

Reflection on Feast of St Alphonsus Liguori for Aug. 1, 2021

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Today is the feast of one of our patrons: St. Alphonsus Liguori, famous moral theologian and founder of the Redemptorists. As we were co-founded by a Belgian Redemptorist, Fr. Louis Florent Gillet, we received from St. Alphonsus a spirituality that we share with the Redemptorists. Alphonsus was known for his deep love of Jesus and he saw that his mission, and that of his community, was to the “poor and abandoned.”

This March, I saw an article in America about Pope Francis’ deep appreciation for St. Alphonsus; he was speaking to Catholic moral theologians, missionaries and confessors and urging them to follow the example of St. A. What was that?

Enter a living relationship with people, the people of God, and to look at life from their perspective, in order to understand the real difficulties they encounter, to help heal their wounds.

He said moral theology cannot be only about principles but it had to respond to the reality of the person in need because, “knowledge of theoretical principles is not enough (as we try) to accompany and (assist) a person to DISCERN in their conscience the good to be done.”

Moral theology cannot be only about principles but must respond to the reality of the persons in need. “It is necessary that knowledge becomes practical through listening and welcoming of the least ones, the fragile ones and the one who is considered discarded by society. (That can apply to many in our society today: migrants, the divorced seeking belonging, members of the LGBTQ community etc.)”

Pope Francis emphasized that “the radical call of the gospel must not be set against human weakness; it is always necessary to find the road that does not alienate people but brings hearts closer to God.”

These comments are much like the general pastoral approach of Pope Francis.

Pope Francis has high praise for St. Alphonsus: He recalled that St. A., in light of his missionary outreach had to review the theological and juridical training that he had received in his early years, which had been marked by a certain rigorist approach. So, he reevaluated it and was led to adopt a “merciful approach and preached the gospel with a dynamism that attracted people!”

In theological disputes, St. A did not stop at the theoretical principles but allowed himself to be questioned by life itself in the concrete situations.

Drawing on the saint’s writings, Pope Francis emphasized that “the proclamation of the gospel in a rapidly changing society requires courage to listen to reality so as to educate our consciences to think in a different way, in what might seem a discontinuity with the past.” Pope Francis, the Jesuit, called St. Alphonsus “the master and patron of confessors and moral theologians because he offered constructive responses to the

challenges of his day. Through his popular way of evangelizing he indicated a style of moral theology that could keep together both the demands of the gospel and human frailty.

Pope Francis said, "Moral theology must not be afraid to receive the cry of the poor and make it their own."

As we honor our patron, Alphonsus Liguori, let us be inspired by how he dealt with people in difficulty, as he shared the gospel with them as we face the moral challenges of our day.