Congregation of the Redeemer

Samuel Maranto
THE MARIAN CHARISM OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE MOST HOLY REDEEMER

Samuel Maranto, C.Ss.R.*

Evidence of a Marian charism in the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer can be gleaned from a study of the institute’s history, including spirituality. Originating in St. Alphonsus Liguori and his Marian theology, this charism has been an essential feature of Redemptorist life down to the present. This charism is inextricably linked to the mission of the institute—“To preach the good news of plentiful redemption to the most abandoned, especially the poor”—and aids in its accomplishment. In the ongoing adaptation of this mission to the need of the poor for evangelization and to the concrete realities of the world today, the Congregation draws on its Marian charism for insight, inspiration and openness to the will of God. Moreover, this charism has proven to be a means by which Redemptorists are drawn deeper into the mystery of God, to personal conversion, into the heart of human suffering and loneliness.

The distinctive feature of the Marian charism of the Redemptorists is derived from the “Marian form” found in the person and life of St. Alphonsus and his Marian theology.¹ This

¹Fr. Samuel Maranto, C.Ss.R. is presently pastor of St. Gerard Majella Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He is a past president of the Mariological Society of America.

¹Sources for this work include the works of Paul Hitz, Théodule Rey-Mermet, and Hamish Swanston. Historical studies by Francesco Chiovaro and Frederick Jones brought 18th-century Bourbon Naples to light and, with it, some of the factors that formed Alphonsus’s spirituality and Marian theology. Materials from Maurice de Meulemeester and Sante Raponi were helpful to relating the history of the Congregation in the 19th and 20th centuries. Dennis Billy, Carl Hoegerl and Jorge Rafael Colón provided an introduction to Alphonsian spirituality. T. S. Skinner and John Reuf provide accounts of the Redemptorist missions; Fabriciano Ferrero treats Our Mother of Perpetual Help.
form gave Alphonsus's life an "epic" quality, one that captures our imagination and discloses to us life's ultimate meaning. A form guided and shaped the life of Alphonsus from birth to death, a form on the basis of which fundamental choices were made and a course set.

Alphonsus's biographers, from A. Tannoja to Frederick Jones, have shown how Mary figured in his religious formation. In eighteenth-century Bourbon Naples, Alphonsus's time and place, numerous churches were dedicated to the Virgin. Shrines to her could be found on most corners. Like his contemporaries, Alphonsus was influenced by La Madonna. At his birth he was consecrated to the Virgin by his mother. He was baptized on a Saturday in a church dedicated to Our Lady and given the name "Mary." From early childhood he carried on his person an image of the Mother of Heaven. Companions and friends regarded him as someone especially loved and privileged by Mary. As an attorney in the law courts of Naples, he was active in the Archconfraternity of Santa Maria della Misericordia, which was dedicated to the care of the poor. Upon admission to the bar, Alphonsus took an oath to defend the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. "This . . . was more than a pious convention," according to Frederick Jones, "it was the setting of a direction that was to mark his life and ministry ever after." Alphonsus later wrote in the Glories of Mary:

All the benefits I have ever received, my conversion, my vocation to leave the world and so many other graces I have received from God, I recognize them all as coming through you, O Mary. You know well that, in order to see you loved by everyone as you deserve and to give you thanks for all the many benefits you have obtained for me, I have always sought, everywhere, whether in public or private, to spread your sweet and saving devotion.

After losing a critical case in law in 1723, Alphonsus placed his cavalier's sword at the foot of the image of Jesus and Mary in the Church of Our Lady of Mercy, Ransom of Captives, and

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2*Alphonsus de Liguori: Selected Writings*, ed. Frederick M. Jones et al. (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1999), 240 (hereafter: *Selected Writings*).

3*Le Glorie di Maria*, as cited in *Selected Writings*, 240.
embraced religious life. While he was a secular priest in Naples, he was part of two mission-preaching congregations which had a special devotion to the Queen of the Apostles. He put under Mary's patronage his work with lay associations and the "evening chapels." He had a profound belief in Mary's mediation, a belief that surfaced, time and time again, in his writings and sermons. Jesus and Mary appeared to Sister Maria Crosta­rosa and showed her the man who was to found a new religious order. The man was Alphonsus Liguori. Later, as founder and first Rector Major, Alphonsus, in his letters and conferences, constantly encouraged his confreres to place their vocations, apostolic work and eternal salvation in the hands of Mary. If they did, he said, they would never be disappointed or lose hope. Father di Costanzo, Alphonsus's confessor recalled the emotion Alphonsus experienced when he talked to him about the early days of the Congregation, when he used to go into a cave to pray and where, he said, the Virgin Mary would counsel him about the future of the Congregation, telling him "many wonderful things."

One of the few decorations Alphonsus ever allowed himself was a picture of Our Lady of Good Counsel; he kept this image on his desk and it was in its presence that he composed the majority of his works. Several pictures of the Virgin which he himself painted can be seen in the museum next to the Basilica of St. Alphonsus. In these pictures, Mary is depicted as a peasant woman in humble dress, not as a distant queen of heaven. Another image of Mary that Alphonsus owned and venerated was that of "La Divina Pastora" (the Divine Shepherdess). Mary has the child Jesus on her lap; both of them are in peasant dress, with straw hats. A shepherd's hut is in the background, and the child Jesus leans over from Mary's lap to play with the sheep. The painting represents Alphonsus's Marian theology: "Jesus and Mary are not distant supernatural figures but ever close to the poor, in their midst, and involved in the struggles of their lives."4

Alphonsus was a musician of some skill. He composed the carol which is sung all over Italy at Christmas, "Tu scendi dalle stelle." He also composed a number of popular songs in honor

4Selected Writings, 241.
of Mary, setting religious lyrics to tunes familiar to the common people.

Antonio M. Tannoja records that Alphonsus never preached a sermon without mentioning Mary. He mandated that a Mary-sermon be part of every mission preached by Redemptorists. Their Congregation was placed under her patronage, and she was to be included in all their pastoral activity. Every Saturday, the sermon was to be preached in her honor.

When, in his old age, Alphonsus was plagued by scruples, he would intercede with Mary for deliverance. He remained faithful to the daily recitation of the Rosary. His Redemptorist confreres could recall Alphonsus as an old man showing some annoyance when he could not clearly remember if he had said his rosary. In 1785, at the age of eighty-nine, Alphonsus renewed his vow of celibacy with an oath he wrote in his own hand: "I, Alfonso Maria de Liguori, have made a vow of chastity in honor of Our Lady in the presence of Father Giovanni Mazzini and I am ready to die a thousand times, rather than fail this vow." He never lost faith that one day, through Mary's intercession, he would win the approval of both government and Church for his congregation. After almost thirty years of waiting, hoping and suffering reverses, approval was granted. As the Angelus rang on August 1, 1787, Alphonsus died, an image of Mary in his hands.

In addition to its embodiment in the "Marian form" of Alphonsus's own life, the Redemptorist Marian charism is further enhanced by a text from its founder. The Glories of Mary was first published in Naples in 1750. Alphonsus had worked on the manuscript for almost twenty years. As he wrote in the Preface, he intended the book to be an offering from a devoted, grateful child to Mary, his spiritual mother. The Neapolitan mariologist, Father Francis Pepe, S.J., had guided Alphonsus's study of the Church's teaching and practice concerning Mary's part in God's plan of salvation. Alphonsus spent years studying Mary in the writings of the Fathers and the great medieval theologians, especially St. Bernard. During his travels to preach missions, whenever the opportunity presented itself, he visited neighboring Marian shrines, observing and talking with the people who had come to pray to Mary. As strange as it may
seem to us today, his *Glories of Mary* encountered considerable difficulty in getting through the office of the state’s censor. In the over 250 years since its publication, *The Glories of Mary* has gone through 1,000 editions and has been translated into over 70 languages. It remains the most popular book on Mary ever written.

Alphonsus had a double purpose for his book: (1) to promote devotion to the Mother of God among the faithful; and (2) to serve as a theological source book which would provide priests with material for their meditation and sermons. He employed a familiar style, one that his fellow Neapolitans would immediately recognize, understand and accept. To make his point he often used stories and legends from the lives of the saints, designed to capture the imagination of his readers. This style reflects Alphonsus’s understanding of the living tradition of the Church and the *sensus fidelium*. He wanted to create a mariology that was both authentic and pastoral, one that was “capable of moving hearts with the love of God through Mary.”

For Alphonsus, “in the Blessed Virgin Mary God’s power meets God’s compassion,” and he vigorously opposed Jansenist pessimism and elitism. Mary not only feels great tenderness toward us, he continues, but enjoys the power to help us, by God’s will. God is depicted as in search of humanity, ever moving toward us in our misery and need. So also Alphonsus’s image of Mary is an intensely apostolic one. She is presented not merely as a past historical figure, but as a present and active force in the world. Mary is the instrument used by God as a first opening of grace into the person of a sinner. Alphonsus’s intuition and pastoral experience taught him that Mary touches the heart like no other element in the Gospel.

*The Glories of Mary* breaks no new theological ground. This was not Alphonsus’s intent. However, due to its popularity his book was a formative influence on the Marian piety of generations of Catholics. It was also influential in forming a theological and popular consensus on two questions: the Immaculate Conception and Mary’s role in the mediation of grace.

5*Selected Writings, 243.*
Redemptorists have always regarded *The Glories of Mary* as a testament of Alphonsus's love for the Mother of God, a love which they are called to imitate. Since its publication in 1750 and up to Vatican II, it was the standard text in courses on mariology in Redemptorist seminaries. As was Alphonsus's intent, *The Glories of Mary* also served as a theological compendium, providing generations of Redemptorist preachers and missioners with sermon and catechetical material. It was used in formation programs to create, in the lives of Redemptorist novices and scholastics, a "Marian form." It has inspired the Marian writings of more than a few Redemptorist theologians and mariologists. On the missions and in parishes, Redemptorists put into practice the pastoral lessons of *The Glories of Mary*: they were required to employ a "familiar" style when preaching and to always show compassion; they were to share the life of the poor.

Preaching, pursuing "the apostolate of the pen," and promoting devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help represented developments in the Redemptorist Marian charism during the period from the death of St. Alphonsus to the Second Vatican Council (1787 to 1962).

The popular missions and programs of parish renewal comprised the principal work of the Redemptorists. The sermon on the Virgin (always preached on the second Saturday of the mission) and Marian prayers and devotions were prominent features of these events. So vital to the mission was the sermon on the Most Holy Virgin that it was decreed by the General Chapter of 1743. For the most part, the themes of these sermons were Mary's intercession and her mediation. In keeping with what St. Alphonsus had written in Chapter 8 of *The Glories of Mary*, mission preachers repeated that whoever served Mary faithfully and honorably, and entrusted himself to her, would not suffer damnation.

Works on Mary by Redemptorist authors proliferated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Included among these were mariologies, dogmatic treatments, pastoral theologies, treatises on Marian spirituality, devotional works, Marian prayer books, biblical studies, studies of Marian art. Among Redemptorist
authors who wrote on the Virgin Mary were Clement Dillenschneider, Paul Hitz, François-Xavier Godts, Victor Dechamps (future cardinal of Malines, Belgium), and Bernard Häring.

The story of the Redemptorist Marian charism from the time of the Second Vatican Council to the present (1965-2002) has yet to be told. When it is told, it will be a story of adaptation and renewal. The charism still exists and continues to inspire the lives and work of Redemptorists. Several Congregation-wide events have been conducted with the Redemptorist Marian charism as their focus. Among these were a week-long workshop in Rome on the iconography and Marian theology of Our Mother of Perpetual Help and the inclusion of Mary in Charism 2001: A Journey in Redemptorist Spirituality, a four-week course in Redemptorist spirituality. Mary figures prominently in Redemptorist histories, including works by Frederick Jones, Théodule Rey-Mermet, and Dennis Billy, professor of historical theology and spirituality at the Academia Alfonsiana. Mary still figures prominently in the Redemptorist mission. Preachers have been aided by recent advances in biblical scholarship and recent works in Marian theology. In addition, Marian books are featured in the offerings of Liguori Publications, a work sponsored by the Denver Province of Redemptorists.

The Redemptorists and Mary, Mother of Perpetual Help

The Redemptorist association with Our Lady of Perpetual Help stems not from Alphonsus but from Pope Pius IX. This thirteenth-century Greek icon of the Virgin had been venerated in Rome since 1499, and was known as “The Madonna of the Three Miracles.” On December 11, 1865, Pope Pius IX entrusted this icon to the Redemptorists and charged them with spreading devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help all over the world. In response to the Pope’s command, Redemptorists began building churches and schools in Mary’s honor. In 1939 alone, sixty churches and monasteries were dedicated to Mary. That same year one finds in the Redemptorist Biographies, 139 authors had written 253 pieces on “Mary.” The first Arch-
confraternity of Our Mother of Perpetual Help was organized in Rome in 1876. By 1950 it had grown to 3,271 chapters. Perpetual Help novenas typically attracted thousands. It was customary in many provinces for the image of Our Mother of Perpetual Help to be exposed during the novena and venerated. Several works on the iconography of Our Mother of Perpetual Help have been written by Redemptorists. While attendance at Perpetual Help novenas is down in Europe and North America, they draw thousands and tens-of-thousands in Brazil, the Philippines and in Nigeria.