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**“JESUS CHRIST SHOULD BE OUR HOPE  
AND OUR LOVE.”**

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRIST'S PASSION IN ST. ALPHONSUS' WRITINGS

The Cross has become an item of “cultural baggage” for many who want to travel light in the modern world. But Henry Chadwick has pointed out that, “believers recognise in the two simple lines making a cross the code-image for the love of God and for the intensity of the price paid for the redemption of humanity.”<sup>1</sup> Two experiences concerning the Passion of Christ and how we perceive it today remain vivid for me from my early days in religious life more than twenty years ago. A confrere had been assigned the task of preparing vocation literature. For the cover picture on the proposed pamphlet he chose a copy of the cross like that which appeared on Gustavo Gutiérrez’ *Theology of Liberation*. It portrayed a grossly distorted and grotesque figure projecting the pain of repression, alienation and servitude of the Latin American masses. Well it nearly split our Redemptorist province in Australia in two! Older religious had such a well formed love for the cross that they could see nothing of the beauty of redemption St. Alphonsus had taught them there. Younger confreres expected the cross to reflect the downtrodden state, the brutality and inhumanity of the world in which they lived. They saw Christ suffering in the drug scene, in the senseless killing in Vietnam, in the slaughter on the roads. For them the violence of the modern world had been carved into the flesh of Christ, making him the representative of the poor. My older confreres, on the other hand, saw Christ coming to console this suffering world. He remained a figure of dignity and grace ever untouched by the “filth” of which the young were too well aware. The distorted humanity of this

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<sup>1</sup> “A Cross to be carried on,” *The Times*, Saturday, March 11, 1995, 16.

modern Christ seemed to them near indeed to blasphemy. With the passing of time we have, however, learnt to make Christ's option for the poor our own. My second experience was much simpler. Being an apprentice missionary, more experienced fathers gave me some wise advice. If you ever have to preach to prisoners in jail, they said, speak to them about the Passion of Christ because that alone will move their hearts.

### 1. - *Images of Suffering and Redemption*

Our awareness of the Passion is not St. Alphonsus' in eighteenth century Naples. It seems to me that the basic human experiences of death and redemption through which we imagined and symbolised the Passion have been irrevocably transformed. It is impossible for us to turn our backs on the horror of the Holocaust, or forget the inhumanity of man to fellow man in two world wars. Our experience of evil must be measured on a mass scale so that today our minds fly to Bosnia or Rwanda when we hear of senseless suffering. Many of our contemporaries balk at making the Way of the Cross because they find nothing there that leads them to believe that suffering could have any real meaning at all. Our awareness has been formed by the mass media that bring global problems right into our living rooms. Two of St. Alphonsus' favorite images that he used in his preaching plugged directly into people's felt experience but are no longer real.<sup>2</sup> The first image was suggested by the aristocratic society to which he belonged where Christ was honored as a King, where a commoner had to seek out an advocate to plead his cause with the crown, and where there was no direct access to the seat of power. Democracy has changed that. In his day redemption still meant that the prince himself had abandoned his royal estate to become not just a peasant but a slave set on paying the impossible price of our ransom. Such a way of seeing human relationships was actual to

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<sup>2</sup> The following are the basic experiential symbols on which St. Alphonsus was able to elaborate in his preaching. See the typical preacher's *esempio* that begins his treatment of the Passion in his first *magnum opus* on this theme *L'Amore delle anime in Opere Ascetiche, Vol. V, Passione di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo*, Roma 1934, 18-19. Most of the matter in this volume appeared in *The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ*, edited and translated by Eugene GRIMM, C.S.S.R., Benzinger Brothers, London 1887, 23-24. Other translations by Grimm will be noted as appropriate.

an as yet essentially feudal Naples where captives were released at a price from Islamic North Africa. The second image is that of the procession of a condemned criminal through the city to the place of public execution. It was high spectacle for the whole populace. The people felt horror at the humiliation inflicted on the victim. Though he might well be innocent they were left helpless except to feel compassion for his miserable condition. St. Alphonsus was a nobleman, an advocate and a priest who had assisted such criminals prepare for execution. Having accompanied them to the gallows he had lived through the drama of their "passion" personally.<sup>3</sup> And so he could see through the power play politics of the Jewish authorities, the callousness of the soldiers, the lie of Pilate condemning an innocent Jesus to crucifixion. He was also acutely aware of the inevitability of the victim's death as the tragedy unfolded. Capital punishment is rare and crucifixion almost unknown today. Many feel that such coarse cruelty is utterly against all human dignity. The type of sentimental devotionism to the Passion that used to permeate Catholic cultures has of late been criticised for motivating the masses to be passive and inactive in the face of political repression, a proof that Marx was right to charge that "religion is the opium of the people." But today the Cross is rather perceived as the symbol of Christ's solidarity with the poor in their struggle not only for liberation and human rights but for complete spiritual freedom as well. Having been evangelised by the poor, St. Alphonsus' pastoral experience gave him a unique view of what Christ's Passion meant for the poor and abandoned.

## *2. - His Works on the Passion.*

To see what St. Alphonsus might contribute to our understanding of the Passion we need a contemporary hermeneutics based on an accurate exegesis of his written texts. Till quite recently scholarly research has repeated his spiritual doctrine without attending greatly to his personal development as reflected in his writing and apostolic efforts. In a way he has been betrayed by becoming a best selling author making it unnecessary

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<sup>3</sup> For many years St. Alphonsus belonged to a confraternity called "Bianchi della Giustizia" whose apostolate was to assist those about to undergo capital punishment.

to look further into his spiritual-literary itinerary. The present essay has been inspired by Father Noel Londoño's study of St. Alphonsus' christology which sought to break new ground on this topic.<sup>4</sup> After the success of *The Glories of Mary* in 1750 St. Alphonsus began writing on the Passion and eventually composed eight books on the same. This is already a hint that while he never again thought to write another major work on Our Lady his attitude to Christ grew and developed. He returned to the figure of the suffering Saviour of humanity again and again in his literary production.

The main works among his many reflections on the Passion are:<sup>5</sup>

1. *L'Amore delle anime, cioè riflessioni e affetti sulla passione di Gesù Cristo, (Reflections and Affections on the Passion of Jesus Christ)*, 1751, published together with the Visits.
2. *Meditazioni sulla passione di Gesù Cristo per ciascun giorno della settimana, (Meditations on the Passion of Jesus Christ for Each Day of the Week)*, 1754.
3. *Recitativo e Duetto tra l'anima e Gesù appassionato, (Cantata on the Passion: The Soul and the Redeemer)*, 1760.
4. *Considerazioni ed affetti sovra la passione di Gesù Cristo esposta semplicemente secondo la descrivono i sagri evangelisti, (Simple Exposition of the Circumstances of the Passion of Jesus Christ. According to the Narration of the Holy Evangelists)*, 1761.
5. *Esercizio di Via Crucis, (Way of the Cross)*, 1761.
6. *Quindici meditazioni sulla passione di Gesù Cristo da farsi per 15 giorni cominciando dal sabato di passione al sabato santo, (Meditations for the Last Fifteen Days of Lent)*, 1766.
7. *Saette di fuoco, cioè prove che Gesù Cristo ci ha date del suo amore nell'opera della nostra Redenzione*<sup>6</sup>, 1766.
8. *Predica della passione di Gesù Cristo, (Sermon on the Passion of Jesus Christ)* 1772.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> N. LONDOÑO, *La teología de la Pasión de Cristo en San Alfonso de Ligorio*. Pars. diss., Roma. Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, Facultas Theologiae 1985. 98, [1] p.

<sup>5</sup> See LONDOÑO, 88-97, for a complete list.

<sup>6</sup> This work was published by St. Alphonsus for the first time as an appendix to the third part of the *Via della salute* in 1766 in Naples. It is available in *Opere Ascetiche*, Vol. I, Roma 1933, 335-370

<sup>7</sup> This sermon is not published in English in *The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ*, Benzinger Brothers, London 1887, as were the other titles on the Passion, but in *Miscellany, The Ascetical Works*. Vol. XVII, translated by Eugene GRIMM, C.S.S.R., Benzinger Brothers, London 1890, 298-318.

9. *Riflessioni sulla passione di Gesù Cristo, (Considerations on the Passion of Jesus Christ), 1773.*
10. *Forza che ha la passione di Gesù Cristo per accendere il divino amore in ogni cuore, (The Power of the Passion of Jesus Christ to Enkindle the Divine Love in Every Heart), 1773.<sup>8</sup>*

### 3. - The "Literary Genre" of St. Alphonsus' Works

There are three main literary genre in which St. Alphonsus presented his thought. 1). His moral theology and the polemical dissertations in defense of his moral system are presented in a strictly logical and scientific form. He cites authors, argues opinions and finally gives his reasoned solution or judgement. He told his students that none of them should take a position contrary to his own because he was convinced that by studying the question he had reached a correct solution. If they wanted to oppose him they had to find better reasons. In these fields where he worked at the highest professional level, he had counselors, e.g., Father di Meo for dogmatic questions that came up in moral theology.<sup>9</sup> 2). In his historical-dogmatic works he is very precise, citing what he found in the best authors and usually does not assume a personal position e.g., his study of the Council of Trent and the apologetical works in defense of the Catholic faith.<sup>10</sup> 3). In ascetics he used two styles. For those who were able to read, for priests, nuns and seminarians, he expounds a more rational type of spiritual doctrine. For those not able to read, he wrote works that could be read aloud so that others could listen and absorb them. *The Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* and his books on the Passion belong here. These works are presented as the content of the *vita divota* or, as we would say, popular piety of the highest quality. They are very discriminating in their appeal to the customs of the country folk of Southern Italy where superstitious practices were sometimes rather widely spread. In fact St. Alphonsus effected a profound

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<sup>8</sup> The English version is found in *The Way of Salvation and of Perfection*, translated and edited by Eugene GRIMM C.S.S.R., Benzinger Brothers, London 1886, 231-252.

<sup>9</sup> Théodule REY-MÉRMET, C.S.S.R., *Alphonsus Liguori: Tireless Worker for the Most Abandoned*, New City Press, N.Y. 1989, 465-483, and Frederick M. JONES, C.S.S.R., *Alphonsus Liguori: The Saint of Bourbon Naples*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1992, 274-286.

<sup>10</sup> REY-MÉRMET, 582-589, and JONES, 286-295.

purification and reshaping of popular religious practices.<sup>11</sup> His works are presented in the form of meditations with the following components; a). a biblical text, b). a patristic comment or a citation from a well known author such as St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Bonaventure or the Jesuits Fathers Alvarez or La Ponte, c). a reflection that expanded and turned this matter over in the mind, d). affections that evoke a spontaneous personal heart felt response. St. Alphonsus held that when writing for this class of persons one does not go first to the intellect but rather to the will as the door by which one enters their life. The aim of a mission was to leave the people bound to Christ by teaching them how to pray on their own. The people were accustomed to go to the church twice in the course of the day, that is morning and evening. At these times the parish priest would read aloud a meditation that St. Alphonsus had prepared as a prolongation of a mission.<sup>12</sup> *The Visits* and the meditations on the Passion were the pivots in his program of permanent and continuing evangelisation. St. Alphonsus was one hundred per cent convinced that without this prayer of meditation a conversion precipitated by fear could not last because not motivated by the force of divine charity. Then as now there were many who could not or chose not to participate in specialized elite apostolic groups. Women, children and the elderly were all excluded in his day. But every adult could meditate and it was necessary to do so to remain free of mortal sin as St. Alphonsus taught on spiritual direction in chapter 9 of the *Pratica del confessore*. His spiritual works also served as model sermons with proofs, authorities and citations his missionaries could utilise.

<sup>11</sup> See the chapter on "La croce" in Louis CHÂTELLIER, *La religione dei poveri*, Garzanti 1994, 115-136 for how devotion to the Cross shaped baroque piety.

<sup>12</sup> *Selva di materie predicabili*, Marietti, Torino 1874, Parte III, cap VII, 235, and Appendice, Punto I. Dell'amore verso Gesù Crocifisso, 288-289. "No one will deny that terrifying sermons are useful...but we should be convinced that conversions brought about only by fear of divine chastisements are of short duration...if the love of God enters not the soul it will be difficult for it to persevere...Hence in our missions, especially on the last three days, we speak only of the Passion of our Lord, so that the souls may become attached to Jesus Christ," in *Preaching God's Word*, translated and edited by Eugene GRIMM, C.S.S.R., Benzinger Brothers, London 1890, 302, 304. See also G. DE LUCA, *Sant'Alfonso mio maestro di vita cristiana*, Alba 1963, for a description of his style of meditating with the people.

#### 4. - *Biblical Meditation on the Passion*

St. Alphonsus insisted that the one and only norm or criterion for preaching on the Passion was the sacred Scriptures which he insists must be rightly and not fancifully interpreted. While not having modern critical tools at his disposition he still sought a simple and as far as possible literal exposition of the Scriptures. He claims that his first great work on the Passion *Reflections and Affections on the Passion of Jesus Christ, (L'Amore delle anime)* is valuable,

especially since it will put before you, in regular order, the passages of Holy Scripture referring to the love Jesus Christ showed us in his death; for there is nothing more apt to stimulate a Christian to the love of God than the word of God itself that is drawn from Holy Writ.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Simple Exposition of the Circumstances of the Passion of Jesus Christ (Considerazioni ed affetti sovra la passione di Gesù Cristo)* he is even more incisive.

The contemplations which devout authors have made and written on the Passion are useful and beautiful; but certainly a single word from the Sacred Scriptures makes a greater impression on a Christian than a hundred and a thousand contemplations and revelations ascribed to certain pious souls; for the Scriptures assure us that what they attest is certain with the certainty of divine faith.<sup>14</sup>

He adjusts himself to the people's mentality by quoting biblical phrases or short sentences that will become fixed in their memory. This was his usual technique in quoting the Scriptures in popular preaching. All his narrative preaching on the Passion takes

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<sup>13</sup> *The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ*, 15. The Italian is in *Opere Ascetiche*, V 130: "specialmente in aver sotto l'occhio raccolti, con ordine, i passi delle divine Scritture circa l'amore che Gesù Cristo ci ha dimostrato nella sua morte."

<sup>14</sup> *The Passion of Jesus Christ*, 160, and in Italian *Opere Ascetiche*, V, 136. "Son belle e buone le tante contemplazioni che sulla Passione hanno fatte e scritte gli autori divoti; ma certamente fa più impressione ad un cristiano una sola parola delle sagre Scritture che cento e mille contemplazioni e rivelazioni che si scrivono fatte ad alcune persone devote; mentre le Scritture ci assicurano che tutto ciò ch'esse ci attestano è certo con certezza di fide divina."

Scripture phrases as keys to interpret an action or a situation in which Jesus is involved. He thus prepared a series for every day of the week, or eight or fifteen meditations taking the events of the Passion in sequence. His classic sermon on the Passion is structured, as it were, in the three acts of a drama, 1. First scene: The Garden of Olives, 2. Second scene: The Pretorium, 3. Third scene: Calvary.<sup>15</sup> The same narrative structure, always based on the Gospels, especially St. Matthew, is found in its simplest and most elegant form in his Way of the Cross (*Via Crucis*).

##### 5. - *The Passion as Suffering and as Love.*

It has always been understood that St. Alphonsus' purpose in all his writing and preaching on the Passion was to inculcate the love of Jesus Christ. He wants to put the believer before Christ himself, to introduce him into his presence as into a fiery furnace of love where he cannot but be inflamed with love for Jesus Christ. The quite bloody portrayal of Christ on the Cross that he as a twenty three years old layman is believed to have painted shows forth the profundity of Christ's suffering and abandonment. Later copies made for the covers of his devotional works have flaming arrows emanating from the wounded side of Christ so as to pierce and penetrate the coldness of the human heart.<sup>16</sup> For him the Cross is the source of the science of the saints and the fountain gushing forth rivers of divine love. He perceives the human heart as an inner sanctuary, a quiet cell where the soul is lost in silent adoration of Christ. Hence his great attention to the *Canticle of Canticles* and the Lamb of God lead to slaughter. These features have already been well brought out by Father G. Velocci.<sup>17</sup>

It is not mistaken to assert that for St. Alphonsus the Passion meant sorrow, crucifixion, death - but Christ freely chose to undergo all of this not as some blind fate but purely out of love. The phrase from Isaiah, "*Oblatus est quia ipse voluit* (Is. LIII, 7)"<sup>18</sup> sets the scene for St. Alphonsus' narration of the Passion. In the

<sup>15</sup> *Miscellany*, 298-318 and in Italian *Opere Ascetiche*, V, 401-417.

<sup>16</sup> See the description and the graphics in E. MARCELLI - S. RAPONI, *Un umanista del '700 italiano: Alfonso M. de Liguori*, Verona 1992, 40-60.

<sup>17</sup> "La croce in sant'Alfonso de' Liguori", *La sapienza della croce oggi. Vol. II La sapienza della croce nella spiritualità*, Elle de CI, 1974, 351-359.

<sup>18</sup> *Opere Ascetiche*, V, 55 is a good example.

Agony in the Garden Christ entered into solidarity with all the poor and oppressed of the world to suffer with and for them. As an advocate St. Alphonsus reexamined all the possible causes for Christ's death, and even sought realistically to attribute responsibility among those involved. His meditations betray a lawyer's rhetoric recalling the causes for the death of Christ: the people's fickleness, the disciples' betrayal, the soldiers' cruelty, the Jewish leaders' religious motives that made them want to do away with an innocent man, and the Romans' politics of imperial power. He rehearses these reasons one by one before our minds and yet none of them nor all of them together is sufficient to explain the Passion and death of Christ. He returns again and again to the mystery of divine predilection: Christ loved me and gave himself for me!<sup>19</sup> The key to understanding the reason for his death is in the will of Christ and the intent of his Father. Christ committed himself to suffer death for the world's salvation during the Agony in the Garden, "*Non quod ego volo, sed quod tu* (Marc. XIV, 36)."<sup>20</sup> What we see is a horrible but small part of the real drama, "the folly of the Cross" of which it is but the tip of the iceberg. This will was carried out and executed by this sacrifice on the Cross. His *kenosis* was completed with the great cry of abandonment that completely identified him with the forsaken, "*Deus meus, Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me?* (Matth. XXVII, 46)"<sup>21</sup>. "*Consummatum est* (Io. XIX, 30)," becomes a refrain throughout these meditations. By this act of self-giving he achieved perfect conformity to the will of his Father in heaven. "*Et clamans voce magna Iesus ait: Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum* (Luc. XXIII, 46),"<sup>22</sup> is the climax of the drama of redemption. The hidden centre and power of the Passion is the overwhelming force of God's "madness of love" for us.<sup>23</sup> All of the reasons for Christ's death direct our minds to God's salvific plan for humanity, drawing us deeper into the unspeakable mystery where St. Alphonsus

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<sup>19</sup> Brian JOHNSTONE, C.S.S.R., *St. Alphonsus and the Theology of Conversion*, in *Readings in Redemptorist Spirituality*, Vol. 2, Rome 1988, 72-85 for the "pro nobis" of redemption as a motive for "the folly of the Cross" as expressing "the madness of love" for us.

<sup>20</sup> Among others see *Opere Ascetiche*, V, 59, 147, 361.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, V, 103, 172, 374, 397, 416.

<sup>22</sup> For a sampling see *ibid.*, V, 107, 247, 254, 374, 398, 417, 430.

<sup>23</sup> See *ibid.*, V, 31 where St. Alphonsus speaks of the Cross as "una pazzia" and Jesus as "l'Unigenito di Dio, divenuto per dir così, impazzito per l'amore eccessivo che porta agli uomini." *Passion and Death*, 39.

discovered Christ “in the bosom of the Father”(Jn 1: 18, RSV version). What Christ did “for us” was to lead us into the heart of the Father where “he has made him known.” St.Alphonsus insisted on an insight that is particularly his, namely, that the Father by giving us Christ was giving us himself. In this way all of the reasons for the Passion and death of Christ become “proofs of God’s love for us.”<sup>24</sup> All of these arguments conclude to God as Love and the events of the Passion are proofs that manifest this love in the Crucified Saviour.

Yes, because we cannot have a more powerful motive for loving God than the Passion of Jesus Christ, by which we know that the Eternal Father, to manifest to us his exceeding love for us, was pleased to send his only begotten Son upon earth to die for us sinners.<sup>25</sup>

In his campaigns of evangelisation St.Alphonsus always preached the Passion and used a painting of Christ crucified in a dramatic, even electrifying way. At his process for canonisation Father Lorenzo Negri made the following declaration about how St.Alphonsus instructed his missionaries.

On the missions the sermons on hell and judgement and others like them are good for shaking up sinners. But conversions based solely on fear endure but a short while and quickly come apart. I had this image of Jesus Crucified painted so that in the *vita divota* preceding the meditation on the Passion you might display it to the people. And when they gaze upon the image of the Crucified their hearts cannot help but become tender and be converted. And those tears flowing at the sight of the Crucified gush from a heart wounded by love of his Passion. For those converted by way of love, their conversion is stronger and enduring. But what has not been done by love cannot be achieved by fear. For

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<sup>24</sup> In fact he sees each event, each wound of the Passion as an arrow that pierces the human heart. Each arrow is thus a proof of God’s love for us as we see in the title of *Saette di fuoco, cioè prove che Gesù Cristo ci ha date del suo amore nell’opera della nostra redenzione, Opere Ascetiche*, V. 335.

<sup>25</sup> *The Way of Salvation and Perfection*, 331. In Italian: “Sì, perché non può esservi motivo che più ci stringa ad amare il nostro Dio che la Passione di Gesù Cristo, in saper che l’Eterno Padre, per dichiararci l’eccesso dell’amor che ci porta, ha voluto mandar il suo Figlio Unigenito in terra a morire per noi peccatori.”

when one falls in love with Jesus Crucified there is no fear (my translation).<sup>26</sup>

This painting of Christ Crucified together with Our Lady's statue were the first visual aids used by the Redemptorists in their missions to the most abandoned. The planting of the five crosses, Calvary as it was called, performed at the close of the mission left a permanent imprint on a town's memory of the wonders worked by grace.<sup>27</sup> And the power of the Passion was to be brought to mind daily in the recitation of the mysteries of the Rosary.

#### 6. - *The Development of St. Alphonsus' Thought*<sup>28</sup>

What would be of benefit for us to discover is how St. Alphonsus' thinking and spirituality were transformed by his own personal assimilation of the meaning of the Cross. It could and I think should be argued that he underwent a spiritual maturing that both accompanied and reinforced a parallel evolution in his moral theology. What precipitated development in both fields was his contact with the people of the countryside and his becoming aware of just how extremely abandoned they were and impoverished of the means of grace. He experienced a real crisis of conscience especially in hearing confessions for he could not apply the full rigor of God's law to people living in such ignorance. As a missionary he had to learn to work with their good faith even when

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<sup>26</sup> See Antonio MARRAZZO - Maurizio DE LUCA, *Il crocifisso di Ciorani: Paternità alfonisiana e restauro*, in *SHCSR* 40 (1992) 2, 186, especially note 2. The quotation is from C. BERRUTTI, *Lo Spirito di S. Alfonso Ma. de Liguori*, Stamperia del Fibreno, Napoli 1873, 130. "Nelle missioni sono buone le prediche del giudizio, dell'inferno ed altre simili, per iscuotere i peccatori: ma le conversioni se provengono soltanto dal timore, poco durano, e sono cose, che si scordano. Ho fatto pitturare questa immagine di Cristo crocifisso, affinché nella vita divota precedendo la meditazione della sua passione, la dimonstiate al popolo, e quando si vede dal popolo l'immagine del crocifisso, non può non intenerirsi, e convertirsi; mentre le lacrime che escono alla vista del crocifisso, escono dal cuore ferito dall'amore della sua passione, e chi si converte per via di amore, la conversione è più forte, e durevole: quello, che non fa l'amore, non lo fa il timore; e quando uno si affeziona a Gesù crocifisso, non ha paura."

<sup>27</sup> See Vincenzo GAGLIARDI, C.S.S.R., *Directorio Apostolico*, a cura di G. ORLANDI, C.S.S.R., in *SHCSR* 30 (1982) 181-189, especially "Maniera pratica di piantarsi il Calvario," 189.

<sup>28</sup> See LONDOÑO, 72-80, and 67 on the crisis of 1768.

it was quite mistaken. As his heart turned to mercy toward the most abandoned so he acquired a new awareness of God's overwhelming goodness in his own regard.

His life, in fact, could be described as a search for a satisfying and captivating image of Christ. His ninety one years might be studied as a progressive configuration to the face of the Redeemer. The Christ he encountered in his family and through his education was the typical Christ of the upper classes of the period. His father had a group of statues of Christ in his Passion with him on the galley he commanded. Alphonsus could not but be deeply influenced by this family piety. In the popular mentality Christ was God and man but perhaps appeared to lean more to humanity's side than to God's. With God people seemed, unfortunately but usually, to have associated a terrifying image of punishment, as the one who brought about catastrophes like earthquakes and consigned the evildoer to hell. A cruel God indeed who induced sentiments of fear and insecurity. No doubt his anxiety in relation to his father is linked with this very experience. Such a God could be satisfied through mortification and the intercession of the saints and Our Lady. The Christ that he is thought to have painted in 1719 was more a suffering servant weighed down by the sins of the world than the saviour of humanity.

With his "conversion" in 1723 he felt the need to better define his image of God. He not only knew that God was almighty but felt personally loved and cherished by him and therefore needed to love him totally in return. Theological reflection too helped him appreciate that the redemption was a matter of divine self-giving. When he became a priest he had a severe struggle with scruples which, by obeying his directors, he conquered and went on to grow in hope and confidence in Christ. After the foundation of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer in 1732 his motto and his advice to all was "To give yourself wholly, wholly to Jesus Christ" and that is the theme of the poems and hymns written in these years. There was an ascending spiral of affection that drew him on to his great Christocentric compositions. Beginning with the *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* in 1743 he already demonstrated a full blown theology of love. At the very time when he is leaving behind the rigorist moral opinions acquired in his seminary education he discovers a new pastoral benignity. He speaks openly of "following Jesus Christ" (*seguire Gesù Cristo*), of dedicating himself wholly to

the "cause of Jesus Christ" (*causa di Gesù Cristo*) in the missions, and of preaching in an apostolic style (*all'apostolica*) so as not to betray Jesus Christ, and in the confessional to show such gentleness and kindness as was proper to "the spirit of Jesus Christ."

His Christocentrism is evident in a collections of texts recently edited by Father Noel Londoño.<sup>29</sup> It is a sort of compendium of his doctrine that gathers together his main insights on the Passion and appears to date from this period. His chosen title is very striking: "JESUS CHRIST should be our HOPE and our LOVE." ("*GIESU-CRISTO deve essere la nostra SPERANZA ed il nostro AMORE.*") He sketched the themes on which he would elaborate as:

1. The Love of the Eternal Father in giving us his Son, (*L'Amore dell'Eterno Padre in darci il suo Figlio*).
2. Of the Hope that we should have in Jesus Christ, (*Della Speranza che dobbiamo avere in Giesù-Cristo*).
3. Of the Love that Jesus Christ brings us, (*Dell'Amore che ci porta Giesù-Cristo*).
  - a. - Of the Incarnation, (*Dell'Incarnazione*).
  - b. - Of the Birth of Jesus, (*Della Nascita di Giesù*).
  - c. - Of the Passion of Jesus, (*Della Passione di Giesù*).
  - d. - Of the Most Blessed Sacrament, (*Del SS. Sacramento*).

From 1750 on we can say that he is overcome by the realisation that Christ is the revelation of the true face of God, of God as fatherly Love. Even though he still preserves elements of expiation and of sacrifice to satisfy the divine justice, these are no longer central. He worked within the parameters of St. Anselm's redemption theology with its emphasis on justice as reparation to be done to the divine honour for the insult inflicted by sin. The whole bent of his thinking was now to make this exchange the foundation of a love relationship between God and humanity so that divine justice becomes another proof and manifestation of God's love for us. His focus is on the God-man who willingly suffers in order to give himself to us in order to conquer our affection. "He loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20) becomes the center of Alphonsus' existence. From 1758 to 1768 he deepened the biblical

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<sup>29</sup> *Prontuario de Textos: Un manuscrito inédito* in *SHCSR* 41 (1993) 2, 277-349. The language is rather Neapolitan as in "Giesù".

foundations of his thought and this manifested to him more lucidly than ever its source in superabundant divine benevolence. He realized that a sound spirituality must be firmly rooted in the Bible. He paid particular attention to St. Paul's "he loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20) and how he "gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:2), as well as to Christ's prayer at the Last Supper. In *The Power of Jesus Christ to Enkindle Divine Love in Every Heart, (Saette di fuoco)* published in 1766 he sets out the proofs God has given us of his love.

So let us proceed to consider in this short inquiry into the love of Jesus Christ, as that is witnessed for us by the Sacred Scriptures, how much our loving Redeemer has done to make us understand the affection he bears us and so to oblige us to love him. (my translation)<sup>30</sup>

He emphasizes that our hope, "is founded on God's promises in the blood of Jesus Christ and on his infinite divine mercy" (my translation).<sup>31</sup> The Redemption is not so much concentrated in the Incarnation or the earthly life of Christ but is to be encountered in his Cross. At the last stage of his spiritual growth after 1768 he brought his meditation on the *Epistle to the Hebrews* to maturity by recognizing in the Christ's sacrifice the pivot-point and fullness of the whole history of salvation. It was the fulfillment of all the promises and images of the Old Testament, particularly "the throne of grace" (Heb 4:16) from which Christ as the great preacher enlightened humanity with his message of truth. Christ is the great High Priest whose sacrifice on the Cross worked the salvation of the whole human race. And so Christ as the eternal High Priest has made his universal sacrifice for us ever present in the Eucharist.

In a way similar to St. Bernard, St. Alphonsus cannot think of Christ as separate from us. What Gerard S. Sloyan says of St. Bernard can be applied to St. Alphonsus: "There is no isolated Redeemer out of the past whose sufferings we look back upon with

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<sup>30</sup> *Opere Ascetiche*, Roma 1933, Vol.1, 335. "Quindi anderemo noi considerando in questo breve scrutinio dell'amore di Gesù Cristo, secondo quel che ci attestano le divine Scritture, quanto ha fatto questo amoroso nostro redentore per farci intendere l'amore che ci porta ed obbligarci ad amarlo."

<sup>31</sup> *Opere Morali Italiane*, Torino 1870, 858: "si fonda nelle promesse di Dio nel sangue di Gesù Cristo, e nella divina misericordia infinita."

gratitude for the benefits to us they represent."<sup>32</sup> Sloyan goes on to demonstrate how meditation on Hebrews 5:8, "He learnt obedience through what he suffered," underlies an identification between the suffering Christ with suffering humanity, of Christ present in head and members. "The suffering Christ of then is identical with the suffering Christ of *now*. His pain is ours and our pain is his, all obediently borne." Christ gives humanity an experience of being one with him precisely through imitating him and conforming itself to him in his Passion and death. "Christ exercises a psychological role on us from the fact he knew human misery".

But St. Alphonsus goes further. He effectively identifies in a mystic manner Christ's salvific love for us in the Passion with his presence in the Blessed Sacrament. In this he had come to an insight into the resurrection of Christ which the spirituality of his time was not accustomed to call by its proper name.

His spirituality and thus his approach to the Cross is essentially that of love, a love that changed his life by uncovering the true face of the Father who gave himself in giving his Son. God is the author and end of salvation in Christ for he is our "unica speranza" of salvation. What can we say of the permanence of this love? Alphonsus wanted the meditation on the Passion to be made before the Blessed Sacrament as the permanent presence of Christ's total self-giving for us on the Cross.<sup>33</sup> There we encounter the hope of our redemption. St. Alphonsus characteristic spirituality is summed up in this statement that links in sacramental unity the Passion with the memorial of the Eucharist.

It was principally for this end that Thou didst institute the most holy Sacrament of the Altar, in order that we might have a perpetual memory of Thy Passion.<sup>34</sup>

The finality of Christ's love displayed in his Passion and Cross was to remain present for us eucharistically. The paschal mystery reaches its term in us, St. Alphonsus thinks, precisely in our being one with Christ in Holy Communion.

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<sup>32</sup> *The Popular Passion Piety of the Catholic West in Worship*, 69 (1995)1, 17.

<sup>33</sup> This advice is repeated in many works on the Passion and in the *Selva* for his missionaries and for pastors.

<sup>34</sup> *The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ*, 13, and in Italian *Opere Ascetiche*, V, 9: "Voi a questo fine avete istituito il SS. Sacramento dell'altare, acciocché noi avessimo una continua memoria della vostra Passione."

How pleasing it is to Jesus Christ that we should often remember his Passion, and the shameful death which he suffered for us, can be well understood from his having instituted the most holy Sacrament of the Altar for this very end, that there might ever dwell in us the lively memory of the love which he bore to us in sacrificing himself on the cross for our salvation.<sup>35</sup>

Father H. Manders has shown how love is the cause of presence. What he says of the Eucharist also applies first and foremost to the Passion in the logic of St. Alphonsus.

The most prominent function of the Eucharist in the spirituality of St. Alphonsus is the intense personal relationship between the God-man and the person who communicates with Him...

At first sight the personal relationship seems to begin with man. But if we follow the real movement of the communication closely, which is a communication of love, as we will see, we discover that its starting point is rather Jesus, who is present. In this spirituality, the blessed sacrament - il santissimo sacramento dell'altare - is the sacrament of «Jesus present»... The sacrament functions in a movement of interpersonal communication. Therefore the personal presence is essential. In this way the sacrament (the person of Jesus, present, longing and looking for our love) becomes the real center of christian life.<sup>36</sup>

This great mystery of love would not be possible had not Christ given himself "for me" (Gal 2:20) in his Passion. St. Alphonsus opened a cold and sceptical world to the real possibility of a felt existential relationship with the Father of all love. Through the suffering of his Son who died "for us" (Eph 5:2)

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<sup>35</sup> *The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ*, 221, and in Italian *Opere Ascetiche*, V, 183: "Quanto Gesù Cristo gradisca che noi ci ricordiamo spesso della sua Passione e della sua morte obbrobiosa che per noi sofferse, ben si scorge dall'aver egli istituito il SS. Sacramento dell'altare a questo fine, acciocché in noi viva sempre la memoria dell'amore che ci ha portato in sacrificarsi sulla croce per la nostra salute".

<sup>36</sup> "Metabolics of a Sacrament", in *StMor* 9 (1971), 308. The present essay presupposes a theology of unitive and ecstatic love such as elaborated in Manders', "Love in the Spirituality of St. Alphonsus", in *Readings in Redemptorist Spirituality*, Vol. 2, Rome 1988, 21-71.

God himself has become eternally present to us.<sup>37</sup> It was in contemplating Christ's Passion presented in the Sacrament of the Altar that St. Alphonsus discovered Christ still suffering in "the most abandoned." He worked, inspired by St. Paul's words, to make up what was wanting in the sufferings of Christ (Col 1:24), so that the poor might become the privileged recipients of God's copious redemption. That Christ really wanted to lovingly take the burden of a broken world on himself was what that confrere of mine charged with preparing vocation literature at the beginning of this essay had so rightly intuited.

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<sup>37</sup> It has not been possible for me to discuss Hamish F.G. SWANSTON'S *Celebrating Eternity Now: A Study in the Theology of St. Alphonsus de Liguori* (Redemptorist Publications, Chawton 1995) which came to my notice only after writing this article. Swanston makes many of the above points and shows that St. Alphonsus cannot speak of redemption without speaking of the Passion. Holy communion, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the whole devotional life are taken up into "that ever fixed eternity" where Christ's priestly love is manifested to us in the Passion. See pages 15-18.