

Divine Love and The Means of Acquiring It

Introduction

Editor's Note: This short text was published at the end of Alphonsus's time as bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths, 1775. He was in his middle seventies when he composed it, after a period of severe illness and constant worries about whether he was obliged to remain as bishop in charge of his diocese. The themes are familiar and encapsulate the essence of his thought. An early commentator on his spiritual writings, Professor Candido Romano, correctly describes this work as the *summa* of Alphonsus's spiritual teaching, with its definite emphasis on practical application.

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1. God, who is so good, loves us very much and wishes to be loved by us. Not only has he repeatedly invited us to love him, as is clear from so many examples in the scriptures, not only has he bestowed upon us individually and on the whole family so many gifts and favors, but he has also wished to oblige us, as it were, to love him, by an express command to do so. He has promised heaven to those who love him and threatened those who do not with hell. As is clear from the teaching of Saints Peter and Paul, he wishes everyone to be saved and that no one should be lost: "Who wills everyone to be saved" (1 Tm 2:4); "He is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pt 3:9). But if God wishes everyone to be saved, why then has he created hell? He has created hell not to see us damned but to be loved by us! If he had not created hell, how many would have loved him? Even as it is with the existence of hell, the greater part of the human race choose to be damned rather to love God. And so I repeat, if there were no hell, how many would choose to love God? And so the Lord has threatened those who do not love him with the prospect of eternal suffering solely for the purpose of securing that those who do not love him

out of their own good will would be compelled to do so from fear of going to eternal perdition.¹

2. My God, how greatly do those consider themselves fortunate who are invited by their king to love him: "Love me because I love you." A king would regard it as a considerable humiliation if he were to condescend to ask his subjects for their love. But God, who is infinitely good, Lord of all, all-powerful, all-wise, a God who, in a word, merits eternal love, a God who has enriched us with so many spiritual and temporal benefits, does not disdain to ask us for our love. He exhorts us and commands us to love him. And yet, in spite of everything, he does not succeed. The only thing he asks of us is that we should love him. "And now, Israel, what does the LORD, your God, ask of you but to fear the LORD, your God, and follow his ways exactly, to love and serve the LORD, your God, with all your heart and all your soul" (Dt 10:12)? For this purpose the Son of God came to be with us on earth: "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" (Lk 12:49). Note the words "and how I wish it were already blazing!" It is almost as if God, who possesses in himself infinite happiness, declares that he would not be fully content unless he saw himself loved by us.²

3. We cannot doubt, therefore, that God loves us and loves us greatly. So much, indeed, does God love us that he wishes us to love him with all our hearts. He says to each of us: "Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart" (Dt 6:5). And then he adds: "Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today....Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest. Bind them at your wrist as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates" (Dt 6:6-9). The important aspect of these words is the desire that the Lord has, the very hunger, as it were, that he experiences, that he should be loved by each one of us. He wishes that the words "we should love him with all our hearts" should be imprinted on our hearts. And so that we should never forget them, he wishes that we should reflect on them whether resting or engaged in activity, as we retire to rest and as we begin our day. He wishes that we should

have them always with us to remind us of our obligation no matter where we are or what we are engaged in. The Pharisees, according to St. Matthew, carried out these instructions to the letter (Mt 23:51).

4. St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote: "Blessed is the arrow which brings God, the Archer, into one's heart." This was the saint's way of saying that when God directs an arrow of love into one's heart, namely, an inspiration or a special grace of illumination, which leads us to realize the goodness of God, the love he bears us and his desire to be loved by us, at that very moment, God himself comes to us. In other words, God is both the archer and the love which the arrow brings. "For God is love," as St. John tells us (1 Jn 4:8). And just as an arrow remains fixed in the heart it has wounded, so God, who wounds a heart with love of himself, remains united with that heart. Oh, that we could all realize that only God has true and genuine love for us all. The love of parents, of friends, and of all those who say they love us (with the exception of those who love us in and on account of God himself) is not really true love since there is always some element of self-interest mixed with it. Yes, my God, I fully realize that only you genuinely love me, not from any self-interest on your part, but purely out of the love for me which comes from your infinite goodness. And I am so ungrateful that despite your love for me, I have displeased you and caused you more bitterness than I have to anyone else. Do not permit me, Jesus, to be so ungrateful to you in the future. You have genuinely loved me and now I wish to love you genuinely for the rest of my life. I wish to say to you in the words of St. Catherine of Genoa, "My love, do not allow me to offend you again. My only wish is to love you and with this I am happy."³

5. According to St. Bernard, a soul who genuinely loves God can only wish what God wills. Let us then pray that the Lord will wound us with the arrows of his love since souls who are wounded by these arrows are incapable of wishing for anything other than what God wills. They rid themselves of all vestiges of self-love. To this they add the total offering of themselves to the Lord and it is this to which the Lord refers when he declares in

the Song of Songs that he has been wounded by those who love him: "You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride" (Sg 4:9).

6. St. Bernard beautifully expresses this whole idea when he says: "Let us cast our hearts up to God." When souls give themselves unreservedly to God, they in a certain sense cast their souls like javelins toward God, who in his turn expresses himself as being completely captivated by those who give themselves to him. Casting their hearts up to God then is an apt description of those who, in their prayers, give expression to their desire to give themselves wholly to him. As they pray, they make use of the following or similar short prayers: "My God and My All; My God, I want you alone and nothing more; My Lord, I give myself wholly to you and if I do not know how to give myself completely to you as I should, do you please take me to yourself."

Jesus, my love,

I want nothing but you:

To you I give myself

Do with me as you wish.⁴

7. Souls who can genuinely say in the words of the Song of Songs "My lover belongs to me and I to him" (Sg 2:16) are extremely fortunate. My God has given himself totally to me and I have given myself totally to him. Souls who are able to pray like this from their hearts are ready, in the words of St. Bernard, to accept all the pains of hell (if they could do this without losing God) rather than be separated from God for even an instant. What a wonderful treasure is the grace of divine love; happy those who possess it. Let them do everything in their power, let them take all means necessary to preserve and increase it. And those who are not yet in possession of it should make every effort to acquire it. Accordingly, let us reflect on the means that are necessary to acquire and preserve this treasure of divine love.

8. The first means of acquiring it is to detach oneself from human attachments. There is no place for the love of God in hearts that are full of earth; the more there is of earth the less there is of the reign of the love of God. This is the reason why those souls who wish to have hearts totally possessed by the love of God should devote themselves to ridding their hearts of earthly

attachments. To achieve holiness of life one must imitate St. Paul who, to gain the love of Jesus Christ, considered all the goods of this world as valueless: "I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:8). So let us pray to the Holy Spirit that he would inflame our hearts with his holy love that we would be able to despise and regard as useless, mere vapor and dirt, all the riches, pleasures, honors, and dignities of this earth in search of which so many lose their souls.

9. When the love of God takes possession of souls, they no longer consider of any value those things the world esteems highly: "Were one to offer all he owns to purchase love, he would be roundly mocked" (Sg 8:7). St. Francis de Sales writes that when the house goes on fire all its contents are thrown out the window, which is another way of saying that when souls burn with the love of God they cast out from their lives all earthly things such as honors and riches in order to love nothing but God. This is what the love of God in their hearts achieves; they do not need the urging of sermons nor the promptings of their spiritual directors. St. Catherine of Genoa said that she did not love God for his gifts to her but that she loved the gifts of God in order to love him more.

10. Gilberti writes that those who love God find it at the same time painful and intolerable that their love should be divided between God and the things of this world.⁵ In the same strain, St. Bernard declares that the love of God is intolerant, meaning that the love of God does not tolerate other loves in the hearts of those who love him. God wants the heart wholly for himself. Some may object that God's demands are excessive when he requires us to love nothing but himself. God, who is infinitely good and deserves infinite love, can rightly demand that he should have all the love of souls whom he has created specifically for the purpose of loving him. Moreover, in order to achieve this purpose, he has sacrificed himself totally for those souls. "You have given yourself totally for me" wrote St. Bernard as he reflected on the love which Jesus Christ has shown him.

Each one of us can well say the very same thing and indeed we should do so as we reflect on the fact that Jesus Christ has given himself over to death, has shed every drop of his blood for us, consumed by sufferings on a Cross. And even after his death he has left us his body and blood, his soul and divinity, in the Sacrament of the Altar so that he could be the food and drink of our souls and so that we could be united with him.

11. St. Gregory the Great considers those souls intensely happy who find unattractive anything which is not connected with God, whom they love above everything else. We should then be on our guard that, when we give our affection to creatures, we do not, by that same fact, withdraw part of our love from God who wants it all for himself.⁶ And even though our love for others may be above reproach, such as the love we have for relations and friends, at the same time, we should not forget the warning of St. Philip Neri that very often the amount of love we give to creatures is taken from the love we should have for God.

12. We should make of ourselves "a garden enclosed," to use the words of the Song of Songs: "You are an enclosed garden, my sister, my bride" (Sg 4:12). The enclosed garden signifies those souls who keep themselves free from affection for things of earth. When, then, some human affection wishes to possess our hearts we should deny it admittance and turning to Jesus Christ say: "My Jesus, you alone are sufficient for me: I do not want to love anyone but you. You are my God and my portion for ever. My God I want you to be the only Lord of my heart, my only love." For this reason we should incessantly ask from the Lord the grace of his pure love. This pure love, in the words of St. Francis de Sales, consumes in us all that is not God and, at the same time, turns all things into him.

13. The second means of acquiring the love of God is to meditate on the Passion of our Savior Jesus Christ. I recommend my readers to read the book which I have recently published entitled *Reflections on the Passion of Jesus Christ*, in which I describe at length the sufferings of our Savior.⁷ I am convinced that the fact that Jesus Christ is so little loved throughout the world is due to our neglect and ingratitude in not reflecting, at least from time

to time, on the sufferings which Jesus Christ has borne for us and the love with which he suffered. St. Gregory asserts that it seems to be the height of madness that a God would wish to die to save us miserable creatures. And yet it is an article of our faith: "Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God" (Eph 5:2). And he willed to shed his blood to wash us clean from our sins: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rv 1:5).

14. St. Bonaventure exclaimed: "My God, you have loved me so much that it would appear that for love of me you were prepared to hate yourself." You even wished that you should become our food in Holy Communion. And taking up this theme, St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor, states that God has humiliated himself for us as if he were our slave and each one of us his God.⁸

15. No wonder then that the Apostle could say: "For the love of Christ impels us" (2 Cor 5:14). St. Paul says that the love which Jesus Christ has shown toward us forces us, indeed virtually compels us, to love him. My God, what will we not do for the love of others when they show us affection? And how is it that we return so little love to a God of infinite goodness, of infinite beauty, who has died for each of us on the Cross? Should we not follow the example of St. Paul who has said: "But may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). What greater glory can I hope to possess in this world than to have a God who for love of me has given his life's blood? Each one of us who possesses the gift of faith should repeat these same words. And if we possess this faith, how can we love anything other than our God? My God, how is it possible for souls who contemplate Jesus crucified, hanging nailed to a cross through his hands and feet, and dying of intense suffering out of love for us, not to feel drawn and even forced to love him with all their strength?

16. The third means of attaining to the perfect love of God is to unite oneself in everything to the divine will. St. Bernard used to say that one who loves God perfectly can only will what God wills.⁹ There are many, of course, who profess with their lips that they are totally resigned to whatever God wills. But when they suffer some small misfortune, some unpleasant illness, they are disconsolate.

The reaction of those souls who are genuinely united with the will of God is quite different. They say in the words of St. Bonaventure: "Whatever pleases my beloved, pleases me. Everything is sweet to those who love." They realize that whatever happens in this world is either permitted or willed by God. So, no matter what happens, they accept it humbly from the hands of God and are perfectly at peace. And even though the Lord does not will that we should suffer persecution and misfortune through the actions of others, he nevertheless wishes us, for his own very good purposes, to bear our sufferings and misfortunes patiently.

17. St. Catherine of Genoa once declared that if God had placed her in the depths of hell she would have said, in the words of scripture, "It is good for me to be here" (cf. Mt 17:4). This was the equivalent of saying: "It is sufficient for me that I am where my love would have me to be. He loves me more than anyone and knows what is best for me. It is good for us to be at rest in God's hands."¹⁰

18. The result of one's prayers should be to conform oneself to God's will. This is the summit of perfection, according to St. Teresa of Avila. We should repeat constantly the prayer of David: "Teach me to do your will, / for you are my God" (Ps 143:9). O Lord, since you wish me to save my soul, teach me always to do your will. The most perfect act of love toward God which a soul can make is that which St. Paul made on his conversion: "Lord, what will you have me do?" ([ed.] Acts 9:6). Lord, tell me what you wish of me since I am ready to do what you want. This prayer is worth more than a thousand fasts and corporal penances. To do the divine will, then, should be our intention in all our actions, desires, and prayers. For this purpose we should pray to Our Lady, our patron saints, and our angel guardians so that they would obtain for us the grace to carry out God's will. And when certain things happen which are not to our liking, we shall be able to gain abundant treasures of merit by our acts of resignation. We shall be able to repeat the prayer which Jesus Christ has taught us by his example: "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?" (Jn 18:11). "Yes, Father, such as been your gracious will" (Mt 11:26). In other words, "Lord, I accept whatever is pleasing to you." And we should frequently repeat with Job; "The

LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; / blessed be the name of the Lord!" (Jb 1:21). The Venerable Master of Avila declared that one "Blessed be God" in trials and sufferings is worth much more than a thousand expressions of thanks when all goes well. And so to sum up, it is a wonderful grace to be able to be at peace, accepting whatever comes to us from the hands of God. The words of the Spirit of God are verified: "No harm befalls the just" (Prv 12:21).¹¹

19. The fourth great means of acquiring the love of God is the practice of mental prayer. The great eternal truths are not perceived by the eyes of the body as are the tangible things of this earth; they are perceived only by means of reflection and meditation. So, if we do not dedicate time to reflect on the eternal truths and, above all, on our obligation to love God on account of all the gifts he has lavished on us and for the great love he has shown us, we will only with great difficulty detach ourselves from creatures and give all our love to God. It is during the time of prayer that the Lord permits us to realize the passing nature of human things and the value of heavenly realities. And it is in prayer that he inflames souls who do not resist his call with love for himself.¹²

Many souls complain that they devote time to prayer but that they do not find God in it. The reason is that they go to prayer with their hearts full of earth, as it were. Detach your hearts from creatures, says St. Teresa; seek God and you will find him. The Lord is good to all who seek him. To find God in prayer, then, we must detach ourselves from things of earth and God will speak to us accordingly: "I will lead her into the desert / and speak to her heart" (Hos 2:16). In order to find God we need not only physical solitude but, according to St. Gregory the Great, the solitude of our hearts as well. Our Lord made known to St. Teresa of Avila his willingness to speak to many hearts but that the world made such a din in their hearts he was unable to make his voice heard. On the other hand, when souls who are detached devote themselves to prayer, the Lord speaks to them and lets them know the love he has for them. Consequently, those souls are on fire with love for God, and in that silence

which is well called the silence of love, they say more to God than all human eloquence is capable of. Their every sigh reveals their desire for God. They repeat again and again the words of the Song of Songs: "My lover belongs to me and I to him" (Sg 2:16).

20. The fifth means of acquiring the love of God is prayer. We are poor and in great need but, if we pray, we become rich and lack for nothing since God has promised to hear all those who pray to him. "Ask and it will be given to you" (Mt 7:7). What greater proof of affection can one give to another than to declare "Ask of me whatever you wish and I shall give it to you"? This is what the Lord says to each one of us. God is the Lord of all. He promises to give us whatever we ask of him. So if we find ourselves poor we have only ourselves to blame because we do not ask for the graces and favors we need. Mental prayer is morally necessary for us all because when we are involved in worldly affairs we give little thought to our souls if we neglect to pray. But when we do give ourselves to prayer, we come to realize the needs of our souls and we then ask for the graces we need.

21. The lives of the saints have been lives of meditation and prayer and all the graces which they received to enable them to sanctify themselves have come to them through prayer. If we, then, wish to save our souls and to sanctify ourselves, we too should stand as mendicants before the gates of the divine mercy praying and begging God for all the graces we need. If we need humility, let us ask for it and we shall become humble. If we need patience in suffering and tribulation, let us ask for it and we shall obtain it. If we need the love of God, let us ask for it and it shall be ours. "Ask and you shall receive" is one of God's promises in which we can never be deceived. And to increase our confidence, Jesus Christ has promised that whatever favors we ask from the Father in his name or out of love for him, or through his merits, will certainly be granted to us: "Amen, amen, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you" (Jn 16:23). In another place he assures us that whatever we ask from himself in his own name he will grant: "If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it" (Jn 14:14). This is an article of our faith since

Jesus Christ who is the Son of God can do whatever his Father can do.¹³

22. No matter how cold souls are in their love for God I cannot see how they are not able to feel themselves constrained to love Jesus Christ if they would only reflect, even in a fleeting manner, on what the scripture tells us about the love which Jesus Christ has shown us in his Passion and in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. As regards the Passion, the prophet Isaiah wrote: "Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, / our sufferings that he endured.... He was pierced for our offenses, / crushed for our sins" (Is 53:4-5). So our faith assures us that Jesus Christ has wished to take upon himself the pains and sufferings which we should have borne. And why did he will to do this, if not to show us the love he had for us? St. Paul says: "Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God" (Eph 5:2). St. John says: "[Jesus Christ] who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rv 1:5). As regards the Sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus himself says to us in the words of institution: "This is my body that is for you" (1 Cor 11:24). And in another place he tells us: "Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me" (Jn 6:57). How then is it possible for anyone with faith to read these words and not feel constrained to love our Redeemer who has sacrificed his blood and his life out of love for us and, even more than that, has left us himself in the Blessed Sacrament as the food of our souls and our constant companion?

23. I conclude with another reflection on the Passion of Jesus Christ. We see him nailed to a cross with nails that pierce his hands and feet, with blood pouring from his wounds, and agonizing in the throes of death. Why was it that Jesus wished us to see him in such a pitiable condition? Was it perhaps that we should have compassion for him? No. It was not in order that we should have compassion for him but that we should love him. And it should be more than a sufficient motive for each of us to love him to know that he has loved us from all eternity: "With age-old love I have loved you" (Jer 31:3). When the Lord realized

that this love of his was not sufficient to move us in our coldness to love him, he determined to demonstrate to us by his deeds the love he has for us. It was for this that he showed himself to us dying on a cross and covered with wounds. From this we can see the immensity of the love that he has for us. And so we have an explanation of the words of St. Paul: "Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering" (Eph 5:2).¹⁴

Conformity to the Will of God

Introduction

Editor's Note: This short treatise was first published sometime during 1755 as an appendix to the sixth edition of *Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament*, etc. On 2 November of that year Alphonsus sent a copy of the new printing of his *Visits* to one of his penitents, drawing her attention to the "trattato della volonta di Dio" at the end of the work. He suggested that she use this little work as a meditation book, reading it slowly and reflecting on it. He pointed out to her at the same time that conformity to the Will of God was the secret of perfection: "mentre qui consiste tutta la perfezione" (*Lettere* Vol.1.309).

The work soon took on a life of its own and was published both separately and in conjunction with other devotional works of the saint. There were innumerable Italian editions. Within fifty years of the saint's death the work is to be found in all the main European languages. The style is simple, almost conversational. Questions and answers help to impress on the reader the clear message of the joyful acceptance of God's will in all the happenings of life. Nowhere else does Alphonsus show his mastery of the use of the *exempla* technique as convincingly as here. This was one of the devotional works that most enraged the Jansenists in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The work marks an important stage in the evolution of Alphonsus's devotional thought, which reached its full development with the publication of *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* some fifteen years later.

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Our whole perfection consists in loving God who is so deserving of our love: "And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection" (Col 3:14). The perfection of the love of God consists in uniting our will with this most holy will, since the principal effect of love, as St. Denis the Areopagite says, is so to unite the wills of those who love each other that they both seem to have but one and