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MEDITATION ACCORDING TO  
ST. ALPHONSUS M. DE LIGUORI

*Modern Society and Meditation; Christian Meditation; Alphonsus and Mental Prayer; Fundamental Concept and Distinctions; Meditation According to Liguori; Alphonsian Meditation.*

The *New Age* movement that was made popular by the American mass media and seized the West's attention in the 1960's did much to renew and spread interest in meditation within modern society. However, meditation is not just a new fad developed on the grounds of "a spiritual awakening"; it is, in fact, a much more ancient and deeply-rooted activity that has been at the heart of our very nature since time immemorial. Meditation has most certainly accompanied our human activity and ability to wonder and reason about the world, and it has pervaded rites and rituals of many cultures and religions since the beginning of the human race. It is present in the Bible, practiced by Moses and Jesus and the Fathers of the Church, as well as by the Christian monks of the first millennium, all the way down to our present-day philosophers and thinkers. In the Middle Ages, in fact, meditation was part of a more formalized philosophical speculation. The current interest in this activity is not a novel one, but rather a renewed awakening of a natural and interior need inherent in every human being and a return to a centuries-old practice. Throughout the long history of Christianity, the tradition of meditating has developed outstanding and worthwhile models worth revisiting, one being that of St. Alphonsus M. de Liguori, founder of the Redemptorist Congregation.

*Modern Society and Meditation*

Although interest in meditation in the West is growing, it is evident that for many societies that are part of Western culture, the art of meditation is still largely alien to the average person. This is due mainly to the way in which people live their lives. Individuals are now, more than ever before, in tune with their

“likes” and “desires” commonly associated with the physical and material aspects of life. With more opportunities to identify and meet one’s material needs and business interests, one is less inclined to reflect well, if at all. A lot of activity results in a more chaotic state of mind as well as more mixed feelings and sensations and, consequently, a sense of loss of the spiritual. There are examples of people in our society who live at such a frantic pace that they no longer are capable of relishing things and events. They superficially “swallow” or “collect” things and events, relishing in the mere sensation of swallowing or collecting and nothing beyond. Rarely do they choose to pursue an in-depth analysis or reflection of their experiences. They do not know how to truly appreciate what they experience, and even less so, how to make sense of their own personal interior life, for they find themselves without any road map to guide them.

Individuals in today’s modern world are mainly absorbed by the outside world of appearances, constantly living “outside of themselves”, searching often, painfully, for meaning. As such, they become increasingly less in touch with what is happening inside of them. Sometimes, individuals become “strangers to their own inner selves”. Such a discovery usually goes hand-in-hand with a feeling of inner emptiness and one of being “burnt out”, accompanied by an acute sense of loss of identity. As early as 1925, in a poem entitled “Hollow Men”, the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) provided the following picture of today’s man:

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together,  
Headpiece filed with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
When we whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats’ feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar  
Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. ELIOT, *Poems 1909-1962*, New York 1963, 79.

Eliot portrays modern man as one who is immersed in what surrounds him. He lives “from the outside into the inside”. Indiscriminately, he opens himself up to the outside world, and surrenders himself to it even when he is constantly being attacked (and sometimes painfully wounded) by external events due to his impoverished interior condition. Therefore, he is often accompanied by a poignant sense of anguish, anxiety, and loneliness. He develops the symptoms of a morbid world-weariness, discouragement, and even depression, sometimes losing life’s joy and its meaning.

Meditation is an excellent force and practice to resist the internal fragmentation and discouragement outlined above. It is worth noting that, first and foremost, meditation is a deeply human activity and one of remarkable anthropological value. Although it is, often and wrongly, identified with relaxation techniques and “a return to unity with the cosmos”; it is, in fact, a value in itself: it has a variety of “human capabilities”, it helps to consolidate one’s own “I”, it expands awareness, and it stimulates creative intuition. In essence, it is useful not only for people of faith, but for those who are seeking a gradual discernment of the internal sense of reality and the beauty that surrounds them. Meditation helps people discover their own identity; it strengthens their individual self-esteem. In general, meditators become more sensitive to the deeper values and meanings of life.

A strong emphasis, nowadays, is to put a purely therapeutic value on meditation or one of preventing illnesses of emotional origin through its use. This notion is to help one regain inner balance as well as a sense of harmony and happiness. Although various external events and factors still affect and harm meditators, the idea is that the spirit can better endure hardships and become even stronger through meditation. The outcome of meditating can sometimes be felt even at a sensual level, allowing the meditator to experience the warmth and cessation of pain, and even levitation. It is not a matter of chance that the words “medicine” and “meditation” are both derived from the same root meaning “assessment” or “judgment”.

The individual today is becoming aware that meditation has a positive impact both on the body and the inner sphere (i.e. the human psyche and mind). It is commonly held, for example, that

meditation will combat causes of stress at the root of metabolic disorders, hypertension, peptic ulcer disease, migraines, and asthma. It is also recommended in for sleeping disorders. It is appreciated as an excellent means for maintaining mental health, preventing the loss of memory, harmony, and restoring the integrity of mental activity and inner peace. It allows for greater concentration and for greater self-control, helping the individual to cope better with many social ills.

#### *Christian Meditation*

For those living a life of faith, however, the main purpose of meditation is to search for truth and God, so to be reconciled with the Supreme Being. The great paradox in to all this, however, is that while people not associated with Christianity are showing a growing interest in meditation, Christians have abandoned it, even those who by tradition or by virtue of their profession, should be practicing it intensely, namely monks and priests. So it is vital to remember that Christian meditation has a long history and tradition worth revisiting as it is rooted in the Old Testament prayer, known as “haga”. This type of prayer consisted of frequent repetitive “murmurings”, and quiet “whisperings”, with lip movements, sentences, or phrases selected from the Bible. Psalm 1 clearly mentions the prayer in question: “Happy those...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and whose mind is on His law day and night” (1: 2). Ezekiel (2: 8; cf. 3: 1) refers to “eating” the word of God: “As for you, son of man, obey me when I speak to you: be not rebellious like this house of rebellion, but open your mouth and eat what I shall give you”. The Book of Joshua (1: 8) commands, “Keep this book of the law on your lips. Recite it by day and night, that you may observe carefully all that is written in it; then you will successfully attain your goal”. There is a continual repetition, deliberation, “grinding”, or even “chewing” of the words of the Bible in order to reach their deepest content and so assimilate them. The meditation as a “chewing” of the word of God is also compared to a cry or a moan. Hence, “Like a swallow, I utter shrill cries; I moan like a dove” Isaiah (38: 14; 59: 11). The “shrill cries of a swallow” and “a moaning of a dove” each symbolize the vocal prayer of the prophet. Also, in Ecclesiastes (14: 20-

21): “Happy the man, who meditates on wisdom, and reflects on knowledge; who ponders her ways in his heart, and understands her paths”, and in Psalms (18: 15; 34: 28; 48: 4; 70: 24), not the least Psalm 118, where its author “chews” slowly and most deliberately, the word of Lord.

Although in the New Testament, the word “meditation” is rarely used and acquires a more practical nature in Greek “*meletân*” – dealing with something<sup>2</sup>, and in early Latin “dry as the Rule of St. Benedict 8: 3, the “*meditari*” means first “training in something”<sup>3</sup>; thus, Mary, the mother of Jesus is the great example and model of meditation as it is in keeping with “all these things reflecting on them in her heart” (Luke 2: 19; cf. 2: 51).<sup>4</sup> The meditative prayer or “mantric” is the repeating of short sentences, a “*mantra*”. Even so, this Gospel also refers to the description of the Tax Collector (Luke 18: 13): “O God, be merciful to me a sinner”, as well as describing of the encounter with Bartimaeus, the blind man, “Son of David, have pity on me” (Mark 10: 46). It is this quote which inspired the so-called “Jesus Prayer” and was circulated by the religious and mystical movement of Hesychasm throughout Eastern Christianity (but also practiced in the West) in the famous letter of meditation: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have pity on me, a sinner”.

This was primarily due to many of the Fathers of the Church believing that the word of God should not only be “eaten” as the food of the spiritual life, but also “chewed” (in Latin, “*ruminatio*” means “chewing”). On the other hand, the term referred to in the Old Testament for “clean” animals is “chew”. St. Augustine taking this ancient tradition, viewed and encouraged rumination or meditation, “to be a pure creature, not an unclean one”. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. T. ŠPIDLÍK, *Prayer: The Spirituality Of The Christian East*, vol. II, Michigan 1986, 140-142.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. BACHT, “*Meditari*” in *den altesten Monchsquellen*, in: *Geist und Leben* 28 (1955) 360-373.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth paying attention to the mantric prayer of Jesus, constantly repeated by Him in Gethsemane: “...Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; take away this cup from me: but even so let not my pleasure, but yours be done”. When Jesus saw his apostles sleep: “And again he went away, and said a prayer, using the same words” (John 14: 36.39).

the method of meditation understood as “rumination” developed since the time of the writing of the Epistle of Barnabas (early second century), and was promoted by Clement of Alexandria, as well as the Fathers of the desert (such as Anthony, Pachomius, Macarius), as well as Isidore of Seville, Caesarius of Arles, and St. Bernard of Chiaravalle, up to the movement of *Devotio Moderna* and Martin Luther.

Although the “mantric” style of meditation was mainly developed and strengthened in the East, the Western Church practiced it faithfully for centuries. Repeating Scriptures in a whisper and in short verses during daily activities became for the illiterate and the less gifted a way to meditate also. Henceforth, it was used alongside the so-called “intellectual meditation” (Greek “*diánoia*”) of the more learned.

A Western theologian, St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) who, alongside his father, coined “*faith seeking understanding*” (*fides quaerens intellectum*), emphasized the role of reason in theology, thus giving meditation a more rational quality. In the period of scholasticism, “*meditatio*” is distinguished from “*contemplatio*” as having the nature of discourse (logical inference based on previously-adopted assertions or conditions) as opposed to contemplation, a natural acceptance and pure intuition of God. It is easy to observe the so-called “systematic treaties”. For example, “*De Meditatione*” by Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141),<sup>5</sup> or “*Scala Claustralium*” by Guigo II of Charteuse († 1193)<sup>6</sup> who honoured the traditional prayer steps: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Thus, where reading is a studious search with the mind to uncover and know what is concealed, meditation discovers by directing one’s desire and will in a most skillful manner, while prayer is a devout desiring of the heart to acquire the good and avoid the bad, and contemplation is the lifting up of the heart to God so as to taste and savour a heavenly sweetness. In other words, “Reading seeks, meditation discovers, prayer asks, contemplation feels”. The same author metaphorically compares prayer to extracting and eating a fruit from its shell. He writes:

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<sup>5</sup> PL 176: 993-998.

<sup>6</sup> PL 184: 475-484.

Reading puts, as it were, the whole food into your mouth; meditation chews it and breaks it down; prayer finds its savour; contemplation is the sweetness that so delights and strengthens. Reading is like the bark, the shell; meditation like the pith, the nut; prayer is like the desiring, the question; and contemplation is the delight in the great sweetness (SC II).<sup>7</sup>

Numerous distinctions and divisions have been made in scholasticism which gradually evolved over time and led to greater rationalisation of meditation. The *Modern Devotion (Devotio Moderna)* includes regular patterns which have a “largely discursive nature”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the West, meditation has evolved into something more “methodical” (as in “*Scala Meditatoria*” of Joannes Mauburnus [† 1501]), and is distinguished from an exclusively philosophical reflection.

Although the meditation which was once conceived as “ruminatio” was strongly dominated by philosophical speculation, the former never did disappear entirely. In the modern era (since the sixteenth century), “ruminatio”, in fact, experienced a spiritual renewal by the methods and preferences of such spiritual notables as St. Teresa of Jesus, St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. John Baptist de la Salle, St. Jean Eudes, and St. Francis de Sales. St. Alphonsus M. de Liguori was also among this historical movement; indeed, he shed great light upon the value of Christian prayer in general, and the Alphonsian Meditation Method in particular.

#### *Alphonsus and Mental Prayer*

Alphonsus M. de Liguori (1696-1787) was a great missionary of southern Italy and the Founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, the Redemptorists. He was one of the most important theologians of the eighteenth century saints, and became best known as a moralist and a pastor. He was known for his ethical propositions and “pastoral gentleness”, becoming a Doctor of the Church (1871) and the patron saint of confessors and moralists (1950). However, both theologians and lay believers know Alphonsus to be, above all, a learned man of great spirit.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. <http://www.fisheaters.com/guigo.html>

<sup>8</sup> Cf. C. M. BOFF, *Come fare meditazione*, op. cit., 50-53.

Reading Alphonsus, a model Neapolitan, the reader keeps alive his ascetic work in which he proposes that “mental prayer” fine tunes the heart’s strings into a spiritual symphony flowing towards Christ from the interior. The pages of all his works are in fact filled with the heat of love for Christ which inflames the heart and encourages readers into a deeper meditation.

From the outset, however, a Liguorian student of meditation should note that systematic lectures and instructions on meditation are not to be found in only one book. For study purposes, Liguori’s writings are scattered in a variety of pastoral and ascetic works. In addition, his thoughts on “mental prayer” which he referred to as meditation, have evolved alongside his pastoral and missionary experiences and, above all, his personal spiritual experience which reflected vocational works published during his life time.<sup>9</sup>

Among the more unique features of Alphonsian spirituality is the crucial role of prayer which is connected with the theology of grace, and is seen immediately as it is emphasized in the most famous St. Alphonsus work concerning prayer, *The Great Means of Prayer*<sup>10</sup> which records the Alphonsian teaching on prayer. It was studied as merely a secondary problem in biographical works and, in general, as a comment on asceticism.<sup>11</sup> One of the initial thoughts concerning the role of mental prayer in Alphonsian spirituality was contained in the ascetic and practical work written by R. Gillet.<sup>12</sup> Gillet points to Alphonsus’ conviction about the necessity of meditation, emphasizing its simple character and proving its efficiency in one’s spiritual growth. Achille Desurmont (1828-1888), while analyzing Alphonsian spirituality in the context of striving

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<sup>9</sup> The term “*l’orazione mentale*” (mental prayer) is used by Alphonsus more willingly than the term “*meditazione*” (meditation). Although the former is a broader one, containing both reflection, namely intellectual discourse of the truths from the Gospel, and the proper meditation based on the acts of will; the author uses the two terms interchangeably.

<sup>10</sup> A. M. DE LIGUORI, *Del gran mezzo della preghiera*, in: *Opere ascetiche*, vol. II, Roma 1962, 3-178.

<sup>11</sup> Thorough historiography can be found in: A. BAZIELICH, *La spiritualità di Sant’Alfonso Maria de Liguori. Studio storico-teologico*, in: *SHCSR* 31 (1983) 331-372.

<sup>12</sup> R. GILLET, *Vie pratique de S. Alphonse de Liguori, modèle de tous les âges et de toutes les conditions*, Lille 1842.

for holiness, defined the need of mental prayer as a necessary of means through which the soul is being awakened in four dimensions: the revival of the truth in one's spirit, the revival of the truth in one's heart, the revival of prayer and grace, and the revival of one's goodwill.<sup>13</sup> Mental prayer, understood in this way, reaches as deeply as to the roots of human existence and, according to Desurmont, it places St. Alphonsus among such great reformers of Christian spirituality and masters of prayer as St. Teresa of Jesus, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and St. Francis of Sales. In addition, while following his masters, Liguori reveals a new attitude towards meditation, and the ways of developing its essential elements, which provide a strong basis for understanding the sense and purpose this kind of prayer.<sup>14</sup> Desurmont questions why, for example, no one before Liguori had deepened the bond between prayer and love as much as he did.<sup>15</sup> A. de Calonne examined more thoroughly the close connection between prayer and grace in Alphonsus' spirituality, while F. Bouchage sought to compile the Alphonsian Method of mental prayer together with its essential principles.<sup>16</sup>

K. Keusch defined the essence of Alphonsian meditation as being the core to understand Christ's immeasurable love as revealed in His passion and death.<sup>17</sup> The moral obligation to practice meditation follows from that. P. Pourrat, however, paid attention to the simplicity and accessibility of the Alphonsian Method of mental prayer; he points to the relation of this method to the conception of striving for holiness through "uniting human will with God's will", which is crucial to Alphonsian spirituality.<sup>18</sup> G. Lievin emphasized the connection of mental prayer with persistence in faith and one's love for God; he stressed also that the Alphonsian Method of meditation remains constantly open to the

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<sup>13</sup> A. DESURMONT, *Saint Alphonse docteur de la vie vraiment chretienne*, Paris 1926.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> F. BOUCHAGE, *L'oraison alphonsienne: Théorie et pratique*, Paris 1932.

<sup>17</sup> CH. KEUSCH, *Die Aszetik des hl. Alfons Maria von Liguori im Lichte der Lehre vom geistlichen Leben in alter und neuer Zeit*, Paderborn 1926, 260.

<sup>18</sup> P. POURRAT, *L'école italienne au 18e siècle: Saint Alphonse de Liguori et l'école liguorienne*, in: *La Spiritualité Chrétienne*, vol. IV, Paris 1928, 449-491.

experience of contemplation.<sup>19</sup> One of the most important works on mental prayer according to St. Alphonsus is the two volume book by L. Colin.<sup>20</sup> Colin highlights that Alphonsian Meditation is clearly Christocentric in character; it is focused on deepening one's intimacy with Christ. He also distinguished two rules which are at the heart and soul of holiness: we have to reflect upon that which will bring us the greatest spiritual advantage and will lead us to the sanctification of our souls by uniting them with God; in meditation, we are directing our love's attention towards the mystery of the Passion and the last things ("*novissimi*").

#### *Fundamental Concept and Distinctions*

It is vital to make a distinction between scientific reflection and meditation. This is as important as the above-mentioned historical reasons because, over the centuries, in the process of excessive rationalisation, meditation has been reduced almost entirely to scientific discussion. The difference between scientific reflection (whether philosophical or theological) and meditation lies in the separation between subject and object. This is particularly evident in the scientific process in which the subject, examining the object of interest, looks at the subject "at a distance", and in the case of Christian meditation (and even more so in the case of contemplation) the aim is essentially a merger between the subject and the object, which in reality, is a "subject" or better, "Subject".

By way of philosophizing, a subject seeks to know the object of its attention – what is "in front" (Latin "*ob-jectum*" is what has been thrown in front of the knowing subject). Meditation is not so much getting to know the object as it is the loving union between subject and object. In the case of Christian meditation, the object (God, Christ) is the lively subject who penetrates the meditator, alone, and is present within the body, or as we say "in the meditator's heart". We can say, therefore, that meditation leads to the so-called "heart" while reflection leads only to "reason".

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<sup>19</sup> G. LIEVIN, *Alphonse de Liguori*, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité Alphonsienne*, Friburg-Paris 1963, 384-387.

<sup>20</sup> L. COLIN, *Alphonse de Liguori, docteur de l'Église: Doctrine spirituelle. Essai de synthèse*, vol. I-II, Mulhouse 1971.

To understand the value of Alphonsian Meditation one needs also to realize that, in this case, we are dealing with meditation in the broad sense of the term, because it involves “mental prayer” and “contemplation”. “Mental prayer” or “meditation” is a form of prayer, which takes place “in the heart” and is different from “vocal prayer” such as the Liturgy of the Hours which is recited and consists of reciting the psalms or the rosary. Contemplation, on the other hand, is not a pure and simple meditation, but a higher stage of meditation. When we think of “acquired contemplation”, as well as the “infused contemplation” or “mystical type”, Liguori explains:

This is God who acts in contemplation, and the soul just *patitur* (waits or endures) and receives gifts which are poured into it by divine grace; the soul does nothing because divine light and love themselves fill the soul and lovingly focus it on contemplating the goodness of its Lord; the Lord enriches it in this way.<sup>21</sup>

Contemplation rises above each image or thought, which are limited to a pure “view” of God as “love notes” that are returned to his presence. God permeates everything so as to contemplate His beauty comparable to the delight of the apostles on Mount Tabor (Matthew 17: 1-9; Mark 9: 1-8, Luke 9: 28-36).

Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite, defined contemplation as “a simple intuition of the truth”, while St. Bernard described it as the “rapture of the divine majesty” and St. Gregory the Great called it “the vision of the most beloved person”. Returning to the concept of Alphonsian contemplation, it is seen as the last step in the development of meditation and its highest stage.<sup>22</sup>

Alphonsus Liguori, commenting on meditation, did not despise intellectual reflection. He commented that the so-called “spiritual reflection” and “meditation” are closer to an intellectual pursuit and even hinted, especially at the beginning of his practice:

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<sup>21</sup> “Nella contemplazione opera Dio, e l’anima solamente *patitur* e riceve i doni chele vengono infusi dalla grazia, senza ch’ella operi cosa alcuna, poiché la stessa luce ed amor divino, di cui allora vien ripiena, la rendono amorosamente attenta a contemplare la bontà del suo Dio, che in tal modo allora la favorisce”. A. M. DE LIGUORI, *Pratica del confessore*, Frigento 1987, 183-184.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. ID., *Dolce trattenimento delle anime amanti di Dio a vista di Gesù crocifisso*, in: *Opere Ascetiche*, vol. V, Roma 1934, 288-289.

“During meditation, the soul searches for God through the effort of thinking ..., the soul acts through the means of its own powers”.<sup>23</sup> Meditation should come out of a reflection that is based on the consideration of God’s word in an effort to understand its meaning. What is meant here is the “assimilation” of the truth. What we consider meditation involves, in essence, “considering the eternal and the goodness of God”. Alphonsus is convinced that “...because of abandoning meditation of eternal truths, the world is full of sin and hell is full of souls. Jeremiah says: “...all the land is made waste because no man takes it to heart” (Jeremiah 12: 11). On the other hand, the Holy Spirit says that the one who often thinks of death, doom, and eternity will be free from sins: “In everything you do, remember your end, and you will never sin” (Ecclesiastes 7, 36).<sup>24</sup> Of course, beginners in spiritual reflection do not have to rely on mere discursive reflection based on inference from the evidence drawn from Scripture. Thus, depriving the whole sphere of affective meditation and devoting one’s self to a large part of meditation is called<sup>25</sup> “meditation” which is the basis for what follows later: deeper feelings, decisions, and, ultimately, the love of contemplation.

St. Alphonsus M. de Liguori stressed that the basis of meditation is to find a solid and wise theological doctrine supported by the teachings of the Church in order to form an appropriate and strong belief in the reality of God. This is the key, especially at the beginning of the spiritual life, for meditation because it can take on and be susceptible to various kinds of twists and errors in its understanding. For this reason, the Saint argued tirelessly against

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<sup>23</sup> “Nella meditazione si va cercando Dio colla fatica del discorso (...), nella meditazione opera l’anima cogli atti delle proprie potenze”. *Id.*, *Pratica del confessore*, *op. cit.*, 183.

<sup>24</sup> “È certo che per mancanza di considerazione delle verità eterne il mondo è pieno di peccati e l’inferno è pieno d’anime. *Desolatione desolata est omnis terra, quia nullus est qui recogitet corde* (Jer 12, 11). Al contrario, dice lo Spirito Santo, che chi si ricorda spesso della morte, del giudizio e dell’eternità, starà libero da’ peccati: *Memorare novissima tua, et in aeternum non peccabis* (Eccl 7, 40). *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>25</sup> Liguori constantly repeats: “The prayer is a fire place where souls are fired with God’s love. ‘My heart was burning in my breast; while I was deep in thought the fire was lighted’ (Ps 39, 3)”. Cf. *ibid.*, 260.

the extreme views of Jansenists that caused great damage to the spiritual life of the faithful by the elimination of the inner life and its authentic affective dimension. It was also the case with the false doctrine of the Quietists on “idle” meditation and contemplation. Caring for solid Christian doctrine as a basis for the development of an integral relationship with God is one of the most important elements of Alphonsian Meditation, and points to his extraordinary attention to the proper development of the interior spiritual life of the faithful. Furthermore, Liguori knew that the spiritual experience of God is defined by a qualitative knowledge and experience of God: a Christian is not looking for some vague and broad sense of Deity or the cut-to-measure type of subjective tastes and views, but one that leads to a union with the one and true God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Christian spirituality depends on Christian dogma, and on the consciousness of the Church from its very beginnings. Prayer and meditation were present and based on faith, considered with great reverence to be the “spiritual building” constructed by the believer to grow on a solid foundation, “*lex orandi, lex credendi*”.

It should be underlined emphatically that Christian meditation must always be focused on love and commitment. It is a meditation on “piety” in the sense of the total commitment of faith that seeks to know God’s love, to be united, and to reach intimate communion with Him. It is a personal relationship, constructed gradually by the grace of God and a human effort. Alphonsian Meditation is very sapiential. It is not a purely theoretical and speculative reflection. “Intelligence of faith” which comes from “pious reflection” on the mysteries of God, or even the mystery of the Trinity, is carried out, according to Liguori, only in the context of prayer and obedience to faith.

The difference between meditation and simple reflection is highlighted in a significant way when we look at the affective sphere: Alphonsian Meditation operates not only in a shrouded atmosphere of spiritual feelings, but it moves towards the development and strengthening of such feelings. This includes, of course, not a simple emotion, sentiment, and nostalgic atmosphere of meditation, but the deep spiritual affection born of the acts of the

will with the unifying nature.<sup>26</sup> The real purpose of meditation is to gain more insightful ideas about God (although, as we have seen, it does not exclude early ideas, and even assumes their presence), as well as spiritual solace, and peace of heart (although the latter two are often by-products of meditation). The ultimate goal of Christian meditation is, then, to grow in communion with God, trusting in His Love, being capable of true adoration of God, and completely surrendering oneself to Him. While the philosophical reflection is limited to knowledge, meditation would go beyond knowledge of God to learning to love. One can, in all honesty, argue that meditation which is not about love, misses its principal target.

#### *Meditation According to Liguori*

Liguori, who knew the value of meditation in his early years, offers daily thoughts or posts to his readers back in 1728 on what he called “Eternal Truths” (*Massime Eterne*).<sup>27</sup> Within it, he outlines a basic scheme and submits a favourite subject of meditation: the initial acts (faith, humility and repentance), on the reading of the Gospel pericope, or reflections on eternal truths developed by an author. That’s the shape and content of the proposed mental prayer Liguori, in his pastoral ministry as a young priest, along with his first companions, prayed, meditated upon, and taught in dozens of so-called “Evening Chapels” (*Cappelle Serotine*), picking up hundreds of poor off the street shrines and sad alleys of Naples. In these places, the poor were taught to pray and given spiritual instruction. Some of these illiterate people were willing to pray and meditate together and then teach others the prayers. At the end of their lives, they achieved a high degree of sanctity.<sup>28</sup>

Alphonsus M. de Liguori writes a short description of his meditation method in “A Quick Way to Practice Mental Prayer”

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 262-264.

<sup>27</sup> A. M. DE LIGUORI, *Massime eterne cioè meditazioni per ciascun giorno della settimana*, in *Opere Ascetiche*, vol. IX, Roma 1965, 381-395.

<sup>28</sup> T. REY-MARMET, *Il santo del secolo dei Lumi – Alfonso de Liguori*, Roma 1983, 228-229.

(“*Ristretto del modo di fare l’orazione mentale*”)<sup>29</sup> issued in 1742; it outlines the basic structure of meditation that has remained unchanged since then. The author, however, did improve and enrich meditation and explained and promoted it in many later works. As for the experience gained in teaching, such a method was used during parish missions and became a permanent feature of such missions (except for Holy Mass, preaching, confession, and worship). He organized many people who had been abandoned on the outskirts of Naples into evening meetings called “Pious Life” (“*Vita Devota*”). During these meetings, Alphonsus taught prayer as a personal dialogue with God, remembering its various formulas. First of all, he prepared the faithful for the celebration of mental prayer before they prayed by themselves. The foundation of the meditation was lively and full of the deepest feelings of the relationship with God who, out of love for the people, “...did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all....” (Romans 8: 32).

Liguori did what he could to introduce the illiterate to meditation. They studied the texts read by others or repeated from memory pious songs written and composed by Saint Alphonsus. They made a kind of extension of meditation, a kind of “song” being hummed during daily activities. This practice was to consolidate the fruit of missions that were not only the way to conversion, but also a way to offer the participants “tools” (“*mezzi*” in Italian) to deepen their personal relationship with Christ in the development of holiness.

In “*Ristretto*”, Alphonsian Meditation is divided into three main stages: preparation, meditation, and end. He begins by ordering calmness and focusing attention on the presence of God through the establishment of personal contact with him as in spoken acts; then goes to the proper reflection and meditation which naturally develops into a dialogue or an union expressed in acts, requests, and prayers.

In addition to the basic scheme, it is worth noting that a strong emphasis is placed by Alphonsus on the person of Christ as being at the centre of spiritual life, and the pattern of overflowing love manifested to man through His death on the cross. This

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<sup>29</sup> A. M. DE LIGUORI, *Opere Ascetiche*, vol. II, Roma 1962, 210-211.

makes Alphonsian Meditation not “an art on its own” nor a relaxation technique, but a Christocentric method of prayer, open to the dimension of salvation. In the first place, it is rooted in the Paschal Mystery of the Incarnate God. Through meditation, the presence of Holy Mary is always emphasized. Through Alphonsus’ desire for holiness, he turned to Mary, her faithful example, and her intercession, recognizing her as the ultimate “tour guide in meditation”.

Alphonsus recommended meditation to all the faithful: from the young and inexperienced all the way to the consecrated priests and bishops. The book guide, entitled “Reflections Useful for Bishops” (*Riflessioni utili a’ vescovi*),<sup>30</sup> indicates mental prayer as the first and most important condition of fulfilling a vocation. However, in the booklet “The Necessity of Mental Prayer” (*Necessità dell’orazione mentale* [1745]),<sup>31</sup> Alphonsus proposes a meditation to seminarians and shows them that without it, the salvation of the priest is uncertain, and achieving excellence without it virtually impossible.<sup>32</sup> Liguori notes that mental prayer comes to meet man with the redeeming love of God which is the sense of excellence and deepest content of the priesthood. This love ignites and transforms the human heart. It is this mental prayer in which God speaks with the priest, and the priest with God. It is a great privilege and grace of Christ for which the priest must continually give thanks and humbly beg for, as required.

According to Alphonsus Liguori, St. Teresa of Jesus’ spiritual son, meditation naturally prepares one for contemplation. As it appears in the “Considerations on the Virtues of St. Teresa” (*Considerazioni sopra le virtù e pregi di S. Teresa* [1743]), the meditator should be open to contemplation. But one should also be prudent enough to defend against exaltations and avoid temporal ecstasies that are unsupported permanent decisions of will.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Id., *Riflessioni utili a’ Vescovi per la pratica di ben governare le loro Chiese tratte dagli esempi de’ vescovi zelanti ed approvate coll’esperienza*, in: *Opere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, vol. III, Torino 1880, 871.

<sup>31</sup> Id., *Della necessità dell’orazione mentale*, in: *Opere Ascetiche*, vol. II, Roma 1962, 209-223.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 109.

<sup>33</sup> *Opere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, vol. II, Torino 1846, 464.

Liguori refers to meditation in many ascetic works, enriching and developing its various aspects. Turning to the confessors in “Guide to the Confessor” (“*Pratica del Confessore*” [1755]), it is about meditation in the context of spiritual direction for both the novice (through excellence) or the more advanced (who may already experience the grace of contemplation). Liguori explains the mutual relationships between mental prayer and mystic prayer. He encourages the spiritual directors to propose meditation to the faithful, regardless of difficulties, since meditation is the perfect “tool” to develop a passionate dialogue about love with God. The duty of the confessor is to introduce the faithful into meditation and to watch over [his] or [her] development [and] practices in a systematic way.<sup>34</sup> In the work “*Del gran mezzo della preghiera*”, the author highlights the place of mental prayer in a Christian’s life and work, and considers the relationship of meditation and prayer to these. Thus, in his view, meditation is morally necessary in a Christian’s life so to receive all the necessary graces from God to gain salvation.<sup>35</sup> It is an important and simple means of spiritual formation, yet an irreplaceable practice. Understanding the economics of Christ’s many graces frees the sinner and gives the meditator the needed confidence received through prayer and cooperation. Hence, mental prayer is the foundation of all kinds of prayers.

The most famous work of the Saint of Naples is “Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ”<sup>36</sup> (“*Pratica di Amar Gesù Cristo*” [1768]) where he draws attention to the dynamic development of meditation associated with one’s personal relationship and “progress in Christ’s love” manifested in the mystery of His Redemption. Love is the primary means by which one can remain in grace. The way to achieve this is through mental prayer directed towards the Saviour who died on the cross for all and who is present in the living Church. This is a particular characteristic of the spiritual teaching of St. Alphonsus. The work is the quintessence of the most mature of Liguori’s teachings on the spiritual life. In “The True Spouse of

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<sup>34</sup> A. M. DE LIGUORI, *Pratica del confessore*, op. cit., 183-206.

<sup>35</sup> ID., *Del gran mezzo della preghiera*, op. cit., 11-32.

<sup>36</sup> ID., *Pratica di amar Gesù Cristo*, in: *Opere ascetiche*, vol. I, 1-243, Roma 1933.

Jesus Christ”<sup>37</sup> (*“La vera sposa di Gesù Cristo”* [1762]), dedicated to consecrated persons, Liguori presents meditation as a great privilege and a morally necessary path for one’s spiritual development. Moral necessity derives from the absolute necessity of prayer for salvation, and prayer is understood to be a profound faith-relationship with Christ. Meditation is so great a “spiritual technique” that it leads to the salvation and sanctification of men and women, especially the consecrated ones. The author devotes much space to a contemplation which calls on God alone. Until this happens, one should not give up on meditation as a means to recognize the call from God and to prepare for a life of contemplation.

The work entitled “Pious Reflections” (*“Riflessioni Devote”*) written at the end of his life (1773) contains a kind of synthesis of the author’s teaching on the spiritual life.<sup>38</sup> Liguori presents the vision of the plots, the means of a Christian’s spiritual life, and the virtues which are irreplaceable elements in mental prayer. It starts from the perspective of eternity, from which one cannot escape thinking about God and one’s own life. It would then appear like the prospect of a limitless and unconditional love of God even to the sacrifice of the Cross.<sup>39</sup> The author recalls the objectives of mental prayer, namely, union with God and His will. All is necessary so to obtain the graces needed for the development of the life of God in the heart and the development of life according to the present will of God.

Studying Alphonsus’ teaching about meditation, one has to remember that mental prayer was vital for him, but it was only part of a much richer and more diverse “project of Christian life”. It was only one side to his spiritual, moral, and pastoral dimensions.

#### *Alphonsian Meditation*

The Alphonsian Method of mental prayer or meditation has not fallen into disuse; it is still practiced today as a living and

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<sup>37</sup> ID., *La vera sposa di Gesù Cristo cioè la monaca santa per mezzo delle virtù proprie d’una religiosa*, in *Opere ascetiche*, vol. XIV-XV, Roma 1935.

<sup>38</sup> ID., *Riflessioni devote sopra diversi punti di spirito a pro delle Anime che desiderano avanzarsi nel Divino Amore*, in: *Opere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, vol. II, Torino 1846, 249-316.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 267-268.

changing reality, as was the case in St. Alphonsus' day. St. Alphonsus' teachings on meditation have been embraced by the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, the community which has been continuing the saint's mission on Earth. Inspired by the charisma of their founder and living the Alphonsian tradition, the Redemptorists are open to the signs of the times, to the current teachings of the Church, and to human achievements and have kept enhancing the practice of mental prayer, both within their own community and during Redemptorist-led parish missions. In its basic scheme, the Alphonsian Meditation Method proposed by them today does not differ from the kind of meditation developed by the founder of the Redemptorist society. In practice, it has been possible to gain a better understanding of the role of individual elements of meditation in the context of the cultural and spiritual development of contemporary man.

The method of meditation developed by St. Alphonsus and communicated to us by the so-called "Alphonsian tradition" consists of three basic stages: introduction, meditation reflection and proper meditation and conclusion. This is a paradigm of meditation which is accessible and easy to remember and to adapt to the mentality of the less advanced to whom the saint addressed most of his missionary message, while at the same time containing all the essential elements of each meditation.

Anyone wishing to meditate properly is advised to do the following: find a quiet place,<sup>40</sup> set oneself a regular, quiet time in which to meditate in order to avoid excessive tension, responsibilities, and troubling thoughts<sup>41</sup> for preferably 20-25 minutes a day, 2-3 times a week.<sup>42</sup> Be sure to be reasonably rested. Make prior

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<sup>40</sup> "Parlando poi del luogo per far l'orazione, il più proprio è la chiesa; ma coloro che non vi possono venire o trattenervisi, la possono fare in ogni luogo, nelle case, nelle campagne. Anche camminando e faticando si può far l'orazione, con tener la mente a Dio. Quante povere villanelle, non potendo altrimenti, si fanno l'orazione faticando e viaggiando! Chi cerca Dio, ben lo trova in ogni luogo ed in ogni tempo". ID., *Pratica del confessore, op. cit.*, 260.

<sup>41</sup> "Discacciare dal cuore ogni affetto che non è per Dio. (...) Discacciare la tristezza, conservando in tutti gli avvenimenti una tranquillità e volto sereno sempre uniforme. Chi vuole quel che vuol Dio non dee star mai afflitto". ID., *Ristretto, op. cit.*, 895

<sup>42</sup> "In quanto al tempo, il tempo della mattina è il migliore. Poco ande-

arrangements. Listen to some quiet music or walk in silence to help yourself calm down mentally, but do not overestimate the value of each condition, since Christian meditation is not just about technique, but more about the meditator having faith. Sit comfortably in an upright position, but do not relax so deeply as to slide into drowsiness and heaviness. Meditation may be hard intellectual work, especially at the beginning. With time and practice, one learns how to relax, move one's attention away from one's current concerns and calmly focus the mind on the topic of meditation and on the presence of God. To this end, stay calm, quiet and silent, and slowly and calmly settle your eyes and mind upon an object such as a cross, an icon, a Scripture passage, or on another religious image. The first stage starts with crossing oneself. It is a preparation for proper meditation.<sup>43</sup> It begins with the so-called "appearance in the presence of God".<sup>44</sup> It is about realiz-

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ranno bene l'azioni della giornata, quando la persona nella mattina non s'avrà fatta la sua orazione. L'orazione propriamente dovrebbe farsi due volte il giorno, la mattina e la sera; ma quando non può farsi la sera, si faccia almeno la mattina. Diceva il v. p.d. Carlo Caraffa, fondatore de' Pii Operari, che un atto fervoroso d'amore fatto nell'orazione della mattina, basta a mantenere l'anima in fervore tutta la giornata. In quanto poi al tempo che deve durare l'orazione, il parroco o confessore si regoli colla sua prudenza. È certo che per giungere ad un grado sublime di perfezione, non basta lo spazio di mezz'ora. Del resto basterà questo tempo per quelle anime che cominciano; ma sopra tutto s'inculchi loro che non lascino l'orazione quando viene l'aridità". *Id.*, *Pratica del confessore*, *op. cit.*, 260-261.

<sup>43</sup> "Nella preparazione tre sono gli atti che vi si han da fare: di fede della presenza di Dio, di umiltà, e di domanda di luce. Dicendo per 1: Dio mio, vi credo a me presente e vi adoro dall'abisso del mio niente. – Per 2: Signore, per li peccati miei ora dovrei stare all'inferno. Mi pento d'avervi offeso. Perdonatemi per pietà! – Per 3: Eterno Padre, per amore di Gesù e di Maria, datemi lume in questa orazione, affinché io ne cavi profitto. Indi dicasi un'Ave a Maria ss. affinché n'ottenga questa luce, ed un Gloria Patri a s. Giuseppe, all'Angelo custode ed al Santo avvocato. Questi atti si facciano con attenzione, ma brevemente, e subito si passi alla meditazione". *Ibid.*, 261. "Circa la preparazione, questa contiene tre atti: di fede, con adorare Dio presente; di umiltà, con umiliarsi dinanzi a Dio e cercargli perdono; e di domanda di lume, con cercare luce a Dio, per amore di Gesù e di Maria, per fare bene quell'orazione. E quindi premettere un' Ave Maria alla Vergine SSma, si passi alla meditazione". *Id.*, *Ristretto*, *op. cit.*, 223.

<sup>44</sup> "Attendere continuamente alla presenza di Dio. Dice s. Teresa: Tutto il danno ci viene dal non attendere che Dio ci sta presente. Chi veramente ama,

ing the presence of a personal God, the God of Jesus Christ: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, rather than some nebulous form tailored to our ideas, limited by our doubts. Alphonsus strongly emphasized the importance of internal “appearance in the presence of God” in a personal act of faith; otherwise, meditation may remain pure mental reflection rather than turning into a prayer, a meeting with God. Thus, what one needs to do is to utter consciously, deep down in one’s heart, a personal act of faith, hope and love for God who is love, a love so great that He became a man, died on the cross for our salvation, rose from the dead, and lives forever. This very God permeates me here and now. He is closer to me than I am to myself. He loves me more than I love myself. He knows who I am and that is why He is listening to me carefully.

By an act of faith, the meditator completely changes the nature of his reflection, opening it to a supernatural dimension. Through faith, expressed in a particular act of his will, the meditator enters into a relationship with God and establishes a meaningful contact with Him. Therein lies the fundamental difference between Christian meditation and Eastern meditation techniques. In the former, we move up to the level of faith. This is of paramount importance because repetition techniques are not the end to meditation; conversely, meditation is an act of Christian faith, love, and hope that our prayer reaches God. This fact diminishes, to a certain extent, the importance of all the so-called technical elements of meditation such as silence, concentration, feelings, distraction, the degree of relaxation, and concentration methods. It is faith, rather, affected by the numerous conditions mentioned above, that makes it possible for meditation to bear real fruit.

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sempre si ricorda dell’amato. Per conservare poi la memoria di questa divina presenza, giova in pratica il porsi qualche segno speciale sulla persona, sul tavolino o nella stanza. E sopra tutto bisogna mantener questa presenza con fare spesso tra ‘l giorno atti d’amore a Dio e domande del suo s. amore: per esempio: Gesù mio, mio amore, mio tutto. Io t’amo con tutto il cuore. Mi dò tutto a te. Fanne di me quel che vuoi. Io non voglio altro che te e la tua volontà. Dammi l’amore tuo e son contento. E simili. Avvertasi però a fare questi atti senza violenza e senza andarvi trovando consolazione sensibile, ma con soavità e volontà pura, solo per dar gusto a Dio. Diceva s. Teresa: Non abbiám paura, che Dio lasci senza premio un’alzata d’occhi con ricordarsi di lui”. *Id., Pratica del confessore, op. cit., 235-236.*

To express his or her faith, the meditator can use one of the traditional formulas or, ideally, do it spontaneously. However, a desire to meet with God remains of utmost importance. That is why St. Alphonsus recommended, especially at this time, an attitude of humility (as expressed in the act of contrition). Personal faith is, above all, a gift from God. Even our so-called “doubts” do not have to destroy the value of our faith. Having realized this, we must confess our meanness and our inability to make contact with God due to our human condition before the Lord. Every encounter with God can only take place by His grace, at His initiative, so one should ask humbly for inner purification to make way for the light of the Holy Spirit needed to put good thoughts into action.

Having briefly outlined above “direct (or immediate) preparation”, it is essential to add here a few more words about the so-called “further preparation” for meditation which St. Alphonsus writes about. Reading the text to be used in one’s meditation the evening before or the morning of the meditation makes the passage more accessible, understandable, and easier to work with. It becomes part of the subconscious, but nothing prepares one for meditation better than a well-ordered, quiet and peaceful life devoted primarily to doing good. The good one does selflessly to other people fills one’s soul with peace and, gradually, one begins to feel the presence of God. The good done to a neighbour opens the believer to the Holy Spirit who lives in his heart, allowing him to feel His presence according to the biblical assurance that “rivers of living water will flow from within him” (John 7: 38). Acquainting oneself beforehand with the morning meditation helps one shift the spiritual contents of moral behaviour so that it is consistent with the spirit of the Gospel throughout the rest of the day.

The second and crucial stage of meditation is a slow reading (“lectio”) of an appropriately selected short text. The contents of mental prayer usually concern the revealed truths, especially those taken from the New Testament. It may also be a short consideration of religious books appropriate for the meditating person’s spiritual interests and advancement level. The chosen text should be read slowly, first as a whole, once or twice, just to capture its general idea and the possible context. If it is a biblical scene, it should be imagined. Then, the text should be read sentence

by sentence, phrase by phrase, until the meditator moves on to meditation proper (“meditatio”). It involves reflecting on the spiritual meaning of a particular phrase and rereading the phrase if necessary, often many times. This is called “rumination”: first, extracting the spiritual element, and then, possibly, deciphering a personal message which the Holy Spirit may reveal to the meditating individual. At that point, we mentally scan the encountered words, situations and images, tapping into our memories, feelings, and imagination. This is not a process one should hurry through, but rather enter into slowly and thoroughly, one sentence at a time. For the point is not so much to consider the selected text as a whole, but rather to grasp and take into one’s heart at least one spiritual truth contained in the text at a time.<sup>45</sup> Asking oneself the following questions may be helpful: What have I just read? How does it apply to me? How should I understand these words, Lord? What do they tell me about You? What do You want me to do?

St. Alphonsus suggests that in the course of meditation one should pause at intervals to reflect on whatever one finds difficult, on whatever particularly “touches” one’s heart (especially one’s mind and will, rather than the emotions), on whatever arouses one’s spiritual interest, enlightens one or opens up a new, inner perspective. Just “like a bee which stops at a flower that has the honey, and then flies away” (St. Francis de Sales),<sup>46</sup> so too does Christian meditation. If the meditator finds that there is nothing

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<sup>45</sup> “Per la meditazione poi giova, a chi sa leggere, il servirsi di qualche libro, con fermarsi dove trova più sentimento. Dice s. Francesco di Sales che in ciò devesi fare come fanno le api, che si fermano su d’un fiore, fino a tanto che vi trovano miele ed indi passano all’altro. Chi poi non sa leggere, mediti i novissimi, i benefici di Dio e sopra tutto la vita e passione di Gesù Cristo: questa (dice s. Francesco di Sales) dev’esser la nostra meditazione ordinaria. Oh che bel libro è la passione di Gesù per l’anime devote! Ivi meglio che in ogni altro libro s’intende la malizia del peccato e l’amore d’un Dio verso l’uomo“. Id., *Pratica del confessore*, op. cit., 261-262. “Circa la meditazione poi si devono avvertire più cose. Primieramente, ch’è di bene che la persona legga il punto su quella materia che le fa maggior raccoglimento, e più inclinazione a pensarvi; ma quando poi l’anima già si sente mossa da qualche sentimento devoto, allora deve lasciare di leggere, ed occuparsi in raccogliere i frutti della meditazione“. Id., *Ristretto*, op. cit., p. 223.

<sup>46</sup> Id., *Pratica del confessore*, op. cit., 261-262.

new and appealing to him or her in a given thought any more, he or she should quietly continue contemplation. The adoption of such an attitude is a sign of respect and obedience to the word of God addressed to the individual, and to the Holy Spirit speaking to us. The meditator is similar to Mary from the Gospel, sitting at Christ's feet and listening to His Words with rapt attention (cf. Luke 10: 39).<sup>47</sup>

The main goal in meditation set by Liguori is to "remain in God's presence" and "talk" with Him. This is called "a prayer of the heart". Meditation is not just about learning new things, for there is a risk of reducing mental prayer to purely utilitarian purposes, namely, gaining religious knowledge or the knowledge of ethical principles. The supernatural aspects of meditation are manifested in the fact that the meditating individual humbles himself before the majesty of God, adores Him, thanks Him, apologizes to Him, and asks Him for a blessing needed to enter into a dialogue of love and communion with God.<sup>48</sup> At this stage in meditation, it is only God that matters as well as anything that relates to Him: our own affairs, desires, and good will. First and foremost, we must offer Him everything from our past, present, and future. This complete submission to God was emphasized by St. Paul, "...for everything belongs to you ... and you belong to Christ, and Christ to God" (1 Corinthians 3: 21-23). Another way to enter into this dialogue of love is to use formulas known as acts of

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. K. TILMANN, *Guida alla meditazione*, Brescia 1989, 135.

<sup>48</sup> "Di più si avverta che tre sono i frutti della meditazione: gli affetti, le preghiere, le risoluzioni. E per 1., deve l'anima occuparsi con la volontà, ma con soavità e senza violenza, in fare affetti verso Gesù e Maria ecc., o di confidenza o di umiltà, o di pentimento, o d'amore, o di rassegnazione, o di offerta ecc.; poiché gli affetti che nell'orazione si accendono, infiammano l'anime e l'uniscono a Dio: questi sono il maggior frutto dell'orazione. Per 2., deve l'anima cercare a Gesù ed a Maria ecc. le grazie che le abbisognano, non solo in generale, ma anche in particolare, come la vittoria di qualche vizio, l'amore di Dio, la santa perseveranza ecc. E tal modo di fare l'orazione è utilissimo, anzi necessario, specialmente in tempo di aridità di affetti; poiché allora non ci è meglio che umiliarsi, rassegnarsi e cercare misericordia da quella infinita Bontà; altrimenti v'è pericolo o di lasciare l'orazione per lo tedio, o di farne pochissimo profitto. Per 3., poi deve la persona, prima di terminare l'orazione, fare o confermare sempre qualche risoluzione particolare, di superare qualche difetto più solito, o praticare qualche virtù più utile". A. M. DE LIGUORI, *Ristretto*, op. cit., 223.

thanksgiving, faith, hope, love, and worship. St. Alphonsus also suggested making a concrete “good decision” inspired by meditation, to be carried out the same day. This decision incorporates the newly discovered truth in the individual’s everyday life and “seals” the inner spiritual experience arrived at during meditation. The Alphonsian tradition encourages one to do an examination of conscience before God to verify if and how the pledge has been fulfilled.

The third stage of meditation is a “summary of the meeting” with Christ, the Mother of God, and all the patron saints and asking for their intercession with God on behalf of the meditator. Liguori and other saints speak here of the so-called “spiritual bouquet”, which brings up a spiritual “enlightenment” gained from meditation.<sup>49</sup> It is essential to remember it, using a quote, for example, or some easy-to-remember sentence of one’s own device to aid one’s memory. It is customary to end a meditation session with prayers for the Church, for one’s loved ones, for sinners, and for persons in need of help as well as by giving thanks to God for the completed meditation session.<sup>50</sup> St. Alphonsus mentions that it is also worthwhile asking God for love, for His help in discovering a personal vocation and perseverance in it, and for some Divine light in an individual’s efforts to understand and do His will, etc. Redemptorists finish their meditation with a prayer to Our Lady who is a Guide in one’s spiritual growth, and by noting any major inspirations received during the meditation.

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<sup>49</sup> “Bisogna poi, in uscir dall’orazione, per 1. come dice s. Francesco di Sales, raccoglierne il mazzolino di fiori, per odorarli in tutto quel giorno, cioè una o due cose dove l’anima ha ritrovato maggior sentimento, affin di ricordarsene e rinvigorirsi nel resto della giornata”. *Id.*, *Pratica del confessore*, *op. cit.*, 266.

<sup>50</sup> Circa finalmente la conclusione, questa si fa con tre atti brevemente: 1. Con ringraziare Gesù e Maria dei lumi ricevuti. 2. Con offrire a Dio, per mano di Gesù e di Maria, gli atti e le risoluzioni fatte. 3. Con pregare il Signore, per amore dell’istesso Gesù e Maria, a dar la forza di eseguire i propositi”. *Id.*, *Ristretto*, *cit.*, p. 224. “Finalmente la conclusione dell’orazione si fa con tre atti. Per 1. si ringrazia Dio de’lumi ricevuti in quella meditazione. Per 2. si fa il proposito di osservare fedelmente le risoluzioni fatte. Per 3. si domanda all’eterno Padre, per amore di Gesù e di Maria, l’aiuto per essergli fedeli. E si termina con raccomandargli l’anime del purgatorio, i prelati della Chiesa, i peccatori e tutti i nostri parenti, amici e benefattori con un Pater ed Ave, che sono le più utili preghiere insegnateci da Gesù e dalla santa Chiesa”. *Id.*, *Pratica del confessore*, *op. cit.*, 265.

The beginnings of the practice of mental prayer may be difficult, even if the meditator takes his time to practice concentration and persistently follows the whole scheme of meditation. For those uninitiated and without practice, meditation takes longer. It is often forgotten that, in particular, an introduction to meditation should be short, simple, and quiet, but at the same time honest, true, and profound. The same applies to the final stage. The central aspect is meditation on the text itself, and a movement of the heart which may accompany meditation when God opens up a previously-hidden truth.

In conclusion, it cannot be overstressed that the wisdom of the meditation practice proposed by St. Alphonsus M. de Liguori is not founded on training the mind to contemplate (although reflection is always open to contemplation), but on strengthening an individual's love of God and other people.<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that in the face of the truth learnt in the course of meditation, one experiences various feelings of awe, joy, confidence, peace, and responsibility. They are important aids in the development of inner life and outer behaviour consistent with the Gospels and scriptural values. Having confronted one's own life with the truth from God, an individual will draw conclusions concerning his or her behaviour and, strengthened by grace, will be able to act accordingly. Meditation allows one to meet God, but it is also a condition for acquiring all other virtues. It should be emphasized that the most important effect of meditation is meeting God and standing before the Lord as the angels do in heaven. The meditator learns to focus his or her thoughts, desires and feelings on God rather than on himself or herself. Faith is what is needed for an individual to enter into a spiritual communion with the Lord.

*(English translation by Edith Baguinho)*

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<sup>51</sup> "Atti d'amore poi sono il dire: Dio mio, vi stimo sovra ogni cosa. Vamo con tutto il mio cuore. Desidero vedervi amato da tutti. (...) Quando poi l'anima si sentisse unita a Dio con raccoglimento sovranaturale ossia infuso, (...) non dev'ella affaticarsi a fare altri atti, se non quelli a cui dolcemente si sente da Dio tirata, dovendo ella solamente attendere allora con un'attenzione amorosa a ciò che 'l Signore opera in lei, poich'altrimenti potrebbe mettere impedimento alla divina operazione. Si noti di più, come avverte s. Francesco di Sales, che se mai dallo Spirito Santo ci viene ispirato qualche buon affetto prima della considerazione, allora dobbiamo lasciar la considerazione e dar luogo agli affetti, mentre la considerazione non si fa che per muovere gli affetti, onde, ottenuto il fine, deve tralasciarsi il mezzo". *Id.*, *Pratica del confessore*, *op. cit.*, 263-264.

SUMMARY

The article identifies the current interest in meditation as a re-awakening of an inward need inherent in the nature of every human being, a need that since time immemorial has accompanied the child-like wonder at the world and that has pervaded rites and rituals of many religions, including but not limited to Eastern ones. In the past century, Christians of the West virtually departed from meditation and they almost lost the deeper meaning of its crucial significance for spiritual life, even though the meditative practices had been known as far back as in the Old and New Testaments. Meditation has been practiced by the Desert Fathers, the Christian monks of the first millennium, and numerous saints of the Western and Orthodox Churches. Over the years, Christians have developed worthwhile meditation techniques and devised efficient methods as well as created outstanding relevant models such as St. Alphonsus M. de Liguori, founder of the Redemptorist Order.

The core part of the article elaborates on the meaning, method, and techniques of meditation (mental prayer – “*orazione mentale*”) initiated by St. Alphonsus and further enhanced within the Alphonsian tradition.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article compare l'intérêt actuel porté sur la méditation au renouveau d'un besoin intérieur inhérent à la nature humaine, un besoin qui depuis les temps immémoriaux a accompagné l'émerveillement d'un enfant devant le monde, un besoin qui perce dans les rites et rituels de nombreuses religions, pas seulement des religions orientales. Au siècle dernier, les Chrétiens d'Occident se sont éloignés de la méditation, ils ont presque perdu son sens profond, son importance cruciale pour la vie spirituelle, même si les techniques de méditation sont connues dans l'Ancien aussi bien que dans le Nouveau Testament. La méditation fut pratiquée par les Pères du Désert, par les moines chrétiens du premier millénaire et par de nombreux saints des Églises occidentales et orthodoxes. Au cours des siècles, les Chrétiens ont développé des techniques de méditation valables, ils ont élaboré des méthodes efficaces et ils ont proposé des modèles éminents et profitables tel que St Alphonse de Liguori, fondateur des Rédemptoristes.

Le cœur de l'article porte sur la signification, la méthode, les techniques de méditation (l'oraison mentale – *orazione mentale*) initiées par St Alphonse et renforcées par la suite dans la tradition alphonsienne.