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Father Alphonse Gilbert (1921-2020): Animated by the Spirit of God for a Century

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Étienne Osty, C.S.Sp. Fr. Étienne Osty, C.S.Sp., Fr. Étienne Osty, C.S.Sp., was ordained priest on August 29 1971. His first mission was among the Kirdis of North Cameroon, 1972-1987. He was novice master in Cameroon (1988-1996). He served as member of the provincial team of France 1997-2000 after which he became vice-rector at the French Seminary in Rome.

From 2001-2004 he was novice master for the Indian Ocean Foundation and took up pastoral ministry in Reunion from 2004 to 2021.

Fr. Osty retired to France in 2021.

Translated from French by Jean-Michel Gelmetti, C.S.Sp.

FATHER ALPHONSE GILBERT (1921-2020): ANIMATED BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD FOR A CENTURY

In his final book, *Aventurier de l'Esprit Saint*," a sort of spiritual autobiography, Father Alphonse Gilbert has made the task of his biographers easier. This rereading of his life allows us to follow the unfolding of his life. He was born on September 11 1921 into a very loving and Christian family of four children in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon. His father was a fisherman, "like the apostles," he said, who worked hard during the cod-fishing season from spring until the end of September, on the banks of Newfoundland. The rest of the year, he was a carpenter "like Jesus." His mother was a kindergarten teacher.

His vocation, he says, dates back to when he was ten years old, but already at the age of seven or eight, he had established an intimate contact with the Lord through prayer. He recalls his conversations with Jesus on Sundays when he accompanied his father to Sunday Mass. At twelve years of age, he obtained permission from his parents to leave the archipelago for France and to enter a minor seminary in order to become a priest.

He arrived at the Spiritan school of Cellule in the Puyde-Dôme, Auvergne region of France. It was a huge shock for this young boy. The priests maintained a strict distance from the students, addressing him as "Mr. Gilbert." The very rigid life in this little seminary weighed on him enormously, all the more so because without a family in France, he had to remain there during vacation time. Fortunately, he was a gifted student. Every week a letter from his parents provided him with solace in his emotional solitude. At the end of three years, after eighth grade, he returned to his native island for a holiday.

Following the holiday, on his return journey to France, so as not to burden the family budget, he travelled on the boat of Father Yvon, a Breton Capuchin and chaplain to fishermen. He paid the fare for the trip himself. Thus began a great adventure and a beautiful friendship with this Capuchin whom he would meet up with again some twenty years later in Canada.

His last years in the minor seminary of Cellule were less daunting for him. He grew up and became accustomed to the harsh regime of a minor seminary of that time. Sports, par-

in an intimate way, as he said, the first person of the Holy Trinity, God the Father.

ticularly basketball, and later tennis, helped him to remain healthy.

With his baccalaureate in his pocket, he wanted to be a missionary like the priests of his island. He chose to become a Spiritan and, in 1940, was admitted to the Spiritan novitiate, which, He came to know because of the war, was situated in Piré-sur-Seiche, near Rennes, the birthplace of Claude Poullart des Places. They had to share the house with German soldiers, although they were already overcrowded with ninety-five novices.

> Even if it was surprising to him during his novitiate year, he came to know in an intimate way, as he said, the first person of the Holy Trinity, God the Father. He also discovered Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, thanks to a pamphlet written by Fr. Liagre. This reading attenuated the rigidity of the teachings on hell and purgatory during the first so-called "conversion retreat" of the novi-

> > tiate. He already discovered there how to live under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit. On September 29 1940, he took temporary vows in the Congregation of the

Holy Spirit.

Alphonse then followed a course of philosophy at Langonnet in Brittany followed by his entry into the Senior Scholasticate of Chevilly-Larue near Paris. There, he injured his foot one day while playing basketball. The infection worsened, and he was confined to bed for several months without any improvement. One of his

friends, Paul Libman, secretly applied to the wound a relic of Father Brottier, who had died in the odor

of sanctity in Auteuil a few years earlier. Alphonse found himself healed almost instantly and recognized Brottier as a miracle worker. His devotion to Fr. Brottier dates from this period, and he would later become postulator for his beatification.

To escape the CLS (Compulsory Labor Service) established by the Vichy regime and the Germans, he left Chevilly and became a tutor for a time to a family in the North of France. After the liberation, he returned to Chevilly. He was ordained a priest there at twenty-four years of age on July 8 1945. No family member was able to attend from St. Pierre et Miquelon. His two brothers, then soldiers in the French army, arrived the following day.

The return to his island on a fishing boat the Duguay-Trouin was quite incredible, with a passage through Gibraltar where the authorities imprisoned him for a while. On release, he enjoyed



Fr. Alphonse Gilbert, C.S.Sp., 1921-2020.

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two months fishing every day for tuna off the coast of Newfoundland. Finally, he returned to Saint Pierre on a smaller boat, the Joseph Duhamel and was reunited with his family. His first mass in Saint-Pierre was a moment of great celebration. He would even hear his father's confession and have the boat's crew participate in the family's joy. His way of living the priesthood was greatly influenced by this boating experience. The Holy Spirit inspired his future pastoral method, which he summarized as follows, "First of all, to love those around me, to go towards them, and to know them personally ... to be close to them and to be good to one another."

His first appointment was a great disappointment. He dreamed of Africa but was appointed to Saint Alexander College in Ottawa instead as a professor and spiritual director. There he taught French literature, Latin, and Greek for fifteen years; he became a purist of the French language, as his numerous publications testify. He played many sports with the students and was involved in other ministries with the scouts and the YCS (Young Catholic Students). He found himself entrusted with a mission to the Algonquin, the aboriginal people of Canada, west of Quebec, whom he joined on weekends and at vacation-time.

THE CALL TO MISSION IN GUINEA-CONAKRY

After fifteen years in Canada Alphonse welcomed a change. The Spiritan Superior General was looking for a missionary to travel to Guinea-Conakry where all schools and seminaries were nationalized by President Sékou Touré. He needed a volunteer with experience as an educator, who would be able to open a semi-clandestine seminary and teach there at all levels. Alphonse felt that this call was for him. First, he had to obtain permission from his provincial that took quite some time. At that point, he experienced what the spiritual writers call "the dark night of the soul." For some time, he, who loved to pray so much, and for whom prayer was usually easy, no longer felt the presence of God. This was a time of great desolation for him. Fortunately, reading a book by Ruysbroeck,3 which he found by chance on the shelves of the community's small library, he came to understand what he was experiencing: definitive union with the Lord. This discovery enlightened him and brought him great peace. He was able to leave for Africa and arrived in Conakry in December 1961.

In Guinea, he spent the first three months resident in a large parish in Conakry, the capital. He began, with Fr. Richard Fowler, a Guinean priest, to study Soussou⁴ and to learn the habits and customs of the Guinean people. Following his six months of orientation, he then

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went on to become director of the minor seminary at Kindia where he would serve for six happy years. What an adventure! He had to start all over again from scratch, without any teaching material. Little by little, the former seminarians returned. He developed a fraternal life with them in the seminary and a short time later priests from the Vendée region of France joined him.

He never punished the students, but after an argument, he sent them back to church to take time to listen to Jesus and in the evening to ask forgiveness before going to sleep. Among his pupils was the future Cardinal Robert Sarah who wrote the preface to his last book. It was by chance that, later in life, he found out that his political science course had become the approved text for all middle and high schools in the Republic of Guinea.

In May 1962, Father Tchidimbo, administrator of the diocese since the expulsion of Bishop de Milleville in 1961, was ordained bishop. Then, in the fall, the Second Vatican Council began in which the bishop participated and which strengthened ties between Guinea and the universal Church. However, relations were gradually deteriorating between the bishop and the president who wanted the bishop to align himself with his party's directives. The bishop tried to collaborate as far as possible with the government, but this did not appease Sékou Touré who expelled all non-African missionaries from the country on May 31, 1967. No less than forty-eight Spiritans, thirty White Fathers, fifty-five nuns and twelve pastors had to leave Guinean soil. A very moving scene during this departure happened when the pastor of Kindia, who until then had shown Alphonse only haughty contempt, came to ask his forgiveness. The bishop, falsely accused of conspiracy, was arrested in 1970. He was humiliated and tortured before spending nine years in prison in Camp Boiro.

After three days spent in Lourdes with his confreres to heal the wounds of the expulsion, Alphonse, who belonged to the Spiritan province of Canada, received permission to spend some time with his family. Then his superior sent him for studies to the Institute of Formative Spirituality founded by Fr. Adrian Van Kaam⁵ at the Spiritan University in Pittsburgh, USA. Unfortunately, he could only stay there for a few months, as the Superior General needed him to help with an emergency in Haiti.

ON MISSION IN HAITI, BELGIUM, AND FRANCE

Alphonse arrived at the Collège Saint Martial in Port-au-Prince where the school year was already underway. Here again he was Here again he was a teacher and spiritual director. a teacher and spiritual director. He also visited the shantytowns where extreme poverty reigned and made friends. He would stay only for a short time. As in Guinea a year earlier, he had to leave in solidarity with his confreres expelled by the president of the country, "Papa Doc" Duvalier. This was another terrible uprooting for him!

The new Superior General, Joseph Lécuyer, sent him to Gentinnes, Belgium, where the Spiritan apostolic school has just closed and where, with his Belgian confreres, he opened a new center of spirituality. During this year, he learned of the death of his mother on June 22 1969. A few months later the sad news reached him that his father had died on January 16 1970. He was unable to attend either funeral.

In the summer of 1970, the French provincial invited him to preach the month of preparation for perpetual vows at Piré-sur-Seiche to young Spiritans preparing for the diaconate. Following this retreat he was appointed director of the theological scholasticate at Chevilly-Larue. This invitation greatly surprised him, as he was little known by the French conferers.

The Senior Scholasticate at Chevilly-Larue had become the "Consortium of Missionary Studies" at the service of Spiritan students, the Foreign Missions of Paris, the African Missions of Lyon, as well as religious sisters and some lay people. It served about one hundred and thirty students. Fr. Alphonse spent five years there from 1970 to 1975. I knew him and lived with him during my last two years as a student before my first appointment to North Cameroon in 1972. In that year he met Pierre Goursat, and a beautiful collaboration was born that brought about the foundation and development of the Emmanuel community.⁸

Superior
of the
Generalate
community
in Clivo
di Cinna,
Rome.

TO ROME

In 1975, Alphonse became Superior of the Generalate community in Clivo di Cinna, Rome. Six years later, he was appointed Director of the Center for Spiritan Research and Studies, where he would remain until 1988. During that time, he published *Tu as mis sur moi ta main*⁹ which proved very popular. This presentation of Libermann quotations associated with particular periods of his life, was a simple handout translated into several languages which, like most of his publications, became bedside reading for many Spiritans. In 1990, he took to writing again. This time it was a book to make known to the Foundation *Apprentis d'Auteuil* the source of Blessed Daniel Brottier's spirituality, *Dieu est tout, François Libermann*. In 1985, the work was supplemented and developed for the general public by another publica-

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Claude François Poullart des Places, publishing his writings in a critical edition through the Spiritan Center. The Center continued the publication of the Cahiers Spiritains (twenty-two issues) and Spiritans Today (five issues), so valuable at the time for the formation of young Spiritans. During his Roman years, Gilbert traveled extensively to Spiritan communities throughout the world to provide animation, especially through retreat work. I had the opportunity to meet him in Yaoundé for a retreat on the Holy Spirit. On that occasion, he came to visit the missions of North Cameroon and my mission in Mokong. He slept there one night. The mission was built in the middle of large granite rocks. In the early morning, he said to me, "Jesus would surely have liked to pray in your rocks!" He himself had got up early

tion, Le feu sur la terre.11 One can regret, along with Paul Coulon,12

that Alphonse did not rigorously follow the historical method in his

work. Nevertheless, his simple and pleasant writings on Libermann were a welcome change from the usually austere way in which Liber-

mann was presented in works such as Coulon's books on Libermann

phonse collaborated with another Spiritan scholar, Fr. Joseph Lécuyer,

the former Superior General, who specialized in study on our founder

and Poullart des Places, 13 or those of Fr. Christian de Mare. 14 Al-

antidote from a pagan Indian guru saved his life.

Alphonse was also admired during his time in Rome, particularly in Via Tito Livio, a parish served by Spiritans. He favored a good balance between work, spirituality and sport, tennis in particular. His ability to pray in all circumstances helped him cope with life's challenges. He once said that he lived "what the mystics call a definitive union with God ... One experiences an incredible inner strength, certainty, and serenity." In 1988, he was appointed Director of the Daniel Brottier Spirituality Center at Orphelins Apprentis d'Auteuil in Paris. Before that, en route from Rome, he had the great joy of spending five months in the Holy Land following in the footsteps of Jesus.

to pray there. I interpreted these words as an invitation for me to pray more. He shared with me many adventures of his travels. He recount-

ed, on a mission to Zambia, how he was bitten by a tarantula. The

Alphonse was Director of Pastoral Animation in Auteuil. In 1990, he wrote a 600-page book on the life and mission of Father Brottier, *En confiance, Daniel Brottier*. As postulator for the cause of Brottier's beatification, he processed the miracle culminating in Brottier's beatification on November 25, 1984. Alphonse is one of the best interpreters of Fr. Brottier, particularly on how he was influenced

His ability to pray in all circumstances helped him cope with life's challenges.

Director of Pastoral Animation in Auteuil. by the spirituality of Father Libermann and that of Thérèse of Lisieux. Brottier was convinced that it was Libermann and Thérèse who protected him for more than four years during the Great War when he was a volunteer military chaplain.

In 2000, Alphonse published another book for the general public on the blessed, *Le bienheureux Daniel Brottier*.¹⁷ Later, in 2003, his popular retreat with Brottier was published, *Prier quinze jours avec Daniel Brottier*.¹⁸ Here we can see some facets of the impressive holiness of this Servant of God reflecting the essential aspects of his way of apostolic holiness. In each of these facets chosen for these fifteen days of prayer, Alphonse could recognize himself and apply them to himself.

From 1995 to 2002, Alphonse was again in Rome as spiritual director at the French Seminary, Procurator of the French Bishops to the Holy See, and Postulator of several causes of saints. In 2000-2001, I had the opportunity to spend a year with him there. I was able to see how much at home he was in Rome, knowing many people and speaking "Italian better than many Italians themselves," according to the seminary housekeepers.

In 2002, he returned to France as chaplain of Maison Africa at Nogent sur Marne (Retreat House of the Spiritan Sisters and some Spiritans). In 2008, he returned to Chevilly to retire. In 2013, he published a book on the Holy Spirit, *Animés par l'Esprit de Dieu*. This is a synthesis of his teachings given during his numerous retreats in some forty countries. On the back cover, we read,

"All who are led by the Holy Spirit are sons of God" (Rom 8:14). This phrase of Saint Paul seduced Father Alphonse Gilbert from the beginning of his religious life and placed his apostolate under the sign of life in the Spirit, left as an inheritance by Christ. Who is the Holy Spirit? What is his nature and his role in the Trinity? How does he act in our lives or how can we let him act? Since he makes us sons of God, it is crucial, if not vital, to get to know him in order to listen to him on our way to the Father. This book, the fruit of a rich personal and apostolic experience, allows us to better understand the reality of the Holy Spirit and gives us the keys to let him do his work in our lives. 19

In 2016, his last book, *Aventurier de l'Esprit Saint*²⁰ tells his life story. We would have liked our confrère, Alphonse Gilbert, to become a centenarian. The Good Lord decided otherwise. All the same, it was

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He was a spoiled child of the Good Lord. a long and rich life of almost ninety-nine years ending with a quiet departure on the night of July 20 2020.

What can we say about such a man who so often revealed himself through his teachings and in his books? What memory should I keep of the man who was my seminary director until my ordination to the priesthood? I will sum it up in one sentence, Alphonse was a spoiled child of the Good Lord, favored in abundance by the graces of God, and one who knew how to respond to those graces.

He was a spoiled child of the Good Lord! First by his Christian family, neither rich nor poor, but loving and united. This modest but very protective family environment allowed him that priceless gift, to experience God from his earliest childhood. He would know the affection of his parents, his father in particular, but also that of his brothers and especially of his sister, whose death at the age of eleven was an immense family trauma. His was a childhood spoiled by the Good Lord also by the simple and careful education he received in his family, in his school, and in his parish where the priests lived closely with their little flock.

He was a spoiled child of the Good Lord still by his intelligence and the culture he developed in himself from his youth and throughout his life. Alphonse was a cultured man, with a very faithful memory. He knew many poems by heart since his time as a professor of literature but probably before that, since his high school years. His was a prodigious memory in everyday life as well. Many marveled at his ability, from the first day of the new school year, to spot and remember the names of all the new seminarians who had just arrived. He became fluent in English and Italian, which proved invaluable in preaching retreats in English-speaking countries.

He was a spoiled child of the Good Lord blest with a very fine artistic sense. In Canada, he was familiar with many artists, poets, and singers such as Félix Leclerc. In Paris, at the Théâtre de la Ville in 1971, he brought a group to a Gilles Vigneault concert. He had also written plays and acted himself and, despite his weak voice, he had an extraordinary presence in front of the public and knew how to capture the attention of his listeners in his speeches and his homilies.

He was a spoiled child of the Good Lord again and especially as far as his life as a religious priest and Spiritan missionary was concerned. Like everyone else, he went through various stages, first as a simple teacher, then as director of minor and major seminaries without any specific formation that I know of for these difficult functions. How was he able to do this? How could he become a preacher appre-

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ciated by those who attended his many conferences and retreats? How was he able to do all this? How could he become the much sought after counsellor of priests and seminarians? It may seem incredible to us today. It is true that Alphonse was an organized man. In addition, he had an enormous capacity for work and a healthy lifestyle, especially through sports. One of my confreres, then twenty-five years old, sometimes played tennis at Chevilly with Alphonse who was already in his fifties. He told me that he had never managed to beat him.

He was a spoiled child of the Good Lord in his multiple and varied relationships. He had the gift of empathy and was capable of compassion in the face of human suffering and misery, remaining positive in the most difficult of circumstances. That was particularly so when he had to leave the poor Guineans and Haitians with the expulsion of the missionaries in 1967-68.

On his appointment to the work of Auteuil in 1988, He told Fr. Jean Savoie, "Be careful because I am someone who takes up a lot of space!" This meant that when he got involved in something, he went all the way and that was likely to cause difficulties for others. In Auteuil, he knew how to give the Spirituality Center its true pastoral dimension enabling it to evolve and prove amenable to the entire staff. Fr. Savoie told me that this probably saved the work of Auteuil at a time of great tension.

He was a spoiled child of the good Lord by his ability to wonder about the beauty of things, people, and events. During my ordination to the diaconate in Chevilly, I can still hear him say to my father, "Mr. Osty, you too are a saint." My aunt, my mother's sister, who did not like my father very much, said, pointing to my mother, "Oh no, not him, she is!" We still laugh as a family about this episode.

During a retreat in Yaoundé, I can still hear the superior tell me that he liked the retreat Alphonse preached to the community, but that he had praised us too much due to his admiration for the missionaries in the field. Some may have thought that he was babbling or boasting when he spoke of his encounters with God the Father during his novitiate or when he said that he was living in the night of the Spirit or that he had entered into the unitive way of which spiritual writers speak. I think he rather possessed the naivety of the village idiot, which allowed him to remember and keep in mind only the positive aspect of things. We will only know the full truth in eternity. Perhaps it was the effect of that childlike simplicity which he admired so much in St. Thérèse of Lisieux that sustained him during his long life.

As a young man, Alphonse had given his life to God, and he never took back his promise.

He was

a beautiful soul.

However, I believe that the secret of his life is simpler than that and lies elsewhere. As a young man, Alphonse had given his life to God, and he never took back his promise. God accepted this gift and refined throughout his life this arrow of choice that goes straight to the point without deviation. He had a faith anchored in his body without ever letting the slightest doubt show through. The secret of his life lies there. He lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as he often said. As a Spiritan, he had consecrated himself to the Holy Spirit. He lived his life in abandonment to this Holy Spirit, as the founders of his congregation, Poullart des Places and Libermann, whom he knew well, had known how to do. He lived his life in intimacy with Jesus joining with him in daily prayer and in trusting obedience to the Father. He was therefore able to show great freedom in all aspects of his life. Probably this is why he was the man of wise counsel for others; able to listen to everyone in confidence, even the most wounded of people, able to accompany many people. The Lord had given him the gift of discernment. He inspired confidence in those who met him, and his presence brought calm to troubled souls. It is relatively easy to talk about these qualities, but harder to live them on a day-to-day basis. Although sometimes misunderstood, he was not offended. Like every disciple of Christ, it was through the cross that he reached union with his God; but he never lacked grace.

Two testimonials conclude this tribute to Fr. Alphonse Gilbert, C.S.Sp. The first coming from André Revert, a former student of Saint-Alexandre in Canada. He wrote, "I had seen in Alphonse Gilbert, a mentor, a beacon of light that was both brilliant and soothing, an inspiring being, so balanced and complete on the intellectual, spiritual, moral, social, artistic, and athletic levels. His memory will long live on in the hearts of the people who met him at some point in their lives." The final testimony comes from one of my Spiritan confrères from Reunion Island. On learning the news of his death, he wrote, "He was a beautiful soul. I visited him every vacation. I interviewed him many times. He had a way of being, as if he was always accompanied. He was more than just his books."

Étienne Osty, C.S.Sp. Chevilly, Paris.

ENDNOTES

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- It is probably Fr. Liagre's pamphlet, Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus et le Vénérable Libermann, a lecture given on 02/02/1926 at the Abbaye-Blanche de Mortain.
- Ruysbroeck, Jan van. Les noces spirituelles. Begrolles-en-Mauges, Bellefontaine Éditions, 1933.
- 4. Soussou, a language spoken in West Africa, Sierra Leone and Maritime Guinea.
- 5. Adrien Van Kaam (1920-2007), Dutch Spiritan priest, a specialist in spirituality.
- Francis Duvalier (1907-1971), nicknamed "Papa Doc," President of the Republic of Haiti from 1957 to 1971.
- Joseph Lécuyer, theologian at the Second Vatican Council. Succeeded Archbishop Lefèbvre as Superior General in 1968.
- 8. The Emmanuel Community is an international public association of the faithful of Pontifical Right, born from a prayer group founded in 1972. The spirituality offered to members is founded on Eucharistic adoration, compassion, and evangelization.
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- 17.______. Le bienheureux Daniel Brottier. Sarment Fayard, 2000.
- 18. ______. Prier Quinze jours avec Daniel Brottier. Paris. Nouvelle Cité, 2003.
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