

RAPHAEL GALLAGHER

THE MORAL METHOD OF ST. ALPHONSUS
IN THE LIGHT OF THE *VINDICIAE* CONTROVERSY

SUMMARY

I. – THE IMMEDIATE BACKGROUND

II. – THE YEARS OF PUBLIC CONTROVERSY: 1873-1875

CONCLUSION

The *Vindiciae* controversy¹ was short and bitter and, taken as an isolated debate, a rather sterile episode. This might initially suggest that it is a waste of time to study it. There is, however, another consideration. Because the controversy is concerned with the theory of probabilism, which is a cornerstone of the casuistic manuals, it deserves analysis insofar as it throws light on the historical development of probabilism. I choose the word 'historical' deliberately. Though probabilism is properly classified as a theory of morality, and a crucial one because it touches on the question of the certainty on which one bases a moral decision, it is a theory that is understandable only within the historical context which gave rise to it in the first place². I am approaching the *Vindiciae* controversy, therefore, as an historical episode that is part of a wider

¹ I am using the term to cover the controversy that arose in the context of the following publications: *Vindiciae Alphonsianae seu Doctoris Ecclesiae S. Alphonsi M. de Ligorio doctrina moralis vindicata*, Rome, 1873 (first edition); *Vindiciae Ballerinianae seu gustus recognitionis Vindiciarum Alphonsiarum*, Bruges, 1873; *Vindiciae Alphonsianae seu Doctoris Ecclesiae S. Alphonsi M. de Ligorio doctrina moralis vindicata*, Tournai, 1874 (editio altera, aucta et emendata).

² Though it contains points that could be argued against, the article of Th. DEMAN, *Probabilisme* in «Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique», Paris, 1936, Vol. 13, 417-619, remains an indispensable source for the history of probabilism.

history, which started before and continued after this particular episode³. The study is justified within those limits: where does this episode fit into the tormented history of the theory of probabilism, and what importance has it for our understanding of the moral methodology of St. Alphonsus, itself clearly marked by an earlier episode in the history of probabilism?⁴

I. THE IMMEDIATE BACKGROUND

A major pre-occupation of Mauron⁵, as Rector Major of the Redemptorists, was the unity of the Congregation. This is entirely understandable given the fragile nature of the institute: the division between the Cis- and Trans-Alpine sections had left its mark, and the Naples Province continued to be a source of worry. Within the provinces there were signs of unease, exemplified in the difficulties of the brilliant Petcherine in the Anglo-Irish Province and the departure of the charismatic Hecker from the American Province. Mauron had good reason to worry about the unity of a Congregation that was still small and whose future was far from stable. Against this background, the concentrated effort made by Mauron to bring to a successful conclusion the process for proclaiming St. Alphonsus a Doctor of the Church in 1871 reveals an important aspect⁶. Apart from the intrinsic merits of the conferring of the title, Mauron undoubtedly used the process itself, and its successful outcome, as a means of stabilizing the internal unity of the Congregation around the one element on which all factions could agree,

³ The comprehensive bibliography of A. SAMPERS, *Bibliographia scriptorum de systemate morali S. Alphonsi et de probabilismo in genere, ann. 1787-1922 vulgatorum*, in *SHCSR* 8 (1960), 138-172 gives a useful overview.

⁴ Two works of St. ALPHONSUS (*Dissertatio pro usu moderato opinionis probabilis*, 1755, and *Breve dissertazione sull'uso moderato dell'opinione probabile*, 1762) are a sufficient indication of this.

⁵ N. Mauron (1818-1893) was Superior General and Rector Major of the Redemptorists from 1855 to 1893.

⁶ The definitive account of this process is G. ORLANDI, *La causa per il dottorato di S. Alfonso. Preparazione - svolgimento - ripercussioni (1866-1871)*, in *Studia Alfonsiana: ad centenariam memoriam doctoratus S. Alphonsi M. de Liguori 1871-1971*, *Bibl. Hist.* 5, Rome 1971, 25-240.

namely, the importance of the person and the heritage of St. Alphonsus for the Congregation. Mauron's handling of the doctorate process highlights crucial elements that will become important in our judgment on the *Vindiciae* controversy. He acted with a prudence that verges on the cautious: he was extremely able in handling the procedures of the Roman Curia (and this meant being able to understand the role of the Jesuits within it), and he was sensitive to the varied political and cultural climates within which the Redemptorists worked. It is fair to say that these characteristics of Mauron's government had a decisive influence on the developing history of the *Vindiciae* project which, under one aspect, can be considered as a continuation of Mauron's strategy to solidify the unity of the fragile Congregation of which he was Rector Major. The characteristics of Mauron's style of government need to be spelt out to understand the *Vindiciae* controversy.

The prudence of Mauron is easily demonstrated. I take some correspondence with Desurmont⁷ as an example. In a personal letter to him on his appointment as Provincial in May 1865, Mauron says: "I know your good will and your great desire to do what is good, but you must never forget that prudence and discretion are very essential virtues in the good Superior... Proceed slowly, especially in matters of some importance..."⁸ Two weeks after the proclamation of Alphonsus as a Doctor of the Church we find Mauron writing to Desurmont in these terms: "I have spoken above about modesty: if we make too much noise about the grace received, those who are against us will be happy, and they will be even more against us and against St. Alphonsus....You would hardly believe how much we need to be prudent in this type of publications..."⁹ That Mauron appreciated Desurmont's enthusiastic propagation of St. Alphonsus is beyond doubt: but note Mauron's wish to temper this without destroying it. As already stated, Mauron was astute in negotiating the procedures of the Roman Curia: this is evident in the

⁷ A. Desurmont (1828-1898) was Provincial Superior of the French-Swiss Province from 1865-1887, and in 1898.

⁸ The translation is mine from the text as printed in A. GEORGE, *Le très Révérend Père Achille Desurmont*, Paris, 1924, 132. (Note: unless otherwise stated, all translations in this article are by the author).

⁹ Letter of 25/05/1871, in AGHR, Prov. Gallico-Helvet., Provincialia, 11 B 111.

immediate preparation of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* where a distinction is held between an attack on an individual Jesuit and an esteem for the *inclytissima* Society of Jesus. The third element (a sensitivity to the variety of political systems and cultures within which Redemptorists worked) is harder to assess in the *Vindiciae* episode. It was crucial in the preparation of the Doctorate process, as is clear in Mauron's handling of the procedure for gathering the signatures of the Bishops. Strategy, and even documents to be signed, varied from country to country¹⁰. This element of a differentiated strategy is not very important in the development of the *Vindiciae* episode, though there are some hints that circumstances might determine strategy. One such indication is found in the correspondence of Coffin¹¹ just after the Doctorate proclamation: Coffin notes that he has received very few congratulations on the Doctorate (just five) and adds that the decree "is foolishness to the great and the wise even *in* the Church, but it will produce great fruit *in tempore suo*"¹².

Within this style of government, and given Mauron's preoccupation for the unity of the Congregation, it is plausible to advance the thesis that the publication of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* fitted into a continuation of Mauron's policy, by benefiting from the Doctorate of St. Alphonsus, on the precise point of consolidating a unity around the person and heritage of St. Alphonsus. The circular letter of March 25th 1871 (that is, the same month as the Doctorate proclamation) is unambiguous: "it is clearly proper that every Redemptorist, in the field of theological science, both dogmatic and moral should espouse and apply in practice the principles handed down by St. Alphonsus.... Without a doubt, he would give little edification, and would display a very limited degree of humility and filial piety, who would dare depart from these principles.... Since such a course might easily prove injurious to the common good of the whole institute, the provincial superior must notify me at once if ever such a

¹⁰ ORLANDI, art. cit, 66-195, Appendice 1 and 2, contain the relevant documentation.

¹¹ R.A. Coffin (1819- 1885) was Provincial Superior of the Anglo-Irish Province from 1865-1882.

¹² Coffin, writing to E. Douglas, 29/04/1871: AGHR, XLVII, Epistolae ad Douglas: Coffin.

subject is found, and I myself will take measures to remedy this evil"¹³. This passage is a repetition of a section of an earlier circular letter (February 2nd 1856) but its repetition at this point is significant. Though the General Chapter of 1855 had not limited Redemptorists to any one system of theological opinions¹⁴, Mauron had governed otherwise. Obedience to the principles of St. Alphonsus was made a matter of obedience to the Rector Major. This simple statement gives an important clue to the decision to go ahead with the publication of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae*. Redemptorists must honour St. Alphonsus, but not vaguely: they honour him by following his principles. And where do we find these? Substantially, in the system of S. Alphonsus' Moral Theology. It was therefore necessary to define that system, and defend it, in a way that could be used as a criterion of fidelity to the founder.

Though von Smetana¹⁵ had been preparing notes for a possible publication, the origins of the project itself do not take shape until after his death. In the months immediately after the doctorate, Mauron's letters are still cautious: this was soon to change. Two letters at the end of 1871 are a useful indication. In a letter to Kockerols¹⁶, Mauron confirms that it is time to publicly refute Ballerini: "The issue now is to finish a work that will completely refute Ballerini, who continues to do great damage to the sound doctrine of St. Alphonsus..."¹⁷. In a letter to Schaap,¹⁸ Mauron postpones a request to allow Aertnijs to publish his tract on probabilism or to go ahead with his projected Manual of Moral Theology¹⁹. These points need clarification.

¹³ *Circular Letters (selected) of Redemptorist Generals The Most Reverend N. MAURON (1855-1893), The Most Reverend Mathias RAUS (1894-1909)*, Milwaukee, 1933, 74-75.

¹⁴ *Capitulum Generale anno 1855 Romae celebratum: Acta integra Capitulorum Generalium Congregationis SS. Redemptoris ab anno 1749 ad annum 1894*, Rome, 1899, 600, at no.5.

¹⁵ R. von Smetana (1802-1871), was Vicar General of the Trans-Alpine Redemptorists from 1850-1855.

¹⁶ J. Kockerols (1823-1894) was Provincial Superior of the Belgian Province from 1859-1874 and from 1880-1893.

¹⁷ Letter of 29/11/1871, in AGHR, Prov. Belgica, Provincialia, 11 6 a.

¹⁸ J. Schaap (1823-1899) was Provincial Superior of the Dutch Province from 1868-1874.

¹⁹ Letter of 17/12/1871, AGHR, Prov. Hollandica, Provincialia, 1.

Ballerini²⁰ was considered a leading moralist in his day. He was, a few years earlier, even highly regarded by Mauron and his consultors. After a lecture on the system of St. Alphonsus given by Ballerini in the Collegio Romano to inaugurate the academic year of 1863/64²¹, Mauron expressed his gratitude by sending him a relic of St. Alphonsus. In the *Vindiciae* controversy there are references to this lecture, but overall its role is not central. Ballerini, considered a friend in 1863 becomes a focus of attack in 1871 principally because of the manual published by him in 1866 (this manual was, in fact, a re-working of the one by Gury)²². In this manual Ballerini claims to be a correct interpreter of St. Alphonsus: on the one hand he asserts that Alphonsus is his principal guide, and on the other he says that, when he differs from St. Alphonsus on specific points, this is done in a manner consonant with St. Alphonsus' own method of differing from another author. The preface is unambiguous on these points. In the Doctorate process it was Ballerini's differences with Alphonsus that were highlighted by the Promotor Fidei: and in the volume *Concessionis Tituli Doctoris in honorem S. Alphonsi M. de Liguori* presented to the Sacred Congregation for Rites in 1870²³, a substantial section is devoted to the *Responsa ad difficultates contra doctrinam moralem S. Alphonsi a clarissimo P. Antonio Ballerini Soc. Iesu objectas*. It

²⁰ A. Ballerini (1805-1881) was Professor of Moral Theology at the Gregorian University from 1855. For eleven years previous to that (from 1844) he was Professor of History at the same University: this may be of some importance in understanding his approach to moral theology.

²¹ A. BALLERINI, *De morali systemate S. Alphonsi M. de Liguori - Dissertatio habita in aula maxima Collegii Romani in solenni studiorum instauratione an. MDCCCLXIII*, Rome, 1864.

²² *Compendium theologiae moralis auctore P. IOHANNE PIETRO GURY S. I. in Seminario Valsensi prope Amicum Professore*. Editio decima septima ab Auctore recognita et Antonii Ballerini eiusdem Societatis in Collegio Romano Professoris adnotationibus locupletata, Rome, 1866.

²³ *Urbis et Orbis Concessionis tituli Doctoris et extensionis eiusdem tituli ad universam Ecclesiam neque non officii et missae sub ritu dupl. de comm. Doctorum Pontificium in honorem SANCTI ALPHONSI MARIAE DE LIGORIO, Fundatoris Congregationis SS. Redemptoris ac olim Episcopi S. Agathae Gothorum, instantibus quamplurimis E. mis S.R.E. Cardinalibus, R. mis Patriarchis, Archiepiscopis et Episcopis, Religiosorum Ordinum Superioribus, Facultatibus Theologicis, Capitulis etc. necnon Superiore Generali et Rectore Majore Congregationis SS. Redemptoris*, Rome, 1870.

seems plausible to reconstruct the changed mentality of Mauron and his advisers about Ballerini in the following way: if the Doctorate title were not granted, it would be because Ballerini's objections had been considered decisive but, once the Doctorate was granted, it would be incumbent on Ballerini to change his views if he were to be a *true* follower of Alphonsus and show *proper respect* for a solemn decision of the Holy See. Instead, Ballerini showed no such inclination. He was to hold to his views, as is clear in the 1874 edition of his manual. Perhaps, also, it was an added irritant for the Redemptorists that Ballerini continued to show his liking for the text of Busenbaum. I speculate, but on a plausible hypothesis: despite Ballerini's professed esteem for Alphonsus was there an implication that the more basic text, from a moral point of view, was that of Busenbaum, a Jesuit, on whom, after all, Alphonsus had himself based the first edition of his *Theologia Moralis*? These details may seem of little importance to us but they were not so for Mauron and his advisors. Given Mauron's desire for unity in the Congregation there could not be, as we saw, any divergence from a strict application of the principles of St. Alphonsus. In March, just after the Doctorate, Mauron is referring to Ballerini as "a very sad figure whose reputation as a professor of moral is destroyed"²⁴. By the end of the year it was clear that this sense of pity had hardened into a desire to refute Ballerini, in public, and not just in the halls of the Consistory of the Cardinals.

Given that Ballerini was the main target, it became even more important for Mauron to maintain a unity among the ranks of the Redemptorists. This explains the importance of the exchange of letters between Schaap and Mauron in December 1871²⁵ which dealt, in the main, with a proposal of the Dutch Provincial to publish some works of Aertnijs²⁶. Why did Mauron turn down the Dutch Provincial's request to allow Aertnijs go ahead with his publications at this time? Mauron tells Schaap that an official manual is being organised in Rome: this would

²⁴ Mauron to Kockerols, 16/04/1871: AGHR, Prov. Belgica, Provincialia, 116a.

²⁵ Schaap to Mauron (09/12/1871), Mauron to Schaap (17/12/1871), AGHR, Prov. Hollandica, Provincialia, 1.

²⁶ J. Aertnijs (1828-1915) was Professor of Moral Theology at Wittem (Holland) from 1860-1898.

appear, much later, as that of Marc²⁷. But it is not difficult to read between the lines of Mauron's response that he was not sure that Aertnijs would exactly follow the official line that was, by then, emerging. Mauron was going to take no risks.

Once the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* project took shape in late 1871, Mauron was to guide it with the same qualities he had shown in the doctorate process. Having won, so to speak, the difficult struggle to have Alphonsus proclaimed a Doctor, Mauron was not going to tolerate any relativising of this fact, certainly not among Redemptorists, and as far as possible, not among those in the wider theological community who differed from St. Alphonsus. On both points Ballerini becomes the focus: Mauron knew that some Redemptorists (for instance Konings²⁸, to whom we shall return later) had a good opinion of Ballerini. Regarding the general theological public, it is clear from Mauron's strategy that, by discrediting Ballerini, the use of Ballerini's text-books would be lessened in the seminaries and replaced, presumably, by sound Redemptorist ones.

II. THE YEARS OF PUBLIC CONTROVERSY: 1873-1875

When it appeared in 1873 the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* was a formidable tome of 957 pages. A full textual analysis would involve a comparison with the relevant parts of the *Concessionis Tituli Doctoris*. For my purpose, I wish to draw attention to what seems to be the literary aim of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae*: St. Alphonsus was always an equiprobabilist, and never a probabilist in the sense proposed in Ballerini's 1866 edition of Gury's manual. A double methodology is used: a negative one of refuting Ballerini's opinions and a positive one which outlines how Alphonsus was always an equiprobabilist, implicitly before 1762 and explicitly thereafter. An illuminating part of the text is the short Appendix 3 which deals with the *Clavis Operum Moralium S.A. - quaedam*

²⁷ C. Marc (1831-1887) published the *Institutiones Morales Alphonsianae*, Rome, 1885. It was to go through 19 editions, the last one edited by J.B. Raus in 1933.

²⁸ A. Konings (1821-1884) served briefly as Provincial Superior of the Dutch Province (1865-1868), and was appointed to the American Province in 1870 to teach at the seminary at Ilchester (MA).

regulae ad veras ipsius sententias discernendas. The essence of the "key" is the affirmation of a textual continuity between the second and ninth edition of Alphonsus' manual. In this, it is possible to see the mentality of von Smetana who, though he died before its publication, had a decisive influence in shaping the text. What is important is what is not mentioned in the "key" to understanding Alphonsus. Given that von Smetana's training was as a lawyer, that his experience as a Redemptorist was mainly as an administrator and that a major part of his writings had been concerned with legal-canonical questions concerning the vow of poverty and the privileges of the Redemptorists, an emphasis of this kind is predictable.

Among the Redemptorists, the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* was greeted with enthusiasm and, with one exception that I shall note presently, seems to have had an immediate impact. This enthusiasm is hardly surprising, given that Mauron's staunch allies as provincials (Desurmont, Coffin and Kockerols) were in control of what was going on in their provinces. The one exception, minor but worth noting, was Konings. His manual, published in 1874²⁹ (therefore, after the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* was published: Konings notes it in his work), differs from the strategy of the *Vindiciae*. For one thing, in the section which he calls *Clavis Operum Moralium S.A. seu quaedam regulae ad veras ipsius discernendas* (that is, with the irrelevant addition of the word "seu", the title used in the *Vindiciae*) Konings mentions the need to note, besides the ninth edition of the Moral Theology, some other works of St. Alphonsus, for instance the *Praxis Confessarii*, *Homo Apostolicus*, *Istruzione al Popolo*: the horizon of the interpretative key is subtly widened. More crucially, he talks about St. Alphonsus' use of the more probable moderate opinion (*probabilismus moderatus S. Alphonsi*, no. 63 ff.). The line of Konings' argument is that, of the moral systems then in use, only a strict rigorism and laxism are condemned by the Church. The implication is clear, and Mauron and his advisors would have been quick to see it. Whatever about calling Alphonsus a moderate probabilist rather than an equiprobabilist, Konings' position left room for an acceptance of Ballerini. Konings may have been in the then distant United States, but Mauron was not going to

²⁹ *Theologia Moralis novissimi ecclesiae doctoris S. Alphonsi in compendium redacta, et usui venerabilis cleri Americani accomodata*, Boston, 1874.

let it pass. But even here the exception is to prove the rule. By the second edition³⁰ Konings is referring to Alphonsus, passim, as an equiprobabilist: and he states clearly that, while technically it is still only strict rigorism and laxism that are condemned as systems for moral theology, it is the equiprobabilism of Alphonsus which "*verum esse censemus*." (no. 62, vi). The fourth edition³¹ continues this position, and implicitly strengthens it. There is now a *Praefatio Apologetica* added, and the reader is urged to read it (*enixe rogatur benevolus lector ne hanc praefationem percurrere omittat*). Konings, because of some implications made against him in some reviews, moves even closer to the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* position. To what extent Konings's Damascus-experience is born from an inner conviction may be another story³² but Mauron was clearly winning the allegiance of the Redemptorists on the question of a unified approach: if the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* proved that Alphonsus was always an equiprobabilist, and if it is the sacred heritage of all Redemptorists to be true exemplars of this tradition, then it meant they were to be explicitly equiprobabilist, even in America.

The reception of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* outside the Congregation was quite another story. In my research I have concentrated on the years 1873-1875 and, for purposes of clarity, I am sub-dividing this into three phases: (a) that between the publication of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* and the publication of the *Vindiciae Ballerinianae* in the Autumn of 1873, (b) the period between the *Vindiciae Ballerinianae* and the second edition of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* in late Summer 1874, and (c) 1875.

In the first phase, the praise for the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* was from predictable sources. Some Redemptorists, notably Pladys³³ and

³⁰ New York, 1876.

³¹ New York, 1880.

³² An important recent study should be noted: G. A. ENDERLE, *The American Theology of Anthony Konings C.Ss.R.*, UMI Microform 9531395, 1995: though this finely researched book does not directly deal with our topic, there are indications that KONING's personality needs careful discernment.

³³ E. Pladys (1832-1906) was, for most of his priestly life, Professor of Theology at Wittem (Holland). The most significant of his articles is that printed in «L'Univers» 08/05/1873.

Boulangéot³⁴, wrote articles defending the book. The Neapolitan cleric Vittozzi³⁵, felt the obligation of *campanilismo* to come to the defence of a native son. A little surprisingly, the Professor of Moral Theology in Maynooth (Ireland), Dr. Walsh, defended Alphonsus with vigour³⁶: surprisingly, in view of the opposition within Maynooth to Alphonsus in the early part of the century. The good-will of these defenders of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* is more evident than the depth and quality of their argument. The criticisms came from equally predictable sources: articles in reviews that were either controlled by and under the influence of the Jesuits, and in England (where St. Alphonsus was poorly regarded in intellectual circles) *The Tablet* was hostile³⁷.

The exchanges were bitter. There is a note of personal dislike of Ballerini in the defenders of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae*: Walsh talks of the "reckless inaccuracy of statement...by no means rare in Fr. Ballerini." and asks, referring to Ballerini, "has the Professor discovered blemishes invisible to the eyes of Peter?"³⁸ There is a tone of personal loyalty to a confrere or a former professor in Ballerini's defenders. The personal tone of the exchanges descends, occasionally, to a language more appropriate to military conflict: there is talk about "daggers", and both sides are anxious to establish who has started this "war"³⁹. The Redemptorists must

³⁴ F. Boulangéot (1832-1898) was, for many years, a Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Téterchen (Alsace). His major contribution also appeared in «L'Univers», 26/07/1873. For a full chronology of the exchange of articles in these months, see SAMPERS, art. cit., 155-156.

³⁵ For a brief note on Vitozzi, see ORLANDI, art. cit., 63, footnote 208. He wrote mainly in the review «La Scienza e la Fede»: the articles are gathered in *S. Alfonso de Ligorio e la teologia morale. Dissertazione teologico-morale*, Naples, 1873.

³⁶ *Vindiciae Alphonsianae*, in «Irish Ecclesiastical Record», Series 1, Vol. 9, 1873, 334-357, 380-388, 418-427. WALSH returns to the fray in 1874 («Irish Ecclesiastical Record», Series 1, Vol. 10, 1874, 265-269, 329-332, 367-383, 406-430) which is, in essence, a polemical exchange with the Jesuit Professor of Moral Theology at St. Beuno's (Wales).

³⁷ Letters to «The Tablet» clearly demonstrate this in the issues of 28/06/1873, 05/07/1873, and 12/07/1873. «The Dublin Review» (New Series, No. 41, July 1873, 264) tries to be less partisan, but its sympathies are more clearly with Ballerini.

³⁸ From the second of WALSH's articles (IER, 1873, 386) quoted above at (36).

³⁹ The exchanges in «L'Univers» (08/05/1873, 25/06/1873) use this type of language.

"defend" Alphonsus now as Alphonsus had to ward off the attacks of Pattuzzi in his own day. The fact that the debate was in the public forum was becoming a matter of concern to the Redemptorists, particularly after the intervention of the Bishop of Liège in a letter to the local Redemptorist Rector⁴⁰ where he comments on the poor impression being given to the faithful when two religious congregations are quarrelling in public. This must surely have begun to worry Mauron: what good was being gained if the internal unity which he was imposing on the Congregation was being offset by a disunity that would hardly benefit the Redemptorists in the public forum?

Behind these polemics, and the exchanges are very much of this genre, there are important issues which justify an assessment of an episode that, in isolation, has little scholarly value. Implicit in the position adopted by the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* is the following line of argument. (i) St. Alphonsus has been declared a Doctor of the Church and this gives an extrinsic note of authority which renders his positions probable, (ii) in declaring St. Alphonsus a Doctor of the Church the system of St. Alphonsus, that is equiprobabilism, as outlined in the *Concessionis Tituli...* is given an approval over all other systems, (iii) therefore, anyone who holds opinions contrary to St. Alphonsus is ignoring the authority of a Doctor, and the authority of the Holy See who had proclaimed him to be such. Though the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* is a publication that has nothing to do with the *process* to grant the title of Doctor to Alphonsus, there is abundant evidence that the authors of the *Vindiciae* saw it as essentially repeating, in another forum, what had already been proven in the Doctorate process. The crucial part in the above argument is, I think, that which moves from a probability based on extrinsic authority to the presumption of the intrinsic probability of the positions of St. Alphonsus. In essence, therefore, the argument is about something substantial: does the authority of St. Alphonsus (which none deny) also mean that only one system is now, in practice, allowable?⁴¹ A

⁴⁰ Letter of Bishop T. de Montpellier to M. L'Hoir, 18/07/1873, AGHR, 050803 PDSA/03 1555.

⁴¹ E. REDMAN, *A few words on the authority of St. Alphonsus*, in «The Dublin Review», October 1973, 485-490, is blunt: "For consider for a moment what this

subsidiary element of this substantial question is the problem of the development of doctrine. If the argument of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* is correct (that is, only the equiprobabilist system of Alphonsus is truly safe), how did the Church manage *before* Alphonsus? And what is the position now: has all moral development ceased with Alphonsus?⁴² Seen in this way, the substantial theological problem of the controversy is an aspect of the other great debate of those years: the development of the neo-thomist project. In that, too, there is the same desire for a coherent system and a central authority-figure⁴³. It is my judgment that the position of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* is not, necessarily, an intransigent one with regard to the development of doctrine (no more than the arguments of Liberatore, Kleutgen or Franzelin can be dismissed, *tout court*, as a rejection of development in the area of dogma). But the way in which development is seen clearly places the authors of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* within a particular theological school. The neo-thomist method can be summarised in the following terms. Church teaching is the starting point and this is proved through arguments from Scripture and Tradition; theologians may speculate within the limits implied in the first two steps. The development of doctrine is accordingly determined in a precise way. Similarly, the authors of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* should not be seen as a group of Luddites. They knew there were new problems to be faced: but they were to be faced by applying *already established* principles. Development is possible, but it will be solid only to the extent that it is based on an approved and safe system.

The attack was on Ballerini, certainly, and in no way can it be construed as an attack on the Jesuits. It is, however, important to place the concern about Ballerini in some wider context, even if this is not a Jesuit one. There is enough evidence to show that the authors of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* shared the concern that liberalism was the great

involves: it places the extrinsic before the intrinsic argument".

⁴² The correspondence in «The Tablet», already referred to, is an important verification of this. The intellectual Catholic readers of this English review would have, on this point, been very sensitive to the analysis of Cardinal NEWMAN, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 1845.

⁴³ P. DEZZA, *Alle origini del neotomismo*, 1940: *I neotomisti del XIX secolo*, 1942 are classic sources for this argument. G.A. MCCOOL, *Nineteenth-century Scholasticism*, 1989, argues in much the same general direction.

theological threat of the day and that, unchecked, this would lead to the further erosion of Catholic faith and morals⁴⁴. Insofar as probabilism, in the wrong hands, could lead to a sort of "liberalism" in moral matters then it was necessary to counteract the proponents of the probabailist system. In this sense, too, the *Vindiciae* controversy is an aspect of the major theological debates of the day, and not simply a family quarrel between two otherwise friendly religious congregations.

This first phase of the debate, therefore, reveals more than an example of polemical disputation. It was, in a real sense, about the level of freedom of discussion for theologians, a matter of no small concern.

The *Vindiciae Ballerinianae* were published in the early Autumn of 1873, and the second edition of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* in the late Summer of 1874⁴⁵. There is evidence that Ballerini was wearied by the whole affair by the Autumn of 1873: it was not he personally, but a Belgian confrere⁴⁶, who put together the *Vindiciae Ballerinianae*, a slim volume of 168 pages. There is little new in it, apart from the *prolusio historica* which, in places, uses an acid tone, the very fault that the opponents of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* had themselves regretted. The controversy was not raised to a higher level by this publication in Ballerini's defence. The exchanges still reflect the combative tones of a military campaign: in a manuscript from this period Desurmont is saying that "the war continues"⁴⁷: Ballerini, in a friendly review, is seen as having "to bear the brunt of the battle"⁴⁸. Dechamps writes to Mauron about "a great war"⁴⁹: another review friendly to Ballerini is still trying to

⁴⁴ Referring to probabilism, M. LE VERDIER, writing about the whole controversy in «Bibliographie Catholique - Revue Critique», Tome XLVIII, 2, Août 1873, 166-169, is explicit: "Le probabilisme est voisin du laxisme....c'est le libéralisme introduit dans la direction des âmes." (168)

⁴⁵ BALLERINI's article in «L'Univers» (28/10/1873) barely disguises the feeling of a man who would rather devote his time to other issues.

⁴⁶ V. De Buck (1817-1876)

⁴⁷ The phrase is from a MSS. of DESURMONT, written probably in late 1873 or early 1874: AGHR, 050803, PDSA/03, 1572

⁴⁸ *The Civiltà Cattolica on the Vindiciae Alphonsianae and the Vindiciae Ballerinianae*, in «The Month», February 1874, 240-246: here 241.

⁴⁹ Letter of 16/12/1874, AGHR, 050803, PDSA/03, 1612.

establish "who declared the war" and refers to the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* as "that great war-machine"⁵⁰. Given that the friends of Ballerini would have had more access to theological journals than the Redemptorists of the era, it is hardly surprising that the reviews of the *Vindiciae Ballerinianae* are broadly favourable. For the Redemptorists, the friendly Vittozzi, once more, writes enthusiastically in defence of a son of Naples, the glory of their clergy, to whom they will be ever faithful⁵¹. An interesting example of what happens when theological debates become centered on personalities, rather than ideas, is the fate of a book by M-A Potton OP published in 1874 on *De theoria probabilitatis*: Potton proposes a new theory ("probabilism by compensation") as a way of solving the difficulties of probabilism. Potton, apparently a mild-mannered and scholarly man, suffered the fate of all conciliatory efforts in the heat of debate: supporting neither side in particular, he is attacked by both and his theory, interesting in itself, has become an almost forgotten footnote in the history of probabilism⁵². The nature of the articles in this period is much the same as in the first period of the controversy: rather polemical in tone, with an occasional effort to assess, in more objective terms, how the question of the authority of Alphonsus is affected by the title of doctor, and to assess the relationship between moral development and the theory of probabilism. Because of where it was published, one article has a special importance. *La Civiltà Cattolica* published a substantial article in which an assessment of the *Vindiciae Ballerinianae* is given as well as a review of articles, critical of Ballerini, that had appeared in the previous September in *La Scienza e la fede*⁵³. The article is solomon-like in its praise of the "veneranda" Congregation of the Redemptorists and the "chiaro" Ballerini, both within the one paragraph. Two points in the article must have given food for thought to the Redemptorists: it is regretted that the controversy is "lanciata nel pubblico" and where readers

⁵⁰ M. JULES DIDOT, *Notes d'un bibliothécaire*, in «Revue des Sciences Ecclésiastiques» 165, Octobre 1873, 374-383: here 383.

⁵¹ *S. Alfonso e la teologia morale*, Naples, 1873, 61-63: *S. Alfonso de Ligorio e il probabilismo commune*, Naples, 1874, 6ff.

⁵² It is discussed, briefly, in DEMAN, art. cit., 595.

⁵³ *Rivista della Stampa Italiana*, in «La Civiltà Cattolica», Series VIII, Vol. XII, Quaderno 564, 20 Dicembre 1873, 699-720.

"d'ogni classe e condizione" are not only talking about the controversy but are also its "guidicii"⁵⁴. In assessing the merits of the debate, the essence of the article says that the difference on the point being debated is one "di modo e non di sostanza". Not surprisingly, another Jesuit magazine (*The Month*, February 1874), in a lengthy comment on the article, comes to Ballerini's defence against "this groundless charge"⁵⁵. The nuances of the *Civiltà Cattolica* article, and its being interpreted in such a pro-Ballerini way, would not have been missed by Mauron and his advisors, ever anxious to be well-respected in Roman circles. Mauron had many friends within that circle, but it is worth recalling the implication of a letter, written a little earlier that year, by the Superior General of the Holy Spirit Congregation. St. Alphonsus is compared to St. Thomas and the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* are lavishly praised, but Schwindenhammer asks that his views be not made public "because of our relations, in Rome, with the Collegio Romano."⁵⁶

Despite these warning signs, preparation for a second edition of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* went ahead. The explanation, I think, is simple enough: a contract had been signed with the Casterman publishing house in Tournai on the previous September 4th. There was still enough enthusiasm among the Redemptorists to proceed, as is evident in the abundant archival material from Ulrich, Desurmont, Kockerols (among others) who were anxious to send suggested improvements for the new edition⁵⁷. Mauron signed the decree of approval to publish on July 19th 1874 and, in a delicate move, the Archbishop of Malines, the Redemptorist Dechamps, gave the ecclesiastical approbation⁵⁸. In this

⁵⁴ Ibid. 699

⁵⁵ This is the article referred to in note 48 above.

⁵⁶ AGHR, 050803, PDSA/03, 1541. The letter was, probably, written to Desurmont.

⁵⁷ The material is abundant in quantity, at least: AGHR, 050803, PDSA, 1563, 1570, 1572, 1575, 1584, 1688, 1689, 1690, 1693, 1695-1703.

⁵⁸ An exchange of letters between Mauron and Dechamps during July/August 1874 is most revealing. Dechamps was caught between loyalty to his Redemptorist Congregation, and the Belgian Bishops of whom he was Primate. It is clear that many of the Belgian Bishops favoured Ballerini: on the basis that the *Vindiciae* had been edited in his diocese, Dechamps, after quite a struggle, gave his imprimatur on August 6th. The question was so complex for him that Dechamps feared there might be an appeal to

second edition some mistakes in the first edition are corrected, and a few matters are formulated more accurately. Two additions, however, should be noted. The first is a treatise on the historical development of Alphonsus's system. The second main difference is the *Praefatio Apologetica*, 59 pages long, which reviews the whole debate. It need hardly be added that, in its review of the controversy, it is favourable to the Redemptorists. The second edition was published with much less fanfare than the first, and in a more subdued tone. The letter of Bridgett to *The Tablet* indicates the mood: announcing to its readers the publication of the second edition he asks that "whoever may wish to pursue the discussion will do so with equal calmness and learning, and in the same ecclesiastical language."⁵⁹

The public controversy was clearly coming to an end. The whole debate was not advancing the image of the Redemptorists. It is not that the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* were, in themselves, to blame: but the public controversy which they aroused was playing into the hands of those who had other reasons to denigrate St. Alphonsus and the Redemptorists. When a Roman broadsheet of doubtful taste (*La Fanfulla*) published a scurrilous article about St. Alphonsus⁶⁰, *L'Osservatore Romano* was pressed into a reply: "*ebbene, secondo il Fanfulla che ripete in modo assai goffo e bestiale le bestemmie di un rinnegato tedesco.... etc...*"⁶¹ The reference is to Döllinger's accusations against St. Alphonsus. It was clearly time to stop any public controversy that might fuel those particular fires. There were, at any rate, other reasons why the debate was to die out.

CONCLUSION

Though some serious issues were discussed during the controversy, these had been overshadowed by the personalised tone of the exchanges: no scientific progress was possible in such a mood. More importantly, political events were putting a theological dispute into perspective. The

Rome against his decision: AGHR, Provincia Belgica, XII, 2b.

⁵⁹ «The Tablet», 23/01/1875, 109.

⁶⁰ «La Fanfulla», 21/07/1875.

⁶¹ «L'Osservatore Romano», 23/07/1875: further (brief) comments appear in later issues, 29/07/1875, and 01/08/1875.

gathering clouds of the Kulturkampf and the rise, again, of anticlericalism in France tended to put a perspective on smaller quarrels. And the political situation in Italy could hardly have been called stable. Attention was to move from a theological dispute that involved two religious congregations to the question of the survival of both of them.

The controversy stopped, for the moment. It was to appear again, though not with the same public interest, in the 1890's and the early part of this century⁶². The climate within the Redemptorists was also changing. An insight into this is the publication of Aertnijs' Moral Theology in 1886/7⁶³: a project which Mauron, as we saw, did not approve of in 1872. Reading it now one can see the reasons. Aertnijs clearly did not believe that St. Alphonsus developed a new system (let alone one that could be precisely defined as 'equiprobabilist'): for Aertnijs, the genius of Alphonsus was to clear up the ambiguities in the then current theories of probabilism, and to do this in a moderate way⁶⁴.

The contribution of this controversy to understanding the moral theology of St. Alphonsus is an indirect one. Among the Redemptorists, it was to stimulate a renewed interest in having proper critical editions of his dogmatic and moral works. The discovery of new letters was to fill out important details. The Redemptorists published the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* in the high-noon of the certainty created by the proclamation of the Doctorate. Time was to show that the question was more complex than they then thought. Insofar as the controversy highlighted the need for more critical standards among Redemptorist moralists this can surely be considered a contribution to moral theology generally. Mauron's ability to steer the Congregation in this direction should be acknowledged. Though Marc's manual was the 'official' one, and had its own impact, Mauron's belated permission for Aertnijs to publish his manual had a greater impact, given the long life this manual was to enjoy, through the editions of Damen to the final one by Visser in 1968/9. The laudable desire of the authors of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* was to hand on the doctrine of St. Alphonsus, as Alphonsus himself

⁶² SAMPERS, art. cit., 165-171.

⁶³ *Theologia Moralis juxta doctrinam S. Alphonsi Mariae de Ligorio.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 120.

understood it. The need to return to the sources, stimulated in part by the less than total success of the *Vindiciae* project, is the unexpected contribution of a controversy that sought to settle matters once and for all. Returning to the sources is not, obviously, a simple matter of quoting texts: there is a delicate exegetical process in understanding the text of Alphonsus in the precise historical moment in which he wrote. His version of probabilism is not an abstract theory but (like all versions of probabilism?) is understandable only as an *historical* theory. Because Alphonsus' moral theology is an historically-conditioned one, and not an abstract formula, it allows us to move on to the hermeneutical stage of applying the moral theology of St. Alphonsus today. The practical intentionality which lies at the centre of that theology does not mean that its expression, precisely as theology, is somehow less intellectually acceptable than those whose theoretic formulations may sound more grandiose. But it does mean that the moral theology of St. Alphonsus is of a particular *type* that demands a very careful reading of the original texts and an equally carefully attention to the experiences of the living conscience of people today. Trying to prove that Ballerini was completely wrong now seems an error: but trying to show that Alphonsus had a *special* way of doing moral theology seems to me to have been a justified aim of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* project, even if the particular way of formulating that in terms of a static theory of equiprobabilism is not convincing. By trying to prove too much, did the authors of the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* obscure some of the truth of their cause? If so, the loss was that of moral theology which developed in ever more legalistic forms of casuistry. St. Alphonsus might not have had all the timeless answers that the *Vindiciae Alphonsianae* tried to imply, but his moral theology has a prudentially solid basis. Thus, the short-term effect of the controversy was, in my judgment, negative: an unnecessary rigidity developed around the interpretation of St. Alphonsus. The long-term effect is more positive: by forcing the question of historical editions of his works, and an appreciation of the circumstances in which his theology developed, the true genius of St. Alphonsus is gradually been rescued.