

# COMUNICACIONES

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## HUMANITY AND HOLINESS

The publication of a new life of St. Alphonsus de Liguori<sup>1</sup> represents not only a fresh breakthrough in the study of the life, work and writings of a remarkable and influential 18th-century saint: it also represents a fresh and original approach to the understanding of sanctity itself. This aspect of the book, which gives it a truly exemplary significance for the modern study of the saints in general, is not something that Father Jones deliberately set before himself as a purpose of his writing. It is not that he started with a new theory of the nature of sanctity and made his life of St. Alphonsus serve as a potent illustration of it. Rather from the range and depth of his researches into all the facts of St. Alphonsus' life and work the holiness of the man emerged in a different way from that in which the quality of holiness is usually envisaged. Father Jones accepts St. Alphonsus' holiness as it actually was and, in the epilogue to his work, portrays it thus: "The path to sanctity for Alphonsus was a painful one. He experienced sufferings of body, mind and soul; he knew disappointment, failure, misunderstanding, rejection and betrayal. When he breathed his last, the faint flame of life that flickered in his body was all that he had left to give back to God: he had been purified by the Spirit of everything else" (p. 489). The broader relevance of this to "the different manifestations of christian holiness" that we encounter through the centuries is, quite rightly, emphasised by Father Jones in his epilogue (p. 488).

The present work, then, is an outstanding synthesis. On the one hand it is probably the best historical study to date of a many-faceted personality in the vast well-documented variety of events

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<sup>1</sup> *Alphonsus de Liguori: the Saint of Bourbon Naples 1696-1787*, by Frederick M. Jones, C.S.S.R., 1992. Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, hardback, xii+532 pp., £ 19.99.

through which it passed in a mortal existence of 91 years. On the other the book is characterised by what its author calls "a sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit" working in that life "at all times and in all places" (p. 488).

The essential facts of St. Alphonsus' life are to be found in every biography of him, scholarly and popular: they underpin the present biography also. He was born in Naples in 1696 into a family of the lesser nobility. He read law in the university of Naples and won his doctorate in 1713 at the age of 17. (Father Jones shows, p. 19, that this was not an unusual achievement of the time.) His promising legal career was out short when in 1723 he lost an important law case. Shattered by the experience and in spite of pressure put upon him by a dictatorial and ambitious father, he was enrolled as a cleric of the diocese of Naples in the same year and was ordained priest in 1726. During the following years his ministry was increasingly directed to the pastorally marginalised — in his own language "abandoned" — Neapolitan poor, both in the city and in the adjacent countryside.

The year 1732 saw the very humble beginnings of Alphonsus' Congregation of the Most Holy Saviour (later Redeemer) — the Redemptorists — whose primary task was to be the evangelisation of the "abandoned" rural poor by means of popular missions. For 30 years, from 1732 to 1762, Alphonsus laboured in the midst of recurring conflicts and crises, largely occasioned by the inflexible opposition of the Bourbon government of Naples to the establishment of new religious orders, to safeguard and develop his Congregation.

In 1762 he was made bishop of the small but comparatively wealthy diocese of Sant'Agata dei Goti. This was very much against his will — but, writes Father Jones, at least 70 aspirants to the position had earlier put themselves forward for it of their own free will, a fact which illustrates the utter worldliness that prevailed in the pre-modern Neapolitan church (p. 357). Alphonsus worked might and main for the reform and renewal of the church and people of his diocese till at the age of 79 he retired from it in 1775 to the principal house of his Congregation, Pagani, where he died on 1 August 1787.

His last years were greatly saddened by the affair of the *Regolamento* ("Regulation" or "Rule") imposed, after endless intrigues on all sides, by the Bourbon government on the Redemptorist Congregation in 1780. Greatly displeased by the acceptance, albeit unwillingly, of the *Regolamento* by the Neapolitan Redemptorists, Pope Pius VI withdrew papal recognition from them and recognised

only the Redemptorist houses in the Papal States as constituting the true Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. Technically, then, St. Alphonsus died outside the Congregation which under God meant everything to him.

All through his active priestly life Alphonsus was a tireless writer. His publications from 1728 to 1778 number over a 100 in all. His own favourite among them was *The Practice of Loving Jesus Christ* (1768), written while he was bishop. Theologically, however, his most important works were those on moral theology, especially his *Moral Theology* itself, the first edition of which appeared in 1748 and which went through nine revisions and editions during his lifetime. It was an immensely influential work not only in Italy but throughout Europe. In it Alphonsus upheld a kindly and flexible but still evangelical approach to the complex moral problems that arise in the turbulence of human existence, as against the "rigorist" approach which would in one way or another solve all moral problems in terms of the letter of the law.

Moral rigorism was in his own blood from his pious but scrupulous mother Donna Anna Cavalieri, and as a student for the priesthood he was trained in French rigorism which bore the imprint of Jansenism (p. 48). His heart, however, put evangelical love above everything — that love of which St. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 13, the scriptural passage which was eventually to provide the basis of *The Practice of Loving Jesus Christ* — and this insight was confirmed by his pastoral experience among the poor and lowly. Intellectually and pastorally, then, he came to reject rigorism and opt for a redemptive theology of divine compassion. In his own emotional life, though, he remained always prone to rigorist fear and anxiety. It involved him in recurrent storms of acute scrupulosity at various stages of his life, particularly in regard to sexual matters. Father Jones describes these with his customary thoroughness in the use of sources and with his customary good judgment in commenting on all aspects of Alphonsus' personality. The pathology of his scrupulosity flared up again, at times violently, in the last years of his life (pp. 480-482), though by July 1787, a month before his death, "it was evident to all that he was no longer agitated by his scruples or temptations. An air of serenity surrounded him" (p. 483). He had at last been "purified by the Spirit" (cf. p. 489) of his self-tormenting interior rigorism also.

Alphonsus was fortunate in his first biographer Antonio Maria Tannoia (1727-1802). He first met Alphonsus in 1746, the year of his own entrance into the Redemptorist Congregation. From

then on he kept detailed notes of all his hero did and said. In 1798, 11 years after Alphonsus' death, he published the first volume of his account of him. Two other volumes followed (1800 and 1802). The work is a masterpiece of its kind — vivid, true to life and most readable. A modern admirer of it was the great Neapolitan philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). Though not a believer he came through his reading of Tannoia to have an affectionate regard for the person of Alphonsus whom he praised for his spirit of "moderation and kindness." It is as good a summing-up as any of the human and spiritual significance of what Alphonsus stood for.

Father Jones is interesting on Tannoia (pp. 1-4), pointing out also the defects of his work. He then surveys the amazing amount of material about Alphonsus' life and work that has been brought to light in the last 50 years (p. 4), particularly by the Spanish Redemptorist Raimondo Tellería whose *San Alphonso Maria de Ligorio* appeared in Madrid in 1950-1951. The compendious nature of Tellería's biography, however, makes it into a "life and times" of Alphonsus. Father Jones's method is different. He focuses throughout on the person of Alphonsus himself, showing him at every stage as a man of his time reflecting its presuppositions and indeed prejudices while ultimately transcending them in the power of the Spirit. He refuses to be drawn into a narrative account or philosophic analysis of St. Alphonsus' time in itself. He is concerned with it only to the extent that it entered into and shaped the personality of the man.

What kind of person, then, was Alphonsus as an individual personality and as a man of his time? He was, in all truth, a bundle of contradictions. He had an explosive temper and could be the most patient of men, even with people who were trying to harm him. He was serenely happy when he was caught up into the love and contemplation of God and was driven to the point of almost manic anxiety when he was caught up in one of his periodic bouts of scrupulosity. He could be utterly direct and straightforward in dealing with others; yet when the labyrinthine politics, civil and ecclesiastical, of the Naples of his time compelled him to be labyrinthine and devious in his turn, he could manoeuvre as skilfully as the next man. Father Jones wisely refrains from attempting a formal psychological analysis of his subject but he provides abundant material for such psychological analyses in the future. One point however can be made right away. Father Jones's narrative exemplifies the degree to which the old social system (*ancien régime*), both

civil and ecclesiastical, was ruled by fear. It was a pyramidal system of dominators and dominated in which the dominated were always afraid of getting into trouble with some dominator or other. This understanding of social relationships was, as the French historian Jean Delumeau has shown, projected into the religious sphere itself so that the image of God in it was first and foremost not that of a loving Father but that of the supreme Lawgiver and just but rigorous Judge. This idea of God produced the widespread spiritual and psychological disease of scrupulosity which afflicted Alphonsus' mother, Alphonsus himself and his sister Anna Maria (see p. 24). There is an interesting connexion here between the socio-cultural structures of the *ancien régime* and its regrettable psycho-spiritual deviations.

In Father Jones's magistral work there is only one point on which I would venture to differ from him. When confronted with some phenomenon of the *ancien régime* that is particularly displeasing to modern sensibilities he gives the impression that all this is a thing of the past. The *ancien régime* has passed away for ever as a result of all that happened in Europe from 1789 onward, two years after Alphonsus' death (cf. p. 399). However, the *ancien régime* in my opinion is still alive and well in southern Italy where there is still a society of dominators and the dominated — only that the dominators today are no longer the aristocracy of Alphonsus' time. They have been replaced by new oppressors and extortioners, notably by the bosses of the Mafia in its threefold form, Sicilian, Calabrian and Neapolitan. These bosses can inject fear and terror into whole populations, perpetuating the feudal system in another form.

As for the ecclesiastical version of the *ancien régime*, it too survives on a worldwide scale. True, it has been purged of the glaring abuses that characterised it in Alphonsus' days and of which Father Jones writes so frankly and learnedly. But its basic pyramidal structure has if anything been strengthened in our days. Power comes as solidly as ever down from the top through the different layers of the ecclesiastical system, making genuine spontaneous community-building in the Church very difficult at the very time when at the pastoral level it seems to be most necessary.

However, it is the function of a good book to prompt some reflections in the reader in a direction other than that taken by the author. Father Jones's *Alphonsus de Liguori: the Saint of Bourbon Naples 1696-1787* is a good book. Indeed it is an outstandingly good one.