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The Fragrance of a Life Offered to God

What makes a saint? Is it a life filled with extraordinary achievements, great works and public recognition? Or can holiness be found in a life that is hidden, marked by suffering and lived quietly away from the eyes of the world?

The life of St. Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception, India's first canonized woman Saint, gives us a beautiful answer. She lived for only thirty-six years, much of that time within the quiet walls of a convent, often struggling with illness and pain. Yet that hidden life became a life of extraordinary holiness.

The fragrance of St. Alphonsa is the fragrance of the Crosspatience, humility, suffering and love.

One of the most striking episodes of her early life took place when she was only thirteen. Her foster mother wanted her to marry, but Alphonsa was convinced that God was calling her to religious life. Determined to protect her vocation, she deliberately placed her foot in burning embers, hoping that the resulting injury would prevent anyone from wanting to marry her. Recalling the incident later, she wrote: "If my body were a little disfigured no one would want me!... O, how I suffered! I offered all for my great intention." We should not romanticize such an action. But it reveals the intensity of a young girl's desire to belong to Christ. Her vocation was not a passing emotion. She was prepared to suffer for what she believed God was asking of her.

Eventually, she entered the Franciscan Clarist Congregation and took the name Alphonsa. But religious life did not mean an escape from suffering. Her health remained fragile, and she experienced serious illnesses, haemorrhage and painful wounds. After making her perpetual profession in 1936, she described her experience in these words: "From that time, it seems, I was entrusted with a part of the cross of Christ." She added, "I have a great desire to suffer with joy." These words reveal how she understood her suffering. She did not merely endure pain because she had no choice. She tried to unite her suffering with the suffering of Christ and turn it into an offering.

There was another suffering in her life which was less visible but no less real. In 1940, a thief entered the convent at night. The experience left Alphonsa deeply frightened and resulted in a serious nervous breakdown. For almost a year she was unable to read or write normally and lost much of her former capacity. Yet she remained prayerful and continued to concern herself with others. Her Cross, therefore, was not only physical. She knew fear, weakness, helplessness and mental anguish. Yet suffering did not destroy her trust in God.

Her final illness reveals this surrender most powerfully. In 1945, her health deteriorated severely. She suffered convulsions, vomiting and intense

physical pain, and her final year became one of almost continuous agony. Yet, writing to her spiritual father in February 1946, she said: "I have offered myself completely to Jesus. May He do with me as He pleases." She went on to say, "I feel that the Lord has destined me to be an oblation, a sacrifice of suffering."

Here we discover the secret of her holiness. Alphonsa did not possess worldly power or influence. When illness confined her, she could no longer accomplish many of the things that an active and healthy person might do. But she could still offer herself. And this is where her life speaks directly to us.

We often think that our lives become meaningful through achievement. We want our work to be recognized, our sacrifices appreciated and our contributions noticed. Alphonsa presents another measure of greatness. A life offered to God need not be spectacular to be sacred.

Her holiness was found in hidden things: fulfilling her duties, living patiently with others, teaching when her health permitted, accepting illness, enduring pain, praying and remaining faithful when she could not understand why God was allowing so much suffering.

Her own words are particularly striking: "I consider a day in which I have not suffered as a day lost to me." She did not mean that suffering itself is good. Rather, she had learned to see even suffering as something that could be united with Christ and offered in love.

That message is deeply relevant today. Many people carry crosses that nobody sees: the parent exhausted by responsibility, the person silently carrying grief, the one struggling with disappointment or loneliness, or the person who continues doing good without recognition. St. Alphonsa tells them that such a life is not insignificant. A patient acceptance can become prayer; a hidden sacrifice can become an offering; a painful experience can become an act of trust; and a faithful duty, performed without applause, can become holiness.

Perhaps, therefore, the most fitting tribute to St. Alphonsa is not simply to admire her, but to imitate her. We can pray when life is difficult, forgive when we are hurt, remain faithful when God seems silent, and offer our daily struggles rather than surrender to despair. Above all, we can learn from her to love Christ not only when life is beautiful, but also when the road becomes hard.

St. Alphonsa did not have a spectacular life. She had a surrendered life. And that was enough. Her life leaves us with a truth our achievement-driven world can easily forget: a life offered to God need not be spectacular to be sacred. It only needs to be given with patience, humility, faith and love.

+ Shyamal Bose