

Alphonsus Liguori's Moral Theology of Marriage: Refreshing Realism, Continued Relevance

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Introduction

ONE OF THE most widely translated and republished theological masters of the last 500 years, the patron saint of moral theologians and confessors, the founder of the Redemptorist order, and a doctor of the Church, St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787) has unfortunately become relatively distant from modern moral theology, especially in the English-language scholarship.¹ As an object of academic study, his moral theology remains alive in the English language through one monograph (actually a translation of a 1987 French monograph) and a small body of secondary literature, which mostly considers the role of his *Theologia Moralis* in the moral manual tradition that lasted until the Second Vatican Council

¹ The only recent monograph on Liguori's moral theology in the English language is the 1998 translation of Théodule Rey-Mermet's 1987 French work *Morale selon saint Alphonse de Liguori* (Paris: Cerf, 1987). The English title is *Moral Choices: The Moral Theology of Saint Alphonsus de Liguori*, trans. Paul Laverdure (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 1998). Rey-Mermet's French was also translated into Spanish in 1991 (*A Moral de Santo Alfonso de Liguori*, trans. Joao Batista Bonaventura Leite [Aparecida: Editora Santuário, 1991]). In the English language, monographs are limited to spirituality, e.g. Hamish Swanston, *Celebrating Eternity Now: A Study of the Theology of Alphonsus Liguori, 1696–1787* (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 1995); Barry Ulanov, *The Way of St. Alphonsus Liguori* (London: Burns, 1961); and biographies, e.g., D. F. Miller, C.Ss.R. and L. X. Aubin, C.Ss.R., *Saint Alphonsus Liguori: Bishop, Confessor, Founder of the Redemptorists and Doctor of the Church, 1696–1787* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1987).

and the renewal of moral theology with Bernard Häring.² Fortunately, Spanish and Italian, along with some French and fewer German scholars, have kept busy studying Liguori's moral theology, though mostly from historical perspectives, and mostly on or near the occasion of the bicentenary of his death and the tercentenary of his birth.³

This article addresses the lacuna of Alphonsian moral theology and spirituality in the modern theological discussion of marriage. The demise of the manual tradition, which brought a renaissance of Scripture as the heart of moral theology, has also meant a forgetting and sometimes a stigmatization of Alphonsus and his methods and approach. Where Alphonsus is remembered, it is wherever his "equiprobabilism" can come in handy or where he seems to anticipate the transition to modern "personalist,"

² See, for example, Raphael Gallagher, "The Systematization of Alphonsus' Moral Theology through the Manuals," *Studia Moralia* 25 (1987): 247; Gallagher, "The Manual System of Moral Theology since the Death of Alphonsus," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 51 (1985): 1–16; John Sharp, "The Influence of St. Alphonsus Liguori in Nineteenth-century Britain," *The Downside Review* 101 (1983): 60–76. See also Dennis J. Billy, "An Alphonsian Model of Spiritual Direction," *Studia Moralia* 41 (2003): 47–72. There is also a 1951 doctoral dissertation from Catholic University of America by Clayton Kramer, "Fear and Hope According to Saint Alphonsus Liguori."

³ Marciano Vidal has published as widely as anyone (in Spanish or otherwise) on Alphonsus Liguori. See, for example, *La familia en la vida y en el pensamiento de Alfonso de Liguori, 1696–1787: proceso a la familia 'tradicional'* (Madrid: Instituto Superior de Ciencias Morales, 1995), which includes much of the work he has done in separate articles published chiefly in the journal *Studia Moralia*. The journal *Studia Moralia*, published by the pontifical university bearing his name, has done much to keep the study of Liguori alive.

In Italian, see, for example, Giovanni Velocci, "S. Alfonso de Liguori, pastore e dottore," *Divinitas* 32 (1988): 606; and "Antonio Rosmini e s. Alphonse de Liguori," *Alphonse de Liguori* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1987), 161–81; and Orlandi Giuseppe, "S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori e i laici: la fondazione delle 'Cappelle serotine' di Napoli," *Lateranum* 53 (1987): 504–26.

Among French scholars, Louis Vereecke is one of the most widely published, e.g. "Evolution de la théologie moral du Concile de Trente à s. Alphonse de Liguori," *Studia Moralia* 25 (1987); Vereecke, "La conscience selon Saint Alphonse de Liguori," *Studia Moralia* 21 (1983): 259–73; and Vereecke, *De Guillaume d'Ockham à saint Alphonse de Liguori: études d'histoire de la théologie morale moderne, 1300–1787* (Rome: Collegium S. Alfonsi de Urbe, 1986).

Among German scholars, see Otto Weiss, "Alfonso de Liguori und die deutsche Moraltheologie im 19. Jahrhundert," *Studia Moralia* 25 (1987); and Bernard Häring, "Ein Gott des Erbarmens und der Gnade: das Vermächtnis des hl. Alfons Maria von Liguori für Moral und Pastoral," *Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift* 130 (1982): 217–27.

“gospel values” approaches.⁴ This article, though, is less interested in how he blazed a trail for where theology has gone. Instead, I begin with these questions: Is Alphonsus Liguori a relevant source for modern moral theology on marriage? If so, is it only as a sort of prophet of modern developments, one who essentially agrees with the direction taken and pats modern moral theologians on the back? Or, would Alphonsus have a valid critique of modern approaches to marriage and the family? In what ways can he not only support the modern move toward the fulfillment of and self-gift of the human person in marriage, but also supplement and possibly redirect modern approaches to the way marriage and the family lead persons to their supernatural end? This article is a step toward engaging Alphonsian moral theology in modern discussions of moral theology in marriage. This article makes a first step: presenting Alphonsus’s theology of marriage in a way accessible to and relevant for modern discussions. To this end, I argue that Alphonsus’s focus on the ultimate end of the human person causes him to look with refreshing realism and yet confident assurance at the place of marriage in attaining that end.

To Marry or Not to Marry: The Alphonsian Approach

All of Liguori’s personal counsels in the confessional, his sermons, his letters, his popular writings, the rule of the Redemptorist order, and his more academic works, such as the *Theologia Moralis*, sought one chief goal: to make saints. Liguori wrote and spoke about what was sure to make people holy, not what was simply good enough to get by. His approach was principally practical, but never merely pragmatic. For Liguori, life on earth was a training ground in sanctification through growth in prayer and virtue.⁵ The Christian life was the love and imitation of Christ on earth, principally

⁴ Vidal, *La familia en la vida y en el pensamiento de Alfonso de Liguori*, 149–53; Rey-Mermet, *Moral Choices*, 112–21.

⁵ Any claim that Alphonsus’s approach to the moral life was primarily casuistic and theoretical would be improbable. For Alphonsus, the holy life consists not in a scrupulous adherence to laws but the practice of Christian virtues, chief among them the love of Christ, the resignation to the will of God, patience in suffering, and obedience to a spiritual director. Practicing these virtues is sure to result in obedience to moral laws, but such obedience is not the center of the moral life for Alphonsus. Alphonsus’s popular, spiritual writings focused explicitly on the practice of the virtues. Take, for example, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, trans. Peter Heinegg (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 1997), which leads the reader through the virtues entailed in the practice of love in imitation of Christ. The text includes a further treatise on the acquisition of particular virtues. See also “The Practice of the Christian Virtues” in *The Christian Virtues and the Means of Obtaining Them*, trans. and ed. Robert A. Coffin (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1855), 372–92.

through a patient share in his sufferings and a constant resignation to the will of God.⁶ When discerning between moral choices, Liguori would reflect: I know this way will make me a saint, but I do not know whether this other way will even certainly save me. Put this way, a right path becomes at once clearer, though not for that reason any easier to choose.⁷ When faced with the decision to marry or remain celibate, among the operative discernment questions for Liguori is this: which way is more likely to avoid sin and facilitate growth in holiness, and which way more likely leads to sin or potentially hinders growth in holiness?

Alphonsus Liguori's own biographies, as well as his own writings across the span of his life, demonstrate his approach to the question of whether or not to marry; in every case we see a saint guiding people toward what he thinks is the surest path to holiness. As to his life's witness, biographers tell us his experience, defying his father and choosing celibacy.⁸ In his own writing, he explicitly treats the question in a letter to his brother Hercules, in letters and discourses to consecrated women, and women and men seeking advice on a choice for the state of life, in *Theologia Moralis*, *Homo Apostolicus*, and *On the True Spouse of Christ*.⁹ His letter to a young man discerning a state of life summarizes his position on the question:

⁶ The theme saturates all of Alphonsus's popular, spiritual and moral works, but see, for example, the section titled "signs by which we may know whether we have the divine love in us," in "A Christian's Rule of Life," in *The Christian Virtues*, 413–18. See also Liguori, *The Practice of the Love of Christ*, 46, where Alphonsus states, with the Blessed Battista Varani, that God does three "great favors" for Christians: "The first enables them not to sin; the second, still greater is to do good works; the third, and the greatest of all, is to suffer for his love."

⁷ In a March, 1733 letter written to advise a nun, Sr. Celeste, about how best to proceed in deciding between two spiritual directors, Alphonsus advocates certainty where it can be had: "I believe that your attachment to Tosquez is not sinful, but is it not true that human feelings are a great deal mixed up in it? It is not God that you look for in Tosquez . . . in following Mgr. Falcoia you will certainly become a saint; in following Tosquez you will certainly not become one, and God knows if you will save your soul," transcribed in Miller, *Saint Alphonsus*, 86–87.

⁸ Don Giuseppe, Alphonsus's father, tried twice to arrange a marriage for his son. Don Giuseppe dropped the first potential match before engagement when the economic prospects turned out to be unfavorable. The second betrothal did not occur either, this time because Alphonsus publicly snubbed the intended, and defiantly maintained his unwillingness to marry. See Miller, *Saint Alphonsus*, 21–22.

⁹ For the advice given to his brother Hercules on the possibility of a second marriage, see Liguori, *Lettere di S. Alfonso Maria de' Liguori*, ed. F. Kuntz and F. Pitocchi, 3 vols. (Rome: n.p., 1887–90), I, 477. For popular writings and published letters to religious and lay people on the question, see "The Choice of a State of Life, and the Vocation to the Religious State," in *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, *The Complete Works of Saint Alphonsus de Liguori*, Vol. 3, ed. Eugene

At the end of your letter you express a wish to learn from me whether, in case you should not have the courage to enter religion, it would be better to marry, as your parents wish, or to become a secular priest. *I answer: The married state I cannot recommend to you, because St. Paul does not counsel it to any one, except there be a necessity for it, arising out of habitual incontinence, which necessity, I hold for certain, does not exist in your case.*¹⁰

If the boy has a call to religious life, he will never be satisfied unless he follows that call, for happiness of those called to the imitation of Christ in the religious life consists in detachment from all things, especially his comforts, his parents, his self-esteem, and his own will.¹¹ If the boy has no vocation to the religious life, Liguori still cannot counsel marriage without reason. Alphonsus will counsel marriage only on account of moral necessity. The criterion here is what will avoid sin and most certainly lead to salvation. Marriage will most certainly lead to salvation if a person suffers from the illness it cures. In the case of this boy, though, Alphonsus is confident no such illness exists, and therefore cannot say that marriage is the best choice, that is, the one that will certainly lead to sainthood.

Behind this approach to the question of marriage is Alphonsus's firm belief that marriage is a more difficult path to holiness than celibate life. Alphonsus has a stark realism about the worldliness of married life. The demands of marriage make it nearly impossible to spend adequate time in prayer:

Now it is difficult, not to say impossible to practise all this in the midst of the noise and the disturbances of the world; for family affairs, the necessities of the house, the complaints of parents, the quarrels and persecutions with which the world is so full, will keep your mind so occupied by cares and fears that you will barely be able in the evening to recommend yourself to God, and even this will be done with many distractions. You would wish to make your meditation, to read spiritual

Grimm (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1927), 381–511. See Liguori, *Theologia Moralis, Editio Nova cum antiquis editionibus diligenter collata in singulis auctorum allegationibus recognita notisque criticis et commentariis illustrata*, 4 vols. Cura et studio P. Leonardi Gaudé (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1912), I, 204–5. Unless otherwise noted, translations of this text are my own. No English translation of this text has been published.

¹⁰ Liguori, "Answer to a Young Man who Asks Counsel on the Choice of a State of Life," in *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, 461–66, at 466.

¹¹ See "The Choice of a State of Life, and the Vocation to the Religious State," in *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, 402–12.

books, to receive Holy Communion often, to visit every day the Sacrament of the altar; but from all this you will be prevented by the affairs of the world.¹²

Meeting the requirements of the family is enormously time consuming, and almost requires a certain connection to the goods of the earth, since the man (for Alphonsus) is required to provide for his family's nourishment. A further caveat comes in a sermon Alphonsus wrote for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost. "If you wish to marry, learn this day the obligations which you contract with regard to the education of your children; and learn also, that if you do not fulfil them, you shall bring yourselves and all your children to damnation."¹³ This young man is asked to consider which path will more surely and more easily lead to peace and holiness. For Alphonsus, the answer is clear: unless he is habitually incontinent, a young man would do better to live a celibate life. This advice is not merely, or even primarily, an a priori pessimism about marriage received from Augustine, but a practical conclusion reached after many years of giving missions and hearing ten hours of confessions a day, witnessing the suffering of the married in their best attempts at the Christian life.

Alphonsus's experience of the situation of married women in eighteenth-century Italy reinforces the notion that his caution regarding marriage is based on realism rather than on theoretical, Augustinian pessimism. Seeking to ameliorate people's lives and lead them more certainly to sainthood in peace, Alphonsus advises avoiding marriage to a strictly earthly husband:

The maltreatment which [women] receive from their husbands, the displeasure caused by their children, the wants of the house, the jealousies and fears to which they are subject, make them live in the midst of continual anguish and bitterness. Married women may be called martyrs of patience, if they bear all with resignation; but unless they are patient and resigned, they will suffer a martyrdom in this world, and a more painful martyrdom in the next.¹⁴

But would to God that married women had no other evil to contend with besides that of not always being able to attend to their

¹² Liguori, "Answer to a Young Man who asks Counsel on the Choice of a State of Life," in *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, 462.

¹³ Liguori, "Sermon 36," in *Sermons of St. Alphonsus Liguori: For All Sundays of the Year*, 4th edition (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1982), 269–78, at 270.

¹⁴ Liguori, "Advice to a Young Person in Doubt about the State of Life which She ought to Embrace," in *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, 468–73, at 471–72.

sanctification as much as they should! . . . Unmarried women do not understand this, but married women and those who have to hear their confessions know it well . . . the ill treatment that they receive from their husbands, the disobedience of children, the wants of a family, the annoyance of mothers-in-law and relatives, the throes of childbirth, always accompanied by danger of death, not to mention the afflictions of jealousy, and scruples of conscience with regard to the rearing-up of their children.¹⁵

These excerpts demonstrate, on Liguori's part, a respect for and understanding of the reality of married life as it was experienced by people he met. If Alphonsus had heard from married women that their practice of the Christian life were well, he would have counseled the state of marriage more strongly, I am sure. This was not the case, however, since women told him in the confessional:

I would wish for retirement in order to spend a little time in mental prayer, but the affairs of the family and of the house, which is always in confusion, do not permit this. I would hear sermons, go to confession, communicate often . . . but my husband does not wish it. My unceasing occupations, the care of children . . . keep me confined to the house; and thus it is not without some difficulty that I can hear Mass at a late hour on festivals.¹⁶

Given that he heard these types of concerns from real women in the confessional day after day, his rhetorical question and answer below are not unreasonable:

And how many married women are to be found in such a state of perfection? They are very rare; and if you find any, they are always in sorrow, that when they could have done so they did not consecrate themselves to Jesus Christ. Amongst all the devout married women I have known, I never knew one to be satisfied with her condition.¹⁷

The fact that married women are often unreasonably prevented from practicing their piety unreasonably is further attested in Alphonsus's work geared for the training of compassionate, knowledgeable confessors, who were to advise women and men in their roles as wives and husbands.

¹⁵ Liguori, "Discourse to Pious Maidens," *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, 474–87, at 478.

¹⁶ Liguori, "Advice to a Young Person in Doubt about the State of Life which She ought to Embrace," in *The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection*, 468–73, at 471–72.

¹⁷ Liguori, "Discourse to Pious Maidens," 474–87, at 478–79.

"The husband sins gravely," Alphonsus writes, "if he impedes her with respect to the precepts of God or the Church without just cause. . . . In truth, if he impedes her without cause regarding the same good counsels of the Church, such as confession, communion, and others; commonly this is a venial sin, except if it is understood that she perceives great usefulness in these activities."¹⁸ If the wife is particularly interested in a devout life, the husband's culpability rises if he frustrates the possibility for such a life. If he had not encountered such cases, Alphonsus would likely not have included them in his manual, which is certainly long enough as it is. Thus, it can be said that Alphonsus's warnings about marriage come from his understanding of the reality of marriage at the time, as well as his concern for leading people in what he understood to be the easiest way to salvation.

The modern reality presents a picture of marriage far different from the one Liguori knew, yet ironically, in a time when "high" theologies of sexuality and marriage are popular (e.g., theology of the body and domestic church), Alphonsus's seemingly "lower" theology of marriage should remind all Christians to attend to the actual practices and experiences of married Christians. Alphonsus counseled marriage as a cure for the disease of incontinence. Contemporary culture, it might seem, stands in need of this medicine even more than did his own. Modern marketing thrives on studying and implementing ways to inflame desire for a product; among the most powerful ways to sell a product is to associate it with positive sexual experience or sexual success. In recent, memorable television advertisements, Cadillac asks: "When you turn on your car, does it return the favor?" In a recent television ad campaign, one razor company shows a man so cleanly shaven by this new razor that a woman working out on the treadmill next to him is so overcome with desire for him that she immediately falls to the floor. Even pharmaceuticals are getting into the game: Viagra and Cialis advertising on many sporting events. Finally, the modern proliferation of pornography in print, television, film, and especially the internet contributes to and helps feed an ever-growing hunger for sexual satisfaction. Alphonsus's contribution to the modern question of discernment about marriage might sound like this: is the graced setting of marriage the place where I can best conquer my specific vices and grow in virtue and holiness while helping another person do the same?

¹⁸ Liguori, *Theologia Moralis*, vol. 1, 615–16, no. 356.

**The Alphonsian Approach to Marriage:
Relief for a Growing Number of Nonvowed Lay Catholics?**

Alphonsus's position on counseling marriage provides an interesting counterpoint to the modern status quo of Christian life.¹⁹ Above, I argued that Alphonsus would suggest a serious consideration of whether the "need" for marriage was even greater today as a cure for artificially inflamed desires, but at the same time, Alphonsus would not accept a popular critique of celibacy, namely, that such a lifestyle by nature makes an unreasonable demand on the human person. It is too difficult to have a fully integrated sexuality and live a celibate life, some say. Further, it is supposed, such a standard attracts to the priesthood and religious life people with psycho-sexual instabilities. Celibate life is, on this account, not a full realization of the human person as "sexual person" but is an unnatural erasure of the person's sexual self. Celibacy, others argue, is the cause of the drastic priest-shortage.²⁰ Alphonsus offers a needed critique of the idea that the religious life is somehow too demanding or unnatural. In fact, Alphonsus made the judgment, based on his years of missions and hearing confessions, that marriage was far more difficult than religious life. He seems to have reached exactly the opposite conclusion from many modern moral theologians and the popular opinion of Catholics young and old. For Alphonsus, it is the married state that could more easily threaten the full realization of the human person, the full detachment from the world and the full resignation of the person to the will of God. While I do not suggest we take up Alphonsus's position and counsel marriage only for those who cannot possibly resist fornication, I do think he challenges modern theologians, pastors, and those considering their own state in life to perform a "reality check." An encounter with Alphonsus's teachings should occasion the question: Is the current paradigm helpful for

¹⁹ The expression "nonvowed form of life" is introduced in Patricia A. Sullivan, "The Nonvowed Form of the Lay State in the Life of the Church," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 320–47, at 322–25; Bryan T. Froehle and Mary L. Gautier, ed., *Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States*, CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 14 (cited in Sullivan, "Nonvowed Form," 322).

²⁰ Richard A. Schoenherr and David Yamane, *Goodbye Father: The Celibate Male Priesthood and the Future of the Catholic Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Penelope J. Ryan, *Practicing Catholic: The Search for a Livable Catholicism* (New York: H. Holt, 1998), chaps. 4, 10; Paul E. Dinter, *The Other Side of the Altar: One Man's Life in the Catholic Priesthood* (New York: Farrar, 2003); First National Conference on a Married Priesthood, *Shaping the Future Priesthood* (Minneapolis: Corpus, 1988); and Brian Godden, *Celibacy and the Catholic Priesthood: The Case for Change* (Northampton: Becket, 1993).

judging which state of life presents more impasses on the road to salvation?²¹ Was Alphonsus right that, practically speaking, marriage may actually present certain obstacles to growth in holiness for some people?

Sexuality in Marriage: A Good in Itself

It should be noted that we have seen little in Liguori's counsels about marriage that defames the sexual aspects of the conjugal relation. Likewise, Liguori's counsel does not suggest that people sin by marrying; Liguori simply thinks that, unless a person is habitually incontinent, the choice for marriage is typically the choice for a more difficult path to salvation. In that sense, then, for Liguori the sexual aspect of matrimony is what chiefly recommends the sacrament to unmarried people. Alphonsus's counsel is not based on a fear of sex, an overemphasis on concupiscence, or disgust with the human body, but, as we have seen, it is a practical suggestion to facilitate growth in piety and holiness.²² One of the rare mentions he makes of sexuality in marriage in his counsels appears in a discourse to pious maidens. "I say that married persons can be holy in the spirit, but not in the flesh; on the contrary, virgins who have consecrated their virginity to Jesus Christ are holy both in soul and in body. *Holy both in body and in spirit*; and mark those other words, *to attend upon the Lord without impediment*."²³ Some modern moral theologians might at first glance be tempted to see in Alphonsus's statement the specter of Cartesian dualism or an antiquated disgust of sexuality and the body, but a second look allays these fears and points to what Alphonsus actually emphasizes in his statement.

²¹ Confronted with a society saturated with sexually explicit images, dialogues, and music that glorify the orgasm and a voracious sexual appetite as among the greatest of human goods, perhaps Alphonsus would consider a greater portion of the population to be hopelessly incontinent and in need of marriage than in his own day.

²² Alphonsus treats the "dirtiness" of sexuality in *Theologia Moralis*, vol. 4, 102–3, nos. 922–23, when considering whether or not a couple can make use of marriage on the same day they receive communion. He sets forth a probable position that receiving communion after having recourse to sex for enjoyment's sake is a venial sin unless some reasonable cause excuse it. If the couple engages in intercourse for the sake of procreation or on account of incontinence, then they ought to abstain because they could have resisted through prayer, but they do not sin in taking the sacrament. After receiving communion, though, Alphonsus states that there is no sin in the use of marriage. On festival, fasting days, or days of special prayer, he says, it is commonly held that to give the marriage debt is licit, though it seems probable that asking for the debt is a venial sin on such days. Here, Alphonsus is more lenient than some, but more strict than some. As always, he steers a middle path.

²³ Liguori, "Discourse to Pious Maidens," 477.

The passage makes clear that Alphonsus's major motivations are his willingness to take St. Paul seriously in 1 Cor 7, and his robust understanding of the commitment made in the marital vows. These lead him to the conclusion that the spouse can be perfectly holy only in spirit. We must pay attention to what Liguori means by "holy." "Holy" carries a sense of exclusive dedication to God, to and for his purposes alone. When Alphonsus says that the married person cannot be "holy" in the flesh as the virgin is, he means that the person has lost the right to dedicate the body exclusively, explicitly, and at all times to the service of God. Marriage, for Alphonsus, is "the sacrament among baptized people, in which a man and woman mutually and lawfully *hand over their bodies* to joint fellowship of life, to the use of the bringing up of children, and to the remedy of concupiscence." The matter is mutual consent that has the essence of handing over (*traditio*) to the other. The form is a mutual consent that has the essence of accepting the other.²⁴ Therefore, after marrying, the body can no longer be handed over to God exclusively, for control of the body has been handed over to the human spouse. Such an understanding flows explicitly from a robust support for the plain-sense meaning of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "Mulier sui corporis potestatem non habet, sed vir. Similiter autem et vir sui corporis potestatem non habet, sed mulier."²⁵ The spouses maintain control of their spirits, their souls, which can and should be dedicated entirely to God and his purposes. But

²⁴ Liguori, *Theologia Moral*, vol. 4, 59, no. 879, emphasis mine. Rey-Mermet (*Moral Choices*, 116) claims that, for Alphonsus, "[m]arriage is considered chiefly and in itself as an expression of the mutual gift of persons in an 'irrevocable pact of love which includes the right of physical union.'" Perhaps Rey-Mermet a bit anachronistically applies the phrase "expression of the mutual gift of persons" to Alphonsus. The personalist approach to marriage is more recent than Alphonsus. Alphonsus uses the term "traditio," which I would interpret as handing over rather than as gift. Additionally, in Alphonsus's thought, the spouses are said to give their "corpora," not their "personas." What is more, in *Homo Apostolicus* (tract. 18, cap. 2, punctum 1) Alphonsus refers to the handing over not as an act of love, but as a "traditio iuris." This is not to say that love is uninvolved. It is only to say that it is not, as Rey-Mermet says, "chiefly" what the marriage vows express for Alphonsus. Finally, Rey-Mermet translates "Vinculum perpetuum animarum cum obligatione reddendi debitum" as "irrevocable pact of love which includes the right of physical union." It seems his translation is nudged toward his intended reading a bit too strongly. I would translate the phrase perhaps more literally: "perpetual bond of souls with the obligation of the debt to be rendered."

²⁵ 1 Cor 7:4. The woman does not have power over her own body, but the man. But similarly, the man does not have power over his body, but the woman. Alphonsus does not cite canon law or any *summas de matrimonio* in his defense, although, as a lawyer, he would have been well aware of the canon law on marriage.

the husband has a legitimate claim to the wife's body, and the likewise the wife to the husband's. For example, if there is danger of adultery or pollution, the spouse must render the marital debt, even at the expense of time spent in prayer or meditation. Obviously Alphonsus would not suggest that sexual relations between spouses be so unaffectively or coldly undertaken as I have just described, but the point is instructive. Marriage for Alphonsus involves ceding control of certain aspects of one's own life for the salvation of the spouse's soul. It is in a certain way parallel to a vow of obedience taken by religious. The mutual handing over of spouses enjoins obedience in matters of the whole nuptial "societatem," which involves not only the other's sexual needs but also all other demands of domestic life—the diapers, the dishes, the education of children, the plowing of the field, the care in times of sickness, the taking on of other family members in need, the dowry, etc. Procuring and maintaining food, clothing, and home, entertaining sometimes difficult guests, and seriously taking on the task of educating children present possibly insurmountable challenges to finding time for Eucharistic adoration, meditation, spiritual reading, mental prayer, etc.

Alphonsus's Moral Theology of Sexuality in Marriage: Innovations and Critique

In what came before, I have not intended to say that Liguori thinks marriage evil, or even that a person sins by entering the sacrament for reasons other than necessity. In fact, Liguori, with Aquinas and others, finds it probable to say that a person can enter marriage for ends extrinsic to marriage per se. In Alphonsus's thought, marriage has three types of ends:²⁶ *intrinsecos essentielles*, *intrinsecos accidentales*, and *extrinsecos accidentales*.²⁷ A

²⁶ Rey-Mermet (*Moral Choices*, 115–16) claims that Alphonsus "does not hesitate to contradict Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas, and (almost) the whole Roman law tradition reaffirmed in the *Codex Juris Canonici* of 1917 (cc. 1013 and 1082) and by Pius XI in *Casti Connubii*." There may be some confusion here, though. Alphonsus's systematization is not a contradiction of the previous tradition. Perhaps Rey-Mermet overstates his case with the use the term "contradict." In the documents Rey-Mermet cites, the question at hand is the three "goods" of marriage: *proles*, *fides*, *sacramentum*. Alphonsus does not contradict these goods, but distinguishes between their species. *Proles* is an intrinsic accidental end (or good). *Fides* (rendering the marriage debt exclusively to the spouse) is an intrinsic essential end (or good). *Sacramentum* (indissolubility) is also an intrinsic essential end (or good).

²⁷ Liguori, *Theologia Moralis*, vol. 4, 61–62, no. 882: "Tres fines in matrimonio considerari possunt: fines intrinseci essentielles, intrinseci accidentales, et fines accidentales extrinseci. Fines intrinseci essentielles sunt duo: traditio mutua cum obligatione reddendi debitum, et vinculum indissolubile. Fines intrinseci accidentales pariter sunt duo: procreatio prolis, et remedium concupiscentiae. Fines

person validly marries as long as none of the essential intrinsic ends of marriage are excluded. A person validly but illicitly marries on two conditions: (1) excluding intrinsic accidental ends of marriage willfully; or (2) including malicious extrinsic accidental ends.²⁸ So a person validly but sinfully (illicitly) marries with the explicit intention of avoiding procreation (*vitandi prolem*) while making use of the marriage act.²⁹ At the same time, though, couples can licitly contract marriage, even if they never intend to consummate the marriage.³⁰ In so doing, they are “*sine intentione prolis et remedii concupiscentiae*.” But to be without the intent to procreate on account of a vow of continence is different from explicitly intending to avoid procreation while still making use of the marriage act.³¹ Alphonsus stands firmly in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas on this point. Also with Aquinas, Alphonsus finds that the spouses may become affianced and marry without the consent of their parents, and, barring just cause, the parents must provide the dowry for their daughter in such cases. Parents must be consulted but not obeyed on this account.³² Provided none of the intrinsic essential or accidental ends of marriage are

autem accidentales extrinseci plurimi esse possunt, ut pax concilianda, voluptas captanda, etc.”

²⁸ Ibid., vol. 4, 61–62, nos. 881–82.

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 4, 61, no. 881. “*Licite contrahitur in remedium concupiscentiae (nihil aliud intendendo): modo proles positive non impediatur; hoc enim sub mortali non licet. . . . Hinc etiam conjuges possunt abstinere ab usu conjugii, et optare ne plures accipiant liberos quam possint alere: dummodo, ut dixi, positive non impendant nec abortum procurent. . . . Valide, sed illicite contrahitur cum intentione negandi debitum, vitandi prolem, vel etiam non educandi, moechandi, etc.*”

³⁰ Ibid., vol. 4, 62, no. 882: “*Certum est secundo, quod si quis excluderet duos fines intrinsecos accidentales, non solum valide, sed etiam licite posset quandoque contrahere (prout, se esset senex, et nuberet sine spe procreandi prolem, nec intenderet remedium concupiscentiae).*” It is important to note that not intending or hoping for children in marriage can be sometimes licit. This is an exception rather than a rule.

³¹ Ibid. “*Valide et licite contrahi potest cum pacto continentiae, sine intentione prolis et remedii concupiscentiae. Ratio, quia non pugnat cum essentia matrimonii. Et patet exemplo Beatae Virginis et S. Josephi.*”

³² Regarding the dowry: “[A]n pater teneatur dotare filiam, contra ejus voluntatem nuptam?” (ibid., vol. 1, 604–6, nos. 336, 337). Regarding consultation and consent: “*Censent teneri filium parentes consulere; quia in tale negotio ipsi majorem experientiam quam juvenes habent*” (ibid., vol. 2, 495, no. 68). This is unlike entrance into religious life, for which parents need not be consulted at all. “*Ex his omnibus concluditur, non solum non peccare filios religionem assumentes, parentibus inconsultis; sed ordinarie loquendo, valde errare si participes eos faciant de sua vocatione, ob periculum cui se exponunt se ab illa averti*” (ibid., vol. 2, 496, no. 68).

excluded, Alphonsus finds no sin in marrying explicitly and primarily for extrinsic reasons such as economic prudence, for bringing peace among families, etc.³³ He diverges here from the Augustinian approach, though, which finds fault with those who enjoin marriage for any reason other than as a means to procreation.³⁴

Liguori takes another step beyond Augustine and Aquinas in his moral thinking about the act of marriage itself. He finds it probable that one does not sin by explicitly intending and seeking only the remedy of concupiscence in the marital act.³⁵ Furthermore, Alphonsus defends moderate pleasure in sex as a licit end of the act, though never as the sole end.³⁶ The act of marriage, after all, “per se est licitus et honestus.”³⁷ Liguori suggests that the man, having “seminated,” ought to continue the act of sexual congress or use some other means to bring his spouse to “semination” (orgasm).³⁸ Neglect in this manner is at least venial sin.

In light of these credentials, then, scholars have applauded Alphonsus as a prophet of modern magisterial approaches to sexuality in marriage that are more relational and less legalistic than magisterial teaching on sexuality before the Second Vatican Council. He is a transitional figure,

³³ Ibid., vol. 4, 64, no. 883.

³⁴ Augustine argues with the Manicheans on this point in *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae et de Moribus Manicheorum*, 2.18. “You think that taking a wife is not for the sake of procreating children but for the sake of satisfying lust. But marriage, as the very laws of marriage cry out, unites a man and a woman for the sake of procreating children.” See also, Augustine, *Sermon* 51.22, where he claims that marriage is entered for the mutual, honorable purpose of *liberorum procreandorum causa*, not for the sake of satisfying lust.

³⁵ See Liguori, *Theologia Moralis*, vol. 4, 95, 109, nos. 912, 927. Pleasure can be sought as a means to the remedy of concupiscence. The ends that make licit the contracting of marriage also make licit seeking the use thereof: “prolis, ad vitandum periculum incontinentiae, et valetudinis causa vel propter alios fines extrinsecos” (ibid., vol. 4, 109, no. 927).

³⁶ Ibid., vol. 4, 95, no. 911–13. This is a divergence from Aquinas and Augustine, for whom the act of marriage must be justified by some good other than itself. This is on account of the fact that in its use, the act of marriage hinders the use of reason, especially in the moment of orgasm. Human reason’s inability to control the procreative act is a symptom of the Fall wherein the body’s rebellion against the will parallels the human person’s rebellion against the divine will. Alphonsus provides the citation of Aquinas in his text.

³⁷ Ibid., vol. 4, 82, no. 900.

³⁸ Ibid., vol. 4, 98–101, nos. 917–20. Liguori makes the decision based on his understanding of biology. He thinks that the wife’s orgasm aids in the healthy conception of the child or its early formation. See also Peter Gardella, *Innocent Ecstasy: How Christianity Gave America an Ethic of Sexual Pleasure* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9–20.

they say, who liberates spouses from the impossible burdens of rigorist moral theology and paves the way to the post-Vatican II approaches.³⁹ This is true as far as it goes, but it by no means indicates that Alphonsus should be enlisted on the side of approaches that dissent from magisterial Catholic teaching on marriage and sexuality. Alphonsus may be forward thinking, but he manages to hold fast to a Thomistic understanding of the sexual act's natural teleology. Keep in mind that, for Alphonsus, explicitly excluding any desire for conception avoids sin *only* in cases where additional children would cause serious danger to the family.⁴⁰ Remember as well, the first end of the sexual act remains, for Alphonsus, procreation; any attempt to frustrate that end constitutes mortal sin.⁴¹ Indeed, the only examples he gives of couples marrying licitly while not intending procreation of children are the elderly, and Mary and Joseph. His use of these examples helps to make sense of the true marriage between Mary

³⁹ Vidal (*La familia en la vida y en el pensamiento de Alfonso de Liguori*, 152–53) sees Alphonsus moving away from Augustine and Aquinas on sexuality in marriage and embracing the “more optimistic and relational” opinion of John Chrysostom. For him, Alphonsus enters the tradition as a means to reorient Catholic thinking in a more personalist direction. Rey-Mermet (*Moral Choices*, 116) claims that, for Alphonsus, “Marriage is considered chiefly and in itself as an expression of the mutual gift of persons in an ‘irrevocable pact of love which includes the right of physical union.’”

⁴⁰ In *Theologia Moral*, vol. 4, 121, 123, nos. 939–40, 941–42. Liguori holds that spouses may abstain from intercourse for any amount of time in their marriage, but if there is an imminent risk of incontinence in one of the spouses, poverty is not a licit reason for denying the marriage debt. In fact, if the spouse is aware of the imminent risk, he or she is obliged to seek intercourse out of love for the other spouse, even if there is serious reason to avoid increasing family size. His reasoning is that it is a great good and an obligation to avoid the sin of pollution or adultery that might come from prolonged abstinence. The *intention* of procreation may be excluded licitly only if there is serious harm that would result in increasing the family size, e.g. in the case of poverty. This is not to say that a person may expressly desire the act to be sterile, nor is it to say that spouses may in any way frustrate the procreative telos of the sexual act. See *ibid.*, vol. 4, 109, no. 927. His discussion of the nature of marriage (vol. 4, 61–62, nos. 881–82) and the use of marriage (vol. 4, 82–117, nos. 900–937) presupposes that the natural telos of the sexual act is the possibility of conception and that purposely to frustrate this end is a sin against nature.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 61, no. 881: “Licite contrahitur in remedium concupiscentiae (nihil aliud intendendo): modo proles positive non impediatur; hoc enim sub mortali non licet.” See also *ibid.*, vol. 4, 95, no. 912, where Alphonsus asserts that use of the marriage act explicitly for the sake of pleasure alone (granted the act is still open to conception) does not avoid venial sin, because it frustrates the right ordering of the natural ends of the act of marriage: “Non excusatur autem a veniali, quia est perversion quaedam ordinis; cum delectatione, quae intenta est a natura ut medium ad generationem, fit finis habendae copulae.”

and Joseph, as well as the marriages between the elderly that have always been recognized in the Church.⁴² Neither of these examples provides precedent to argue that a fertile couple could licitly marry with the intention of having sterile intercourse. The elderly couple does not willfully make a formerly fertile act now sterile. The sterility of the act, if they make use of it at all, is accidental to their desires. As to Mary and Joseph, they are in a sense more open to the procreative good of marriage than any couple, and they too never intend to engage in sterile sexual intercourse. So, while Alphonsus offers a way forward from the post-Tridentine reclamation of sexual morality by rigorists,⁴³ he does not necessarily point toward a probable dissent from the magisterial position on the intrinsic evil of contraception.

Alphonsus's Robust Spirituality of Marriage: Raising up a Family of Saints

Saints Suffer

Though he does not counsel marriage except for the case of need, and though he does allow licit contraction of marriage for reasons extrinsic to the sacrament itself, Alphonsus nonetheless is optimistic about the ultimate end of married Christians. He finds reason to think that saints may be made of all spouses: "God wants all of us to be saints, and each one according to his or her state of life: the religious as a religious, laypeople as laypeople, the priest as a priest, the married person as married, the merchant as merchant, the soldier as a soldier, and so on, in every other state of life."⁴⁴ For Alphonsus, this holiness is a life of virtue and prayer, but also a life that nonetheless grows amidst the worldly demands of marriage. Obedience to life's duties does not itself determine salvation; whether the events and duties of life are born in virtue or vice marks the difference between a saint's life and a sinner's. Chief among the virtues and the source of holiness for all people is love, the love of Jesus Christ given by grace and manifested by the imitation of his life. This excerpt from a letter to Father Tannoia on January 28, 1762, summarizes his notion of the love of Jesus that brings people to salvation:

Bind yourselves, then, ever more and more with love to Jesus Christ. Love is that golden chain which attaches souls to God and binds them so

⁴² Ibid., vol. 4, 62, no. 882.

⁴³ See, for example, the moral textbook used by Alphonsus during his education: François Genet, *Théologie morale* (Paris: Chez André Pralard, 1703).

⁴⁴ Liguori, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, trans. Peter Heinegg, intro. J. Robert Fenili, C.Ss.R. (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 1997), 76.

closely that it appears they are no longer able to separate themselves from Him. Always, therefore, I pray you, make acts of love in your meditations, Communion, in the visits to the Blessed Sacrament, during reading, in your cells, in the refectory, in the wood, in all places at all times. He who loves Jesus Christ from his heart has no fear of losing Him, and is content to *suffer every pain, all contempt and all poverty for His love*.⁴⁵

Although this letter explicitly treats the holiness of Alphonsus's confreres, the sufferings of "*pain, all contempt and all poverty for His love*" link the passage directly to the kind of sufferings we have seen Alphonsus describe in the married life. Recall that the wife's lot is more difficult than that of the religious on account of the "throes of childbirth," the abuses, insults, and ill-treatment of husbands and relatives, and the wants of the household (poverty) that continual toil never seems to assuage.⁴⁶ It seems, then, that—given recourse to the love of Christ—spouses stand to become as great saints as any.

In Liguori's thought, it is married people who suffer most in this world, but they are not, for that reason, most cursed. In fact, for Liguori, the most graced saint of all was not only married but also more given to suffering than any person except Jesus. Her name was Mary, the mother of God. In his widely read *Glories of Mary*, Alphonsus calls Mary the "queen of martyrs." Her suffering sorrows, he says, "surpassed the sufferings of all other martyrs together."⁴⁷ Recall that Liguori also called holy spouses "martyrs of patience." He dedicated a number of sermons and discourses to explicating the sorrows of Mary endured in patience.⁴⁸ For example, following the prophecy of Simeon at the Temple, Mary's sufferings were amplified by the anticipation of Jesus' crucifixion that lay ever before her.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Mary's life is most graced, for any grace ever received by any person was also received by Mary, as she was "*gratia plena*."⁵⁰ In effect, far from presenting merely a pessimistic view of marriage,⁵¹ Liguori understands marriage to be graced in the suffering it brings, and he calls a married

⁴⁵ A portion of the letter is transcribed in D. F. Miller, *Saint Alphonsus*, 225–26.

⁴⁶ Liguori, "Discourse to Pious Maidens," 478.

⁴⁷ Liguori, *The Glories of Mary* (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2000), 282–93: "The sorrows that tortured her soul were the crown that proclaimed her the queen of martyrs."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 354–55.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 294–98.

⁵⁰ See Alphonsus's sermon on the Immaculate Conception: *ibid.*, 178–97.

⁵¹ See Vidal, *La familia en la vida y en el pensamiento de Alfonso de Liguori*, 182–88, at 188. For Vidal, Alphonsus's characterization of married life is entirely pessimistic and excessively so, even after granting that strong rhetoric would have been used to exhort those choosing a state in life as well as those already living the religious life. Since his work is a socio-historico-biographical account of Alphonsus on

woman the exemplar of discipleship, love, patience-in-suffering, and resignation to the will of God. Marriage can be the setting for holiness, albeit a more difficult one than consecrated life.

In Mary, Alphonsus has a strong pastoral tool for ameliorating the suffering of women both in his own time and in our current day. After all, during the eighteenth century women lost, on average, more than half of their children during the first year of life. They suffer all the more from the anticipation of this loss or the loss of their own life in childbirth, knowing full well these sufferings are not only possible but probable.⁵² Similarly, whereas infertility was a deep, enigmatic, practically incurable wound for a family in the eighteenth century, medicine of the twenty-first century tempts spouses to seek technological solutions to this problem that destroy human dignity and life. In a world where technology can solve almost any problem, including infertility, Alphonsus's development of the virtues of resignation to the will of God and patience in suffering ought to resist the modern desire to have life "our own way." As Alphonsus says, "a soul that desires to belong completely to God must be resolved to suffer in all things, eagerly embracing all voluntary mortifications, and *with still more eagerness the involuntary ones, since those are more welcome to almighty God.*"⁵³ What's more, Alphonsus notes that there are many who would like to serve God, but only on their own terms: at such and such a position, with such and such a person, in such and such place. Alphonsus finds that such people—possessing a velleity for sainthood, but only as they see fit—lack freedom of Spirit and suffer from a slavery to self-love.⁵⁴ Perhaps Mary's freedom of Spirit and unequivocal "yes" to the sorrows of her life and her son's life can help couples pause and reconsider how their own sufferings and disappointments in marriage, among them infertility, or, on the other hand, the need to maintain family size for serious economic or health reasons contribute to their salvation. Perhaps Liguori might lead infertile couples, or those suffering loss of children to death, to find solidarity with Mary, who saw the fruit of her womb crushed at the pillar and hung on the cross. Perhaps infertile couples might find further strength to pursue adoption, perhaps even adoption of unwanted or handicapped children, through solidarity with

marriage and the family, he does not explore the theological connections between suffering, the Christian life, and Mary.

⁵² See *ibid.*, 148, and G. Da Molin, "Struttura della famiglia e personale di servizio nell'Italia meridionale," in M. Barbagli and D.I. Kertzer ed., *Storia della famiglia italiana, 1750–1950* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992), 227.

⁵³ Liguori, *Practice of the Love of Christ*, 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

Mary, who, at the foot of that same cross, accepted the beloved disciple as an adopted son. It seems the questions about fertility and suffering in childbirth that modern spouses face are in many ways opposite from those Alphonsus faced in the confessional. In the West, while infant and maternal mortality have decreased, they nonetheless remain cause for great suffering. Miscarriage affects approximately one-in-five pregnant women, and other less serious complications also continue to bring suffering to many expecting parents, but as couples continue to wait longer for children and as modern industrial technologies bring people into contact with ever more dangerous chemicals and materials, it is infertility that increasingly plagues spouses and garners the most attention. Alphonsus's Marian theology serves as a poignant resource for answering the question, how to deal with suffering in a marriage yesterday and today.

Parents as Missionaries of the Home

Holiness in marriage, though, is not restricted to bearing suffering in virtue; holiness in marriage also includes the virtuous embrace of its responsibilities—among them the rearing and education of children. While married couples are not necessarily missionaries zealously pursuing the salvation of the souls of the most abandoned of society, Liguori nonetheless enjoins on them the same missionary zeal for the salvation of souls—their children's souls. Just as it is the mission of the Redemptorists to bring the gospel and sacraments to the abandoned rustics, it is the parents' mission to bring the gospel and sacraments to their children. We learn of parents' responsibilities to their children in Alphonsus's exposition of the fourth commandment in his *Theologia Moralis*, his *Istruzione al popolo*, and also in a sermon composed for the seventh Sunday after Pentecost.⁵⁵ This sermon, "On the Education of Children," is preached for the Gospel of Matthew, 7:18, "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can an evil tree bring forth good fruit." The mission of parenthood is to produce good fruit, that is, saints. Nowhere does Liguori make this more explicit than when he says that parents, with Queen

⁵⁵ Alphonsus also explicates this commandment in *Homo Apostolicus* tract. 7, "De quarto praecepto decalogi"; in *Institutio catechistica ad populum in Praecepta Decalogi et Sacramenta*, "De quarto praecepto," pars prima, cap. 4, "De sexto praecepto," pars prima, cap. 6; in *Istruzione al popolo sopra I Precetti del Decalogo per bene osservarli e sopra I sacramenti per ben riceverli per uso de' parrochi e missionary e di tutti gli ecclesiastici che s'impiegano ad insegnare la dottrina cristiana*, "Del quarto precetto," cap. 4, "Del sesto precetto," cap. 6. All of these texts are available and searchable at www.intratext.com/Catalogo/Autori/AUT231.HTM (accessed 16 April 2008).

Blanche, the mother of St. Louis, ought to teach their children this maxim: "My son, I would rather see you dead in my arms, than in a state of sin."⁵⁶ Fathers who neglect their children's souls "are not, says St. Bernard, fathers, but murderers; they kill, not the bodies, but the souls of their children."⁵⁷ Alphonsus notes, though, that the task of raising Christian children depends first and foremost on the parents' holiness.⁵⁸ In order to have zeal for the souls of their children, spouses must energetically pursue the salvation of their own souls. "But if parents be wicked, how can the children be virtuous?"⁵⁹

As I said above, parents can lead their children to Christ only inasmuch as they have solicitude for their own souls; at the same time, though, responsible parenthood itself constitutes a path to sanctification for Liguori. Liguori relies on Sirach 30:5 and 1 Timothy 2:15 for this conclusion. "Hence, he who teaches his son to live well, shall die a happy and tranquil death. . . . And he shall save his soul by means of his children; that is, by the virtuous education which he has given them. 'She shall be saved through child-bearing.'"⁶⁰ Alphonsus has an extended understanding of this passage from 1 Timothy, one that transcends the physical act of bearing a child in the flesh and reaches toward the bearing of a child up to sainthood through Christian education, virtues, and the sacraments.⁶¹ In addition, Alphonsus applies this passage to fathers as well as mothers.

Commitment to a child's education in virtue and faith also comes from a proper understanding the child's place in the family and the nature of the parents' relationship to the child. Spouses must know that "God gives children to parents, not that they may assist the family, but that they may be brought up in the fear of God, and be directed in the way of eternal salvation."⁶² "We have", says St. Chrysostom, 'a great deposit in children; let us attend to them with great care'—*hom. ix.*, in *I. ad Tit.* Children have not been given to parents as a present or possession, which they may dispose of as they please, but as a trust, for which, if lost through their negligence, they must render an account to God."⁶³ What a stirring

⁵⁶ Liguori, "Sermon 36," 275. While I cite most from this sermon, I do not intend to offer an exhaustive reading of this sermon or of his sermons in general. There is, however, substantial overlap of content among the popular writings.

⁵⁷ Liguori, "Sermon 36," 276.

⁵⁸ Liguori, "Sermon 36," 269.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 269, 275–76: "Children are like apes; they do what they see their parents do . . . scandalous parents compel, in a certain manner, their children to lead a bad life."

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 271–72.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 270.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

critique of modern commodification of children in marriage, and, as we see below, the attendant personification of pets and property.⁶⁴ “Would to God,” Alphonsus writes, “that certain parents paid as much attention to their children as they do to their horses! How careful are they to see that their horses are fed and well trained! And they take no pains to make their children attend at catechism, hear mass, or go to confession. ‘We take more care’, says St. Chrysostom, ‘of our asses and horses, than of our children’—*hom. x., in Matt.*”⁶⁵ It seems that love of things and animals more than children is as old a phenomenon as parenting itself.

This is all fine, some might say, but do parents today not already care about the spiritual wellbeing of their children? What does Alphonsus really add to a Christian understanding of the mission of parenthood? What Alphonsus offers is a complete reprioritization of the tasks of parenthood. Solicitude for the child’s salvation by growth in virtue and knowledge of the faith holds the primary position, far above their education in letters, sciences, and/or trade. Mothers are to teach their children the maxim, “What will it profit us to gain the whole world, if we lose our own souls? Everything on this Earth has an end; but eternity never ends. Let all be lost, provided God is not lost.”⁶⁶ Liguori is not just emphasizing a focus on salvation, but he is drastically prioritizing it over other ends. “On the day of judgment,” he writes, “parents shall have to render an account for all the sins of their children.”⁶⁷ Liguori’s approach serves to remind modern parents that saving their child’s soul is more important than saving for their child’s college education. In a culture where middle-class parents spend more hours at work than at home so that they can afford luxuries for their children, Alphonsus’s vision of parenting as a spiritual, moral mission, rather than as primarily an economic one, offers refreshing and liberating alternatives for spouses bogged down by a society telling parents that what their children have is more important than what they are and what they become.⁶⁸ Liguori exhorts parents to be

⁶⁴ See John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006). Certainly Liguori would tremble to see the modern proliferation of dog parks over against parks for children. Without question he would be shocked to find a civilization that allows 3.7 million abortions per annum but vigorously prosecutes cruelty to animals.

⁶⁵ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 271.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 275–76.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 271. He finds this idea in Origen’s commentary on Job: “—Origen, *Librum II, in Job*, ‘Omnia quaecumque deliquerint filii, a parentibus requiruntur,’” (Quoted in Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 271).

⁶⁸ See, for example, Susan Linn, *Consuming Kids: The Hostile Takeover of Childhood* (New York: New Press, 2004); and Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and*

concerned most with what God intends their children to become—saints—and his advice for doing so is not merely to be an eco-friendly consumer or resist materialism by a moderate, generous life, but rather he counsels a life of radical piety (sacrificing the supermarket and the soccer league for the sake of eucharistic adoration and spiritual reading).

Toward a Livable Christian Family Life for Yesterday and Today

A true missionary and a gentle moral theologian, Liguori does not simply lay these demands on the shoulders of parents and then walk away; he is most interested in giving parents real, bearable solutions to the challenges of the moral life in conjugal life and raising children. His suggestions for how to live the moral life proclaimed in the gospel can be divided into three sections: (1) pious practice; (2) propositional knowledge of the faith; and (3) growth in virtue.

First, he treats the teaching of pious practice. For the gospel to be successfully preached, it must be practicable. It must truly be good news, a truly better way of life. This notion would not be lost on Alphonsus. He does not burden spouses with impossible yokes of odious pious practice in the realm of child-rearing, but offers simple, clear practices that are as relevant today as in the eighteenth century. Alphonsus gives families a “rule of life” drastically abridged from the rule of the Redemptorists. He includes abridged or revised versions of this rule in many of his spiritual books and in some sermons.⁶⁹ The rule given in the sermon on parenting is even more abbreviated than those found in spiritual treatises for a more general audience, which suggests a special care that his counsel to families be approachable. The rule typically has two parts: (1) things to be done daily, and (2) general counsels for Christian living. The daily acts frame the day in terms of worship. On rising, members of the family are “first, to thank God for having preserved their life during the night; secondly, to offer to God all the good actions which they will perform, and all the pains which they shall suffer during the day; thirdly, to implore of Jesus Christ and the most holy Mary to preserve them from all sin during the day.”⁷⁰ At the end

the New Consumer Culture (New York: Scribner, 2004). On the other hand Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993) tries to support consumer culture among children as a form of communication.

⁶⁹ A version of the rule appears also in Liguori, *The Way of Salvation and of Perfection*, 502–10; and *The Christian Virtues*, 335–71, 392–402.

⁷⁰ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 274. In “Rule of Life,” in *The Way of Salvation and of Perfection*, vol. 2, rev. ed., Eugene Grimm, ed. (Brooklyn: Redemptorist Fathers, 1926),

of the day, each person should perform an examination of conscience and an act of contrition.⁷¹ At some point each day, “good fathers of families are careful to get a book of meditations read, and to have mental prayer in common for half an hour every day. This is what the Holy Ghost exhorts you to practice.”⁷² Additionally, “teach them [children] to make, every day, the acts of Faith, Hope, and Charity, to recite the Rosary, and to visit the blessed sacrament.”⁷³ Again, Alphonsus abridges the abridged “rule of life” here, leaving out the visits to our Lady.⁷⁴ It also seems that here, unlike in the “rule of life,” the acts of Faith, Hope, and Charity are to be made daily, while the practices of reciting the rosary and visiting the Sacrament are to be taught but need not be made every day. Parents ought weekly to avail their children of the sacraments of confession (beginning at 7 years old) and communion (beginning at 10 years old) as well; they should have their children confirmed at the age of reason.⁷⁵

Parents are not only morally obligated to teach their children authentic practices of piety, but they must also teach and pass on to them the content of the faith. Again, as a missionary to the abandoned rustics, typically uneducated in the faith, Alphonsus is sensitive to the parents’ own lacking knowledge of the faith. So, once again, he makes the moral obligation to pass on the faith an easier yoke to bear. Alphonsus simplifies the faith to four “mysteries” that parents should teach their children:

First, that there is but one God, the Creator and Lord of all things; secondly, that this God is a remunerator, who, in the next life, shall reward the good with the eternal glory of Paradise, and shall punish the

502–10, at 502, Liguori adds the option that a person could also recite the Our Father, a hail Mary, the Creed, and 3 more hail Marys in honor of her purity.

⁷¹ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 274. In “Rule of Life,” 505, he adds that a person might perform the “Christian acts” at this time.

⁷² Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 274. In “Rule of Life,” 505, another half-hour of spiritual reading is suggested in addition to the half-hour of meditation. Alphonsus also provides detailed description of how to perform these meditations (503–4).

⁷³ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 274. In “Rule of Life,” Alphonsus describes in greater detail the practice of visiting the Blessed Sacrament (505). Liguori also wrote an immediately popular book to aid people in visits to the Blessed Sacrament (*Visits to the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady* [Rockford, IL: TAN, 2000]).

⁷⁴ Liguori, “Rule of Life,” 505. Liguori also leaves out of this double-abridged version the advice to hear as many sermons as possible, to make a one-day retreat once a month, and to make an eight-day retreat annually (508).

⁷⁵ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 274. In “Rule of Life,” 504–6, Alphonsus suggests, in consultation with a spiritual director, hearing mass daily and receiving communion multiple times a week. One ought to, if possible, spend a half-hour in preparation to receive communion and a half-hour in thanksgiving after receiving the Sacrament as well. He also suggests spending a half an hour visiting our Lady.

wicked with the everlasting torments of Hell; thirdly, the mystery of the most holy Trinity,—that is, that in God there are Three Persons, who are only one God, because they have but one essence; fourthly, the mystery of the incarnation of the Divine Word—the Son of God, and true God, who became man in the womb of Mary, and suffered and died for our salvation. . . . If you are ignorant of these mysteries, you are obliged to learn them, and afterwards to teach them to your children.⁷⁶

Parents are responsible for the propositional knowledge that there is one God who is of one essence but three persons, who is creator, judge, and redeemer through his incarnate Son, who was born of a virgin and suffered and died for our salvation. Given that they themselves have the opportunity to learn these truths, parents are morally culpable for their children's ignorance of them.

Parents are not only invested with teaching piety and the articles of faith to their children, but they “are obliged to instruct their children in the practice of virtue, not only by words, but still more by example.”⁷⁷ The practices of piety and the propositional knowledge of Christian mysteries are of little good without virtue. There are two pieces to the pedagogy of virtue for Liguori: shunning the occasion for sin, and correcting faults in the progress of virtue.⁷⁸ As to the first, parents must take every caution to spare their children from occasions of sin.⁷⁹ For, as Alphonsus commonly puts it, if one does not avoid voluntary occasions of sin, how can one possibly hope to resist involuntary occasions?⁸⁰ The second is to train children in developing the habits of virtue through discipline, actively correcting faults.⁸¹ This discipline will fail if hypocritical or done in anger. It must be gentle, reasonable, and only rarely corporal.⁸² Finally, as they develop in virtue and move toward choosing a state in life, the parents must not interfere with the choice, for more often than not, when they do, they cannot help but seek their own or the family's interest.⁸³

⁷⁶ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 273–74.

⁷⁷ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 275.

⁷⁸ Elsewhere, Liguori states the role of the father in governing the good of the family in general as twofold: to rid the home of all evil and vice, and to promote the growth of virtue in the home. See *Instrucción al pueblo sobre los diez mandamientos y los sacramentos*, trans. N. Moriones (Madrid: n.p., 1955), 215–22.

⁷⁹ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 276.

⁸⁰ Liguori, “Rule of Life,” 507.

⁸¹ Liguori, “Sermon 36,” 277–78.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 275–78.

⁸³ See Liguori, *Selva di materie predicabile ed estrumente*, parte prima, cap. 10, in *Opere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, vol. 3 (Turin: 1847), 80. “The will of the parents is not a sign of vocation to the priesthood, as parents [who] induce their children to embrace

Conclusion

In this article I have sought to frame Alphonsus's moral theology of marriage in the terms used in modern discussions of marriage and family: the discernment of marriage, sexuality in marriage, spirituality and growth in holiness in marriage, and the mission of educating children in Christ. What we have seen is that, more than anything, Liguori seeks to make saints. His discussion of state in life centered on this point, for he could suggest a marriage only if it was clearly for the spiritual benefit of the person in question. His vivid expression of the challenges confronting married people was based on his experience of the reality in his time, rather than solely on an Augustinian or Thomistic notion of the Fall and sexuality. Despite the sufferings the nuptial life presents, Alphonsus called spouses to rise up as saints in their married state. In fact, the very sufferings presented by married life provided part of the occasion for Alphonsus to praise the virtue of Mary above that of all other saints. Specifically, Alphonsus calls spouses to holiness in three ways: through patient suffering of life's trials; through active pursuit of pious practice and growth in virtue; and through the passing on of piety, the content of the faith, and virtue to children by education in word and deed.

Alphonsus's approach to the moral theology of marriage has the potential to supplement current discussions of family life. By basing his counsels on an honest understanding of the reality of marriages in his time, Alphonsus encourages the same type of theological and pastoral attention on how spouses can virtuously deal with what they will actually encounter in their marriages. The article has demonstrated four points of contact: (1) Alphonsus's position on marriage as an exception rather than a rule challenges popular practice of discerning marriage or celibate life; (2) Alphonsus's understanding of the graced life as a life of patience in suffering, detachment from worldly goods, and resignation to the will of God radically challenges the modern consumer, emotivist ethic in marriage and opposes the modern obsession with technological manipulation of the world and our own bodies for our own ends; (3) Alphonsus's characterization of parenthood as a mission to nurture and form children into humble saints gives pause to the current trend of making children into professional consumers and slaves to self-love and self-aggrandizement; and (4) in the face of myriad, often nebulous,

the priesthood are not looking to the good of their children's souls but only [to] the interest and good of the family." At the same time, though, Alphonsus warns against the danger of being drawn away from a true vocation to religious or priestly life by parents who desire otherwise (*Theologia Moralis* I, 603, and II, 496).

confusing, and overly affective spiritualities, Liguori's rule of life provides concrete, practicable options for modern Christian families, which often find themselves floundering in their search for real ways to grow in their Christian life. N·V