

St. Alphonsus de Liguori, Doctor of the Church,
(1696-1787)

*Advice for Priests Who Minister to
Those Condemned to Death*

Introduction

Editor's Note: In 1725 while still engaged in his studies for the priesthood, Alphonsus became a member of the *Confraternità dei Bianchi*. The *Compagnia di Santa Maria succerre Miseris*, or simply the *Bianchi della Giustizia*, was an association of priests and laymen whose function was to attend to the spiritual needs of criminals in the Naples prisons and specifically to assist spiritually at the execution of criminals and to bury them. The *Bianchi* wore a white habit with a capuche and white cincture, hence their name. Dressed in their habits, the members of the confraternity accompanied the condemned persons on their last journey to the gallows erected in the Piazza del Mercato. Executions took place in public before a large crowd, which witnessed the gruesome routine culminating in the spectacle of the *tirapiedi*, who clung to the prisoner's feet and swung with him into space to ensure that the spinal cord was effectively severed.

Entry into the sodality or confraternity was not automatic; a candidate had to be strongly recommended and capable of performing satisfactorily the important priestly duties attached to membership. Alphonsus's application, supported by two Oratorian Fathers and the Jesuit provincial, was favorably received and he became a member in April 1725. The registers of the confraternity show that Alphonsus assisted at several executions after his ordination to the priesthood. When an execution was to take place, the Courts of Justice would inform the confraternity. The members were then summoned to assemble in their own oratory to begin a program of prayers for the condemned person. Certain members were then assigned to immediate participation in that particular execution. They visited the condemned man in his cell and accompanied him in procession through the streets to the Piazza del Mercato. They remained with him to the last moments of life and the final anointing.

As a result of the experience gained in this priestly ministry,

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Alphonsus later included in his moral theology writings instructions for priests who would have to assist at executions. They are to be found in Italian in the *Pratica del Confessore* (1755) and in Latin in the *Praxis Confessarii* (1757) and the *Homo Apostolicus* (1759). Years later, in 1775 and 1777, he published a final version of these instructions in Italian, in both Naples and Venice, *Avvertimenti a' Sacerdoti che assistono a' Condannati a Morte*. There are thus four versions of this pastoral work, differing in minor details. For example, the Latin version in the *Homo Apostolicus* has suggestions for prayers to be said when the priest accompanies the condemned person from the prison to the gallows, when the criminal is blindfolded, when he begins to ascend the steps to the gallows platform, and finally just before the sentence is carried out. The translation here is of the 1777 Venice edition in Italian.

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To assist spiritually those who are dying is a work of great charity. But it is a far greater charity still to assist those who are condemned to be executed for their crimes. They merit our greatest sympathy on account of the sad plight in which they find themselves. They are facing death; in a few days they are destined to leave this world. St. Paul's words come to our minds: "Blessed be...the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God" (2 Cor 1:3-4). The Apostle urges us to console those who "are in any affliction." Who are in greater affliction from every point of view and who are more deserving of our compassion than the unfortunate criminals who are condemned to die within a short while for their misdeeds? They find themselves confined in a prison cell guarded by the agents of justice, abandoned by their relations and friends. (1) They are sorely troubled by the thought of hell which they have merited on account of all their misdeeds; (2) they dread the thought of dying at the executioner's hands while they are yet at an age in which they could have hoped for many more years of life; (3) they are dejected at the prospect of

being subjected to a shameful death in public; (4) they are heart-broken at the thought of leaving their parents, relations, wives, and children without someone to protect and provide for them.

The priest whose duty it is to assist these unfortunate persons must do everything possible to bring them consolation in their terrible sufferings.

At the very outset he should be extremely careful not to speak to those who are condemned to death about the rigors of divine justice or about any other similar subject which inspires terror. He should rather emphasize the divine mercy and God's will that all should be saved. So, from the very first moment that he comes in contact with the condemned persons, he should address them in a joyful and friendly manner, calling them by their Christian names. He should say to them: "God wishes to save you. He is calling you to leave this world which is full of sorrows, to bring you to another world where he wants to make you happy for all eternity. Now is the time for a genuine confession of your sins. All you have to do is to repent of the offenses you have committed against God. He is waiting for you with open arms to embrace you and to make you happy for all eternity in paradise."

After these and similar words of encouragement, endeavor to console the unfortunate persons condemned to death and specifically in regard to the four areas of anxiety which I have outlined above. As regards the first source of their anxiety, namely, the fear of damnation for the evil they have done, endeavor to reassure them by pointing out that God does not wish the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live for all eternity. "Why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, says the Lord God. Return and live!" (Ez 18:31, 32). And in another place he says that when sinners repent of what they have done wrong, he forgets all their sins: "But if the wicked man turns away from all the sins he committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die" (Ez 18:21).

Of course, when one is speaking with those who are unlettered, one is not to quote any of these texts in Latin. Even in the case of an educated person who has been condemned to death, only the briefest quotation in Latin can be tolerated. To increase

their confidence place before the condemned persons the image of Jesus Crucified. And then you should say to them, "How could we possibly doubt for a moment that our sins will be forgiven when we realize that Jesus Christ died in order to forgive sinners their sins? 'I did not come to call the righteous but sinners'" (Mk 2:17). And in another place, Jesus Christ declared that he will not reject anyone who comes to him repentant: "I will not reject anyone who comes to me" (Jn 6:37). And, furthermore, he adds in Matthew's gospel (18:12) that he continues to go in search of the lost sheep and when he finds it he places it triumphantly on his shoulders.¹

And then we have Mary, the Mother of God, who also goes in search of sinners to bring them to God. She revealed to St. Brigid of Sweden that when sinners have recourse to her, she disregards their sins and considers only the intention with which they come to her. When they come with a determination to change their lives she endeavors to heal all the wounds their sins have caused them and she obtains for them the grace to make their peace with God.

Supposing, then, that the condemned persons object that they are going to their death with very little confidence since they have done little or no penance for their sins, you should reply as follows: "My child, realize that to accept your death as a penance for your sins is the greatest penance you could perform and the one most acceptable to God. Accept your death then as coming to you from the hands of God and, for this authentic act of resignation, God will pardon you all your sins and remit all the punishment they have merited" (cf. 1 Pt 2:20-26).

As regards the bitterness of having to die before one's time, endeavor to point out to them that they should thank God that they did not die when they were in their sins and in great danger of losing their souls. Now they are dying, strengthened with all the sacraments of the church and with such great hope of eternal salvation. Perhaps if the Lord had permitted them to live longer they would only, with great difficulty, have succeeded in saving their souls.

As regards the fact that they are going to die a shameful death, endeavor to console them with the thought that they are

going to die just as Jesus Christ did, who was the Son of God and Lord of the universe. He died in shame on a cross which was the most ignominious of all deaths for those condemned to be executed. Encourage them to unite their deaths with the death of Jesus Christ and so make of their deaths an offering to God. It is recounted that on one occasion a man condemned to death confided to his priest that he was totally innocent of the crime with which he was charged. The confessor then suggested to the condemned man that he would do everything in his power to make known his innocence. "No, Father," replied the condemned man, "for many years I have asked the Lord to allow me to die in shame just as he wished to die on the Cross. And now that he has granted me this favor would you wish to deprive me of it? I wish to die in this shame since this was the way my Lord Jesus Christ died."

Finally, as regards the anguish of leaving their families and relatives abandoned console them by pointing out that since they are certainly going to save their souls they will be able to assist their families and relatives from heaven much more efficaciously than they could have done on earth. And moreover, God, who loves them more than the condemned persons do, will certainly come to their assistance.

The greatest sorrow that a priest who assists those who are going to be executed can experience is when he comes across those who are so hardened that they do not wish to repent and are not willing to pardon their enemies who, they say, were the cause of their being condemned to death. In such cases the priest should do his best to point out to them that if they do not forgive, and if they die with hate in their hearts, they will certainly lose their souls. Our Lord has said: "Forgive and you shall be forgiven." And so whoever forgives is forgiven.

Say then: Be sure that if you forgive, you yourself will be forgiven. Your salvation is assured since God has promised to forgive those who forgive their enemies. However, if you do not wish to pardon others, then all you will receive in return is justice and you will certainly lose your soul. You now realize that in the past God pardoned you so many sins which you have committed against him and will you now refuse to forgive your enemy as the

Lord demands? Do you mean to say to me that it makes no difference to you whether you go to hell or not? If you speak like that it is clear that you have no idea of the reality of hell. One hour in hell is worse than all the accumulated sufferings this earth can produce over thousands of years. Do not allow the devil to deceive you in this way in order to drag you into this place of torments. Know also that if you lose your soul on account of the hatred which you harbor in your heart, the bitterest suffering you will endure in hell will be the realization that, if you had overcome this hatred, you would have saved your soul. Once in hell there is no further hope for your eternal salvation. So to overcome this temptation, pardon your enemies for the love of Jesus Christ who died for you and is ready to embrace you once you pardon others out of love for him.

If those who are condemned insist that they are unwilling to pardon the judges who have unjustly condemned them, endeavor to convince them that the judges are obliged to mete out justice and to pronounce sentence according to the evidence given in the trial. So it is not fair to hate them.²

It is especially difficult to bring to a right frame of mind those condemned persons who, as a result of all their crimes, have arrived at the stage of hating God. However, we must, at least, make the effort. Those who are condemned to death declare that God hates them, that they are the objects of his hatred, that he created them only for the purpose of sending them to eternal damnation. All the misfortunes that happened to them were decreed for this end. The priest should reply to them in this way: No, God does not hate you; he only hates your sins. Remove your sins and God cannot hate you any further. And even at this very moment when you say you hate God, he, for his part, still loves you and is ready to embrace you and bring you to paradise. All you have to do is to ask his pardon and to love him. It is certainly not true that God created you for hell; he has created you for paradise. You are the one who has set yourself on the road to perdition as a result of the sins you have committed. And, despite all this, God is ready to pardon you if only you are sorry for having offended him. How can you say that

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God hates you when in fact he died for you on the Cross out of the love which he has for you? Love him then, do not hate him any more since he has not deserved this ingratitude from you.

If the condemned persons still remain obstinate, be sure to encourage them to have recourse to the Virgin Mary, and get them to pray to her in these words: "Mary, Mother of God, you see that I am on the verge of losing my soul. You can help me, come to my assistance."³

All these thoughts and exhortations are very good and effective but when you find a condemned person totally obstinate, then there is more need for an increase of prayer than for more words. The priest himself should recommend these souls to Jesus Christ, to the Mother of God, and to different communities of religious. Endeavor to celebrate Mass for their conversion since it is unlikely that they will be moved to repentance without considerable prayer.

LETTERS
