

St. Thérèse and St. Alphonsa, a Comparative Study

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On September 12, 2008 while the Synod of Bishops was going on in Rome, the Holy Father Benedict XVI, canonized Blessed Alphonsa, the first woman Indian saint. The celebration was participated by many cardinals, bishops who were present for the Synod, and thousands of the people from all over the world. God gave India a saint who suffered much like St. Thérèse all through her life. Alphonsa's canonization took place at a time when Indian Christians, who make up just over two percent of India's billion-plus population, have come under fresh attacks from Hindu fundamentalist groups. It seems that St. Alphonsa who is also called the Little Flower of India would encourage the missionaries and Christians in the midst of their persecution. Here we are trying to understand the life and spirituality of St. Alphonsa which had great similarity with St. Thérèse.

Short biography

Annakutty Muttathupadathu who became known as Alphonsa was born as the fourth child of Joseph and Mary of Muttathupadathu on August 19, 1910 at Kudamalur, Kerala, in the diocese of Changanacherry. Her father Joseph known as a Kuttan Vaidhyan was a traditional Indian doctor of *Ayurveda*¹ while her mother Mary was an ordinary house wife.² Eight days after her birth she was baptized and she was given the name Annakutty, a diminutive of Anne. Her mother died three months after giving birth to Annakutty. She lived

¹ Ayurveda is the traditional medicine of India, which originated there over 5,000 years ago.

² T.T MUNDACKAL, *The Story of Blessed Alphonsa*, St. Paul Publication, Bombay 1989, p. 15.

her infancy in the house of her grandparents in Elumparabil where she was given human and Christian formation. Here in this family the first seeds of vocation flowered.³ In 1917 she began to attend the elementary school of Thonnankuzhy. After having finished the third standard in the primary school she was transferred to the Muttuchira government school by her father. Thus, she spent her adolescence at Muttuchira with the Murikkal family with her aunt.⁴ Her aunt was a very severe and demanding woman, at times hard in demanding obedience from Annakutty in her every minimal disposition or desire. Annakutty accepted this severe and rigid education as a path of humility and patience for the love of Christ.⁵

As a school girl Annakutty was good in studies and excellent in her conduct. She was already making spiritual progress at her young age. She loved God, prayed for long periods and had great devotion to Our Lady.⁶

Firm Vocation to Religious life

Annakutty was very beautiful and pleasant girl. At the age of 13 many marriage proposals came from good families. Her aunt was determined to procure an advantageous marriage for Annakutty. She obstructed the clear signs of her religious vocation. Annakutty resisted all marriage proposals because she gave herself to the Lord and she wanted to become a religious sister. Finally she won but at the cost of great suffering.⁷ She deliberately disfigured herself at a young age to ward off suitors and enter the convent of the Franciscans Clar-

³ Her grandmother was a pious and charitable woman. She inculcated into Annakutty faith, love for prayer and charity towards the poor. *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, Piazza San Pietro 2008, p. 52. This she always kept in her mind and lived according to the example given by her grandmother.

⁴ L. KIZHAKKEDAM, *Vellathamara*, St. Paul Publications, Ernakulam 1986, p.32-36. Her mother before she died entrusted Annakutty to Annamma Murickal. She was the aunt of Annakutty.

⁵ *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, p. 53. Her aunt was a strict formator but at the same time she loved Alphonsa. She very often found fault in her and scolded her but at the end of the day she embraced her and consoled her. She provided her good clothes and ornaments. She wanted Annakutty to be a good and efficient house wife. K.C CHACKO, *Sister Alphonsa*, Bharananganam: The Vice Postulator 2000, p. 31-32.

⁶ K.C CHACKO, *Sister Alphonsa*, p. 31-32.

⁷ R. CAPORALE, "Un fiore di grazia nell'India dei Bramini", in *Civiltà Cattolica*, Number 2537 (1956), p. 520-521.

ist Congregation.⁸ It took three months for the wounds to heal. She offered her sufferings for her intention of entering the convent.⁹ Finally the aunt yielded to Annakutty's desire and she entered the convent of Franciscan Clarist Congregation¹⁰ at Bharanangam in 1927. She also continued her studies. On August 2, 1928, she began her postulancy taking the name of Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception in honour of St. Alphonsus Liguori whose feast it was that day. She was clothed in the religious habit of the Clarist Congregation and made her profession on May 19, 1930 before Msgr. James Kalacherry.¹¹

Her sickness and death

Alphonsa became very sick after her profession but she continued her studies in spite of her physical illness. In 1932 she was appointed as a teacher in the lower primary school of Vakakadu. The canonical novitiate was introduced into her Congregation only in 1934. Due to her serious sickness, she was admitted to the Novitiate in 1935. Her health deteriorated but she was miraculously cured by Blessed Chavara. On August 12, 1936 on the day of the feast of St. Clare she made her perpetual profession.¹² She experienced many more sufferings. She was consoled by St. Thérèse who told her that she would suffer much until her death.¹³ As it was revealed to Alphonsa by the Little Flower, painful illnesses followed. Most seri-

⁸ Annakutty found that her beauty was the reason for many marriage proposals and to escape from it, she voluntarily caused a grave burn by putting her foot into a heap of burning embers. She spoke about this event: "O, how I suffered! I offered all for my great intention". *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, p. 53.

⁹ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, Edizioni Paoline, Bari 1956, p.28.

¹⁰ The Franciscan Third Order for lay people was founded in the parish of Palai in 1875. Later, some of the female members began to live in a community doing some charitable and apostolic work. Eight members of this group expressed their desire to lead religious life to their local director Fr. Kunjulahanan. Their desire was communicated to Msgr. Lavigne, the Apostolic Vicar of Kottayam. Thus this Franciscan Clarist Congregation (FCC) was founded on 14 December 1818. B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, Dissertatio ad Lauream in Facultate S. Theologiae apud Pontificium Universitatem S. Thomae Aq. In urbe, Rome 2007, p. 20-21.

¹¹ *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, p. 54.

¹² *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, p. 54.

¹³ K.C CHACKO, *Sister Alphonsa*, p. 41-42.

ous of all was a dramatic nervous shock as a result of a fright on seeing a thief during the night of October 18, 1940. This psychic problem lasted for a year during which she was not able to read or write. In 1945 she had a violent outbreak of illness which she accepted with love for God. She died in the convent of Bharanganam on July 18, 1946 leaving behind a memory of love and holiness.¹⁴ On July 29, 1946 burial ceremony was conducted in a very simple way. Since she was not known to the outside world, very few people participated in the funeral service. Fr. Romulus T.O.C.D, who was her confessor and spiritual director, delivered a funeral talk which turned out to be prophetic. He said: "With most profound conviction in my heart, and as one who knew this sister very closely, I declare that we are here participating in the funeral rite of a very saintly person honoured by God. If the world really understood her worth, many people including hundreds of priests and bishops from all over India, would have gathered here...I should make it clear that this young sister was very saintly as the Little Flower of Lisieux...If God wills, this place of Bharanganam would be the Lisieux of India".¹⁵ This prophesy of Fr. Romulus was fulfilled when Alphonsa was proclaimed blessed by Pope John Paul II at Kottayam in India, on February 8, 1986 and canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in Rome, on September 12, 2008.

Influence of St. Thérèse

Maria Vittoria Donadeo who wrote the biography of St. Alphonsa spoke of St. Thérèse as the inspirer and guide of St. Alphonsa. The devotion to St. Thérèse, very often called as Little Flower or *Cherupushpam* in Malayalam, is much diffused in India particularly in the southern state of Kerala.¹⁶ In the life of St. Alphonsa we see many references to St. Thérèse. As a child she was learned about this great saint from her grandmother. She often read the autobiography of St. Thérèse to Alphonsa. This grandmother planted in St. Alphonsa the seed of the spirituality of the "little way" that matured as she grew up.¹⁷ At Muttuchira where she grew up, there was a Carmelite convent of the Congregation of Mother of Carmel. She used to visit them

¹⁴ *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, p. 55.

¹⁵ ROMULUS, *Snehabaly*, Vice Postulator, Bharanganam 1994, p. 197-199.

¹⁶ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 12, 38.

¹⁷ ANNA MARIA GELLINI, "Un Fiore del Kerala", in *Testimoni*, Bologna 2008, (14), p. 14-14.

and they had given her the autobiography of St. Thérèse.¹⁸ Therefore, as an adolescent she read personally the autobiography of St. Thérèse and Alphonsa was very much taken up and influenced by the life of the Little Flower. She meditated over the life of St. Thérèse and she wanted to become a saint like her.¹⁹ The reading of the autobiography led her to a greater devotion to St. Thérèse. Sr. Gabriel who knew Alphonsa well wrote about her devotion: “St. Thérèse was her heroine in the spiritual world; and Alphonsa was a great devotee of the Little Flower. One of her treasured possessions was the autobiography of the saint. She almost knew it by heart. The feast of the Little Flower was a day of happiness for Alphonsa: she would diligently prepare for it by attending the novena and by decorating the altar”.²⁰ She had a great desire to have the relique of St. Thérèse and within the few days of her grave suffering she got it through the post.²¹

She had appearances and special favours received from St. Thérèse. We see the first vision of St. Thérèse in the life of St. Alphonsa in connection with her vocation. When she was walking in the garden at Muttuchira, St. Thérèse spoke of the great splendour of religious life and asked her to pursue it. Thus, it was St. Thérèse who advised her to be a religious sister.²² Through the inspiration of St. Thérèse, she was ready to face any challenge and suffering for entering the convent.

Alphonsa had another appearance of St. Thérèse in her life. Once she became very sick. She was coughing, spitting blood, and had high temperature. The doctors were suspecting tuberculosis. The best medical care possible was given to her but in vain. A nine day Novena was started by the community to Father Kuriakose Chavara who gave her the miraculous cure during her formation period. Alphonsa asked the community to pray also to the Little Flower to whom she had special devotion and the community did. In the morning of the ninth day novena the fever left her. She revealed

¹⁸ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 70.

¹⁹ ANNA MARIA GELLINI, “Un Fiore del Kerala”, in *Testimoni*, Bologna (2008), Number 14, p. 24.

²⁰ SR. GABRIEL, “The Alphonsa I knew”, in *Passion Flower*, Vol. 24 (1979), p. 8. Quoted in the thesis of B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 74.

²¹ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 70.

²² K.C CHACKO, *Sister Alphonsa*, p. 33. B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 38.

later to Mary Ursula, the mother superior what had happened when she insisted. "It seemed to me that a Carmelite nun came, stood close to me, touched me and said, "You are cured of your fever. You will never suffer from any contagious diseases, but you will be tried unto death by other sicknesses".²³

We do not know with certainty whether she had a third appearance of St. Thérèse but it seems that she had. She received a special favour from St. Thérèse during her suffering when she was not able to read and write many months due to the mental breakdown of seeing a thief entering her room. She had already predicted to her sisters that she would regain the memory of the forgotten alphabets on the eve of the feast of St. Thérèse. Surprisingly, as she had predicted earlier, she regained memory on the eve of the feast of St. Thérèse. She asked for a book and she read it. She also got a special gift of reading and interpreting another language, *Tamil*, which she never studied. When Msgr. James Kalacherry visited the convent he witnessed the capacity of St. Alphonsa's talent of reading and explaining Tamil.²⁴

Similarities between St. Thérèse and St. Alphonsa

Similarities in life

We see many similarities between St. Thérèse and St. Alphonsa in their life and spirituality. These similarities begin from their early childhood. St. Alphonsa's mother died a few months after her birth and she grew up without the special love and care of a mother. St. Thérèse also lost her mother early and she had to grow up under the protection of her father and sisters especially Pauline. When her mother was very sick, St. Therese was nursed by Rose Taillé at Semallé. Both the fathers of St. Thérèse and St. Alphonsa were inspirations for their children. They had to do work hard and provide religious education to children with their exemplary life.

There were some similarities and difficulties for St. Thérèse and St. Alphonsa in the vocation to religious life. Both of them wanted to enter the religious life at an early age. Both of them loved and valued their vocation²⁵ very much and were ready to suffer in persuing it. St.

²³ K.C CHACKO, *Sister Alphonsa*, p. 41-42.

²⁴ ROMULUS, *Snehabaly*, p. 72-74. In India different languages were spoken by the people. Malayalam is the language spoken in the southern state of Kerala where Alphonsa lived. Tamil is the language spoken by the people of Tamilnadu.

²⁵ Alphonsa spoke of her vocation "O, the vocation which I received! A gift of my good God... God saw the pain of my soul in those days. God distanced the dif-

Thérèse in order to enter the Carmelite Convent at the age of fifteen went even to meet the Pope Leo XII to get his permission. She also had to convince his father and there was the opposition of her uncle. For Alphonsa, the difficulty came from the marriage proposals and she knelt before her uncle requesting him not to compel her to get married. When all her efforts failed to convince her guardians, she physically disfigured herself to be unattractive and then she entered the convent.²⁶ Her love for God was so intense that she did not mind the pain of burning her legs for him. Both St. Thérèse and St. Alphonsa had great desire to become a saint. Both of them expressed it in various ways. Like the Little Flower, Alphonsa took great care to avoid even the venial sins. She had nothing special to mention when she confessed for the first time for her first communion.²⁷ In examining her life later, she found out that she did not commit any sins willingly in her life. Therefore, St. Alphonsa had courage enough to note that God had blessed her in a very particular way that she did not lose the sanctifying graces that she received on the day of baptism.²⁸ She loved God and did everything to become a saint after reading the biography of St. Thérèse.²⁹ She prayed for that and many sacrifices were offered for this purpose.³⁰ On the day of her vestition St. Alphonsa once again made her resolution to become a saint: "I joined the convent to become a saint, and having survived so many obstacles, what I have to live for if I do not become a saint". This was the single desire which Sr. Alphonsa had in her religious life and continuously she reminded herself of this longing.³¹

Similarities in their Spirituality

Sr. Alphonsa was very much influenced by St. Thérèse in her spiritual life. She began to imitate St. Thérèse in many and different

faculties and established me in this religious state". *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, Piazza San Pietro 2008, p. 53.

²⁶ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 70-71.

²⁷ ROMULUS, *Snehabaly*, p.19

²⁸ T. PAZHUPARAMBIL, *St. Alphonsa-Ente Kochamma*, Kottayam 2008, p. 95-98.

²⁹ R. CAPORALE, "Un fiore di grazia nell'India dei Bramini", in *Civiltà Cattolica*, Number 2537 (1956), p. 521.

³⁰ K.C CHACKO, *Sister Alphonsa*, p. 32-33.

³¹ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 38.

ways. Like St. Thérèse St. Alphonsa imitated the Little Way spirituality in great extent. Like her beloved saint, St. Alphonsa had great love for God the Father and she trusted in the fatherhood of God. She trusted God with her whole heart and strength without any doubt, anxiety or fear. She approached God in her every need, in all the dangers with full of trust in her heavenly father. At the same time she was aware of the littleness of herself.³² Therefore, St. Alphonsa made all efforts to be a child of her heavenly Father. As a sign of her simplicity St. Alphonsa loved very much the children. Children were also attracted by St. Alphonsa. After the death of Alphonsa children were the first ones to visit the tomb of St. Alphonsa to ask her intercessions telling that she was a saint. When they were getting many blessings of God through the intercession of St. Alphonsa others also came to the tomb for her intercession.³³

Alphonsa mortified many of her desires and wishes. In one of the letters to her brother we come to know her natural desire to see her brother and the new house he was constructing. She also speaks of the prohibition to write letters to the relatives. But she immediately accepts all these things as a way for mortification. Therefore, she writes: "Let me sacrifice all my desires for Jesus. The virtue of St. Thérèse was self-negation".³⁴

In the Little Way spirituality, St. Thérèse compared herself to a little bird which tries to fly so high. The little bird may not be able to fly so high like an eagle but it raises the little wings to fly. She was speaking of reaching God, the Trinity when she mentioned the little bird.³⁵ Accepting the little way spirituality of St. Thérèse, St. Alphonsa compared herself to a little bird which is not heavy and therefore can soar high up in the air. "Little birds are light and can fly at high speed. Even the flappings of their wings are noiseless. Like a little sparrow, I too will fly away".³⁶

St. Thérèse who is also called Little Flower loved flowers very much and spoke many times of garden and flowers in her autobiography.³⁷ St. Alphonsa spoke of roses and flowers but in a different

³² B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 83. *Positio*, p. 138-139, 462.

³³ R. CAPORALE, "Un fiore di grazia nell'India dei Bramini", in *Civiltà Cattolica*, Number 2537 (1956), p. 526.

³⁴ T. PAZHUPARAMBIL, *St. Alphonsa-Ente Kochamma*, p. 83.

³⁵ ST. TERESE OF LISIEUX, *Story of a Soul*, John Clarke (tr), Third edition, ICS Publications, Washington 1996, p.198-199.

³⁶ SR. SUCHITA, "The Pearl of India", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol. 72 (2008), p. 652.

³⁷ ST. TERESE OF LISIEUX, *Story of a Soul*, John Clarke (tr), Third edition, ICS Publications, Washington 1996, p. 171, 175-176, 178, 267-268.

way. She referred to the roses in relation to her suffering and her desire to be unknown. She compared herself many times to the leaves of the trees that fall near the roses to become manure for plants.³⁸ She wanted to be like manure to the roses so that flower plants would produce beautiful flowers. All are happy in seeing the flowers while nobody notices the leaves and manure that nourished the plants to produce the flowers.³⁹

Offering as a holocaust of Love

St. Thérèse realized that God has chosen her as a holocaust of love. Therefore she offered herself as holocaust of love because in order to satisfy the divine justice victims were necessary.⁴⁰ The act of oblation to merciful love was a real martyrdom for her. St. Alphonsa, likewise, offered herself as a victim and holocaust for the love of the Lord.⁴¹ She wrote to her spiritual director explaining it. “Now I understand the plan of God for me, that is, my life must be a holocaust, a sacrifice of suffering; otherwise I would have died many years before. God accepts my suffering rather slowly”.⁴² She also felt that God was purifying her like gold in the furnace. She expressed this suffering telling that she was suffering in body and soul as if burning in the fire. She feels that God wants to purify her just like gold in the fire.⁴³ Her daily suffering was a continuous martyrdom. She even sometimes felt that God is treating her without any mercy. But she added: “O Lord, do with me as it pleases you: I am yours. Consume me in the fire of suffering. Pierce my heart with sorrow. Set not before my eyes the world’s goals, but lead me on to the acquiring of virtues”.⁴⁴ She had many physical and spiritual suffering which were many times intolerable for her. But she always trusted in God

³⁸ MAR JOSEPH KALLARANGATTU, *Santhuanaprakasam*, Vol. LVIII, November (2008), p. 518.

³⁹ T. PAZHUPARAMBIL, *St. Alphonsa-Ente Kochamma*, p. 98.

⁴⁰ ST. TERESE OF LISIEUX, *Story of a Soul*, John Clarke (tr), Third edition, ICS Publications, Washington 1996, p. 195

⁴¹ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa’s Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 96.

⁴² MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L’India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 86.

⁴³ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L’India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 88.

⁴⁴ MOTHER MARY URSULA, “The Alphonsa I knew”, in *Passion Flower*, Vol.13 (1968), p. 26.

telling that He who has given her pains will also give the force and courage to suffer.⁴⁵ John Britto makes a valid observation that this offering of Alphonsa as holocaust and oblation made the bitter cup tasty, sweet and gladdening.⁴⁶ She had only one desire in the bitterness of suffering, that is, to love Jesus her beloved bride. She wrote to Fr. Aloysius in 1945: "Help me to become bride of Our Lord...You told me that I should never cling to anything that would not please Our Lord. I always remember your advice and pray that I may follow it".⁴⁷ When bishop of Chenganacherry visited her he asked her what she was doing during the nights without sleep. Her simple response with whole sincerity was "I am loving". In another occasion she told the sisters what she was doing the nights without sleep. "I multiply the acts of love to the Sacred Heart". In one of her writings we find her intention in this life: "My only desire is to love Our Lord totally".⁴⁸ She narrated the special love of God for her in these words: "Jesus gives them (sufferings) to me. It is in giving crosses that Jesus shows His love. He sends crosses only to those He loves".⁴⁹

Little way of practicing virtues

Following the Little Way of St. Thérèse, St. Alphonsa practiced virtues which were ordinary and simple but with extraordinary love for God. She used to fold up the clothes of the religious sisters, and rendered the sisters all other little services, mortifying her own self love.⁵⁰ The letter of bishops of India addressed to the Holy Father speaks of her spiritual infancy and doing little things for God. "Imitating St. Thérèse of Infant Jesus of whom she was always very much devoted, she followed her spiritual infancy with great fervour and

⁴⁵ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 86-87.

⁴⁶ JOHN BRITTO, "The Spirituality of Sister Alphonsa: The Redemptive Value of Suffering", in *Passion Flower*, Vol. 4 (1959), p. 16.

⁴⁷ K.C CHACKO, *Sister Alphonsa*, p. 79.

⁴⁸ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 75-76. This experience of her love to Jesus is like the love of St. Thérèse who wrote in the autobiography that my vocation is love. ST. TERESE OF LISIEUX, *Story of a Soul*, John Clarke (tr), Third edition, ICS Publications, Washington 1996, p. 194.

⁴⁹ K.C CHACKO, *Blessed Alphonsa*, Bharananganam: Vice Postulator 1986, p. 14.

⁵⁰ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 92-94.

understanding herself small and doing small things with great happiness... she served God with real love and with real filial trust".⁵¹

St. Alphonsa was not a famous person while she lived but unknown to many like St. Thérèse. To the outside world she did not exist or was a sickly nun. She spent much of her time on the sick bed inside the Bharanaganam Convent in the same way her beloved saint, Thérèse who lived inside the four walls of the Carmelite convent of Lisieux. St. Alphonsa had not done any meritorious or great acts in the sight of the world.⁵² The world would have termed her useless. She was not a founder of any Congregation or held any offices in the convent or congregation. She had no great apparition or stigmata. But she was loving God in silence for the great love of God. As in the case of St. Thérèse she was suffering and sacrificing herself for God. She also, like the Little Flower understood that she is not able to do great things in life but only to suffer for God. Therefore, she wrote: "My Jesus, I wish to suffer and die for you...My Divine Spouse, I am ready to die a thousand times for your sake. I am incapable of doing great things. I want to love you more and more".⁵³ It was her desire to be unknown and unnoticed by others. So she prayed continuously in this way: "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".⁵⁴ She was doing little things, daily acts of ordinary things and suffering but with an extraordinary way which was very pleasing to God. Doing little things she was cultivating many virtues and thus, responding to the graces of God.⁵⁵ This was also the secret of the spirituality of St. Thérèse from whom she learned it.

She did not write any autobiography like St. Thérèse. She was compelled by Sr. Ursula, the mistress of the novitiate to write about her spiritual life. She wrote it by obedience but later she requested

⁵¹ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 71

⁵² SR. SUCHITA, "The Pearl of India", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol. 72 (2008), p.649-650.

⁵³ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 141.

⁵⁴ SR. SUCHITA, "The Pearl of India", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol.72 (2008), p. 652. This prayer is seen in the prayer book used by Alphonsa to recite it every day of her life and she used to recite it even when she was unconscious due to her sickness.

⁵⁵ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 78.

with humility and tears to destroy her writings. She said to Sr. Ursula: "My life is a very simple one and I feel that nobody else would know me or remember me after my death".⁵⁶ When her writings were destroyed by Ursula at her request she was overjoyed.

Her virtuous life remained hidden from all except from those who moved closely with her. Therefore, even her death was unnoticed by the public. The funeral was attended by less than 50 people very much unlike a funeral of a religious sister or even a lay person which was always well attended according to the custom in Malabar. Like St. Thérèse, she became a famous and powerful intercessor after her death. "The Lord wanted to glorify her with a glory that goes beyond the four walls of her little world".⁵⁷ In life and death there are many similarities between St. Thérèse and Alphonsa. Both were unknown to the world but suffered all throughout the life. Both died at an early age. St. Alphonsa died at the age of 36 while St. Thérèse died at the age of 24. Unknown when they died, but later came to be known to the whole world.

Attitude to sickness and suffering

Her attitude to a life long suffering

The short life of Alphonsa was marked by the cross and passion of Christ like that of St. Thérèse. It started with her birth and ended only in her death. She did not get the love of her mother. When her mother died a few days after her birth she had to live under the strict vigilance of her aunt who rebuked her very often. She was not allowed to speak to many girls in the school except two or three. On going to the school and coming back she was asked not to turn this side or that side. Such strict discipline was inculcated in her by the aunt and as a small girl she was already suffering.⁵⁸ St. Alphonsa lived only 16 years of religious life but much of the time was spent in sickness, trials and suffering except one year of teaching in the elementary school. Her biography could be seen as a long clinical report

⁵⁶ We have some letters written by her to the spiritual director and others which remain valuable sources of knowing her spirituality together with many testimonies of her life. MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 64.

⁵⁷ VARKEY CARDINAL VITHAYATHIL, "Message by His Eminence Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, C.S.S.R., Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church", in *Vidyajyothi*, Vol. 72 (2008), p. 642.

⁵⁸ R. CAPORALE, "Un fiore di grazia nell'India dei Bramini", in *Civiltà Cattolica*, Number 2537 (1956), p. 520.

of various sicknesses and suffering. Even before making the simple profession she was very sick and she had undergone an operation. Superiors even thought of sending her home due to her ill health but before making their final decision they asked the opinion of the bishop of Chenganacherry, Msgr. James Kalacherry. He advised them to admit her to first profession.⁵⁹ In the Novitiate before the final profession she once again became very sick. She had haemorrhage from the nose and eyes and had profound organic wasting and deep wounds in her legs. The illness advanced and the worst was feared.⁶⁰ The novice mistress used to visit her many times during the night to see if she was still alive. Once again her life in the convent was questioned. To the enquiry of the Superiors of the Clarist Congregation, once again the reply of Msgr. James Kalacherry was "If she dies, let her die in the Convent".⁶¹

In 1940 when Alphonsa was already sick she had a terrible experience of a thief entering her room while all the others were in the Chapel praying. She with great fear took the cross and having shown the cross asked the thief not to do any harm to her in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Soon he left her but she was so shocked that she could neither speak, nor read and write, and lost her memory. Her physical sickness is added with this psychic problem. In this difficult situation she could do nothing but to pray. She very often showed actions to give her the Holy Eucharist which proved her love for the holy sacrament. Then, she developed a deep wound in her leg which lasted for a few months. She could not move her legs without having terrible pain which made her think of the horrible pain Jesus suffered on the Cross. She used to tell others that her suffering is nothing and insignificant compared to the suffering of her spouse, Jesus Christ with whom she wanted to be united. This wound on her leg was followed with other complications such as ulcer. When she became very sick once again anointing of the sick was administered to her. The priest also gave her the special benediction of the dying person with plenary indulgences. While all were worried of her illness, Alphonsa alone was serene and was enjoying a peace of mind. Once again she was miraculously cured on September 30, 1942 on the eve of the feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, her loving patroness.⁶²

⁵⁹ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 33-34.

⁶⁰ *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, Piazza San Pietro 2008, p. 54.

⁶¹ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 34-40.

⁶² MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 42-46.

In 1945 she had a tumour, which spread throughout her organs. Gastroenteritis and liver problems caused violent convulsions and vomiting on occasion forty times a day. Her final days were of continuous agony.⁶³ During her life time she underwent an intense suffering every Friday which lasted for three to four hours. This agony, according to her spiritual director was “something mysterious”.⁶⁴

Attitude to the physical and spiritual suffering of Alphonsa

Together with her physical sufferings St. Alphonsa also experienced spiritual sufferings, and hostility of others. When she was having illnesses one after another, some religious were thinking that her sickness was not real but due to her imagination. They were of opinion that her sickness was just psychological. Some other sisters accused her that she was using her illness to get the attention of the Superiors. Such a way of gossiping was reported to a preacher of a retreat at Bharananganam convent and he questioned her suffering. Instead of showing any displeasure to this priest she responded to the questions humbly and finally he left the room asking St. Alphonsa's pardon for misunderstanding her. On the other hand, she was praying actually for this priest.⁶⁵ Her attitude towards the accusations leveled against her is clear from a note which she wrote: “I have suffered much from the diseases, and for the most part, helped by my spiritual director, I have done so patiently, but it is very much more difficult for me to stand accusations from others than any amount of physical suffering... I will try not to report to anybody (cf. Mt 5:38). I will apologize whenever I can or at least endure it all silently. When I am despised and humiliated I will seek shelter within the Sacred Heart. Let others speak what they like of me; for my part I will thank God for the favour of allowing me to be reproached by them... whatever trouble or trial comes to me; I shall not complain. Even if I am accused for no fault of mine, I shall try to admit the fault and apologies (cf. Mt 5:11).⁶⁶ She also noted with Christian charity how to face the criticism of others; “I love all of them. I cannot hate anybody”.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, p. 55.

⁶⁴ ROMULUS, *Snehabaly*, p. 79.

⁶⁵ R. CAPORALE, “Un fiore di grazia nell'India dei Bramini”, in *Civiltà Cattolica*, Number 2537 (1956), p. 524.

⁶⁶ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 145.

⁶⁷ T. PAZHUPARAMBIL, *St. Alphonsa-Ente Kochamma*, p. 95.

Vocation of Suffering

St. Thérèse knew that she had to suffer a lot in this life as she said, “My little life is to suffer”.⁶⁸ As she said she lived a life of suffering. St. Alphonsa imitated the life of St. Thérèse in her suffering too. She knowingly acknowledged it. “I imitate the Little Flower; I have great desire to suffer gladly; it seems to me as if Divine Spouse is fulfilling all my desires”.⁶⁹ To her continuous suffering the attitude of St. Alphonsa was like this: “I feel that the Lord has destined me to be an oblation, a sacrifice of suffering... I consider a day in which I have not suffered as a day lost to me”. Even during the severe suffering she had a smile of innocence on her lips.⁷⁰ She kept always the happiness throughout her life in spite of her suffering. It is because she was well aware that the special vocation she received from the Lord was suffering.⁷¹ She narrated her vocation to her Spiritual Director in these words: “I am lying here without doing anything; therefore, suffering is the only thing that I must do”.⁷² Quoting the words of the Bible John 12:24-25, she explained well her vocation for suffering: “The grains of wheat are ground and crushed. Then the white flour is obtained. This is baked and transformed into hosts for the Holy Eucharist. Even so we must be ground and crushed and transformed by suffering like hosts: it is when grapes are pressed that we get the juice, the wine; they do not yield wine of themselves. When God, by suffering, purifies us, we become like good wine...”⁷³ In one of her severe pain she prayed for this vocation of suffering: “O Lord, give me more to suffer in silence; I would drink deep of the chalice Thou hast given me, draining it to the very dregs”.⁷⁴

St. Alphonsa found the reason why she should suffer for the Lord. “Since my Spouse always had nothing else than pain and torments, I also embrace them with my whole heart and with whole my

⁶⁸ SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, *Her last Conversations*, Clerke, J (Translation), Carmel International Publishing House, Trivandrum 1996, p. 133

⁶⁹ St. Thérèse considered suffering as a treasure and an occasion for the greatest of joys. B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 136-137.

⁷⁰ *Canonizzazione, Alfonsa Dell'Immacolata Concezione (1910-1946)*, p. 55.

⁷¹ JOHN BRITTO, “The Vocation of suffering”, in *Passion Flower*, Vol. 6 (1961), p. 6.

⁷² ROMULUS, *Snehably*, p. 80.

⁷³ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 8.

⁷⁴ K.C CHACKO, *Blessed Alphonsa, The Vice Postulator*, Bharananganam 1986, p. 14.

soul and I am at peace even though my body is suffering continuously".⁷⁵ She considered a great privilege to suffer with Jesus.⁷⁶ She also wanted to suffer according to the example given by the Lord. She was consoling herself in her suffering saying that Jesus did not get any consolation when he was nailed on the Cross. They were insulting him, shamed him, bitter water was given to him when he was thirsty. He got only a hard cross to lay down at the last moment of his life. Therefore, she has to imitate him.⁷⁷ She never complained of her suffering or blamed others to meet her needs. Her suffering was a silent one.⁷⁸

At the same time, even though Alphonsa was very sick, she participated in all community acts which were possible for her and did not demand any special privileges from the convent. In order to do that she was hiding her weariness and suffering. She practiced love in little things, in the routine things of community life.⁷⁹ She was also very careful not to disturb her community in any way due to her sickness. She used to tell the sister who was assisting her to be at the community act and did not want to be the cause of preventing her to attend it.⁸⁰ She also found that her suffering was nothing compared to the many sufferings of other people. Therefore, in her intolerable agony she told that she should thank God continuously because she was in a privileged position. She had a bed to sleep and many people to look after and to take care for her. Such privileges are not there for many people who suffer.⁸¹

She did not want to show her suffering to others and endured pain in the silence of the night. She explained her motive for suffering at night to others when she was asked: If she suffers in the night nobody would notice it and she could suffer alone with Jesus. On the

⁷⁵ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 85.

⁷⁶ In the last letter written to her relative she says that it was a special grace she got from God to suffer with Jesus. T. PAZHUPARAMBIL, *St. Alphonsa-Ente Kochamma*, p. 89.

⁷⁷ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 89.

⁷⁸ Sr. Grace, "Sister Alphonsa in the Path of Suffering", in *Passion Flower*, Vol.3 (1958), p. 14.

⁷⁹ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 92-94.

⁸⁰ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 40-42.

⁸¹ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 142.

other hand, if she suffers during the day others would see her suffering and show their sympathy towards her. God wants that she carries the cross alone with Jesus. She did not want others to know her suffering because it would be like a public display and then, her reward would be poor.⁸²

A joyful suffering is possible when it is accepted for a higher purpose. St. Alphonsa in her suffering never showed any displeasure to others but accepted everything with joy. She wrote to her spiritual director that she was happy in her sufferings to do the will of God and to please him. She was joyful in the sufferings because the Divine providence would sustain her in everything. She also felt great joy because the good God never refused whatever she asked of him. But at the same time she wanted that this happiness would not lessen her merits of suffering.⁸³ St. Thérèse also suffered very much here on earth. But she endured everything with happiness. Therefore she wrote in autobiography: "I am very happy to suffer".⁸⁴ Thus St. Alphonsa was following the example of St. Thérèse to suffer with joy.

Suffering to fulfill the will of God

Following St. Thérèse, St. Alphonsa totally followed the will of God in every aspects of her life even in the very difficult moment of her life. In order to fulfill the will of God concerning her desire to enter religious life she had to struggle a lot against all proposals of marriage and finally burning her legs. When she was very sick during formation, the superiors thought of transferring her to another community and they asked her opinion. She replied smilingly: "Mother, what counts is only the will of God. I shall be always glad to stay wherever you ask me to go."⁸⁵

Like St. Thérèse, St. Alphonsa accepted all her suffering, sickness and the cross by submitting totally to the will of God. In suffering she wanted to be united with Christ. Her spirituality consisted in accepting suffering in union with crucified Christ for the salvation of

⁸² MOTHER MARY URSULA, "The Alphonsa I Knew", in *Passion Flower* (1970), Vol. 15, p. 14

⁸³ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 69

⁸⁴ SAINT THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, *Her last Conversations*, Clerke. J (Translation), p. 210. There are many references in the autobiography of St. Thérèse which speak of her suffering for the Lord with Joy.

⁸⁵ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 67-68.

the world.⁸⁶ Therefore, St. Alphonsa felt that her only desire in this world is to suffer for the love of Christ, to fulfill his will. When she was very sick she wrote to her Spiritual Director submitting herself to the will of God. "For the past seven years (that is from religious profession) I belong only to my divine Spouse. You know that well. Let the Lord do what he wants to do in me. I do not desire to be cured but let his will be done in me".⁸⁷ Sometimes she felt that her mental and physical sufferings were beyond her endurance. But she was willing to suffer much more for the sake of Christ, her spouse. It is because she considered God's will for her was to die as a sacrifice of suffering. This doing of the will of God was the fulfillment of her commitment to God. If one day she had nothing to suffer she would ask whether the Lord had forgotten her or did not love her. She seemed to be imitating St. Thérèse exactly when she said totally abandoning herself fully to Jesus to do whatever he liked to do: "Let the Lord do with me what he wills: trampling over, wounding, or piercing me, a humble sacrificial offering for the benefit of the world which is marching to its ruin".⁸⁸ It shows that St. Alphonsa did not only know by heart the autobiography of St. Thérèse but also imitated fully her life. In another occasion of her suffering she wrote dedicating herself to the will of God: "I have given myself totally to Jesus. He can do anything whatever he wants to do."⁸⁹

Redemptive Value of Suffering

Suffering has no value unless it is to be understood in the light of passion and death of Christ. Jesus underwent suffering for the salvation of the world accepting the will of His Father. It had a redemptive value. We accept the suffering of St. Alphonsa because it had salvific value.⁹⁰ Like St. Thérèse she was well aware of the redemptive value

⁸⁶ VARKEY CARDINAL VITHAYATHIL, "Message by His Eminence Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, C.S.S.R., Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol. 72 (2008), p. 641-642.

⁸⁷ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 68.

⁸⁸ Little Flower gave herself to the Child Jesus as His little plaything. He could do whatever he wanted to do. B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its on-going Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 138-140.

⁸⁹ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 68.

⁹⁰ SR. SUCHITA, "The Pearl of India", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol.72 (2008), p. 651.

of suffering. Her desire to suffer and forget herself was not a symptom of masochism. It was not for the sake of suffering but suffering with Jesus, for Jesus, through Jesus and with the Church. But it was the Little Way of St. Alphonsa which was born of her love for Jesus and for the salvation of the world.⁹¹ Her suffering for the salvation of others was an example for the whole Christian world. Sr. Suchita writes: "In her love of Jesus, Alphonsa even thirsted for suffering and actually prayed for more opportunities of sufferings and more afflictions. This was a mystical grace inbuilt in her desire to be like her Divine Lord; bearing the crosses that came to her life was her equivalent of the crucifixion...Alphonsa accepted them as valuable gifts, for it was her conviction that they served a salvific purpose...She accepted it all for her own sanctification and the sanctification of the world in general".⁹² Once she clearly expressed this redemptive value of suffering telling that she was ready to suffer much more because the modern world is searching after pleasure and happiness. She asked the Lord to punish her for their wrong doings as an expiation for the sins of others. She was ready to offer her sufferings for the salvation of the world and in a special way to the priests, religious who are not very fervent in their vocation.⁹³ Therefore, St. Alphonsa is powerful reminder to the modern world of the salvific value of suffering because she accepted all sufferings in union with the crucified Christ for the salvation of the world.⁹⁴ St. Alphonsa knew that through her suffering she is sharing the apostolate of the Church. She found joy in this suffering because it was offered to Christ for the mission of the Church.⁹⁵

Conclusion

St. Thérèse is the greatest saint of the contemporary world and the third woman doctor of the Church. Her life and Little Way spirituality or Spirituality of Childhood is well known to the whole world. St. Alphonsa who heard of St. Thérèse from her early childhood and

⁹¹ B. KOTTANALLOOR, *Blessed Alphonsa the Little Flower of India: A study of the Influence of St. Thérèse of Lisieux upon Blessed Alphonsa's Spirituality and its ongoing Effects in the Syro-Malabar Church*, p. 146, 153.

⁹² SR. SUCHITA, "The Pearl of India", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol.72 (2008), p. 651.

⁹³ MARIA VITTORIA DONADEO, *L'India attende la sua prima santa: Suor Alfonsa*, p. 90.

⁹⁴ VARKEY CARDINAL VITHAYATHIL, "Message by His Eminence Varkey Cardinal Vithayathil, C.S.S.R., Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol. 72 (2008), p. 642.

⁹⁵ SR. SUCHITA, "The Pearl of India", in *Vidyajyoti*, Vol. 72 (2008), p. 652.

read her Autobiography was very much impressed by her life and spirituality. Thus, Alphonsa was totally imitating St. Thérèse in her life, vocation, spirituality and suffering. When we analyze her letters and sayings we come to the conclusion that she was closely following the ideas of St. Thérèse and even many words used by St. Thérèse were repeated by St. Alphonsa. This third Order Clarist of Kerala was following the foot path of the Carmelite nun St. Thérèse. Like St. Thérèse, St. Alphonsa announces to the contemporary world that suffering has a meaning when it is offered for the redemptive work of God. It is right to call St. Alphonsa the St. Thérèse of India because she was literally following the life, spirituality and attitude of St. Thérèse.