

Sr. Alphonsa Rejoiced in Her Suffering
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Sr. Alphonsa is officially declared a Saint at Rome by Pope Benedict XVI on October 12, 2008. When a person is declared a Saint in the Catholic Church a few things get special approval in the entire Christian World. First, that the saint becomes a venerable and revered person in the entire Church. Second, the Catholic believers around the world could build places of prayer, chapels or other institutions in the saint's name as their patron. Third, people could pray to and worship the Lord through the intercession of the saint without any discriminations of creeds or religions.

We could say that a saint is recognized by her/his life as a child from the cradle. Sr. Alphonsa, who died on July 29 1946, was already respected as a saint by some of her companions in her convent and also by the people who knew her closely before her death. But the number of visitors to her grave has been constantly increasing after her death. Today not only from Kerala and from the rest of India but lakhs of people from all over the world visit her grave and offer their devotions and make prayers of intercession at her tomb.

Sr. Alphonsa who has been declared a Saint on October 12, 2008 has become the first female saint of India and the second Indian saint after Gonsalo Gracia of Vasai, Mumbai. Gracia born of Indian mother and Portuguese father had been martyred on a cross at Nagasaki in Japan in 1597 and was declared a saint by Pope Pius IX in 1862. Also Mother Teresa has been declared 'Blessed' on October 19, 2003 and the procedure of declaring her as a saint is still going on.

Sr. Alphonsa has not been a popular person in our world for the services to the poor as was Mother Teresa of Kolkata. Both were nuns of different religious Congregations in the Catholic Church. There is no resemblance or similarity of their lives too. But sometimes Sr. Alphonsa is compared with St. Therese de Lisieux of France who is known in Gujarat as Pushpavati. Like Saint Pushpavati, Sr. Alphonsa endured severe illness and suffering and lived a unique life with much sacrifice, patience and prayers. So some people call Sr. Alphonsa "Kerela's Saint Theresa of Lisieux."

Sr. Alphonsa was born on August 27, 1910 in a noble and rich family in Kudamaloor village in Kerala. But she was brought up by a foster mother since she lost her mother in her childhood. She was given name 'Annakutty' at the time of her baptism. Her foster mother was forcing Annakutty to settle in a noble and rich family by marriage as she was beautiful and attractive at the age of thirteen. But it was Annakutty's firm believe that the religious life was the all-time best for her and she would die than to get married. So she even tried to disfigure her face with burning chaff of rice and thought that her foster mother would leave her alone from the attempts to get her married.

Annakutty wanted by all means to offer herself entirely to Lord Jesus by joining one or other religious congregations. There were many famous and not so famous religious congregations in Kerala. But Annakutty, in spite of many invitations to join many famous religious congregations from her relatives, chose the religious congregation of Saint Clara (Clarist) for herself which was not so famous at that time. She entered the congregation of Saint Clara at the age of 17 years in 1927.

Annakutty, who had accepted the spirituality of Saint Francis Assisi, took the religious name of Sr. Alphonsa after her preliminary training in the congregation of Saint Clara. For one year she taught children in the Congregation's primary school, but due to the suffering from various illness, she could not continue teaching. So most of her life was confined to her convent and to her small room itself.

Sr. Alphonsa suffered also from the mental tension along with her physical illnesses. In the beginning of her illness some Sisters of her convent were accusing her of false pretence of illness without understanding her real sickness.

Sr. Alphonsa used to willingly suffer her illness and false accusations without any complaint. She used to offer herself at the foot of Lord Jesus along with all her sorrows and pains as well as her happiness. She wrote once about her sorrows, "The wheat becomes powder when we grind it and we offer the bread made of it to Jesus in the Holy Mass. The same thing is done with the grape. After putting the grapes into the machine, we offer the grape-wine to Jesus. In the same way, we become ever more better people when our griefs crush us and we offer them to Jesus." Sr. Alphonsa embraced this doctrine of life during all her illness and used to keep a smiling face while welcoming the people who visited her.

Sr. Alphonsa was generous and patient even to take upon herself other people's sorrows amidst her own illness and pains. There is one incident narrated in her biography. The Bishop of Changnachery was suffering from malaria and was not able to do his duties. With the humility of heart Sr. Alphonsa prayed to God and said: "Let your wish be fulfilled, Oh Lord. If it is your will, give me the illness of the bishop and let him be cured." As a result, Sr. Alphonsa got the fever of malaria and on the same time, the malaria fever left the bishop completely and he could attend to his duties.

Sr. Alphonsa lived the religious life of a nun for only 19 years and had to suffer various ailments most of the time. Her best virtue was that she could endure with much patience all her many illness and sorrows. She could remain joyful all time and in all circumstances. She could also behave with love both with her critics and with her admirers. She could remain calm and transparent in spite of her suffering many painful illness.

Sr. Alphonsa has not left behind any significant achievement. She has also not left any material thing as her heritage after her death. But she had submitted herself entirely into the hands of God. The Sisters of her religious congregation and the people who come to visit her commenced to think of her as a saintly person and were inspired by her transparent holiness and her spiritual life. After her death first her school children began to pray at her grave and their prayers were fruitful with her intercession. The number of all sorts of visitors to her grave grew up steadily over the years.

The fame of Sr. Alphonsa spread not only over the entire State of Kerala and in India but also all over the world. I have taken many friends who come from Gujarat to my home in Kerala to the grave of Sr. Alphonsa in Bharnangnam, Kottayam district. One can see many pilgrims from all over the world in the chapel which is built on her grave. Many miracles were registered through

her intercession. As a result, a decision was taken to declare her a saint after a lengthy investigation of her life.

The prayer of Sr. Alphonsa is helpful to understand the concept of her spirituality:

“Oh Lord Jesus, hide me in the holy wound of your Sacred Heart. Free me from my desire to be loved and to be appreciated. Keep me away from my evil ways to get recognition and fame. Make me humble till I become a little spark in the fire of love in your Sacred Heart. Give me your grace that I am able to forget myself and all the attractions and temptations of the world. Oh Jesus, sweet beyond all words, make bitter for me all worldly consolations. Oh my Jesus, sun of justice, enlightens my mind and intellect with the rays of your light. Purify my heart. Consume me by my burning love for you and make me one with you.”

The life of Sr. Alphonsa proves true a Chinese proverb which says, “Without friction a jewel cannot be made smooth and shining. Without being tested no person can become perfect.”
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