

# Introduction

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**S**t. Alphonsus de Liguori (1696–1787), doctor of the Church, founder of the Redemptorists, and patron saint of confessors and moral theologians, wrote over 110 works, many of which were books of spirituality and pious devotion. He was a giant of eighteenth-century Catholic spirituality and had an impact on the devotional life of the faithful that lasts to this day. In 1745, he published, *Visits to the Most Holy Sacrament and to Most Holy Mary*, a small collection of thirty-one meditations specifically designed to help believers pray on a daily basis before Jesus in the Sacrament. Although Alphonsus had written a few devotional pamphlets prior this time, this is the first of his works that clearly identified him as its author. For this reason, it is often presented as his first published work.

The reception the book received was nothing short of astounding. It was an immediate success and went through many editions in Alphonsus's own lifetime and numbered more than two thousand editions by the last decade of the twentieth century. Although the book has lost some of its popular appeal in recent years, due largely to the changing contours of Catholic spirituality in the latter half of the twentieth century and the drop in interest in eucharistic adoration during the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, its lasting impact on the popular Catholic imagination should not be underestimated. As one of Alphonsus's recent biographers claims: "Perhaps no other work, with the possible exception of *The Imitation of Christ*, has ever had such an effect on devotional practice throughout the whole Catholic world."<sup>1</sup>

## *A Complete Translation*

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The present volume is a complete and accurate English translation of the *Visits* based on the critical Italian edition of 1939.<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding some editorial difficulties of its own, (e.g., identifying sources; establishing an accurate history of composition), this work is and still remains the best version of Alphonsus's *Visits* that has come down to us in the original Italian.<sup>3</sup> In my translation of this work, I try to present an accurate rendition of Alphonsus's language and thought patterns in an English style that reflects both the work's simplicity and its driving passion to draw others into a deep, personal intimacy with Christ. I also attempt to establish a dialogue between the

spiritual and cultural climate in which Alphonsus wrote and the very different spiritual and cultural sensitivities of today's Catholic readers.

Doing so, on either count, is no easy task. If it is true that every translation is an interpretation (and, at times, even a betrayal), it should come as no surprise that a literal, "word for word" rendering of the *Visits* would prove cumbersome and even burdensome to even most interested readers of today. In this translation, I try to be faithful to Alphonsus's writing, while making it accessible to English-speaking believers who are distanced from it by linguistic, cultural, and historical barriers. To accomplish this task, I try to enter the mindset of Alphonsus and translate his words and thoughts in a way that today's readers would understand and find palatable. In this way, I hope to contribute to the renewed interest in eucharistic adoration in the Church in recent years and provide those already dedicated to this venerable Catholic devotion with an important text from the past that both speaks to their spiritual sensitivities and faithfully reflects the words, thought, and spirit of its author.

To facilitate the reader's conversation with this great Catholic devotional classic, I have included a brief "Introduction" before each major section. These introductions summarize the main themes of each section and identify any historical figures with whom the reader may not be familiar. They offer a clear idea of what and of whom Alphonsus is writing and seek to familiarize the reader with the text of each visit from the very outset. Each major section, in turn, is followed by a series of reflection questions under the heading, "Visiting Jesus and Mary." The purpose of these questions is to help the reader probe his or her own thoughts about what Alphonsus has written and take ownership of it. Taken together, these brief introductions and reflection questions seek to encourage the reader to personalize the visits and use them as a means for fostering his or her relationship with Christ. Hopefully, they do not get in the way or take the place of the visits themselves. Instead, they should provide a framework for Alphonsus's thought that will help the reader to ask questions that will deepen his or her love for Jesus and his mother Mary.

### *The Life and Writings of Alphonsus de Liguori*

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Alphonsus de Liguori was born on September 27, 1696, at Marianella, Italy, on the outskirts of Naples. He was the son of Giuseppe de Liguori, a captain of the Royal Navy, and Anna Cavalieri, a member of the Neopolitan nobility. He was educated at home until the age of twelve, at which time he was enrolled in the University of Naples to study law. He completed his course of study at the age of sixteen with a doctorate in both Church and civil law (*in utroque jure*). He practiced law for a number of years and was on his

way to a fine legal career, when in 1723 he lost an important civil case due to court corruption and intrigue. A devout Catholic from his early years, Alphonsus was extremely disillusioned by this experience and reacted by forsaking the world and professing his desire to become a priest.

Despite his father's dissatisfaction with this decision, Alphonsus received his theological training at home under the direction of Don Julio Tornì and, in 1724 became a member The Congregation of the Apostolic Missions, a group of diocesan priests and clerics dedicated to mission preaching. He was ordained on December 21, 1726, and for the next few years devoted himself to preaching, catechetical instruction, and hearing confessions. In 1727, he organized the very popular Evening Chapels, regularly held evening sessions for the religious instruction, pious devotions, and charitable works of the working classes of Naples. In 1729, he took up residence in the Chinese College founded by the Matteo Ripa (1682–1746) and became heavily involved in local mission preaching.

A turning point in his life came in 1730 when he made a trip south of Naples to the small town of Scala on the Amalfi coast. There, he renewed his acquaintance with Thomas Falcoia (1663–1743) who had resided for a time at the Chinese College, was a member the Pious Workers, and was the recently consecrated bishop of nearby Castellamare di Stabia. During his stay, he also met Sister Maria Celeste Crostarosa (1696–1755), a contemplative nun and mystic living in a monastery at Scala. Each of these people had an important part to play in the establishment, in 1731, of the Institute of the Most Holy Savior, an order of contemplative order of nuns later to be known as the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer (the Redemptoristines). They also helped to found, in 1732, the Congregation of the Most Holy Savior, an apostolic institute of priests and lay brothers, later to be known as the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (the Redemptorists). The establishment of these distinct yet closely related religious institutes set Alphonsus on a new course of apostolic action. It would lead him and his small band of followers to the hilltops and remote mountain villages on the back roads of the kingdom of Naples to preach the Gospel of plentiful redemption in Christ to the poor and most abandoned.

From 1732 on, Alphonsus devoted himself to living out this option for the poor. The major projects of his life—his mission preaching, his theological and spiritual writing, the founding of the Redemptorist Congregation, his painting and musical compositions, his life of prayer—were all motivated by his profound desire to share the Good News of plentiful redemption in Christ with as many people as possible, especially those who did not have easy access to the Church's spiritual treasures. During his lifetime, he had some thirty-four years of missionary experience and gave no less than 150 popular

missions. He wrote more than 110 works, composed many popular songs, many of which are sung to this day, and was an accomplished painter. In the field of moral theology, he is best known for *The Practice of the Confessor for Exercising His Ministry Well* (1755), the *Instruction and Practice for a Confessor* (1757), and the nine editions of his three-volume *Moral Theology* (9th ed., 1785). His most important spiritual works include: *Visits to the Most Holy Sacrament and to Most Holy Mary* (1745), *The Glories of Mary* (1750), *The Way to Converse Always and Familiarly with God* (1754), *Conformity to the Will of God* (1755), *Preparation for Death* (1758), *Prayer, The Great Means of Salvation* (1759), *Dignity and Duty of Priests or Selva* (1760), *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ* (1760–61), *Darts of Fire* (1766), *The Way of Salvation* (1766), and *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* (1768). By 1961, his works had gone through some twenty thousand editions and had been published in over seventy languages. He was Rector Major of the Redemptorist Congregation for much of his life and served as bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths from 1762–75. He died on August 1, 1787, at Nocera de’Pagani, at the age of ninety-one. He was beatified on September 15, 1816, by Pius VII, canonized in 1831 by Gregory XVI, declared a Doctor of the Church in 1871 by Pius IX, and made the patron of confessors and moralists in 1950 by Pius XII. Of his many titles, “Doctor of Prayer,” as Pius XI referred to him in 1934, probably best expresses the important role he fills as author of the *Visits*.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Spirituality of Alphonsus*

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Alphonsus’s spirituality is first and foremost a “Gospel Spirituality,” one rooted in the person of Jesus Christ and which takes seriously the Lord’s injunction to his apostles “to make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). All of his writings, regardless of their subject, length, or intended audience, try to draw people into a deeper and more intimate relationship with Christ.

Even a cursory reading of his voluminous literary output shows that Alphonsus was extremely well read in the scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, and the great spiritual masters of the Western Church.<sup>5</sup> Of all that he was exposed to, four streams of spirituality, in particular, had a profound effect on his spiritual outlook. Like St. Teresa of Avila (1515–82), one of the patrons of his religious institute, he saw the importance of practical realism, a deep sacramental sense, dogmatic orthodoxy, and a strong Catholic identity. With St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), he emphasized a spirit of service based on effective, prudential love for the common good. Like St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622), he stressed the abundance and gratuity of salvation, the tenderness of God’s love, and conformity to the divine will. Like him, Alphonsus also highlighted the importance of exclamatory prayer for personal recollection, of developing a popular lay spirituality, and of learning and

the arts as important aids to holiness. Finally, with the Oratorians of Naples he emphasized such themes as participation in the Divine Image, the centrality of the Trinity, the Incarnation and Grace, and a devotional life based on the Incarnation and the eucharist. Through this same influence, he demonstrated an interest in the theology of states of life within the Church, and highlighted the simplicity, discipline, and training needed for an authentic spirituality of Christian childhood.<sup>6</sup>

In keeping with his highly focused and pragmatic spiritual ends, Alphonsus borrowed from these schools in a “creatively eclectic” way to develop his own synthesis that was relevant to his particular mission in the Church of preaching the Gospel to the poor and most abandoned.<sup>7</sup> Through his popular style, he met people where they were and brought them a little further along in their walk with the Lord. His spirituality may best be summarized through the phrase: “crib, cross, and sacrament” and is distinguished by a close adhesion to Jesus under the title of “Redeemer” and the proclamation of the need for fundamental conversion (*metanoia*). It is also marked by a deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jesus’ first and closest disciple. Alphonsus’s vision of God’s love for humanity focuses on the wonder of the Incarnation, the selfless giving manifested in Christ’s passion and death, the resurrected Lord’s continued presence in the Church through the eucharist, and the compassionate love of Mary, the Mother of all believers.

Alphonsus offers his readers and listeners a Christ-centered “theology of the heart” that he coupled with an ongoing “spirituality of practice.” “Paradise for God,” he once wrote, “is the human heart.”<sup>8</sup> He is concerned not so much with knowledge *about* Christ as with *knowing* Christ himself. Although he recognizes that such a relationship is primarily the work of God, he knows it can be fostered by a life of heartfelt prayer sustained by a daily regimen of fervent, yet moderate, ascetical practices.<sup>9</sup>

### *Alphonsus’s Teaching on Prayer*

In implementing his pastoral aims, Alphonsus was a great popularizer and synthesizer. Alphonsus dedicated his entire life to helping others grow in a personal knowledge of God. He reflected on his own experience and shared what he learned with others through his preaching, his writing, and the practice of spiritual direction. A practical man deeply steeped in the Catholic tradition, he was not afraid to make prudent adaptations to what he read and to use it to bring others closer to God.

This willingness is especially evident in his teaching on prayer. He recognizes the classical distinctions between *oratio* (i.e., vocal prayer), *meditatio* (i.e., meditation or mental prayer), and *contemplatio* (i.e., contemplation) and uses them for his overall framework.<sup>10</sup> To capture the various nuances

between these fundamental “types,” he generally follows the teaching of Teresa of Avila, making only some slight adjustments for his pressing pastoral concerns. His teaching on prayer can be best understood against this important backdrop.

According to Teresa, there are nine grades of prayer: four ascetical (i.e., vocal prayer, mental prayer, affective prayer, and acquired recollection) and five mystical (i.e., infused contemplation, the prayer of quiet, the prayer of union, spiritual betrothal, and spiritual marriage).<sup>11</sup> Alphonsus is primarily concerned with teaching people the ascetical grades of prayer, especially mental prayer. These forms of prayer are, in fact, the only ones that can actually be taught. The mystical grades of prayer depend entirely on God and cannot be prepared for or even expected in this life.

Alphonsus devoted his time and energy to providing those he served with those tools that would best help them to nurture an intimate friendship with God. He focused on the earlier grades of prayer to get as many people as possible off to a good start in the spiritual life. These kinds of prayer were the bread and butter of the spiritual life, and he made no apologies for the insistence with which he urged the faithful to take advantage of these indispensable means of salvation. Once the proper foundation was laid, he felt sure that God’s grace would supply all that was necessary for a person to experience the liberating movement of the Spirit that would eventually lead to the beatific vision itself.

Whether a person had mystical experiences in the present life did not really matter. Alphonsus was primarily concerned with a person’s eternal destiny, not with whether he or she was ready to breathe the rarified air of spiritual marriage. Although he drew a clear distinction between meditation and contemplation,<sup>12</sup> he also recognized that the ascetical and mystical states shared much in common and were sometimes mingled with each other in the concrete circumstances of a person’s life. For this reason, he understood that there was a contemplative dimension to these earlier grades of prayer, and he was very clear that the full benefits of such prayers could be reaped only if they took place against a backdrop of solitude.<sup>13</sup>

Alphonsus’s doctrine of prayer is actually quite simple. “Everyone receives sufficient grace to pray.”<sup>14</sup> “He who prays is certainly saved. He who prays not is certainly damned.”<sup>15</sup> “God wishes us to speak to him with confidence and familiarity.”<sup>16</sup> “Mental prayer is morally necessary for salvation.”<sup>17</sup> These simple phrases represent the hallmark of his teaching and could be easily remembered by those who came to him. They also point to the main characteristics of his spiritual doctrine.

Alphonsian prayer is honest, humble, passionate, eclectic, practical, spontaneous, continual, popular, devotional, and petitionary. Above all, it is simple and childlike.<sup>18</sup> In Alphonsus’s mind, everyone might not experience

the heights of mystical prayer, at least in this life. All, however, are called to a life a prayer, one which will provide them with the means of salvation and which will enable them to talk to God as one friend to another. For him, mental prayer is the one grade of prayer that fosters this type of relationship the most in the lives of the faithful. It is meant for everyone, not a select few, and for this reason is the centerpiece of his teaching on prayer.<sup>19</sup>

### *Mental Prayer*

Mental prayer, for Alphonsus, “. . . is nothing more than a converse between the soul and God; the soul pours forth to him its affections, its desires, its fears, its requests, and God speaks to the heart, causing it to know his goodness, and the love which he bears it, and what it must do to please him.”<sup>20</sup> It has a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end, what Alphonsus calls the preparation, the meditation itself, and the conclusion. In the preparation, the person praying makes brief acts of faith in God, humility and contrition, and a petition for light. The meditation involves four movements: (1) reflecting on a particular of the faith, (2) raising one’s heart and affections to God in acts of love and contrition, (3) asking God for his graces, and (4) making some practical resolution that will help the person in his or her walk with God. The conclusion consists of thanking God for whatever lights and inspirations were received, affirming one’s decision to carry out the resolution, and asking God for the grace of fidelity. At the end of each session, Alphonsus also encourages the person praying to pray for others, especially those who have died and those whose hearts have been hardened by sin.

Alphonsus’s manner of making mental prayer could be used by just about anyone and could be done privately or in a group setting. It was noted for its simplified, easy-to-learn structure, and the centrality that it gave to the prayer of petition. It was simple, flexible, and highly practical, something that could be taught to both simple and learned alike. He did not develop his approach in a vacuum, but relied heavily on those spiritual masters whose teachings on prayer had helped him the most in his own spiritual journey. What he came up with was a way of fostering an intimate relationship with God that could be practiced anywhere, by anyone, at anytime. Alphonsus believed that mental prayer was morally necessary for salvation. Without it a person would have great difficulty persevering in the way of holiness.

At the heart of Alphonsus’s approach lies the need to retreat to the solitude of one’s heart so that one can get in touch with one’s deepest yearnings and express them to God. Asking God for help is a central feature of this manner of making mental prayer. When making these petitions, we are not telling God something that he does not already know, but simply getting in touch with our dependence on him for all things. Our recognition of this dependency puts us in

touch with our ongoing need for conversion. Integral to this process is our need to make concrete resolutions of a practical order that will improve our relationship with ourselves, others, and God.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Visits*

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Alphonsus believed that the most appropriate place to conduct mental prayer was in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. After all, in what better place could one conduct an intimate conversation with Jesus than by visiting him personally in the Sacrament? Alphonsus wrote the *Visits* to provide a concrete help for beginners in this practice. He offers the faithful words which can be prayed vocally or mentally, individually or in a group, that would help them conduct a heart to heart conversation with Jesus and his mother, Mary. The visits, therefore, are not an end in themselves, but a series of carefully crafted meditations, the fruit of Alphonsus's own intimate conversations with Jesus and Mary, that he believed would help the faithful deepen their relationship with God. They are, in other words, written examples of Alphonsus's approach to mental prayer. They follow the same general structure of preparation, reflection, affection, petition, resolution, and conclusion, although this structure is not as clearly delineated in the *Visits* as one might expect, but woven into a seamless garment of devotional prayer with a simple and very accessible literary style.

When discussing the *Visits*, a number of other important factors should be kept in mind. The following list of observations, while in no way exhaustive, should help readers get a better grasp of what these meditations are and how they were meant to function in the life of a believer. They should also give them an idea of some of the theological and cultural lenses through which they should view them.

1. *The Visits and the Voices of Past.* The *Visits* reveal Alphonsus's characteristic way of immersing himself and his readers in "the voices of the past." He fills each visit with an abundance of quotations and timely examples from the Scriptures and the lives of the saints. The spiritual insights from the Old and New Testaments and of such saintly giants as Augustine, Bernard, Francis, Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Francis de Sales, and Teresa of Avila, (to name just a few) confront the reader on nearly every page. This carefully chosen literary style gives the reader the sense of being steeped in the spiritual tradition of the Church. By steeping himself in the sayings of the saints and by allowing them to speak to his readers on their own terms, he offers his audience an experience of the richness of the Church's spiritual tradition that few would have had the time or the energy to accumulate elsewhere. Alphonsus keeps the needs of his readers before him at all times. In mediating to them the



wisdom of the Church's great spiritual masters, he performs a humble role of pastoral service that will be of benefit to many people. He also draws an important connection between devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and membership in the company of saints, thus giving those making the *Visits* the hope of one day being counted among them.

2. *The Visits and Alphonsus's Image of Jesus and Mary.* Alphonsus's high Christology and Mariology may put off some of today's readers, who would rather focus on Jesus' humanity rather than his divinity and Mary's solidarity with humanity rather than her strong intercessory powers. If this is so, it must be remembered that Alphonsus's writing reflects the cultural and spiritual climate of his day and it would not be fair to expect him to speak in relevant ways at all times to our present sensitivities. At the same time, it is important to remember that Alphonsus presents nothing that would have been considered irregular in his day and is in full accord with the teaching of the Church (both then and now). What is really at play here is the question of emphasis. In Alphonsus's day, it was considered normal to begin with Jesus' divinity and eventually come to his humanity. It was also normal to emphasize Mary's great intercessory powers and her exalted role as Queen of heaven rather than her solidarity with humanity and her role as the humble maiden from Nazareth and our sister in the faith. When seen in this light, Alphonsus's *Visits* remind us of the various ways in which the relationship between the human and divine in Jesus can be construed even within the bounds of legitimate Catholic orthodoxy. We can also see here the variety of roles played by Mary in the Church. Those who do not agree with what Alphonsus emphasizes should take his approach as an opportunity to examine their own faith more critically to see if something very important has not been overlooked.
3. *The Visits and Alphonsus's Understanding of Redemption.* The view of redemption prevalent in Alphonsus's day was the satisfaction theory of St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), which stated that the Word of God became man and died on the cross out of necessity in order to do what humanity itself was unable to accomplish. Through his passion and death, God's compassion satisfied the demands of God's justice over the infinite transgression of Adam's sin. While Alphonsus recognized humanity's inability to satisfy the demands of God's justice, he did not believe that it was absolutely necessary for Christ to die. As he says in the *Selva*: "It was not necessary for the Redeemer to die in order to save the world; a drop of his blood, a single tear, or prayer, was sufficient to procure salvation for all; for such a prayer, being of infinite value, should be sufficient to save not one but a thousand worlds."<sup>22</sup> Alphonsus believed that Christ chose to redeem humanity through his passion and death not out of necessity, but

as an expression of God's unconditional love for humanity. Alphonsus's God is madly in love with humanity and would do anything to win its love. For Alphonsus, Christ's passion and death is really God's attempt to show us how much he loves us. For Alphonsus, after receiving the sacraments, making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament was the best way we could reciprocate that love.

4. *The Visits and Sacramental Worship.* For Alphonsus, the *Visits* are a concrete way in which his readers can nurture their relationship with Jesus outside the strict confines of sacramental worship. It takes little effort to recognize their relevance for today's believers. Jesus still remains present in the Blessed Sacrament; he still yearns for our friendship; he still desires us to visit with him. Mary still wishes to draw us closer to her Son; she still plays an active role in our sanctification; she still looks upon us as her spiritual sons and daughters. All we need to do is to step out in faith and talk to them. The *Visits*, while not the last and definitive word on the matter, provide a comfortable and easy point of departure. The reader who takes them up and prays them as Alphonsus had envisioned it will have very little to lose.

Visiting Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, moreover, flows from the eucharistic celebration and necessarily leads back to it. Any attempt to separate this devotion from its underlying orientation to the Mass comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus' presence in the sacrament. The eucharistic action is the source and summit of the Church's life. Eucharistic devotion flows from that source and should lead believers back to it for their primary source of spiritual nourishment.

5. *The Visits as a Means of Fostering Friendship with God.* Alphonsus states his intention for writing the *Visits* in his opening dedication to Mary. He wrote it “. . . only so that souls may be more greatly inflamed with love for Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup> This unequivocal statement is reinforced just a few sentences later, when he states that he does not wish to receive the praises of others, but only that whoever reads his work grow in devotion and affection for Jesus. Alphonsus points to “the tender and excessive love”<sup>24</sup> of Jesus' passion and the institution of the Most Holy Sacrament as the foundation upon which our love for God is built. He gives his readers a practical way of fostering their personal relationships with Jesus and the Blessed Mother. The best way to do this is to do what you would with any other friend, by simply visiting him. Alphonsus realizes that such visits cannot be exactly the same as the normal friendships we share in the human community, but he does put his finger on several similarities: preparation, dialogue, expressions of gratitude, frequency, order—to name but a few. A good visit with a close friend normally has a ritualistic dimension to it that

has developed over a long period of time. Friends draw closer to each other by doing again and again the same things they have done for years. Alphonsus recognizes this ritualistic dimension of human friendship and applies it to our friendship with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary. In the *Visits*, he invites his readers to pray familiarly with Jesus and his mother Mary. Mary is not only his mother; she is also our mother. Jesus is not only her Son; he is also our Savior, our Lord—and our Brother. Alphonsus does not want his readers to forget the close bond they share with Jesus by virtue of his becoming man, his suffering, death, and resurrection, and by virtue of the spiritual motherhood of Mary.

6. *The Manner of Making a Visit.* Alphonsus gives his readers a detailed breakdown of how one should proceed. Each visit should begin with an act of love to Jesus which clearly states the three reasons for coming to the Blessed Sacrament: thanksgiving, reparation, and adoration. The text of this opening prayer remains the same in each visit. It is followed by the actual visit itself (Alphonsus writes thirty-one in all—one for each day of the month), which, in turn, is followed by an act of spiritual communion (two versions are supplied), then the visit to Mary (again, thirty-one in all), and a concluding prayer to her (constant throughout). Alphonsus shapes the visits in such a way so that there is a fine balance between constancy and variety. The fundamental structure always remains the same: (1) opening prayer to Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament, (2) visit to the Most Holy Sacrament, (3) act of Spiritual Communion, (4) visit to the Most Holy Mary, and (5) closing prayer to the Most Holy Mary. Within this structure, the first and last parts always remain the same; the second and fourth parts change each day in a cycle of thirty-one days; the third part involves a choice on the part of the reader between a more formal prayer or a shorter version.

In setting up the structure of the *Visits*, Alphonsus is careful to incorporate a good rhythm of continuity and change. Something each day of every month will be the same; something will also be different. He includes just enough structure to preserve the important ritualistic dimension of the devotion and just enough innovation to allow for a certain spontaneity of heart. Although he is aware that spontaneity is not something that can be structured, he does hope that the visits themselves will turn into an outpouring of affection for Jesus and his Mother, Mary. The pious exclamatory prayers at the end of each *Visit* to the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary are intended to serve as a bridge to this kind of affectionate and spontaneous prayer.

7. *The Visits as an Expression of Alphonsus's Personal Experience and Missionary Zeal.* Finally, Alphonsus writes with one purpose in mind: to lead as many

people as possible into an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. He chooses the devotional genre of the *Visits* as the way to best implement those concerns. He writes in a simple style that can be easily understood by many classes of people; he fills the *Visits* with stories from the lives of the saints and with numerous quotations from the Scriptures because he knows that the popular mind needs models to look up to and takes great relish and delight in a good story. His writing always serves his deep missionary zeal. He writes as an apostle of Jesus Christ and as a servant of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He hopes that his *Visits* will draw others closer to them and, in doing so, raise up other disciples and servants for the vineyard of the Lord.

One cannot read the *Visits* without knowing that they themselves represent the fruit of Alphonsus's own deeply familiar and intimate conversations with Jesus and Mary. He wrote down what gushed forth from the depths of his heart and what was the product of his own in-depth consciousness of God in his life. Alphonsus wishes only to share that with his readers. He gives them the *Visits* as one means of many of finding what he himself has tasted and seen. He also recognizes that the more and more his readers make such fervent and devout visits to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Virgin Mother of God, the closer they will be drawn to each other. In this respect, the *Visits* are but another way in which Alphonsus seeks to carry out his missionary task of spreading and building up the body of Christ, the Church.<sup>25</sup>

## *Conclusion*

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Alphonsus's *Visits to the Most Holy Sacrament and to Most Holy Mary* is one of the great classics of popular Catholic devotion. Its astounding success helped to give the practice of visiting Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament a place of pre-eminence along side other popular devotions such as the rosary and the Stations of the Cross.

This new translation seeks to make this work more accessible to today's Catholic faithful. It follows Alphonsus's text closely, but tries to present it in a twenty-first century English idiom that speaks to the reader's spiritual sensitivities. It also presents the text in a format that encourages its readers to question both the text itself and the way they themselves converse with God. Each reader of the *Visits* must appropriate it personally and use it in a way that will nurture his or her relationship with Christ. For this reason, there are no hard and fast rules for how to approach it. Each visit is self-contained and comprises a heartfelt prayer of adoration and praise to Jesus (when directed to the Blessed Sacrament) and of deep reverence and veneration (when

directed to the Blessed Mother). Although these thirty-one meditations were intended to be read in order, there is nothing to stop the reader from skipping around and choosing the one which he or she deems most appropriate at the moment. It should be pointed out, however, that the monthly cycle of the *Visits* would be more easily kept intact if they were made every day and done in the order in which they were written. This seems to be what Alphonsus's intention was: to provide his readers with a monthly structure in which they could turn daily in prayer to Mary and Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and converse with them "as a friend to a friend."<sup>26</sup>

Beyond such questions of order and frequency, it is important to remember that the most fundamental idea to the entire work is the metaphor of "the visit." Here, Alphonsus stands in marked contrast to the ideas of the Enlightenment, that rationalistic movement that swept through Europe in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which viewed God as an impersonal force which designed the world and kept it in motion, but had little interest in the routine affairs of people. Alphonsus, by way of contrast, glories in the traditional truths of the Catholic faith: God visited this world at the Incarnation through Mary in the person of Jesus; he also visits the world daily in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and remains hidden in the consecrated species of bread and wine. Since God visits the world in these mysterious ways, it makes perfect sense that we should reciprocate our love for him by visiting him in the Blessed Sacrament and by talking to Mary, who is never far from his side. To this day, the Church continues to proclaim these traditional truths of the faith, even in a world that has long moved past the clear and distinct ideas of the Enlightenment and now struggles to stay afloat in the shrinking globalized sea of postmodern uncertainty.

In the *Visits*, Alphonsus highlights God's personal nature and the invitation extended to each of us to come to know him better. The act of spiritual communion, moreover, reminds us that God visits us not only physically in the concrete dimensions of time and space (i.e., in the Incarnation and in the Eucharist), but also in the deepest recesses of the human heart. We visit the Blessed Sacrament precisely because we want God to visit us and to dwell within our hearts. This mutual indwelling of God in us and of us in God is one of the characteristic marks of the divine/human friendship which Jesus has made possible by virtue of his passion, death, and resurrection. It is the deepest longing of the human heart and the greatest hope of a God madly in love with his people.<sup>27</sup>

## Note on the Translation

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A few words should be said about the translation and its layout. As stated earlier, the text is a direct translation of the critical Italian edition of 1939.<sup>28</sup> Until now, the best known *complete* English translation of Alphonsus's *Visits* was the one found in the centenary edition of Alphonsus's complete ascetical works that was edited by Eugene Grimm, C.Ss.R., published in 1886–94, and reprinted in 1926–34.<sup>29</sup>

Since this translation came out before the critical edition of Alphonsus's writings, one should expect to find some inaccuracies in it. For example, when comparing the Grimm edition of the *Visits* to the critical Italian text, one sees that the translator sometimes adds sentences that are not there, omits others that are, and often gives an embellished and occasionally archaic English rendering of Alphonsus's very simple Italian.<sup>30</sup> Be that as it may be, the Grimm edition has given generations of readers close and immediate access to one of Alphonsus's most important devotional works and has done much to spark devotion to the Blessed Sacrament in the English-speaking world. This invaluable service is no small feat and deserves due recognition and well-earned praise.<sup>31</sup>

This new English version of the *Visits* is a complete and direct translation from the critical Italian edition.<sup>32</sup> In it, I have tried to be faithful to Alphonsus's love for simplicity and desire to reach as many readers as possible. In translating his Italian, I have tried to convey his thought in a simple English style appropriate for today's readers. As one might well imagine, this attempt had its own share of difficulties. Alphonsus's Italian syntax and punctuation, for example, did not always translate easily in a fluid English style. From a translator's standpoint, I have taken the liberty to divide up many of his long, run-on sentences and to bring his punctuation in line with acceptable English usage. I have also sought translations of words that would be valid renderings of the Italian, yet acceptable to the literary sensitivities of today's readers.<sup>33</sup> I have minimized capitalizations and, when possible, have used inclusive language (an eminently English-language concern) when it did not detract from the work's overall meaning and grammatical flow. Following Alphonsus's lead, I have also kept exclamation points to a minimum so that the reader will be encouraged to add emphasis to the text when he or she feels it is appropriate rather than at locations decided upon previously by the author.

The scripture references throughout the work reflect the chapter and verse divisions of the Latin Vulgate. The English translation of these verses is either my own or an adaptation of the first complete Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate of 1749–52. In keeping with the devotional nature of the *Visits*, references to quotations from other works mentioned by Alphonsus are not included. For those interested, these references are readily available in both the critical Italian edition and in the Grimm edition. It bears noting, moreover, that Alphonsus often quoted scripture and the Church fathers in Latin and that I have translated all such references into English to facilitate the reading experience. These Latin quotations can also be found in the critical Italian edition and in the Grimm edition.

As an aid to the reader, I have listed the dates for the saints and other historical figures mentioned in the *Visits* in the brief introductions at the beginning of each major section. These dates occur after the person's name, the first time he or she is mentioned in the text. An appendix with alternative visits to the Blessed Mother also appears at the end of the book. For reasons that will be explained in the opening paragraph of the appendix, these prayers replaced the original visits to Mary in the 1758 Naples edition, but not in editions produced elsewhere and which eventually became more widespread. Although they appear directly below the original visits to Mary in the critical Italian edition, they have been put in an appendix in this version to avoid the impression of their being "additions to" rather than "replacements of" the original visits. The reader should feel free to use them as they see best as alternative prayers to Mary.

Finally, I would like to give special word of thanks goes to Rev. Carl Hoegerl, C.Ss.R., a former member of the Redemptorist Historical Institute in Rome and presently the archivist of the Redemptorist Province of Baltimore, for examining the entire work and making many invaluable historical and literary suggestions throughout. For whatever errors or inadequacies the translation and accompanying commentary may still contain, I take full responsibility.

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