonsus was consecrated

“He wrote as a pastor, offering a balanced approach between law and liberty.”



Head of Christ, by Rina Scafi

bishop of a small diocese, an elevation he neither sought nor desired, seeing it instead as punishment for past sins. Nevertheless, for thirteen years, he worked tirelessly to remedy the poor instruction of the people and the indifference and slackness of their priests. He combined initial kindness with firmness to improve public morality, and reformed the diocese's seminary. He nearly impoverished the diocese to provide food during a period of plague.

By seventy-one, Alphonsus was so deformed by rheumatism that he had to drink through tubes, being unable to raise his head to drink normally, and for a time could not even celebrate Mass. He was nearly paralyzed for the last six years of his episcopacy. He finally retired at age seventy-nine, only to enter a period of deep suffering. He was deposed from his leadership of the Redemptorists. The order went through a time of severe dissension that did not end until after his death. It was also during these eleven years, increasingly deaf and blind, unable to read or write, that his experience of the world of the spirit became most pronounced. For an eighteen-month period, he went through terrible temptations against the faith and against virtue, again had to fight scrupulosity, and was assailed by illusions produced by Satanic forces. Yet in this same period he also worked miracles, saw visions, and prophesied. Alphonsus indeed heeded our Lord's example: *“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren”* (1 Jn 3:16).