



Love God and Do What You Please!

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One of the pithy statements attributed to St. Alphonsus Liguori that you can put on a banner and hang in church is, “Love God and do what you please.” Saint Alphonsus meant that if you love God, you’ll consistently choose that which leads to life, that which is holy and healthy. If you love God, you’ll do God’s will and avoid activities or thoughts that you understand as contrary to God’s will.

The confidence at the heart of this man’s assertion is all the more amazing when you learn more about Alphonsus (1696-1787). Although St. Alphonsus is a saint, a bishop and doctor of the Church, the patron of confessors, the patron saint of our SA family, and the person on whom the moral theology of the Church is rooted, he didn’t have his entire act together. This may surprise people who think saints are perfect.

Despite his suffering and daily struggle, St. Alphonsus Liguori constantly acted against: the impulse to despair, to doubt his spiritual beliefs, to give in to the feelings of guilt and anxiety.

Saint Alphonsus was a man of great passion and desire. You come to appreciate that his energy was fueled by a conviction that the redemption Jesus offered was intended for all people, especially the poor and those who are often ignored and marginalized. His pivotal insight was that the only thing denying people their share in the reality of the gospel was



that no one was giving them the news that God loves them. The passion, desire, and insight of Alphonsus led the Italian to found the Redemptorists, through which he sought to energize the Church and the people of God with the truth that there is “plentiful redemption for all.”

However, the flip side of his story is perhaps even more amazing and makes this saint more inspirational. Saint Alphonsus suffered terribly from scrupulosity. The man who poured his spirit into preaching, writing, and helping others struggled every day with believing he was lovable, that he was forgiven, and that God was pleased with him. He was easily able to see God's love at work in others, but he struggled to see God working within himself. This aspect of his life has been downplayed by many of his biographers, perhaps because they were uncomfortable that such a great saint could suffer in such a way.

The doubts, the anxiety, the uncertainty of constant questioning and the compulsiveness that accompanies this suffering affected St. Alphonsus' physical health and well-being. However, despite his suffering and daily struggle, he constantly acted against: the impulse to despair, to doubt his spiritual beliefs, to give in to the feelings of guilt and anxiety. Instead, he held on for dear life to the conviction that he had been redeemed and that his redemption was something that needed to be celebrated and proclaimed.

His conviction gave him a foundation from which grew an effective moral theology and teaching that enabled him to recognize error and false teaching quickly. Alphonsus identified immediately any lies being preached and was determined to offer effective remedies to combat them. Such sensitivity can be a great gift when it's understood and appreciated as a gift and not as something that needs to be overcome or disciplined.

The philosophy "love God and do what you please" that Alphonsus fostered also comes to life when we reflect on Gospel narratives, particularly those related to scrupulosity. For example, one of Jesus' central teachings comes to mind: "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." In order to love God with your whole heart and soul and love your neighbor, you first must love yourself. If you don't love yourself and don't believe you are lovable, then that which you offer to God and to your neighbor will be incomplete, conflicted, and marked with your own self-doubt and questioning, your own anxieties and insecurities.

This is another place where St. Alphonsus can help us and point the way that will lead us to the full truth that we are loved. Remember, the saints weren't perfect. Like Alphonsus, they struggled to accept and love

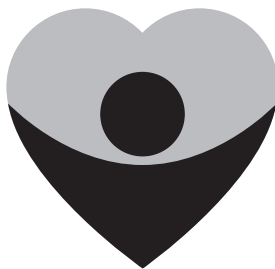
themselves as they were and believe that they were formed into the kingdom of God. Thus, knowing that the beloved saints had challenges becomes more essential in helping us come to accept and love ourselves and our fellow people as God loves all of us.



As we begin this new year of grace, let's resolve to live the gospel. To help, I invite you to make the statement of St. Alphonsus into a prayer: "Help me, Lord, to love you, and in loving you, to trust that I please you in all things. Amen." With this prayer, we will practice the commandments, learn the way of truth and love, and understand what it means to "love God and do what you please." ✨

Prayer

***"Help me, Lord, to love you,
and in loving you,
to trust that I please you
in all things. Amen."***



Prayer of the Other

Depression has a constant companion: anger. But if the anger is hidden under some protective cloak, how are we to see its real face? How do we get in touch with what or with whom we are angry?

Prayer and praying become essential elements here, especially the prayer of the other. For it is in dialogue, in communication, in trustful sharing with another that successive layers of blindness are scraped off, thus giving us the courage, power, and vision to see what is going on inside us.

The key element here is trust, and we will never grasp that element if we don't venture out, risk, become vulnerable and honest. How can we dare do this, however, if others do not prove themselves to be trustworthy? Such a process will unfold only with the prayer of the other.

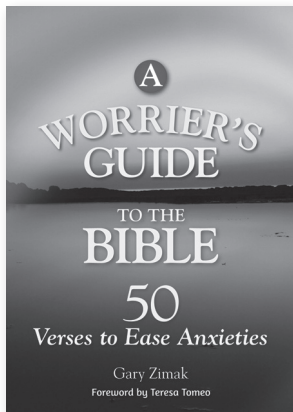
Healing happens not so much as the result of a technique or formula, but within an atmosphere of loving communion. Within such an atmosphere we learn that we are OK, that we have something to say that others will find worthwhile. In a trusting, loving atmosphere we learn that we can do things...What holds us back? Perhaps we are afraid that our own creative goodness is not there, that it isn't really "good" or creative, or that we will be laughed at.

There are countless indications that the prayer of others is present and working in our world. Its power is stupendous. In almost every church, or within reach of every church, we can find a prayer group, charismatic or otherwise. These groups are made up of people who strive mightily in the Lord to create an atmosphere of openness and trust. In their midst, we need not be afraid. Their motive is not to find fault or to compete; rather, honesty rules their actions. In such supportive prayer groups, we learn about who we are and how to live.

Destructive behavior—whether it manifests itself in violence, divorce, alcoholism, drug addiction, apathy, depression, vandalism, or squandered potential—does not happen when the prayer of others is at work. As long as one is embraced in such prayer and the supporting kinds of prayer that accompany it, there is great hope.

From the prayer of the other, we learn trust, and only with trust are we willing to exchange sword for key. Without trust, we would be fools to do so. Until the exchange is made, each of us hides away in a barricaded fortress where the atmosphere, although it feels safe, is not supportive of life. ☼

Excerpted from *Overcoming Depressive Living Syndrome* by Earnie Larsen (Liguori Publications 1996)



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Q. You answered a question in the October issue of this newsletter that I disagree with. I don't believe Catholics should go on a cruise where Sunday Mass is not offered. You answered that "superhuman" effort was not required. Choosing a cruise with Mass is not my idea of superhuman effort. Getting out of bed when I am sick with the flu is a better example of extraordinarily unnecessary effort.

A. Perhaps I should have reflected that what is required in all of our decision making is an informed and mature conscience. That would be more in line with the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Regardless, my answer would remain the same. There is nothing in the moral teaching of the Church that would suggest that a traveler has to make sure Sunday Mass is part of his or her itinerary. I would make Mass a very strong consideration in my planning, but it would not be the only criterion I would apply in making my choice.

Q. One night, I deliberately chose not to recite my bedtime prayers, and right before I went to sleep I cursed God. I'm sure this was a mortal sin, but was it also a sacrilege?

A. Neither can be called a mortal sin or a sacrilege. When you chose not to engage a particular spiritual practice, it doesn't mean you sinned. It only means you chose not to engage the practice. Also, I doubt you cursed God before you went to sleep. You may have imagined or feared you did, but my guess is you have the same fears when you're awake, and it's those fears you struggle with. Fear can become dominant in us when we're awake or asleep, conscious or unconscious. That's the way humans are created. It's no sin to be human.



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