

Saint (Blessed) Alfonso Maria Fusco: The Man and His Mission

*NB - The following was presented by Sr. Lois Darold, CSJB
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Welcome. As you know, today's workshop will focus on St. (Bl.) Alfonso Maria Fusco, Founder of the Baptistine Sisters. Our goal is to present a portrait of him both as a man of and for the people - and as a man of and for God.

In another session Sr Loretta Marie will explore with you the spirituality of St. (Bl.) Alfonso Maria Fusco. That word may be puzzling to some of you. For many people the term conjures up images of something mystical, churchy, pious or otherworldly. Something on the fringes of ordinary life. Something optional that only "holy" people have. Nothing could be further from the truth. Everyone has a spirituality. It is the sum of all that makes us unique and that characterizes how we individually approach God. So, this morning we will focus on coming to understand Bl. Alfonso Fusco as a man of his times.

Names are such unique things. For the most part they are given to us - and we grow into them. When a name is spoken an image is evoked. Today, as a help to focusing our thoughts, I'm going to use the letters in the name of ALFONSO to reflect on various aspects of the Founder. Certainly more than one characteristic would match each letter, but I'll focus on the one that I feel best helps our understanding.

If you saw a newcomer in your club or at work and asked: "Who is Mary Smith?" chances are that the responses would be something like this:

" Oh, she's from the Pelham section of the Bronx."

" She goes to St Benedict's Parish"

" Her parents are Marie and Tom, you know, the family that adopted the Chinese children."

What's happening here? People come to know us by knowing *about* us. And so it is for Alfonso Maria Fusco. In order to know him, we must know about his family and colleagues, his neighborhood, the world of his day. What influenced him? What did he value? Only after a living portrait of him begins to emerge can we begin to look at how he approached God - can we begin to understand what his spirituality was.

A - .ANGRI

Let's begin by considering the impact on Alfonso of being a "son of Angri", for he was a child of his era and his country, molded by the current events of mid- 19th century Europe. He was born in Italy in 1839 in the southern town of Angri. Angri was and is a beautiful city located on flatlands not far from the Mediterranean Sea and the bubbling Mt Vesuvius. During Alfonso's time there were about 15,000 inhabitants. The town was divided into 2 sections: Angri proper, called Terra, was the home of the

Fusco family. It was the more thickly populated section since city life was concentrated there. This area had wide streets paved by blocks of stones formed from the lava of nearby Vesuvius. It bustled with activity: religious feasts and traditional festivals, civic parades and church processions. The other section of town was Ardinghi, the site of the first Baptistine foundation. It was a much poorer section. During the day it was almost deserted since the majority of its inhabitants were laborers who spent long hours in the fields. The agricultural area of Angri had lava-rich soil and produced excellent fruits and vegetables. So, Alfonso grew up surrounded by nature: the beauty of its seas, the bounty of its fields, the awesome power of its nearby volcano. From all these he learned patience, caution and hope. Like Jesus, he used the familiar images of nature in his preaching and his teaching.

But Italy then was not the Italy that we know today. It was not a unified nation but rather a composite of city-states and kingdoms. Among them rivalries were bitter and wars frequent. For Alfonso another familiar sight in Angri was the massive round fortress or tower adjacent to the old castle of the Doria family that dated back to medieval times. This was an impressive and imposing sight for all the children and Alfonso was no exception. It spoke of war and political battles but it also symbolized steadfastness, strength and endurance under stress - qualities that Alfonso would need throughout his life.

The political climate of southern Italy was like Mt Vesuvius itself - idyllic on the surface, but capable of erupting at any time. In 1860, as Garibaldi ascended to power, restless political conditions in Italy reached their peak. Demonstrations and riots were frequent as was imprisonment for political reasons. Fear pervaded Angri as both guilty and innocent went to jail, including one of Alfonso's mentors Father Tortora. This left an impact on Alfonso, then 21, who throughout his life displayed an aversion to involvement in political affairs, whether in the Church or in the civic arena, but who also developed a keen sense of justice. So, Alfonso was a true son of Angri. The geography of southern Italy, the politics of the times, the landmarks of Angri left an indelible impression on him.

Reflect: What event or image in my own heritage has been important in shaping me?

F - FAMILY & FRIENDS

The "moso" is a unique bamboo plant that grows in China. Once the seed is planted, it takes 5 years before there is any sign of growth. But once the plant pushes out from the ground, it begins to grow at the phenomenal rate of 2 ½ ft per day for about 6 weeks. How is this rapid growth possible? Because for 5 years the moso plant has been getting ready, laying a root system that extends for miles.

And so it was with Alfonso. His early years with his family were a time of root-laying, of preparation. Alfonso's family was involved in the life of Angri and the Church, and lovingly passed on the traditions of both. Alfonso grew up as the oldest of 4 siblings: 2 sisters and a brother, although his youngest sister was born after he had already left for the minor seminary. The 3 oldest children spent happy hours together, entertaining each other with games and stories. As the oldest, however, Alfonso

willingly accepted tasks of greater responsibility.

Alfonso's family was not poor. His father Aniello was a landowner and a transporter of farm produce who worked hard to provide for his family. In today's terms the Fuscus would be considered "middle- class". As a son in such a family Alfonso was well-cared for and educated. During this era the laity exercised great influence in the Church through membership in Confraternities. These Church groups raised funds to provide religious instruction to the young; food and medicine for the poor; prayers for the deceased. The Fuscus were active members of the Confraternity of S. Margherita. Alfonso saw how seriously his parents carried out their membership obligations and was proud to see his father serve as president for 2 terms.

His mother Giuseppina was a constant loving presence in Alfonso's life. When he was barely able to walk she took him to church; as soon as he could talk, she taught him his prayers, which the family recited in common every evening in front of the prominently displayed picture of Our Lady of Sorrows. Her gentleness, prayerfulness, and generosity to the poor were to be mirrored in his soul and his actions. Both she and her husband encouraged Alfonso's priestly vocation which they believed was the fulfillment of the gift that Alfonso was to them from God.

In Alfonso's time the Church was a vital part of the daily life of every family. Before heading to the fields the townsfolk gathered in church for Mass and returned in the evening for the Rosary and Benediction. Angri had around 50 priests staffing a number of churches. Some of these priests became Alfonso's respected mentors and lasting friends. Of the churches, most notable among them was the Collegiata of St. John the Baptist, patron of Angri. This was the Church Alfonso's family attended; where he received the sacraments; where he first exercised his priestly ministry.

Because it was the tradition of the Church at that time for priests to live with their families, even after Alfonso was ordained he remained close to his family and his friends. This was a significant factor in his formation. He experienced the importance of family as the primary nurturing unit, and of God and the Church as ever-present realities in daily life. He did not despise wealth, but looked to use it to the advantage of those less fortunate. Alfonso accepted who he was, where he came from, and looked to see what God was asking him to do in light of his background.

Reflect: Who of my family & friends has had a significant influence in my faith life?

L - LEARNED

When we look at Alfonso's pictures we see a man of humble demeanor. This can deceive us into thinking that Bl Alfonso was, to use an old-fashioned phrase, " a country bumpkin". Far from it. For his era, Alfonso was quite a learned man. In the mid 1800's there was no system of schools for youngsters to attend. The children of the rich and the middle-class were tutored. So, at age 7 Alfonso's formal education

was entrusted to the care of local priests. At age 11 his attraction to the priesthood led him to the minor seminary. He was not a brilliant student, but he was a disciplined and determined one. Alfonso took his studies seriously realizing that learning would be the key to his dream of becoming a priest. For Alfonso, studying was essential in coming to know his God. He valued the educational opportunities given to him. He devoted many hours to studying the Scriptures, the writings of theologians, the documents of the Church. At the same time he felt an obligation to know what was going on in the world and had a lifelong habit of reading the newspapers. His perusal of the papers was often followed by spirited discussions with his friends. In later years, Alfonso himself would author a number of widely read religious articles.

Over the years Alfonso acquired a personal library that was varied and very extensive. Books were not seen as extravagances but as necessary tools. His books and notebooks attest to the fact that he was proficient in keeping accounts, skillful in writing and speaking, and gifted in music and liturgy. As a young priest he demonstrated an eagerness for delivering sermons. This was further developed when he joined the Congregation of Nocerini Missionary Priests whose members preached missions in nearby parishes. His talent for music and his gifted singing voice resulted in his appointment as a cantor in the Collegiata. His detailed knowledge and love of the liturgy led to his appointment as head sacristan of the Collegiata. Both of these appointments were unusual for such a young priest.

Even as he valued education for himself, Alfonso's appreciation for learning extended to his vision for the care of the children of Angri. And for the Sisters who would provide for them. Alfonso's impulse for the children was twofold: (1) to prepare them with knowledge and practical skills for the success of their earthly life; (2) to provide them with a growing knowledge of God and prepare them for their eternal home. The chronicle of the early years of the Institute reveals that the Sisters, in conjunction with an orphanage, almost always established a school and a sewing workshop. And one of the first endeavors of Alfonso was to establish a printing shop so that young boys could learn a trade. For Alfonso education was not a luxury but a necessity - a right due to every person.

As for the Sisters, soon after they began to receive children into their care Alfonso made arrangements for the Sisters to receive formal training so that they would be adequately prepared to educate God's little ones for the here and now as well as for the hereafter. From his earliest years Alfonso treasured the mind as a gift of God and he never apologized for his love of learning. He accepted his talents as treasures to be brought forth, polished, and used for God's glory.

Reflect: How do I continue to learn about God and God's active presence in my world? Do I have a gift that can be better used for God's purposes?

O - OPPORTUNITIES & OBSTACLES

Like most of us St. (Bl.) Alfonso's life was a mosaic of opportunities and obstacles. This is illustrated by a story from his childhood. One cold, rainy January day Alfonso's mother saw him leave his room with a bundle of linens in his arms. Thinking

that he wanted to help her with her chores, she reminded him that it was not laundry day. Alfonso responded: "Mama, I want to bring these sheets to Vincenzino. He is very sick and very cold for his bed has no coverings. As soon as his mother returns from the fields, I will get them back." Giuseppina was so moved by her son's compassion that she procured for Vincent's mother the material required to make bed coverings.

This vignette serves as a model for Alfonso's mode of action and interaction throughout his adult life.

- 1) He recognized a need and he determined what he could do;
- 2) He took whatever action was possible, even in the face of opposition or discomfort to himself;
- 3) He involved others in his good deed and in doing so extended the parameters of charity;
- 4) Most importantly, he trusted that in the interaction of obstacle and opportunity God's Divine Providence would accomplish the Divine Will.

As a young priest, Alfonso saw the children of the poor idling in the streets and fields, often engaged in fights or pranks. Because wars, disease and political revenge had ravaged the region for many years, many had only one parent surviving - or none. In the society of their day they would never have an opportunity to be educated. They would remain unschooled, illiterate. Alfonso knew that unless these children were taught to read and write and learn a trade they would be caught in the grip of an impoverished life. His love for them was both compassionate and active.

And so, as a newly ordained priest Alfonso began a little school for them in his own house. In the afternoon the children would come to his door, be welcomed with "sweet treats", and taught the basics of their religion. Through games, outings, and talks Alfonso instilled in their hearts love - love of God and love of neighbor. Unfortunately for Alfonso the neighbors did not love the noise of the children's activities and he had to disband the group.

This obstacle moved Alfonso to explore other opportunities. He knew that while it was imperative to prepare these youngsters to be good citizens of heaven, it was equally imperative that they be prepared to be good and productive citizens here on earth. Alfonso recognized that a quality education was the best gift one could give a youngster - and he needed help in accomplishing this.

In Alfonso's day there were no Sisters in Angri. As a result of the anticlerical atmosphere rampant throughout Italy in the 1800's, religious communities had been forced to disband. Alfonso saw the absence of Sisters as an opportunity to bring them back to Angri. From a dream he had while in the seminary, he felt called to found a religious group of Sisters to help him with his work with the children. At the same time, he learned that a pious, wealthy widow of the parish, Mrs Graziani, was concerned about the plight of young girls and wished to start an institution to help them. Instead of seeing this as an obstacle to his own dream, Alfonso saw this as an opportunity for collaboration.

When we think of the founding of the Baptistine Sisters we sometimes lose sight of the fact that we were not the Founder's first choice! What was essential for Alfonso was that the children be cared for - whether by his group or someone else's. Working with Mrs. Graziani, Alfonso tried in vain with 3 different groups of Sisters - the Daughters of the Precious Blood; the Stigmatine Sisters; the Compassionist Sisters - to arrange for the care and education of the poor children of Angri. One day while at Mrs Graziani's house lamenting his failure to achieve his goal, he met a pious young woman from the parish, Maddelena Caputo. In her Alfonso found a "soul-sister" who shared in his dream. The Compassionist Sisters had indeed come to Angri and opened an orphanage. Maddalena had applied for membership in the Compassionist community - and was inexplicably refused. At the same time, Alfonso realized that the work of these Sisters was not growing. A year after the first 4 orphans had been brought to them, they were still the only children being cared for. Alfonso and Mrs Graziani withdrew their support. Again, an obstacle evolved into an opportunity. Now was God's time for a new foundation.

This interplay of obstacle and opportunity was to mark the Founder's life to the very end. There are many notable examples but one in particular impacts directly on the American Province. As the young Community grew there arose a division between some of the Sisters and the Founder. One of these, Sr Bernardine D'Auria, reconciled with the Founder, but found it difficult to be accepted by some of the Sisters who had opposed her. Even though he had cautioned the Sisters to be forgiving and welcoming, the Founder knew of Sr Bernardine's internal sufferings. He worried, wondered and prayed about what to do. At that time, Sr Bernardine received a letter from her brother who had emigrated with his family to America. Her brother lamented the lack of religious care for the many Italian immigrants in his Brooklyn neighborhood, especially the children. Sr Bernardine shared the letter with the Founder, along with a request to visit her brother. Concerned about her continued alienation by the Sisters, the Founder saw this as an opportunity for Sister's healing. In God's Providence, it became that and more - the first steps toward the foundation of the Baptistines in America.

Reflect: What seeming obstacle in my life has God transformed into an opportunity?

S - "SERVANT OF GOD"

Alfonso Fusco was a true and devoted Son of the Church, a "servant of God". He was openhearted and compassionately generous. His amiable disposition made him approachable. Children, especially, gravitated toward him feeling welcomed in his presence. To these little ones he was truly the loving father that many did not have. Adults, too, did not hesitate to bring themselves to him presenting their needs, confiding their failings, sharing their hopes. As God's servant, Alfonso was nonjudgmental. He did not condone what was wrong, nor did he judge people because of the circumstances that left them in need whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. He accepted people as they were - and gave unstintingly of his time and

energies to help them help themselves.

Alfonso listened with his heart - understanding that for this particular person he represented Jesus: he was Jesus' eyes, seeing into hurt and troubled hearts; Jesus' ears hearing unspoken words and feelings; Jesus' hands blessing and comforting and offering unconditional help. Alfonso made himself graciously available to all and pointed them always toward the loving heart of God.

Throughout his life, no matter how trying, how frustrating, how disappointing circumstances might be, Alfonso was true to his faith, to his ecclesial superiors and to the mission that he knew God had given him. In turn, God was even more faithful to him. Alfonso did not shrink from the task that God laid out before him. Indeed, he remained faithful to it because he was convinced in the core of his being that the care of young girls and boys through the founding of a religious group of Sisters was God's Will for him.

And Alfonso was never more a "servant of God" than when he was with his new Community. Though human misunderstandings, jealousies or shortsightedness might delay the accomplishment of his dream, Alfonso would not let any human power deter him from the ultimate goal. The first communities of Sisters that he approached hoping for assistance, said "yes" then "no". The local Bishop to whom he initially presented his request for starting a community, acceded, then reneged. A benefactor first offered to provide funds to buy a house for the Sisters, then withdrew the offer. When the Little House of Providence, the first home of the Sisters and the orphans, finally became a reality there were many needs and challenges. Primary among them: too many orphans, not enough food. Alfonso believed that God would provide. And so God did, time and again, through a steady stream of benefactors. From September 1878 when the first 4 young women gathered together until February 1910 when God called him home, Alfonso was at the disposal of the Sisters. He cared for them, provided for them, counseled them, encouraged them, forgave them and guided them in the ways of God and of man - but mostly, he loved them as a father loved his dear daughters.

Alfonso wholeheartedly embraced the idea that others were called to be collaborators with him. He had friends among the wealthy and wise and he did not hesitate to ask others to become part of his project, to use their resources in fulfilling his mission. Alfonso knew well that the expectation that what one does, one does on one's own is a fallacy. Each of us emerges from a community of family, friends, colleagues. But the most important community that we come from is that of the Trinity: the Father whose love created us; the Son whose love forgave and redeemed us; the Spirit whose love continually sanctifies and empowers us. Alfonso used the resources of all these. Because of his absolute trust in Divine Providence Alfonso had the right perspective on his role and responsibility: "The Institute is not my work, but God's. He will sustain it. I am only God's servant "

Reflect: In what particular way is God calling me to be a "servant of God" in my family? or neighborhood? or place of work?

N - SAYING "NO"

Most often when we think of being "holy", we associate the word "yes". But equally important is what we say "no" to. So, perhaps Bl. Alfonso Fusco's life is best summarized by what his life and actions said "NO" to. He declared "no":

- to the belief that things as they were, were the best that they could be;**
- to the "naysayers" who hesitated to risk, to challenge, to offer alternatives;**
- to the self-serving who did not see that: "God's work on earth must truly be our own."**

Because he could say "no" to social biases and injustices, to political or ecclesial inequities, to the growing secularism of society; to personal rebuffs; to the neglect, indeed the exploitation of children, his legacy to us contains a strong dynamic to alleviate immediate conditions and to work to change the systems that are the root cause of so much suffering.

Reflect: What is God asking me to say "NO" to at this time? and how?

As we bring this session to a close, we can summarize the profile of Bl. Alfonso Maria Fusco as follows:

A - ANGRY

L - LEARNED

F - FAMILY & FRIENDS

O = OBSTACLES

N - SAYING "NO"

S = SERVANT OF GOD

O = OPPORTUNITIES