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DID ST. ALPHONSUS PRACTISE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY?  
"PER VENIRE DUNQUE ALLA PRATICA"<sup>1</sup>:  
PRACTICE OR PRAGMATISM?

SUMMARY

1. – *The importance of praxis or pratica for St. Alphonsus*; 2. – *Pratica in his Spiritual Writings*; 3. – *Moral theology as prudence in action*; 4. – *Cose di pratica: rhetoric, priestly life and the missions*; 5. – *Practical Theology and the Episcopal Ministry*.

The historian Daniel Rops in his critical assessment of St. Alphonsus says that the movements that flowered in the Church after the French Revolution all bore his mark. He identifies him as the one who summarised in himself the essential marks of a Catholicism which defined the Church's life through the last century up to Vatican II. His claim that there is very little in the Church's practice in that period that cannot be found in St. Alphonsus's doctrine bears repeating. How is it that St. Alphonsus's thought, worked out under a regalist regime for the people of the Kingdom of Naples became the model for the Church in and outside Europe in an age of revolution, restoration and democracy in sequence? He showed universal intent by writing his *Theologia Moralis* for the whole Church and he was anxious to propagate his spiritual works internationally. But he also recognised the limits of his pastoral methods and the need for Clement Hofbauer to adjust to a new public on returning to German territory. St. Alphonsus's doctrine is not admired just for its contemplative beauty nor for its poetic inspiration but for its capacity to mould Church life.

By temperament and life-experience St. Alphonsus was inclined practically and not speculatively. His education in the *scuola pratica* of

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<sup>1</sup> *Riflessioni utili ai vescovi per la pratica di ben governare le loro chiese*, in S. ALFONSO DE' LIGUORI», *Opere*, Marietti, Torino 1867, III, 865. This expression marks the transition from theory to practice in a very clear way.

Neapolitan jurisprudence left a lasting imprint on his mind.<sup>2</sup> He was an intellectual who practiced law and wrote theology professionally. He saw himself as a theologian in all his efforts, writing moral theology, preaching missions and in his vocation as a priest, a bishop and a founder. He insisted that not only his moral but also his spiritual and pastoral writings were theological productions. No one grasped the need for theological competence and continued study in these fields better than he. His *Theologia Moralis* was not conceived as mere casuistry, a mechanical technique for solving cases, but as a true theology, faith penetrating the inner meaning of God's action in Christian existence. He manifested his theological intent by the way all his activities were the working out of insights that would become quite unintelligible without reference to the theological principles that inform them. Such principles, however, are truly practical and generate the driving force within his actions. His personalised grasp of Catholicism, in Daniel Rops' terms, as a life principle justified St. Alphonsus's prominence in the Church over two centuries.

This essay presumes and builds further on the solid research of historians who have brought the basics of his theology to our attention. The aim is to investigate whether there might not be a way of showing, in part or under one aspect, how his mind worked in coming to his characteristic insights. Is there a systematic way of relating theology and action in St. Alphonsus that is not simple pragmatism? That would mean that he just happened to stumble on the right moves without being able to identify deeper reasons to justify them. He expressed himself in a very accurate but often consciously rhetorical manner. Rhetoric is an organised art that has to hide its artistry to be successful. My method shall be to select, with the help of some contemporary philosophy, traces of his way of thinking in some key words that might even serve to engender a fuller search into their significance. The issues to be considered are 1). the importance of *praxis* or *pratica* for St. Alphonsus, 2). its use in the spiritual works, 3). how he elaborated it as prudence in action in his moral theology, 4). its place in priestly ministry with special regard to

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<sup>2</sup> See A. FREDA, *S. Alfonso universitario*, in O. GREGORIO et al., *S. Alfonso de Liguori - Contributi bio-bibliografici*, Morcelliana, Varese 1940, 100. Blessed Gennaro Sarnelli who shared the same legal education and influenced much of St. Alphonsus's writing also often used *pratica* in the titles of his works. See F. FERRERO, *The Apostolate at Home*, in *The History of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, ed. by F. Chiovaro, Liguori, Liguori MI. 1996, 378, n. 32, 33 and 34.

rhetoric and the popular missions, and 5). episcopal ministry and pastoral theology. Given the wide general scope of this study it shall focus on how *praxis* defines the horizon of meaning in each of these tremendously diverse fields. Practice here implies more than the deliberate application of a theory and derives from a long history where it signified, "Formerly, an established custom; the pursuance of some traditional action."<sup>3</sup>

### 1. – *The importance of praxis or pratica for St. Alphonsus*

It is impossible to study here a complete listing of St. Alphonsus's use of these words in Latin or Italian.<sup>4</sup> Practice would suggest pious practices, the term usually being employed in the plural. But readers of St. Alphonsus will spontaneously recall, probably without adverting to its import, how he uses practice in the singular in the title of his best known and most popular works, the *Praxis confessarii* and the *Pratica di amar Gesù Cristo*.<sup>5</sup> The first describes his confessional practice and was added at the conclusion of his great *Theologia Moralis* as the way he wanted his moral doctrine to be actualised and activated. He was convinced that without the *Praxis* the *Theologia Moralis* just could not reach term and really make sense. Introducing the *Pratica del confessore* he pointed out how moral theory inheres in practice: *In questa pratica io accennerò molte dottrine appartenenti alla medesima*. There is a dialectic relationship between the *praxis* given in experience and the *Theologia Moralis* as *theoria* or the body of knowledge that reveals its intelligibility and interprets moral experience. His insight into souls in the confessional has been assimilated into his theology, and his theology lives from this experience. Each one of his books works out this theory-practice relation in its own unique way. St. Alphonus varied his literary style in inculcating the appropriate practices for various audiences. He explains morality in a scientific manner in his formal theology: he writes for an educated reading public in his spiritual works for priests

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<sup>3</sup> *Practice* in «Dictionary of Philosophy», edited by Dogobert E. RUNES, Philosophical Library, New York 1942, 245.

<sup>4</sup> A CD of his works is presently being prepared so that this project should soon be realisable.

<sup>5</sup> Other titles to be noted are: *Breve pratica per la perfezione*, *Sermoni compendiat: Norme per la pratica di questi sermoni*, and *Riflessioni utili a' vescovi per la pratica di ben governare le loro chiese*.

and nuns: for the general public that was still largely illiterate he wrote meditations to be read aloud to the people gathered in the church, e.g., *Le visite al SS. Sacramento* and the meditations on the Passion.<sup>6</sup>

A fine example of his approach is the *Praxis* where he takes up the four-fold role of the confessor as father, healer, teacher and judge as a way of analysing *praxis*. An official *munus* or office in the Church can thereby be broken down into roles which are combined together to compose the practice defining that office. In this sense *pratica* is a unitary and unifying idea. It characterises the confessor as a priest called by God to the end of sanctifying souls in this sacrament. *Pratica* unifies the roles he performs in fulfilling this office.

## 2. – *Pratica in his Spiritual Writings*

*La pratica di amar Gesù Cristo* is a slender volume that is a golden summary of his spirituality emphasising his teaching that perfection is possible for everyone of whatever state of life. M. Vidal has pointed out how the practicality of his spiritual writing communicates with all, even the most poor, deprived and socially emarginated. St. Alphonsus achieves this breakthrough by focusing his total attention on people's real interests and concerns. He is drawn to the concrete in all its details, particularly the individual person in his or her life situation.<sup>7</sup> Perfection consists in being united with God in love by conforming our will to his as the final goal of the spiritual life. This end is achieved through the virtues, the form and unity of which is found in charity. But it is precisely this attainment that he describes as *pratica*. Perfect love is therefore actualised through practice. The concentration of St. Alphonsus's solicitude then shifts to the exercises, practices or *pratiche* to be learnt so that charity will become a living reality binding us eternally to Christ. He claims that the spiritual life is profoundly simple; charity consists in one *pratica*, to love Jesus Christ as He loved us if we could.

How do we go from the one unified practice of loving Christ to the multiple practices of a Christian life? To do this love has to find its measure; it has to become as we would say a life-plan, or in St.

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<sup>6</sup> See T. KENNEDY, "Jesus Christ should be our Hope and our Love." *The Experience of Christ's Passion in St. Alphonsus' Writings*, in SHCSR 42 (1995), 469-470.

<sup>7</sup> M. VIDAL, *Una espiritualidad centrada en la práctica del amor*, in «Vida Religiosa» 62 (1987) 4, 256-273, especially 267.

Alphonsus's terms, a *regolamento*. The states of life are distinguished exactly by the diverse standards to be followed and applied in each life-style to attain the same end of perfect love. St. Alphonsus therefore drew up rules of life for a Christian,<sup>8</sup> a seminarian, a priest and likewise a bishop. The means of perfection, grace that transforms the soul and the virtues as sources of moral goodness, have been left us by Christ. Good will and right intention are not enough. These have to issue in the concrete execution of good actions that become a fixed way of being that binds us permanently in charity to Christ. The unity of an individual's life is decided by the choice of a state of life. A *regolamento* spells out the practices which insert a person into a socially recognised role and institution. These practices in turn are constitutive of such a state of life as a way of perfection.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. – Moral theology as prudence in action.

The critical issue for St. Alphonsus will, of course, be his moral theology because of which he was proclaimed a doctor of the Church by Pius IX in 1871. Moral theology at his time was elaborated against the background of a war between moral systems and conflicting conceptions of human nature. The nub of the debate was how could a conscience that was speculatively in doubt about a rule establish the moral certainty necessary to act so as to achieve salvation. The rival ways of going from speculative doubt to moral certitude were formulated in various moral systems.<sup>10</sup> In terms of these systems St. Alphonsus proposed his ideas under the rubric of equiprobabilism. In so doing he had unfortunately left himself open to the charges levelled at casuistry in general. But in fact he wanted to break out of this false impasse and transcend the narrow mentality behind the systems. His project of loosening the hold of the systems followed a double tactic: to establish the claims of the truth of law against laxists and the rights of conscience and its freedom against rigourists. But how in fact did he perform his decision-making? In this matter there

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<sup>8</sup> Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini of Milan has just proposed such a project for today in his *Parlo al tuo cuore: Per una regola di vita del cristiano ambrosiano*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milano 1996, 73p.

<sup>9</sup> See how he emphasises repetition in preaching Christian virtue in *Selva di materie predicabili*, Marietti, Torino 1874, 236.

<sup>10</sup> See J.-M. AUBERT, *Probabilisme* in «Catholicisme», Vol. 9, Letouzey et Ané, Paris 1988, 1064-1076.

is no fixed rule even though all just rules and systems can claim their rightful place. The reason is that it is not possible to foresee all the conditions or circumstances under which we must act. St. Thomas says the number of singular circumstances in which a moral rule or law might be applied is potentially infinite.<sup>11</sup> So rules and laws may be universally valid and yet there is no mechanical rule for their application. This was something St. Alphonsus understood as a defining characteristic of casuistry.<sup>12</sup> He was forever insisting that it was a chaos where theologians had to study the changes in living conditions and how they were being assessed by theologians. He came to this insight by paying attention to individuals in their life situations. Now by paying attention to the individual he was undermining the false dichotomy of speculative-practical that bedevilled casuistry in his day. Contemporary philosophy in the Aristotelico-Thomistic tradition sees such rules as expressions of moral principles derived from "good is to be done and evil avoided", the first principle of practical reason. All moral principles and laws are extensions of sound speculative principles. Speculative and practical are distinct but there is no break between them as in St. Alphonsus's time but rather continuity. These principles are extended through deliberation to a right judgement of conscience and a good moral choice. When all of this is again extended by the execution of a fully good moral act into the concrete conditions of life, only then do we dwell in the world of *pratica*. But *pratica* is more than the execution of a complete moral act. It is a complex of acts that gives coherence to a determined area of life, or a profession or to a whole life in the public visible world. It presupposes the co-ordinated actuation of all the virtues that bear on any such complex and reflects them as concrete, empiric realities in our life world. One comprehensive end unites all the means employed into a consistent way of personal and social existence. That is why St. Alphonsus was at pains to introduce his books by identifying their end with the means to it and then the appropriate *pratica*. In this sense he speaks of *per venire dunque alla pratica*. So with his eyes fixed on this world where people really lived their lives he produced the solutions to the cases in the *Theologia Moralis*. He wanted his moral theology to be popular in the sense of

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<sup>11</sup> See S.T., IIa-IIae, 47, 2, ad 2um.

<sup>12</sup> This is clear in the introduction to the *Theologia Moralis* and the *Homo Apostolicus*.

penetrating and forming a Christian people with Gospel moral values. He graded his intellectual approach according to the capacity of his audience. The *Theologia Moralis* was for intellectuals; this was extended to educated clergy in the *Istruzione e pratica* which in turn was further concentrated into *Il confessore diretto per la gente di campagna*. Popular had less to do with publicity and advertising as we understand these today than with the common good of the people whose spiritual welfare was entrusted to the care of priests and bishops by Christ. His references to the simplicity in the way of thinking and acting of the population at large are all made in view of that end. He shows how norms are made livable by emphasising how principles function as theory informing practice in this statement of intent at the head of the *Istruzione e pratica*:

"Il mio fine principale è stato di dare un'istruzione pratica per ben amministrare il sacramento della penitenza; ma perchè in pratica non si possono mai prendere come si debbono le confessioni, e ben dirigersi le anime, se non si ha la notizia de' principii, ed anche delle dottrine..."<sup>13</sup>

His approach has nothing to do with unmitigated pragmatism with which it is often identified because of its obvious practicality. "Ho stimato di registrare...non solo cio che s'appartiene alla pura pratica, ma anche le avvertenze più notabili e necessarie a sapersi sui trattati principali della morale."<sup>14</sup>

St. Alphonsus, although he invoked many of those mental schemas beloved of casuists, was essentially a practitioner of prudence which is the heart of moral *praxis*.<sup>15</sup> He is interested more in constructing *praxis* as recognisable right action than in how to analyse it. Both C. Damen<sup>16</sup> and D. Capone<sup>17</sup> see him as "the Doctor of prudence" because his moral theology reaches into *practica*.

<sup>13</sup> *Opere*, IX, Marietti, Torino 1887, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>15</sup> His thought is consistent with the distinction made by E. BERTI between ethics and prudence, in *Le ragioni di Aristotele*, Laterza, Roma 1989, 139-153. This helps to explain how St. Alphonsus could so willingly accept St. Thomas, choosing from him what bore on *practica*.

<sup>16</sup> See S. *Alphonsus Doctor Prudentiae*, in «Rassegna di morale e diritto» 4 (1939-1940) 1, 1-27, especially 5, where he gives a personalist interpretation of St. Thomas in order to fit St. Alphonsus's attention to the individual into that tradition.

<sup>17</sup> Among his many contributions along this line, *La Theologia moralis di S. Alfonso. Prudenzialità nella scienza casistica per la prudenza nella coscienza* in *StMor*, 25 (1987) 1, 27-78.

#### 4. – *Cose di pratica: rhetoric, priestly life and the missions*

The *Selva di materie predicabili ed istruttive* is a remarkable document for the image of priestly life it conveys, and for the standards it established for giving retreats and missions. The priest is called to be a saint whose office it is to sanctify the faithful through offering the sacrifice of the Mass, by forgiving sin in the confessional, by preaching *all'apostolica* and through the transparent example of a good, sanctified life. At the very beginning, in his advice to a retreat master St. Alphonsus reveals how his thought works. He starts from preaching's purpose, *il fine*, to procure the salvation of souls. In view of this end the priest must preach, not himself, but the glory of God. The motives that move a retreatant toward God are *le verità eterne e le massime del vangelo*<sup>18</sup>, which constitute the normative content of preaching. They are to be mentioned often throughout the exercises. In this context he proceeds to the *cose di pratica* which form the pattern or *regolamento* of a priest's life; the way of making meditation, thanksgiving after Mass, how to correct faults, how to hear confessions especially as regards the most difficult cases, e.g., *occasionarii e recidivi*, and a short compendium on how to preach. Latin phrases are easily forgotten but practices penetrate the memory forming a way of life. "I passi latini, uditi che si sono, si dimenticano: ma qualche cosa di pratica solamente è quella che resta a memoria."<sup>19</sup> He follows the same method as in his spiritual writings. From a consideration of one of the great Christian mysteries, e.g., the eternal truths or the Birth or the Passion of Christ, he shows how it links us with our salvation which we lovingly assimilate in meditation. He always wants *di lasciare le anime legate con Gesù Cristo*.<sup>20</sup> This occurs when meditation penetrates memory so as to issue in action i.e., practices upon which we resolve at the conclusion of mental prayer.

St. Alphonsus's compendium on the missions is also put forward in the key of *pratica*. He takes it for granted that the theory of the missions and of preaching has already been worked out, as is obvious by his references to Filippo de Mura's *Il missionario istruito* and to

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<sup>18</sup> *Istruzione ai predicatori in Opere*, Vol 3., Napoli, Ufficio dei libri ascetici e predicabili 1871, 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Selva di materie predicabili*, Marietti, Torino 1874, 6.

<sup>20</sup> See *Selva*, 289.



Muratori's popular rhetoric which he both recommends and quotes at length. There is therefore an established body of organised knowledge into which he can graft or insert his reflections. This body of knowledge functions as what we would call theory. His real aim here is to teach others how to give missions and how to preach. *Pratica* here assumes two meanings intimately linked together. First, it refers to his own experience, "per ragione della pratica che ho avuto di trentaquattro anni di missioni". Second, it is a *compendio* that summarises and puts that experience in order so that it can be communicated to others. It is in this sense that he proposes to set out "Tutti gli esercizi di missione, colle loro regole e pratiche"<sup>21</sup> as a unified *pratica*.

He details these *regole e pratiche* with precision as regards 1) the aim of the mission, 2) means to this aim, 3) choice of sermons and 4) arranging their sequence.<sup>22</sup>

1) The aim of a mission concretises the aim of the congregation he founded. "E' certo... che la conversione dei popoli è il massimo beneficio che Iddio fa agli uomini... Or questo appunto è il fine delle missioni, la conversione de' peccatori; poichè nelle missioni essi dalle istruzioni e dalle prediche vengono illuminati a conoscere la malizia del peccato, l'importanza della loro salute e la bontà di Dio, e così mutansi i loro cuori, si spezzano le funi dei mali abiti, e cominciano a vivere da cristiani."<sup>23</sup>

2) The means were those of preaching in such a way that every person would be reached. This meant a departure from Paolo Segneri's central mission by going into the villages and remaining till all the confessions were heard. He knew that conversion based on fear would not last. St. Alphonsus, therefore, added the *vita divota* so as to provide motives of love to make conversion permanent. This was done by meditating the Passion of Christ and Our Lady and by teaching the people how to pray.

3) The choice of sermons depends on the topics necessary to bring about conversion. He insisted on a core group of eternal truths

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 185.

<sup>22</sup> The following reflections are largely taken from T. L. DUNPHY, C.Ss.R., L.S.S., *Source of Our Tradition*, in «Apostolicum» (Province of Canberra), No. 44, June 1972, 15-21.

<sup>23</sup> *Vantaggi delle missioni* in *Opere*, Vol. 3, Napoli, Ufficio dei libri ascetici e predicabili 1871, 25.

and the means of persevering in God's love. 4). How he arranged the sequence of sermons reveals much about his idea of *pratica*. He had no prefixed order, nor can it be said he had a plan of sermons as such, a point he goes out of his way to make when discussing rhetoric.<sup>24</sup> Instead, he classifies sermons under the rubric of forces of conversion<sup>25</sup>:

- a) Motives, the eternal truths communicated by the Gospel,
- b) Obstacles, e.g., *le male pratiche* which fix a person habitually into a state of sinfulness and have to be broken,<sup>26</sup>
- c) Means of conversion provided by grace in God's providence to everyone,
- d) Means of perseverance in conversion by concretising it in *pratiche di vita cristiana*.<sup>27</sup>

These moving forces in conversion reduced, on the negative side, to fear which helped push sinners away from sin and harm, and positively, to love which bound them to Christ in God. St. Alphonsus's idea of a practice is flexible. It is not a conditioned response in the sense of a habit as repeated action,<sup>28</sup> nor is it the mechanical application of a rule as occurs in technology. *Pratica* cannot be reduced to positive measurable quantities because it is a definite commitment of our freedom cooperating with God's grace that gives a concrete and permanent, personal and social shape to Christian life.

But does this mean a sermon is unstructured? In no way, for rhetoric is the art that conceals art by demonstrating the correct logic of living in our everyday existence. It shows us what we must do. For this reason St. Alphonsus denounces *prediche speculative* that do not concentrate on *cose di practica*.<sup>29</sup> These are an essential part of his rhetoric.

In an instruction there are three parts:

<sup>24</sup> Selva, 228 and 230 as the way of discovering the points of a sermon and the proofs of a proposition. St. Alphonsus was adamant about not beginning with a plan but inventing it.

<sup>25</sup> See *Metodo per usare di questi sermoni in un corso di missioni*, in *Opere*, Vol. 3, Napoli, Ufficio dei libri ascetici e predicabili 1871, 214-214 where he gives this division with a list suitable to each heading.

<sup>26</sup> See *Vantaggi delle missioni*, in *Opere*, Vol. 3, Napoli, Ufficio dei libri ascetici e predicabili 1871, 30-31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 24, with reference to St. Francis de Sales.

<sup>28</sup> See S. PINCKAERS, *La vertu est tout autre chose qu'une habitude* in *Le renouveau de la morale*, Casterman, Tournai 1964, 144-161.

<sup>29</sup> *Selva di materie predicabili*, Marietti, Torino 1874, 288.

- 1) The exordium which introduces, defines and divides the topic,
- 2) The explanation, and lastly and most important,
- 3) *la moralità colla pratica*.<sup>30</sup>

A mission sermon has its own rhetoric based on:

- 1) invention of the matter,
- 2) disposition of the points,
- 3) the execution in word and gesture.

St. Alphonsus considered the moral part of the sermon by far the most important because it was here the preacher touched people's lives. He was to denounce vice or *male pratiche* and provide the needed remedies, but without either revealing anyone's particular sin or letting any person feel accused by the preacher. This is the most delicate manoeuvre in a sermon. St. Alphonsus gives a long list of pious practices to be performed and evils to be avoided beginning with this statement of purpose:

"Per tanto avvertano i missionarj che l'affare più importante e di maggior frutto per i popoli nelle missioni è l'insegnare loro cose di pratica, cioè i remedj per astenersi da'vizj ed i mezzi per perservare nella buona vita."<sup>31</sup>

It is precisely these easy practices, *facili pratiche*,<sup>32</sup> that have to be repeated so that even the most ignorant never forget them. The same applies to meditating on Christ's Passion because it is by repetition of affection that, "entra nel cuore il santo amore di Dio."<sup>33</sup> *Pratica* therefore can be learnt, taught, preached and communicated by a truly virtuous life.

##### 5. – *Practical Theology and the Episcopal Ministry*

Fabriciano Ferrero has pointed out how St. Alphonsus and the early Redemptorists were acutely aware of the crisis in education that afflicted the civil and ecclesiastical world they knew.<sup>34</sup> Their efforts in preaching, catechesis and particularly writing were aimed at

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 219.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 235.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 236.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 288.

<sup>34</sup> *The Formation of Members*, in *The History of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer*, Vol. I., edited by F. Chiovaro, C.Ss.R., Liguori Publications, Liguori MI 1996, 483-487.

providing a remedy whether for the poor people in the country side, the priests in villages or for seminarians preparing for the ministry. They did not see the university as their field of influence, but the seminary and the books that would be used by priests in their ministry. The clearest hint of what St. Alphonsus would understand by practical theology comes in his *Reflections Useful for Bishops*. St. Alphonsus notes that theologians have defined their powers and obligations in detail and yet bishops are quite often unaware of what is required. He defines a bishop as the one God has chosen to set the rule or standard of Christian living for the flock of his diocese. He is therefore the pivot of all the pastoral action in his particular diocese. Again he describes the whole activity of the bishop inclusively as *pratica di ben governare* which can be divided into six principal areas of care or *cure* in his terms. These are ranked in priority as i) the seminary, ii) the *ordinandi*, iii) parish priests, iv) priests, v) vicars and other ministers, and lastly, vi) nuns. The absence of the laity is all too conspicuous. The means a bishop should use in governing his diocese are, i) prayer, ii) good example, iii) pastoral visits, iv) synods, v) seeking the advise of experts, vi) listening or being available for people to approach him, and lastly vii) correction as the reform of behaviour. Here we have a *vade mecum* theology of pastoral care in the Church of God drawn up for bishops of the eighteenth century. It is inserted into the theology and pastoral programme set up by the Council of Trent. It has its heroes, the men of virtue, the bishops who carried through what Trent wanted, particularly Charles Borromeo to whom abundant reference is made. It accentuates the spirituality, or as St. Alphonsus would put it the sanctity of the bishop with which he is to sanctify his flock. This is the driving force that must shine through in his administering the things of God. And all this is described in one word, *pratica*! St. Alphonsus makes theology his point of reference. On the basis of this theology he focuses not only upon what a bishop must attend to, but precisely on how that is to be actualised as the way of salvation for a Christian people. His idea of *praxis* never goes outside Church teaching and sound theology but brings these alive as normative not only for thought but for and in action. To invoke practice without principle would for him be like trying to get more swing out of a door by taking it off its hinges. Christian practice without the Gospel is dead.

The Fathers of the Church were particularly present to St. Alphonsus and are constantly reflected in his thought. It is as if he

were continually consulting them about what Christian life should be. He also refers to saints of his own age, e.g., St. Theresa and for preaching to St. Francis Regis and St. Francis de Sales in particular. He was determined in his own teaching and preaching to reproduce their practices as normative for the Church's on-going life. His attitude to the Fathers and saints is summed up in this statement about the writings of St. Francis de Sales on which he swings his whole argument for the efficacy of the missions as implanting *pratiche di vita cristiana: colla guida e pratica di essi (i documenti di questo Santo) procuriamo di aggiungere all'acquisto della vita eterna*.<sup>35</sup> This essay has demonstrated the tremendous number of ways St. Alphonsus has of relating *theoria* and *praxis* in the concrete. The last word on *pratica* is that it is Tradition, that it is grace, the living of the Gospel in its completeness as handed down by the Apostles, the Fathers and the saints of the Church. St. Alphonsus lived before the modern Marxist influenced interpretations of *praxis* as the contestation and overturning of tradition.<sup>36</sup> For him a bishop summed up for his diocese the whole sanctifying activity of the Church. In this way a bishop's *pratica* incorporates up all the other *pratiche* which he must preserve and hand on as Traditions's official representative. Practical theology in Catholic circles has been formulated with a view to the episcopal office as its nucleus. In the bishop *pratica* achieves its comprehensive meaning as authority over and responsibility for handing on the living Gospel from age to age. St. Alphonsus therefore was a Doctor of the Church in a double sense. Not only did he correctly diagnose the spiritual malady of his time but his skillful *pratica* effectively healed the disease.

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<sup>35</sup> *Istruzione ai predicatori in Opere*, Vol. 3, Napoli, Ufficio dei libri ascetici e predicabili 1871, 22. What St. Alphonsus says here of *pratica* as a guide applies a fortiori to what he said earlier of the Fathers.

<sup>36</sup> Today, it seems, St. Alphonsus would interpret *praxis* in the tradition of prudence rather than as justifying revolutionary change. See David TRACY, *Theologies of Praxis*, in *Creativity and Method: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lonergan, S.J.*, Matthew L. Lamb (ed.). Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1981, 35-51. Alasdair MACINTYRE'S *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, Notre Dame IN 1981), is useful for understanding practice but he would not identify it with tradition as St. Alphonsus does.