



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONFERENCE PROMOTED BY THE ALPHONSIAN ACADEMY**

*Clementine Hall
Thursday, 23 March 2023*

[[Multimedia](#)]

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

I am pleased to welcome you, at the end of your Conference on the topicality of Alphonsian moral thought and on the eve of the 75th anniversary of the founding of your Pontifical Institute, which you will celebrate on 9 February next year. I thank the Dean for his words, and I greet the Moderator General, the Rector of the Lateran University, the teachers, the officials and the students, grateful for the formative service you offer the Church in the field of moral theology. I would also like to greet the numerous professors emeritus, who with their work have left their mark on the *Alphonsianum* and on the Church, and the many former students who studied with you and who continue to make their contribution to the People of God. Thank you for this precious service of formation!

Vatican Council II states that moral theology, nourished by the Sacred Scripture, must help the faithful to understand the greatness of their vocation, and to bring Christ's charity into the world (cf. Decree *Optatam totius*, 16). Every moral-theological proposal has, in the final analysis, this foundation: the love of God is our guide, the guide of our personal choices and our existential journey. As a consequence, moral theologians, missionaries and confessors are required to enter into a living relationship with the People of God, engaging in particular with the cry of the least, to understand their real difficulties, to look at existence from their perspective, and to offer them answers that reflect the light of the eternal love of the Father [1]. Faithful to Alphonsian tradition, you try to offer a model of Christian life that, with respect for the demands of theological reflection, is not however a cold morality, theoretical morality, I would say a "casuistic" morality. I say from

experience, because unfortunately I studied “casuistic” morality at that time. Just think, we were forbidden from reading Häring’s first book, *The law of Christ*. “It is heretical, you can’t read it!”. And I studied with that morality that says: “It is a mortal sin if two candles are missing on the altar, a venial sin if there is just one”. And all casuistry is like that, I humbly say. Thanks be to God we have moved on; it was a cold theoretical morality. You are asked for a model that responds to pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, aimed at understanding, forgiving, accompanying and, above all, integrating (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, 312). Being ecclesial presupposes this: integration.

In keeping with the work of Saint Alphonsus [2], you began your Conference by reflecting on the conscience and on the dynamism of its formation. This is an important theme. Indeed, in the complex and rapid epoch change we are living, only people endowed with a mature conscience will be able to exercise, in society, a healthy evangelical agency in the service of their brothers and sisters.

Besides, conscience is first and foremost the place where every person “is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths” (Pastoral Constitution. *Gaudium et spes*, 16). The word it says is not its own, but comes from the very Word of the Creator, who was incarnated to be with mankind [3]. And it is in his school, the school of the Incarnate Word, that each person learns to dialogue with others, cultivating the aspiration to a universal fraternity, rooted in the recognition of the inviolable dignity of every person (cf. Encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, 8; *Gaudium et spes*, 16).

You also focused on some matters of bioethics. In this complex field, I invite you to cultivate the patience of listening and exchange, as Saint Alphonsus recommends for conflictual situations. Do not be afraid to listen. It will be fundamental for the search for common solutions, that recognize and ensure respect for the sacrality of every life, in every condition. This listening will then be decisively enriched by the adoption of transdisciplinary research methods (cf. Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, 4c), which enables an approach to new challenges with greater competence and critical capacity, in the light of the Gospel and of human experience (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 46). Only in this way will it be possible to develop reasonable and solid arguments in the bioethical field, rooted in faith, adapted to adult and responsible consciences and capable of inspiring socio-political debate. We must shun extremist, polarizing dynamics, more typical of media debate than healthy and fertile scientific and theological research; apply instead the principle, always indicated by Saint Alphonsus, of the “middle way”, which is not a diplomatic balance, no; the middle way is creative, it arises from creativity, and it creates. Only those who have studied and practiced this can understand it. Isn’t it balance? No, this is not the middle way.

The approach to bioethics must be attentive to the real dramas lived by people who often find themselves confused in the face of the moral dilemmas of life [4]. Therefore, I recommend you make the fruits of your work accessible by using the “language of the people” and by formulating proposals for moral life that are practicable and humanizing. The “language of the people”. I urge

you, do not forget the holy people of God! But not at the level of thought, but starting from your roots, which are in the holy people of God: do not forget that you were taken from the flock, you are one of them, do not forget the air of the people, the thought of the people, the feeling of the people. And this is not communism, socialism, no! This is the holy faithful people of God, infallible *in credendo*: do not forget this, Vatican I and then Vatican II said so. Always to be on the side of real human beings, use the tools of ethical reflection to build solid barriers to defend them from the rampant mentality of efficiency and rejection (cf. Encyclical *Laudati si'*, 130-136).

The third area of your conference dealt with matters of social morality. In this field too, there is a need today for solid reflection. The environmental crisis, the ecological transition, war, a financial system capable of conditioning the life of people to the point of creating new slaves, the challenge of building fraternity among people and among peoples: these themes must stimulate us to research and dialogue.

“The Lord is the goal of human history” (*Gaudium et spes*, 45), and the human being, renewed in Christ, is destined to grow as the family of God (cf. *ibid.*, 40). This is the aim of our work! Let us try, then, to enter with humility and hope into the complex fabric of the society in which we live, to know better the dynamics and to propose suitable paths for maturation in this direction to the men and women of our time (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 26). And I speak of paths, suitable paths, not mathematical solutions; suitable paths. Problems are solved by walking ecclesially, as the people of God. And to walk with people in the moral state in which they find themselves. Walking with them and looking for a way to solve their problems, but walking, not seated like doctors with a finger raised to condemn without concern. In recent years we have faced grave moral issues such as migrations and paedophilia; today we see the urgency of adding others, such as profits concentrated in the hands of the few, and the division of global powers. Let us confidently accept these challenges too, prepared to “account for the hope that is in you” (cf. *1 Pt* 3:14).

In conclusion, the Church expects from the Pontifical Alphonsonian Academy that it will be able to reconcile scientific rigour and closeness to the holy faithful People of God, that it will give concrete answers to real problems that it will accompany and formulate humane moral proposals, attentive to the salvific Truth and the good of people. Saint Alphonso was a creator of the moral life and he made proposals... “But he was a great theologian”. Yes, but he was capable – in these days I have listened to the hymns you gave me at Christmas – he was capable also of writing those things! How can this be explained? This is the way, this is the beauty of the soul, gentleness, this is belonging to the people of God, that must never be negotiated, never. May the Holy Spirit help you to be formators of consciences, masters of that hope that opens the heart and leads to God. I bless you from my heart, I thank you for your work, and I ask you, please, to pray for me. Thank you.

[1] Cf. *Message for the 150th anniversary of the proclamation of Saint Alphonsus as Doctor of the Church*, 23 March 2021.

[2] Cf. especially Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori, *Conscience*.

[3] Cf. B. Häring, *Free and faithful in Christ*, I, 1994, 268.

[4] Cf. *Address to teachers and students of the Alphonsianum*, 9 February 2019.

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