



ALPHONSIAN SPIRITUALITY



As we explore the IHM Charism, it is important to reflect on the spirituality of the IHM Congregation, which finds its origin in the spirituality that has been passed down to us from our patrons, St. Alphonsus Liguori and St. Teresa of Avila. It is the spirituality of St. Alphonsus in particular that influenced Father Louis Florent Gillet and Mother Theresa Maxis, the founders of the IHM Congregation.

When we speak of spirituality, we mean the living expression of a particular prayer tradition. The spirituality of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is grounded in the tradition of Saint Alphonsus Liguori, whose passion was to make the redeeming love of Jesus Christ accessible to every person, especially the spiritually abandoned poor and the marginalized of our society.

St. Alphonsus held the belief that God is lovingly present in all the daily and ordinary happenings of our lives. He celebrated God's great journey to the human heart in his contemplation of four major themes: The Incarnation, the Redemption, the Blessed Sacrament and his beloved Mother of God. For St. Alphonsus, contemplation always led, in one way or another, to the practice of the love of Jesus Christ. Alphonsian spirituality, then, is the living expression of the experience of, the belief in, the response to, and the practice of the love of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. Alphonsian spirituality highlights reverence for prayer, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, praying the Stations of the Cross, the importance of Marian devotions, love for God and others, and service to God and the Church through the spirit of mission.

As we now contemplate St. Alphonsus' four major themes, may we be drawn into the heart of the God of Boundless Love.

THE INCARNATION: THE CRIB

Christmas, for St. Alphonsus, was the revelation of the true face of God, the unexpected God who surprised humanity by appearing as a small, defenseless child. To contemplate this wondrous mystery of the Incarnation is to experience God's mercy in a new way. Taking on human flesh and becoming one with us reveals God's tender affection for us. This God, on fire with love for us, comes to enkindle in our hearts that same love for the entire human family.

Alphonsus is fascinated with the affection of a God who dis-placed Himself, who stooped down to become one with us. By drawing us to contemplate the mystery of the nativity in its totality, Alphonsian spirituality rids us of the narrow notion that the crib represents only the Infant, appealing and lovely as that may be during the Christmas season. Alphonsus calls us to recognize that the mystery of the Incarnation embraces human life in its entirety.

Through the Incarnation, God comes to penetrate and inhabit our ordinariness. God draws near to us in all the real and ordinary situations of our lives. Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, points to the dignity of all human persons, and invites us to commit ourselves to the love and service of our brothers and sisters.

Our faith in the mystery of the Incarnation enables us to see God in the people we meet, to really see them so as to enter their world, to look into their eyes, and to see the face of God anew.



REFLECTION

The Incarnation was not a mere coming, a temporary visit of one who was to be a fleeting sign of the Father's love. The Incarnation is Jesus' entrance into our world in history.

- Am I aware of Jesus' continuing presence in my life in this third millennium?
- How welcoming am I to that presence?
- How am I able to see the face of God in the faces of the people I meet each day?

LET US PRAY IN THE WORDS OF ST. ALPHONSUS

O sweet Infant Jesus, let my heart be Your crib and Your resting place. I desire to purify it from all sinfulness and imperfection, and to furnish it – though ever so poorly, with charity, humility, and a desire to conform to Your plan for my life. Make my heart serve as Your crib, not only during the Christmas season, but let it always be a fitting dwelling place for You.

THE REDEMPTION: THE CROSS

For St. Alphonsus, the Passion and Death of Jesus had everything to do with this great and abiding love for each one of us. The mystery of Redemption is revealed in a humble God who emptied Himself of His Godliness, poured Himself out in His ultimate humanness, and laid down His life upon the cross in a wondrous excess of love. On the cross, the precious cost of our Redemption, Jesus experienced the very depths of darkness, fear and distress,

Alphonsus was deeply aware of the emotional stress involved in all types of human sorrow. He hoped that we would come to know that the God who desires to be so closely involved in our lives, enters our every suffering. Jesus would have us walk through our suffering by His side and in His company, there to experience hope – the hope of newness of life – by virtue of His resurrection. This experience of the Paschal Mystery is an invitation to see the world and ourselves with new eyes: eyes that see life in the midst of death, possibility in the midst of failure, love in the face of lovelessness, and forgiveness in the face of anger and hurt. This is the image and likeness of the crucified God in broken humanity – near and far.

St. Alphonsus saw on the Cross one who died for love of him, a fact that he could not absorb passively as if it were like any other fact. It was something that demanded a response – a response in faith that God is present in all situations and will not abandon us; a response in hope that all will work out for good; and a response in a reciprocal movement of love so that what we have received can be freely given.



REFLECTION

The crucifix is the book that all of us must constantly read.

- Am I aware of the extreme to which God was willing to go for love of me?
- How much of me am I willing to pour out in loving response to so great a love?
- Do I know how to recognize the limitless Stations of the Cross where the crucified Christ can be found today?

LET US PRAY IN THE WORDS OF ST. ALPHONSUS

My dear Redeemer, I know that You have been close to me for so many years, because You want me to belong to You entirely. Help me to seek only Your love and the fulfillment of Your will.

Come, my Love, and consume everything in me that is not You. The same love that made You die on the cross for me makes me want to die to myself. Help me to desire only Your grace and Your holy love. Mary, my mother, I place my hope in your intercession.

THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

St. Alphonsus' devotion to the Eucharist was intense because he saw in it the movement of his own conversion to the Lord. It was in frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament that he found the basis for closeness to Jesus Christ. He often said that when we visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament we are able to speak as a friend does to a friend.

When St. Alphonsus spoke of the Eucharist, there were always echoes of the Passion. The Eucharist is a memorial to remind us daily of the love that Jesus bore us in dying. But it is more than just a return to something of the past. It is to keep us ever mindful that the love of Jesus on the Cross is the same love that is present and active in the Eucharist. St. Alphonsus saw in the Eucharist the presence of the Risen Lord with all His power to save. Moreover, he saw in the Eucharist the best way in which the Lord's love can do its work in us.

If the great commandment is to learn to love God and each other, what better way than to have the Lord of love with us and within us in the Eucharist.



REFLECTION

Let me take my life to the Blessed Sacrament. Let me be with His presence. Let me listen to His message. Speak, Lord, I love to listen to Your voice.

- Do I appreciate Jesus' gift of boundless love in the Eucharist?
- Am I generous enough with Jesus to visit the Blessed Sacrament, to speak with Him as a friend?
- When I receive the Eucharist, am I conscious of taking the love offered there to those I meet every day?

LET US PRAY IN THE WORDS OF ST. ALPHONSUS

My Lord Jesus Christ, I believe that You are really here in this Sacrament. Night and day, You remain here compassionate and loving. You call, You wait for, You welcome everyone who comes to visit You. I thank You for all the wonderful graces You have given me. I love You with all my heart. I give You my will, my love, my desires, everything I own. From now on do what You please with me. All I ask is that You love me, that You keep me faithful to the end of my life. I ask for the grace to do Your will exactly as You want it done. Amen.

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

St. Alphonsus had a deep devotion and passionate love for Mary, the Mother of God. He believed that the graces and spiritual insights received throughout his life came to him through the hands of Mary. This filled his heart with a strong desire to draw the “little people” of his day into intimate relationship with Mary as their Advocate, their Hope, and their Refuge in time of need. As simply as Mary said at the marriage feast of Cana, “Son, they have no wine,” she continues to intercede for us with Jesus. In her tenderness toward us as Mother, Mary is or perpetual help, our closest advocate in our journey to God. “To Jesus, through Mary.” All we need to ask.

Trust in God’s Providence, exhibited from the moment of her “fiat”, guided Mary through the mysteries of her Son’s life to the moment of her final “fiat” by the foot of the cross. With deep love, she stood near her Son as a hope for each of us that we might know and love Him. Truly, Mary is the hope of all believers, the one who gives birth to hope in our souls, in our hearts, in our yearnings.

In the midst of life’s fears, struggles, anxieties, and doubts, we can fix our eyes on Mary, the brilliant Star that lights our way. As we call her name, and run to her as our Mother of Refuge, Mary hopes that we will recognize her love and her special care for the poor, the lonely, the sick, and the oppressed of our world. Mary, the Blessed Mother of God, reveals to us the loveableness of God and fills us with hope as she leads us through this world’s darkness to the eternal light of heaven.



REFLECTION

Mary is a symbol of the constant help of God, always attentive to our needs and always a sign of fidelity to God.

- Is Mary, the Mother of God, a real presence in my life today?
- Am I aware of Mary's powerful intercession in time of need?
- For whom can I be an advocate or messenger of hope these days?

LET US PRAY IN THE WORDS OF ST. ALPHONSUS

O sweet Virgin Mary, O tender Advocate, perform your task for me. Do not say that my case is too difficult to be won, for I know, and everybody tells me, that every case, no matter how desperate it may be, if undertaken by you, will never be lost. Will mine be lost? No, I have no fear of this. Who ever was lost who appealed to you? That is why I invoke your help. O my great Advocate, my Refuge, my Mother Mary!

SUMMARY OF ALPHONSIAN SPIRITUALITY

And so it is that the wondrous mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption, the tender devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Mother, form the horizon of Alphonsian spirituality. St. Alphonsus' great insight, the one he held very closely and never veered from, is that all we need to do to deepen our relationship with God is to open our hearts! He would often say: "The paradise of God is the human heart." St. Alphonsus wants us to be at home with God, and it is in our very hearts where we can be most at home – the place where God finds each and every one of us.

In the spirit of St. Alphonsus Liguori, the Sister, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, have always been found with and among the people of God from 1845 until this present moment. This Charism Guide is our effort to share in a fuller and more intentional way the Alphonsian spiritual heritage, which is our IHM tradition.

It is our profound hope that with you, our cherished colleagues and friends, we may continue to pray together, to work together, and walk together, in the great mission that we share – proclaiming the gospel message in the spirit of Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

