

## The Love Life of Saint Alphonsa

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In this article, Dr Perumpallikunnel, CMI makes a contemplative reflection on the life of Saint Alphonsa, the first woman saint canonized on Sunday, 12 October 2008. The article paints Saint Alphonsa as a representative of bridal mysticism in the lineage of *bhakti* tradition. The author argues that Saint Alphonsa was not as pathetic and miserable as some people want us to believe, but she was a great mystic who was elevated to higher levels of beatific vision.

### Introduction

It appears that a number of admirers and devotees of St Alphonsa exhibit a tendency to commit an unpardonable crime of glorifying and exalting pain and suffering as if our whole life here on earth is meant to be a pilgrimage through the gloomy valley of tears and toil. In fact, she teaches the hedonistic world of ours the right and laudable way of suffering and cross. There is no doubt or dispute about the fact that she suffered a lot during her short life span both physically and mentally due to her delicate physical constitution and external situations like her family background. She is often depicted as a "passion flower" whose life could be summarized into three words: born, suffered and died. She too at times referred to herself as the "daughter of suffering." However, it will be a superficial evaluation of her life and a grave mistake if we conclude that her entire life was a saga of continuous, vicarious suffering. For her suffering willingly for the sake of love was the greatest expression of genuine love. She was not a masochist. She never enjoyed suffering in itself. She never blamed anybody or claimed anything on account of sufferings she underwent. For her suffering was not an end in itself but a means to achieve certain desirable goals. There are life-giving sufferings and life-taking sufferings. She chose the first type. She found her happiness

in the happiness of others. She was ready to suffer vicariously but always in accordance to the will and plan of God. This extraordinary way of kenosis or self-emptying is a divine path tried successfully by Jesus.

However, there are numerous dangers in the tradition of the spiritual acceptance of suffering and the cross, if isolated from the dynamic thrust of the whole life of Jesus which consisted in carrying out the will of his father. A spirituality of a false exaltation of cross and suffering will perpetuate injustice and exploitation. It may possibly feed the unhealthy traits of masochism or even sadism. The cross of Christian spirituality should not weaken our commitment to bring holistic salvation to humanity and liberation to each of its suffering members

The “unremarkable” life of this young Catholic nun came to an end on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1946. She remained rather unknown to the public till her death. Only a few attended her funeral. There appeared no news in the media about her death. Yet, her divine lover had been well pleased to exalt this humble bride of his to the honour of the altar within the time span of a few decades. On October 12, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI declared Alphonsa, this unremarkable, unknown nun, as the first woman saint of India. What might be that charisma which allures tens of thousands to Saint Alphonsa’s tomb? This article is an attempt to shed light on certain important areas of her life that is not given proper consideration.

### **A Brief Biography**

Annakkutty *Little Anna*, was born on August 19, 1910 at Kudamaloor, a rural village in Kottayam district, Kerala, India, to Joseph and Mary Muttathupadathu. She was baptized on August 27, 1910 at Saint Mary’s Church in Kudamaloor. Anna’s mother died soon after that premature child birth. Therefore her maternal aunt took upon herself the responsibility of bringing her up. In 1916 she started schooling at Arpookara, a nearby willage. She received First Communion on November 27, 1917. In 1918 she was transferred to a school at Muttuchira. In 1923, at the age of thirteen, Anna was badly burned on her feet when she fell into a pit of burning chaff. She arrived at the Poor Clares convent at Bharananganam on Pentecost 1927. She received the postulant’s veil on August 2, 1928 and took the name Alphonsa. In May 1929 she entered the Malayalam High School at Vazhappally. On May 19, 1930 she received her religious habit at Bharananganam. Three days later she resumed her studies at Changanacherry, while working as a temporary teacher at the school

at Vakakkad. On August 11, 1931 she entered the novitiate. She took her permanent vows on August 12, 1936. Two days later she returned to Bharananganam from Changanacherry. She taught at the primary school, but was often sick and unable to teach. In December 1936 she was reportedly cured from her ailments through the intervention of Blessed Kuriakose Elias Chavara, but on June 14, 1939 she was struck by a severe attack of double-pneumonia, which left her weakened. On October 18, 1940, a thief stumbled into her room in the middle of the night. This traumatic event caused her to suffer amnesia, and weakened her further. Her health continued to deteriorate over a period of months. She received extreme unction on September 29, 1941. The next day she regained her memory, though not complete health. Her health improved over the next few years, until in July 1945 she developed a stomach problem that caused vomiting. She died on July 28, 1946, aged 35. She is buried at Bharananganam, in the Diocese of Palai, in Kerala, South India.

Soon her tomb at Bharananganam became a pilgrimage site and miracles have been reported by her devotees. On December 2, 1953, Eugène-Gabriel-Gervais-Laurent Cardinal Tisserant inaugurated the diocesan process for her beatification. Pope John Paul II formally approved a miracle attributed to her intercession and Alphonsa was declared Servant of God on 9 July 1985 and she became known as Venerable Sister Alphonsa. She was beatified along with Kuriakose Elias Chavara at Kottayam and finally on October 12, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI declared her the first woman saint of India.

### **Bridal Mysticism**

Mysticism in general has been defined as the first hand experience with God. Bridal mysticism is one of the nine modes of relationships with God where the relationship is similar to the one between the bride and the groom (*Bharya-Bhartha*). We can relate with God through many mental states, like those of *Shaanth Bhaava* (tranquility), *Daas Bhaava* (master and servant relationship), *Sakhaa Bhaava* (friendship or comradeship), *Vatsalya Bhaava* (affection, like between mother and child), and *Maadhuriya Bhaava* (bridal mysticism - sweetness, as between lover and beloved). On a material platform, these relationships are based on selfishness. However, on the spiritual platform, they are purely based on selfless love (*Bhakti* or devotion). In bridal mysticism the soul of the devotee is the bride and God is the bridegroom; their union is recognized as the spiritual marriage. The great outpouring of the soul to realize the Lord as her husband is the essence of bridal mysticism. A soul fallen in love with God leaves the worldly pleasures to the worldly people and longs for

union with God as her groom in body and soul. The longing and seeking of the Lord as her bridegroom is the essence of bridal mysticism. The soul in the practice and experience of bridal mysticism goes through the harrowing experience of separation from him (*viyogam*) and the exhilarating experience of union (*samyogam*) with him. For enamoured souls, *vislesham* appears to be stretched into eternity while in *samslesham* the eternity is crowded into a moment. The soul suffers the worst from separation from her Lord. She may implore birds, flowers, the dark rain clouds, and bees to be her messengers to her Lord and to bring him to her quickly. She is reminded of her Lord in everything she sees around her. After these painful efforts that get her nowhere, she decides to put up with her sorrow and places her trust in the Lord's infinite mercy. The soul has to annihilate her ego (*ahamkara*) to realize the fruits of bridal mysticism. Even the presence of a tiny bit of *Ahamkara* (divisive ego) leads to sorrow. Once that is banished in the intense pursuit of realizing the unitive life with the Lord as her groom, the soul will be able to face the sorrows undismayed and enjoy pleasures uncontaminated. Any bit of divisive ego has to be pulverised through total surrender to the Lord, the eternal bridegroom. The love of the soul for her Lord should be selfless - love of God for the sake of love and for nothing else, not even for the sake of salvation is the true mark of bridal mysticism. God is both the path and the goal of the journey on this earth - a path in which there is no self-losing and a goal to which his wisely guided steps are surely arriving at every moment. True love brings with it deep humility, an awareness of one's insignificance before all and helplessness before God. A love-stricken soul would not feel it as a humiliation at all when she has to go all out with her sufferings to pretty little things like flowers and bees and seeks consolation from them. It is this humility, born of love of God that helps her win the game of love. Spiritual union with the Lord in wedlock brings to the bride utter rapture, joy, and contentment. Due to the absence of selfishness the soul would prefer that all human souls should come to experience this marvellous and divine union.

To experience the bridal mysticism, one has to realize that all souls are females in relation to the Supreme Being, who is considered the only man (*purush* or *purushottama*). The lives of all God-immersed souls or *bhaktas* (devotees) who have revelled in this form of mysticism testify to this. Those engrossed in the bliss of the divine love consider God as the beloved or husband, and the rest as his soul-brides. In other words, considering one's soul as the lover or bride and God as her beloved or husband, one surrenders the false ego and then maintains this relationship to eternity.

In almost all religious scriptures we come across examples of bridal mysticism. They bear witness to the glory of the divine love or pure devotion through numerous hymns belonging to the genre of bridal mysticism. They are written by those revelled in this form of selfless love, steeped in the bliss of the divine experience by constantly remembering him. It is said that bridal mysticism (*maadhuriya bhaava*) is the all-rounded, most intimate, highest ecstasy and most exalted expression of pure transcendental love. Also, the bridal mysticism is considered to be inclusive of all the qualities of other "*bhaavas*" or "*rasas*," where all other *Bhaavas* attain their spiritual perfection.

Thus, bridal mysticism is a characteristic of pure love or devotion (*bhakti*), not lust; for love and lust are two totally opposite feelings. Simply put: bridal mysticism is acting in a way that is pleasing to the divine will (eternal law). Other characteristics of pure devotion include abandoning of all desires and fear, keeping devotion unadulterated, being steadfast in devotion to the One Divine only, and keeping mind engaged in meditation and deep reflections.

### **Bridal Mysticism in the Christian Tradition**

In Christianity there is a rich tradition of bridal mysticism. It uses nuptial and erotic imagery to describe the soul=s relation with God. There are many scriptural passages (Isa 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Jer 2:2; 3:20; Hos 2:19; Ezek 16:8; Mt 9:15; 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25-27; Rev 10:7-9; 19:7-9; 21:2; 22:17) that describe the relationship between Israel and God or Church and Christ in this background. The Fathers of the Church continued this tradition through their writings. Origen=s *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is a clear example of this trend. This unusual piece of biblical literature is a narrative of the most sacred of human events, the love between two people. It is primarily a human love song, though it is also described allegorically as God=s relationship with his people. Rather than being an embarrassment, the vivid sensuousness and even eroticism of the Song portray a celebration of sexual love. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Bernard of Clairvaux borrowed images of human love, sexual experience, and marriage from the Song of Songs, and Richard of St. Victor used the symbolic language of betrothal, marriage, wedlock, and the fruitfulness of the soul to describe the developing union of the soul with God. This imagery was elaborated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century lay movement of the Beguines. They described their experience of mystical union in terms of ecstasy, erotic sexuality and passionate loving devotion. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Theresa of Avila, and John of the Cross later likened the loving, transforming union of the soul with God to mystical marriage, in which God and the contemplative become one in spirit and love.

## Union with Christ Necessary to Be a Christian

The great truth that the Bible continually conveys is that in the same way that man and woman are to become >one flesh=, we must in like manner become the faithful spouse of our divine bridegroom. Once the dynamics of male, female, and the mental/spiritual dimensions of a true and genuine marriage is envisioned, we must then begin to apply this concept to every aspect of our lives. Jesus frequently used figures drawn from marriage to illustrate his teaching concerning the coming of the kingdom, as Paul did concerning Christ and the church. Everywhere He accepts and deals with it as sacred and of Divine origin (Mt 19:9, etc.). Both the Old and New Testaments warn us that there are two paths - the narrow path that leads to Life, and the broad road that is walked by the multitudes of people into destruction. We are either of the earth, and walk in the broad-way - which signifies that condition when our energy flows outwardly - or we are able to direct our vital life-force of energy inwardly. When our life-force is directed outwardly, we are said to be carnal, and we belong to this world. When we are able to direct our energy inwardly then we are moving in a spiritual direction, and our consciousness is actually expanding. Paul stated:

It is good for a man not to touch a woman... But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this... An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord=s affairs - how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world - how he can please his wife - and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord=s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world - how she can please her husband (1 Cor 7:1; 26-35).

Paul=s observation that it would be better for man not to touch a woman is based on a number of factors. In not understanding the sacredness and depth of the relationship=s potential, men are merely squandering away the vital energy that could instead be channelled in a better way than to be lost in nature. Our physical bodies were not created to torment us - but rather, every inclination was manifest within us for a higher reason and purpose that we must embrace and raise to its highest expression. It is not until we understand that the attractions and urges of men and women to come together go far beyond a biological need, that we can begin to perceive both the laws working within and without us, as well as the forces that will bring about our eventual destiny. The coming together of the sexes is initiated by a need that is manifest in the soul of man - and once

properly understood from a higher perspective, can be used to perceive the movement of every aspect of Creation itself. The soul of man, which is neither male nor female, dwells in a realm where these forces of mind exist in harmony. Once this is understood, we can then look beyond the realm of physical attraction, and understand that the deeper foundation of man's sexual appetite is his absolute need to be complete and know himself. The problem that exists in the physical relationship between a human male and female is that there will always be something lacking in their relationships, until they begin to perceive that a void exists within themselves. This means that those forces and appetites we perceive as carnal and sensual, can never be satisfied until we have returned to a state of Oneness with our Creator and Source of Being.

### **Biblical Roots of Bridal Mysticism**

The Bible is teeming with vesicles that underscore its bridal mystical inclination. The entire book of *Canticle of Canticles* (1:1 - 8:14) belongs to this genre. It begins as follows: "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is oil poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you, let us make haste. . . . Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices." The following quotes are just a sample of what we come across in the Bible: Isa 54:5-6: "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God." Isa 62:4-5: "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My delight is in her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." Jer 2:2: "Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown." Jer 3:1: "If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the harlot with many lovers; and would you return to me? says the Lord." Jer 3:6-8: "The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: 'Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the harlot? And I thought, >After

she has done all this she will return to me=; but she did not return, and her false sister Judah saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the harlot. @ Jer 3:20: "Surely, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord." Jer 12:7: "I have forsaken my house, I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies." Jer 31:3-4: "The Lord appeared to him from afar. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall adorn yourself with timbrels, and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers." Hos 2:2-7: A Plea with your mother, plea - for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband - that she put away her harlotry from her face, and her adultery from between her breasts; lest I strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and set her like a parched land, and slay her with thirst. Upon her children also I will have no pity, because they are children of harlotry. For their mother has played the harlot; she that conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, >I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.= Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns; and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers, but not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them. Then she shall say, >I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better with me then than now.= " Hos 2:19-20: "And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord." Hos 3:1: "And the Lord said to me, A Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins. @ Ezek 16:1-1: "Again the word of the Lord came to me: A Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, and say, Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. And as for your birth, on the day you were born your navel string was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor swathed with bands. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you; but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. And when I passed by you, and saw you weltering in your blood, I said to you in your blood, >Live, and grow up like a plant of the



field.= And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full maidenhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. AWhen I passed by you again and looked upon you, behold, you were at the age for love; and I spread my skirt over you, and covered your nakedness: yea, I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you, and anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with leather, I swathed you in fine linen and covered you with silk. And I decked you with ornaments, and put bracelets on your arms, and a chain on your neck. And I put a ring on your nose, and earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown upon your head. Thus you were decked with gold and silver; and your raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and embroidered cloth; you ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful, and came to regal estate. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendour which I had bestowed upon you, says the Lord God. ABut you trusted in your beauty, and played the harlot because of your renown, and lavished your harlotries on any passer-by.@ Ezek 16:28-35: "You played the harlot also with the Assyrians, because you were insatiable; yea, you played the harlot with them, and still you were not satisfied. You multiplied your harlotry also with the trading land of Chaldea; and even with this you were not satisfied. AHow lovesick is your heart, says the Lord God, seeing you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen harlot. building your vaulted chamber at the head of every street, and making your lofty place in every square. Yet you were not like a harlot, because you scorned hire. Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all harlots; but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side for your harlotries. So you were different from other women in your harlotries: none solicited you to play the harlot; and you gave hire, while no hire was given to you; therefore you were different. Wherefore, O harlot, hear the word of the Lord." Ezek 23:17-20: "And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their lust; and after she was polluted by them, she turned from them in disgust. When she carried on her harlotry so openly and flaunted her nakedness, I turned in disgust from her, as I had turned from her sister. Yet she increased her harlotry, remembering the days of her youth, when she played the harlot in the land of Egypt and doted upon her paramours there, whose members were like those of asses, and whose issue was like that of horses."

In the New Testament, Jesus too was quite vociferous in this regard. To cite just a few: Mt 9:15: "And Jesus said to them, ACan the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.@ Mt 25:1 : "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom." Mk 2:19: "And Jesus said to them, ACan the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.@ Lk 5:34: "And Jesus said to them, ACan you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?@ Jn 3:29-30: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease. 2 Cor 11:2: I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband. Eph 5:25-27: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." Rev 19:7-9: ALet us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure@ - for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, AWrite this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.@ And he said to me, AThese are true words of God.@ Rev 21:2: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Rev 21:9: "Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, ACome, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.@ Rev 22:17: "The Spirit and the Bride say, ACome.@ And let him who hears say, ACome.@ And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price."

### **Saint Alphonsa's Budding Love for Jesus**

Alphonsa as a small girl happened to read the story of Saint Therese of Lisieux and was much fascinated by her life and spirituality. She wanted to follow the same path. However, at the age of 13, as per the custom of that time, Alphonsa had to face a forced arranged marriage. In order to thwart it she placed her legs in fire. The fire burned her badly and she had to undergo treatment for three months, yet that adventure spared her to go after her true love of life. Like

the young Clare who followed Francis Assisi, Alphonsa followed Jesus. Clare knew well that following Francis will not bring her anywhere near him physically because he was already wedded to the Lady Poverty. Alphonsa too knew very well that following Jesus who was wedded to cross was not going to bring her any physical consolation or comfort. It was a choice of self negation, an option for a total kenosis. She wanted to be like her beloved – to be a loser, to ascend to nothingness.

A burning love for Jesus in her heart made Alphonsa step into a simmering fire at the age thirteen.<sup>1</sup> But alas, her lover left her there for the next twenty three years until there was no impurity of selfishness left within her virgin heart.<sup>2</sup> As she approached the age of thirty six her divine lover extended his hands to take her to his bridal chamber and like a little robin she flew away.

Her whole life was a love song, a progressive self emptying enterprise until nothing was left. This was undertaken not on account of some external force or persuasion, but quite willingly and happily. Entering the poor Franciscan Clarist Congregation (FCC) was a conscious choice towards her goal of self emptying. The love for Jesus that sprout in her heart at the age of thirteen bloomed at the age of eighteen as she walked through the aisle to the altar wearing the same wedding clothes her foster parents prepared five years ago for her wedding. She insisted on wearing the very same ornaments and cloths to be the bride of her divine lover. On the altar she sacrificed her lovely name Anna and received a new name - Alphonsa.

### **The Initial Lessons from Religious Life**

Religious life, which is a school of faith, hope and charity, taught Alphonsa her first lesson that true love implies suffering. There she acquired two treasures of the Christian faith, namely, the Holy Spirit and the cross. The Spirit opens human intelligence to horizons that surpass it and makes it understand the beauty and truth of God's love revealed, in fact, on the cross – a love of which no one will be able to separate the believer, which is experienced by giving up one's life as Christ did.<sup>3</sup> Hence her life became a continuous exaltation of the Holy Cross. She crucified herself on the cross using the three nails of chastity, poverty and obedience.<sup>4</sup> The religious life she embraced initiated her into the essence of Christianity: that the Cross is the height of our faith, and through accepting it wholeheartedly we enter into the full mystery of our salvation.<sup>5</sup> Religious life taught her to regard the crosses of her life in the light of the glorious cross of Christ. The cross reminded her that there is no true love without

suffering, and there is no gift of life without pain.<sup>6</sup> Alphonsa understood the deeper meaning of this truth. It is not death or suffering that is the last word in the life of a Christian, but resurrection. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in the world will keep it for eternal life." (Jn 12:24). Like a grain of wheat, which is ready to fall down and bring forth fruit, Alphonsa was ready to take up the Cross which the Lord gave her and even in death she was united with Him.

### **Love in the Life of Alphonsa**

Love was the special attribute of Alphonsa's personality. She loved everybody with a strong feeling of affection, not only those who loved her but also people who were harsh towards her. A heart which is filled with genuine love can never keep any kind of animosity, resentment or ill feelings against anybody and anything. She would say that her heart was full of love. It is the love for Jesus that stirred her to ask for more and more sufferings so that she could become one with the crucified Jesus. Her sufferings and agonies were never a curse for her, but a sign of her greatest love. She was ready to take any kind of sacrifice for the sake of Jesus. She felt immense joy while suffering for her beloved Jesus. "For me everything is God's Providence. Because of that I need to be happy in my sufferings. Jesus of indescribable sweetness, turn for me all the worldly joys into bitterness, this is my constant prayer," wrote Alphonsa to her spiritual guide Father Louis Perumalil, CMI.

Alphonsa gave a thought-provoking piece of advice to the young sisters. She said, "The leaves that lie at the foot of the plants rot away thus providing the food which makes the flowers grow. All see the flowers and rejoice but no one thinks of the decaying leaves that fed them. For us it is enough that we remain as those leaves forever." Her theology of littleness and humility is well expressed in the story of the decaying leaves, which allow the flowers to shine at the expense of its very existence.

She knew well that her choice was a difficult one, since she got wedded to a man who dared to embrace cross, brutal death and total kenosis as his share and patrimony. Even during the trying situations and acute physical and spiritual agonies, like Job she never cursed the day or blamed the parents who brought her to life. She knew that it was her share in her lover's patrimony. No resistance, no complaints! One after another sufferings followed, most of them physical. To those who tried to console her, her response was typical, "I'm now lying on the cross. Our Lord could not move his hands or legs or turn

around. He had neither pillow nor bed. People standing at the foot of the cross made fun of him. He had no solace. But see, how many are here to take care of me and comfort me. In comparison with the sufferings of my beloved my sufferings are nothing. I should drain the cup that he gives me to drink.”<sup>7</sup> She was trying to prove that she was worthy of her lover. She enjoyed suffering because it brought her closer to her beloved. She wanted her life to be like the bread and wine on the altar. In the winepress of suffering she wanted to get transformed into the blood of her beloved. She wanted to be crushed like wheat grains to become the body of her lover.

However she always had her share of consolations from her beloved. Once she dared to say that “her beloved loves her by giving pain all over her body except her nose.”<sup>8</sup> She was a silent, non-complaining sufferer. Once she told her superior, “For the last seven years I’m not mine. I sacrificed myself to my heavenly bridegroom. Let the Lord do whatever he wants. I do not desire for a cure. I want his holy will be done. I think my holocaust burns up in a very slow pace.”<sup>9</sup> Even when she was ill treated or left aside she took it calmly and quietly. She was ready to suffer vicariously. She accepted the malarial infection of her bishop James Kalasseril to relieve him of it. She even claimed that she feels days without suffering as null and void.<sup>10</sup>

### **Total Abandonment to the Divine Providence**

Alphonsa wrote to her spiritual director Fr Louis Perumalil, “The peace and the joy that I experienced seeing you were beyond all limits. The terrible pain and the fever that followed soon afterwards could be a penance for that. My response might have displeased the Lord.” She even doubted and asked her spiritual director whether the Lord could be displeased by her over attention towards him. Her only attention and care was to please her Lord. She never wanted to do anything that displeased him. She never cared what she wanted or liked. On another occasion she wrote, “I’m often tempted to see and console the mother superior. Yet I held myself back because I was afraid that my love may cross the limits and the Lord may not like it. Let God repay her.” She was totally convinced that whatever happens, both good and bad are God’s mysterious ways of providence for the advantage of his children. Therefore the best response on our part is to cooperate with him rather than putting blocks through our prayers, complaints and interventions even for the sake of others. Therefore she wondered what she should do when she witnessed issues that naturally invited her prayer and intercession. However, when the requests for prayers and intercession were coming from the part of lay people she never hesitated to offer her prayers on their behalf.

She preferred to remain in the background, remaining as a secret lover of her beloved. She has not written anything about her mystical experiences or her trials while following the footsteps of her lover. Even her diary entries she insistently got destroyed. She knew of her impending death and asked her sisters to dress her with the best she had in preparation to meet her beloved. "What should I say about my ailments? It continues with its ups and downs; may be yet to attain the required maturity. Until then the Lord will build. Once it is reached, like an eagle snatching chicken I will be carried away."<sup>11</sup> "I have totally given myself to Jesus. Let him do whatever he wants of me. To suffer for the love of God and to be happy about it is my only desire in this world."

### **Her Raptures and Ecstasies**

The total surrender and self abandonment practised by Alphonsa slowly but surely elevated her to the higher levels of mystical experience. Her love life was reaching its fruition. During the final years of her life sufferings intensified and she experienced her first rapture in the month of July in 1945. She had to undergo repeated raptures ever since until 28 July 1946 when she had her final "battle" as she herself put it.<sup>12</sup> At times these raptures lasted for seven hours. When asked to describe the experience she was undergoing during that time her response was simple, "Terrible pain, nothing else I remember."<sup>13</sup> Her personal prayer bears witness to her total commitment to the will of God:

"O Lord Jesus, hide me in the sacred wound in your heart, save me from my evil desire to be loved and esteemed. Redeem me from my selfish attempts to gain respect and fame. Make me until I become very insignificant and a small spark in the love of your sacred heart. Give me the grace to forget myself, and other creatures. Most sweet Lord Jesus, make bitter all my worldly consolations. Jesus, Sun of Justice, with the sacred fire of your love, cleanse my heart, enlighten my intellect, and make me one with you."<sup>14</sup>

### **Alphonsa, the Mystic**

Like Bhakta Meera and many other Christian Mystics like Teresa of Avila, or Catherine of Sienna, Alphonsa too reached by the end of her life a state of deep mystical experience. This ascent began when she told her aunt who insistently wanted to give her in marriage as follows, "I've already chosen someone as my bridegroom. I prefer to die to keep my word."<sup>15</sup> When the aunt continued her insistence pointing towards her obligations to those who brought her up she dared to utter these bold words, which were otherwise unthinkable

to come out of the mouth of that timid, gentle girl, "In my heart I've abandoned you already. So please don't force me again."<sup>16</sup>

It is true that Alphonsa had to undergo great pain during those raptures she experienced during the final years of her life. However, to Bp James Kalasserry, who asked her what she was doing during those sleepless nights, she replied, "I love."<sup>17</sup> These two words summarize her entire life. When Sister Ursula, her superior, seeing the tremendous suffering she was undergoing demanded her to pray to get rid of raptures she gave a better account of her experience during and after the rapture as follows, "It is true that I'm terrified even to think of getting the rapture because of the trouble I give others. But the joy that I experience during the night after the rapture makes me want to get it more often. The heavenly joy I experience due to my willing acceptance of the rapture exceeds the suffering. The joy and the sweetness I experience correspond to my suffering during the rapture." "How is that sweetness?" sister Ursula asked. She replied, "It is beyond words, I'm incapable of describing it. After the rapture during the night I get drowsiness, the visions I have during that drowsiness are inexplicable. I feel that our Lord sits beside me caressing me and pouring the sweetness of his sacred heart into me. I feel that the room glows with divine light. In fact, I do not know how to describe all that. There is no limit or measure for the ecstasy I experience then."<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Though Alphonsa never wanted to leave behind her any evidence of her mystical experience and insisted her superior to destroy every bit of written material she prepared in front of her, we have ample circumstantial evidence to measure the height of her mystical ascent. The life and writings of many great mystics provide us with enough material to conclude that the last days of St Alphonsa was not as pathetic and miserable as some people want us to believe. She was a great mystic who was elevated to higher levels of beatific vision which "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him" (1Cor 2:9).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Gnanadas, *Alphonsa*, Bethany Publications, Kottayam, 1987, p.47

<sup>2</sup> Linet FCC, "Enough to be Manure Forever," *Keralasabha* 40( November, 2008), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Vatican, Sept. 17, [www.Zenit.org](http://www.Zenit.org).

- <sup>4</sup> Linet FCC, "Enough to be manure forever," *Keralasabha* 40/10 November, 2008. p.4.
- <sup>5</sup> Pope Benectict XVI, Vatican, Sept. 17, [www.Zenit.org](http://www.Zenit.org).
- <sup>6</sup> Pope Benectict XVI, Vatican, Sept. 17, [www.Zenit.org](http://www.Zenit.org).
- <sup>7</sup> K.C. Chacko, *Sister Alphonsa*, Trivandrum, 1949, p.75.
- <sup>8</sup> Fr Romulus TOCD, *Snehabali Aathava Alphonsamma*, Kottayam, 1947, p.134.
- <sup>9</sup> Elişeus, ed., *In the Footsteps of Alphonsa*, Palai, 1986, p.78.
- <sup>10</sup> Fr Romulus TOCD, *Snehabali Athava Alphonsamma*, p.149.
- <sup>11</sup> Gnanadas, *Alphonsa*, Bethany Publications, Kottayam, 1987, p.90.
- <sup>12</sup> Kizhakkedam Luckose, *Vellithamara*, Janatha Services, Thevara, Cochin, 1986, p.150.
- <sup>13</sup> Gnanadas, *Alphonsa*, p.80
- <sup>14</sup> Suchita FCC, "The Pearl of India," *Vidyajyoti*, 72 (September 2008), p.652; Fr Romulus TOCD, *Snehabali Aathava Alphonsamma*, p.137.
- <sup>15</sup> Gnanadas, *Alphonsa*, p.51.
- <sup>16</sup> Gnanadas, *Alphonsa*, p.52.
- <sup>17</sup> Gnanadas, *Alphonsa*, p.75.
- <sup>18</sup> Gnanadas, *Alphonsa*, p.82-83.