

Next year will be the 100th anniversary of Liguorian Magazine. Most of us have read or at least heard of this Catholic publication whose purpose it is “to help readers better understand the gospel and Church teaching and to show how these teachings apply to life and problems confronting them as members of families, the Church, and society...The name Liguorian honors the founder of the Redemptorists, St. Alphonsus Liguori.”

I mention this because, it just so happens, today August 1st is the feast day of St. Alphonsus Liguori and I thought it would be appropriate to learn something about him.

St. Alphonsus was born in Italy near Naples to a noble family at the end of the 17th century. He initially had a legal career but, despite his father’s opposition, he decided to become a priest and was ordained at 30 years old.

He had many talents and was an artist, musician (he even composed a Christmas hymn), poet and prolific writer who wrote over 100 works on theology and spirituality. He was a strong contributor to Mariology and was named only one of thirty-four Doctors of the Church by the Pope.

He was, well...a saint.

But as I was reading about his life there was something that caught my eye – throughout much of his adult life he suffered from **scruples**.

As you probably know, scruples, or scrupulosity, is the persistent concern that things might be sinful when in fact they are not. It is pathological guilt, psychological in nature, concerning moral or religious issues. Reinforcing its psychological roots the sacrament of reconciliation usually does not relieve the sense of guilt. Many famous saints have suffered from scruples including St.

Therese of Lisieux, St Frances de Sales, and one of my heroes, St. Ignatius of Loyola.

St. Alphonsus noted scruples was a groundless fear of sinning that arose from erroneous ideas. But, as often the case, the intellectual realization of a condition does not alleviate the condition.

Religious scruples is related to obsessive compulsive disorder. Not only can someone be obsessed about sinning but scruples may also be related to the psychological concept of intrusive thoughts. Here thoughts enter a person's thinking that are **just of the opposite** of what the person may desire or intends. For example, a loving mother may have an intrusive thought of harming her child – just the opposite of what she might do. These thoughts can be very disconcerting and frequently lead a person to a mental health professional for help.

Those negative thoughts are the opposite of the nature of a person. It is of little wonder that a person trying to be good, saintly if you will, would be the target of an intrusive thought that insists, despite the logical evidence, the person is committing serious sins.

St. Alphonsus tried to cope with this malady. He attempted to take a positive view and wrote that scruples could be a blessing at times, actually the beginning of a conversion. He noted scruples have the potential for leading a person to cleanse his or her soul and to make one be prudent in actions. In other words, he took a terrible affliction and sublimated the experience -- as the Jesuits say-- "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam," for the greater glory of God. I am reminded of St. Paul's

"that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me."

Talking about trying to put a positive outlook on something!

Perhaps we should try to deal with our own adversities in this way, especially if the adversity is part of our own being and psychological make-up. A negative may actually be an indicator light that our heart is committed to pointing in right direction. Maybe we shouldn't be so hard on ourselves. Maybe when an

intrusive thought comes into our head we might *dare* it to harm us and try to take a cue from St. Alphonsus (and other saints) by sublimating the experience and try to make the lemon-- lemonade.