

Saints closely linked by pastoral hearts

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

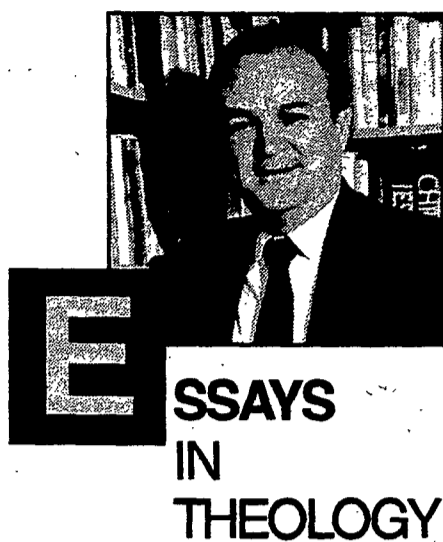
In a column written for *The Chicago Tribune* on June 18, 1995, a few days after Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's cancer surgery, well-known Catholic psychologist and author Eugene Kennedy lauded the cardinal for "his understanding that religion is more interested in helping people get up than in making them feel guilty because they fall down so often."

Although the well-deserved accolade was directed in this instance at Cardinal Bernardin alone, Kennedy was really describing a quality that is present in any truly pastoral heart.

Good pastors are not judgmental; they are patient and understanding. Good pastors do not regard themselves primarily as enforcers of the moral law; they are, first and foremost, healers and reconcilers. Like Jesus. Like Cardinal Bernardin. Like so many others.

This week's column continues our focus on "summer saints." Our two subjects appear on the surface to be very different kinds of saints. One is an outstanding theologian, perhaps the most important moral theologian in the church's entire history, as well as a major religious order's founder. The other is a simple parish priest known as much for his intellectual limitations as for his sanctity.

These two saints are closely linked



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together, however, by their staunchly pastoral hearts: the one expressed in learned and voluminous writings; the other, in the unpretentious ministry of a parish priest.

St. Alphonsus Liguori (feast day, Aug. 1), born of an aristocratic family, left a promising law career, was ordained a priest, and worked among the poorest in Naples.

He later shifted his pastoral attention to the rural poor and founded a religious order, the Redemptorists, to instruct them in the faith. He gave strict instructions to his preachers not to use abstract or flowery language but to speak in such a way as to touch the

minds and hearts of ordinary people.

In spite of his efforts to avoid the appointment, he was named bishop of a diocese near Naples, where, during a severe winter famine, he literally emptied the episcopal residence to feed the poor and avert widespread starvation.

He also found time to write more than a hundred works, including devotional literature, instructions for priests and religious, responses to enemies of the church, and his classic "Moral Theology," which was revised and reprinted nine times before he died in 1787 and which continues to influence Catholic theology today.

Although burdened with scruples himself during much of his life, he fought against the Jansenists who portrayed God as a stern and uncompromising judge of moral behavior and who discouraged frequent Communion on the grounds that most people are unworthy.

The Jansenists, to use Eugene Kennedy's words, were more interested in "making (people) feel guilty because they fall down so often" than in "helping (them) get up."

In opposing the Jansenists, however, Alphonsus did not fall into the opposite extreme of laxism ("Anything goes."). His balanced moral reasoning was rooted in his many years of first-hand pastoral ministry among the poor. His writings were as far removed from ivory-tower theology as one could

imagine.

St. John Vianney, better known as the *Cure d'Arns* (feast day, Aug. 4), was born the year before Alphonsus died. He was ordained in 1815 even though he had been dismissed from the seminary for failing his examinations and for his inability to learn Latin.

After three years as an associate at *Arns*, he became pastor (*cure*, in French) in 1818. His fame soon spread as a spiritual counselor and confessor. It is said that he sometimes spent as many as 18 hours a day hearing confessions. He was canonized in 1925 and was named patron saint of parish priests.

Before the Second Vatican Council, some seminarians used to appeal to the *Cure d'Arns* to justify their own lack of interest (or success) in studies. His example, they argued, showed that one doesn't need "all that intellectual stuff" to do the work of a parish priest.

"If you intend to emulate the *Cure d'Arns*," one of my seminary professors would retort, "then you'd better be able to emulate his sanctity as well. Intellectual mediocrity by itself won't suffice to get you through the seminary."

Alphonsus Liguori and John Vianney were great saints because each in his own way had a richly developed pastoral heart. They both understood that "religion is more interested in helping people get up than in making them feel guilty because they fall down so often."

Prayer is water to the heart

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

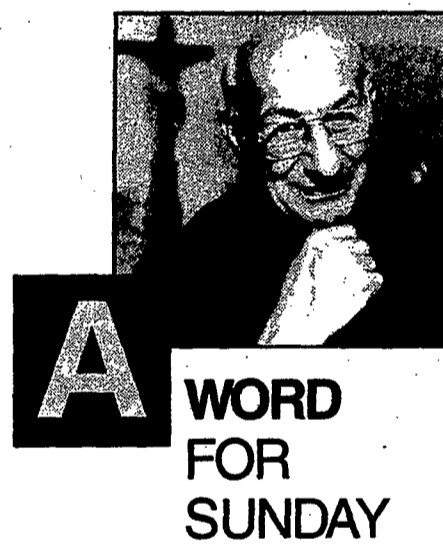
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 11:1-13; (R1) Genesis 18:20-32; (R2) Colossians 2:12-14.

Sunday's readings offer two examples of prayer: they teach us what to pray for and how to pray.

The first reading teaches us to pray for sinners, as Abraham did for Sodom and Gomorrah. The Gospel tells us to pray persistently.

The key to effective prayer is not its length, nor much speaking. Rather, the key to effective prayer is perseverance. Abraham prayed six times for Sodom and Gomorrah. Jesus said, "ask," and if that doesn't seem to work, "seek;" and if that doesn't seem to work, "knock." In other words, don't give up. If a persistent friend can get a man out of bed in the middle of the night just to get some bread, how much more will persistent prayer be effective with a willing God.

God is a loving Father. Did not Jesus say that a father would not hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread or a snake when he asks for a fish. "If you then," Jesus concluded,



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SUNDAY

"who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him?" (Mt 7:11).

If God is so disposed to giving us good things, why do we have to ask Him? Prayer is not coaxing God to change His mind or to play favorites. We pray because God has decreed not only what will happen but why it will

happen. God has made prayer a cause. He has willed that certain effects be produced by prayer alone.

God, for instance, gives us many things without our asking Him, but there are certain other things that he will not give us without our asking Him — namely, our salvation. As Augustine said, "He who created us without our consent will not save us without our consent."

And why does God do this? Precisely to help us save ourselves. Man's greatest danger to his salvation is to declare his independence from God. Were everything given man without his asking, man, proud-bent as he is, would soon think himself lord and master of all things; and, puffed up with pride, he would fall from grace like Lucifer.

So important is prayer that St. Alphonsus Liguori said: "If I had only one sermon to preach in my whole life it would be on prayer" — for if you pray, you will be saved; but if you do not pray, you will certainly be lost.

We pray, therefore, not to change God's will, but to change ourselves to conform to God's will.

We pray, not to change God, but to change ourselves.

We pray, not to reveal our needs to God, but to reveal to ourselves our need for God.

Prayer opens up our hearts. Take a flower-plant, water it daily, and eventually it will blossom into a beautiful flower. Prayer is water to the heart. Water the heart daily with prayer and it too will grow and blossom like a beautiful flower. Without that water, our hearts will shrivel up, become sterile, and die to the things of God.

We should pray three times: morning, night and in times of temptation.

Don't let "saying" prayers get in the way of your praying. In the morning, all a husband has to say to his wife at breakfast is, "Good morning, honey, I love you." That would make her day. So in the morning say, "Good morning, Jesus. Thanks for the good night sleep. I offer this day to you. Be with me today." That's all.

The same with night prayers. "Thanks Jesus for the day. I'm sorry for a slip or two today (mention them). Give me a good night sleep. If I die, take me to heaven."

And when tempted, simply run to Jesus and Mary and offer a short prayer: "Jesus and Mary help me."

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RULES: ALL ENTRIES MUST BE RECEIVED BY MIDNIGHT, August 4, 1995. Random drawing of correct entries to be held August 7 by Catholic Courier Representatives. Entries must be returned by mail to: Catholic Courier, Movie Trivia, 1150 Buffalo Rd., Rochester, NY 14624-1899. Winner will be notified by mail. Prize is one year of Wegmans Video Rentals, membership is free and is required. Prize is not exchangeable for cash or other merchandise.

Question: Name the Home Alone star in the Warner Brother's movie **Richie Rich**.

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