



The Care of the Soul

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Saint Alphonsus Liguori dedicated himself and all his pastoral efforts to the consistent, loving, and pastoral care of the soul. He was concerned with his own soul and those of all men and women. He had a particular devotion to the

men and women who were, through no fault of their own, abandoned spiritually. These were the people who were unable to celebrate the sacraments of the Church with any regularity and who suffered spiritually because of this deprivation.

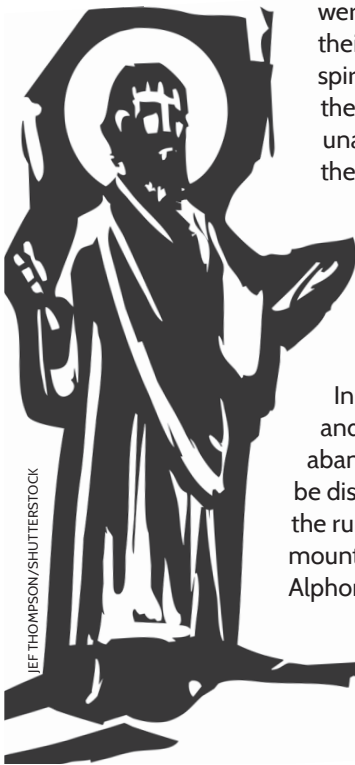
In Alphonsus' time and place, such abandoned people could be discovered easily in the rural areas or in the mountains above the sea.

Alphonsus traveled to these people and offered them the best pastoral care he could.

Later in his

life, he founded a congregation of men, the Redemptorists, who were willing to join him in this work. They chose to leave the comforts of home, family, and city and seek out those who were lost. They accepted the consequences of this choice with a sense of joy because they were supported in their effort by other men who were willing to embrace any difficulty in order to care for the souls of the abandoned. The modern community continues in this spirit and in this commitment, although the manner in which the work is undertaken is different now because of changing times and circumstances.

One conviction Alphonsus had and that he insisted that the men who follow him also share was that pastoral care must be consistently orthodox. As a result of this shared belief, their work as preachers and teachers was always faithful to the teaching of the Church. To assure faithfulness as a community, personal demands needed to be engaged. This meant the men who followed St. Alphonsus maintained a regular spiritual practice and discipline, prayed often and always, and committed themselves to an up-to-date understanding of the theology that the Church practiced. This commitment and understanding continue. Redemptorists are not always on the cutting edge of theological discovery, but rest assured that they vow to make every effort to be faithful representatives of the tradition and teaching of the Church at all times.



JEFF THOMPSON/SHUTTERSTOCK

Orthodoxy is an important and necessary part of the ministry to the scrupulous. Key factors in making the pastoral direction of this newsletter helpful and practical are that it is consistently sensitive pastorally, it is rooted in the reality of human experience, and it is theologically sound and orthodox. For people who suffer with anxiety and doubt, the last thing they should have to worry about is the pastoral advice and direction they receive. To not be faithful to the Church in our teaching and practice would not only violate the trust of the people who seek our pastoral care and direction, but it would be unfaithful to the spirit of St. Alphonsus.

Unfortunately, despite my best efforts and pastoral commitment, I occasionally receive feedback that calls into question my faithfulness to the tradition. Over the years, I have learned that my faithfulness is usually not the real issue but rather the fearful anxiety of the person providing the feedback. This may sound arrogant, but it is not. It is truthful and transparent in its honesty. Most of the challenges or harshly worded questions I receive indicate that I have “rubbed up against” a person’s closely held conviction or powerfully held opinion. As a result, my pastoral care is not appreciated by that person. It is not that the pastoral care is inadequate but rather that the person is not yet ready to receive it or consider its ramifications. This is perfectly acceptable, and it does not indicate a lack of openness to the Spirit of God. I believe it is more reflective of the truth of human growth. It takes time and patience to grow in maturity, understanding, and healthy living.

A reality that can lead to understanding is that no one, not even a good pastoral teacher/confessor, is an expert on the personal scrupulosity of another. People with scrupulosity suffer alone and in isolation, often forming judgments and perceptions that are untested and generally not applicable

to any situation but their own. Each person’s scrupulosity is unique. Pastoral care and direction, on the other hand, is universal in its application to the scrupulous and all women and men. Conflict and points of tension and disagreement are inevitable when universal understanding clashes with the personal interpretation. This does not make one experience less truthful or less honest than another. It simply describes the reality and indicates why good pastoral care for the scrupulous is very difficult and at times challenging.

An example of the challenge one faces in helping people with scrupulosity is a reader who consistently accuses me of heresy and other problems, demanding I apologize and recant my comments in this publication. In my personal responses to him, I have been patient and pastorally sensitive. I know that accusations of the sort he presents are rooted in his own fear, suffering, panic, and anxiety. A life of this depth of fear and self-loathing must be miserable.

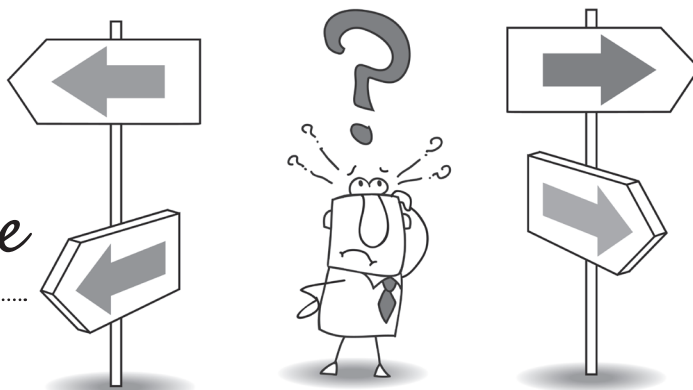
I tell you this because it illustrates the kind of suffering

that a person with scrupulosity can experience. The outlook on life that the reader I mention has constructed for himself makes pastoral and psychological care difficult, if not impossible. His perspective has, sadly, guaranteed he will remain isolated, wounded, and in pain. Many with scrupulosity suffer in this way. Such pain reflects the spiritual harm that is at work within people who have this disorder.

The care of the soul is a serious responsibility. Saint Alphonsus dedicated himself to the ministry of care and invited others to follow him. He developed a way of living and a spiritual path that enables healing, effective ministry, and faithfulness to the teaching of the Church. We who follow in his footsteps remain sensitive to his spiritual guidance and continue to depend on his vision of care and concern. ✨

***Each person’s
scrupulosity
is unique.***

Netflix and the Culture of Choice



To choose a movie to watch out of the massive expanse of options Netflix offers is challenging. Every film is plagued by the immediate availability and advertised possibility of a better film lurking down the menu. Every apprehended option speaks of better unapprehended options. We become saturated with possibility. The prospect of actually choosing something becomes a point of anxiety.

The very possibilities of divorce and prenuptial agreements keep the door open to another possibility—a “better” way. The myth is that we will be enabled to choose what we really want. The reality is that we are terrified from choosing anything at all, and worse, that even in the choosing we only try.

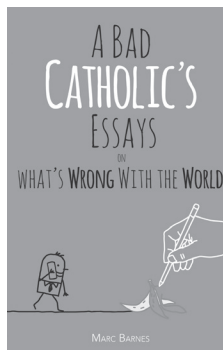
But, as with Netflix, “choice” is an open-ended category that can paralyze us from ever doing anything. And when we do lurch into action, choice presents the possibility of other options that haunt our decisions, transforming them into tentative tests. If we allow choice to plague us, we never extract ourselves from the primordial soup of possibility.

The opposite of this mode of being is adventure—a free, creative dealing with what is given. It involves reckoning with what you do not choose. We would do well to make use of G. K. Chesterton’s formula here, that an adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is given as an annihilation of other possibilities. It is an inconvenience to be born into a particular family and a particular body; to have a home in a particular place, a vocation to

this particular man or woman; or a project of work no one else can do. An inconvenience rightly considered is not haunted by the possibility of another choice. It is a restriction. We are made terribly responsible.

Against the vagueness of being able to do anything at all, against the absurdity of placing value in the mere ability to choose something else, adventure is an acceptance of what is given in all its thorniness, tragedy, and splendor. To be on an adventure is to reduce, to limit, to perhaps burn the bridges that no one else can burn at the expense of any “other choice” or “better place.” In this lies our profound experience of freedom.

Paradoxically, we are most certain that we are free when we make a vow and keep it; when we give ourselves a moral law and obey it; when we admit that we, without our choosing, have been given to a family and a community and give ourselves to them. We feel freedom when we eliminate “the other option.” ✨



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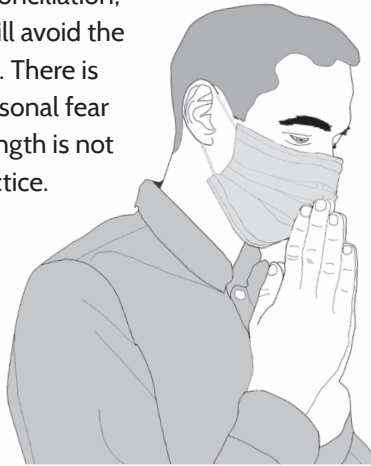
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Q. *The pandemic has not been kind to those of us who suffer with OCD. It has made our fear even more palpable. I truly struggle with the idea of going to church and celebrating the sacraments, especially within the confined space of a confessional.*

A. Do not go to church until you feel safe. Take your time. There is no need to complicate what is already a difficult situation with a sense of obligation that is not required. If you truly need to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation, call for an appointment that will avoid the need to enter the confessional. There is no need to ratchet up your personal fear and anxiety. Superhuman strength is not a requirement for spiritual practice.

Q. *Is there still a requirement to practice “custody of the eyes”? Today’s clothing and swimwear attire make me feel surrounded by temptation. I avoid the beach, swimming pools, and all other places where I know there will be temptation.*

A. There is a huge difference between a spiritual practice such as modesty and choosing to live a way of life that becomes more and more isolating every day. It is not spiritually or psychologically healthy to isolate, no matter what the reason. I would suggest that you find someone to help you find balance in your perception so you can enjoy the freedom of living that is required and necessary to be healthy.



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