

St Aloysius Gonzaga, an Example of Living Out the First Commandment

Fr Vincent Miceli, in his book “The Gods of Atheism,” points out that the first commandment does *not* say: Thou shalt not be an atheist. It *does* say: I am the Lord your God, you shall not have false gods before Me. Man always seeks some sort of god, some sort of supreme being, but all too often not the actual God. In our times, man himself, or even the individual person, is considered god. This is the new humanism and it has crept into the human dimension of the Church as well, both in “theory” or belief and in practice. Modern atheists do not have so much a lack of belief in God as they do a hatred or resentment of God, seeking to condemn Him through scorn, ridicule, and mockery. This is becoming more and more manifest, as, for example, with the opening ceremonies of the Olympics in Paris. Mass-attending Catholics have to be careful not to think that this applies to others and not to themselves. Sexual immorality (cohabitation, contraception, acceptance of same-sex acts and transgenderism) is about as rampant amongst so-called Catholics as it is in the general population. Very few really believe in and accept the Church as our Lord created it, considering themselves instead as the supreme arbiters in the Church. Any time a person places judgement on what God has revealed and teaches definitively in and through His Church, they reject the first commandment, they make themselves God, they engage in the new humanism, and they set themselves on the path to perdition, taking others with them.

What is it like to love God first and foremost with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. Because of original sin, it can be hard to even know. We need examples, examples to imitate, yes, but not just to merely mimic but also to really think about and let settle in our minds so as to live out the first commandment at every moment of every day. This is the path to Heaven. What is the interiority, the mindset, the thinking and motivation like of someone who has perfected the first commandment? Of course, our Lord comes to our aid here with the lives of His saints. One of those saints is St Aloysius Gonzaga, whose memorial is in June. St Aloysius was born in 1568 in Italy. He joined the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) but never reached ordination because of his early death. A plague had broken out in Rome and St Aloysius chose to serve and care for those who were afflicted with the plague. He eventually contracted the plague himself and died at the age of 23. During his illness, he wrote the following letter to his mom, which reflects well his interior “disposition:”

May the comfort and grace of the Holy Spirit be yours forever, most honored lady. Your letter found me lingering still in this region of the dead, but now I must rouse myself to make my way on to heaven at last and to praise God for ever in the land of the living; indeed I had hoped that before this time my journey there would have been over. If charity, as Saint Paul says, means to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who are glad, then, dearest mother, you shall rejoice exceedingly that God in his grace and his love for you is showing me the path to true happiness, and assuring me that I shall never lose him.

God is calling me to eternal rest; his voice from heaven invites me to the infinite bliss I have sought so languidly, and promises me this reward for the tears I have so seldom shed [St Aloysius was a mystic; our Lord himself appeared to him].

And our parting will not be for long; we shall see each other again in heaven; we shall be united with our Savior; there we shall praise him with heart and soul, sing of his mercies forever, and enjoy eternal happiness. When he takes away what he once lent us, his purpose is to store our treasure elsewhere more safely and bestow on us those very blessings that we ourselves would most choose to have.

I write all this with the one desire that you and all my family may consider my departure a joy and favor and that you especially may speed with a mother’s blessing my passage across the waters till I reach the shore to which all hopes belong. I write the more willingly because I have no clearer way of expressing the love and respect I owe you as your son.

“Lingering still in this region of the dead.” Notice that St Aloysius’ mindset, the truth that he has embraced and that has freed him from all encumberments, one that comes from God, is that *this* life and this world is the region of the dead. How contrary this is to our common way of thinking. It is what we are meant to develop. It won’t happen all at once. **It begins by first choosing not to just dismiss this as “not for me,” or “well it**

might be ok for somebody else, but this is what I like.” This is for everybody who wants to love the Lord. This true belief, true understanding, true freedom, is something a person has to have in order to enter Heaven. Perhaps it seems strange and peculiar at first; maybe I say: I don’t know how to arrive at it or maybe I ask myself if such a thing is really possible. There might be many more thoughts and questions that pass through my mind as I really begin to think about the true understanding exemplified and articulated by St Aloysius. All of that is just fine; but notice that these thoughts and questions are very different than someone simply turning up their nose about and rejecting it outright, which is rejection of the truth revealed by God Himself. To reject true belief is to reject our Lord. “Why do you say Lord, Lord and yet your hearts are far from Me?” Just by pondering the very question – how do I attain that, for example – a person has already taken the first step towards arriving at the mentality that leads to their perfection, to becoming what and how they are meant to be.

Notice the sense of eagerness for leaving this life so as to be able to finally see the ultimate good, God, face-to-face. He does not have a hatred of this life, not by any means. He is more like a young child who is on the way to some very exciting place for the first time – a zoo maybe, or an amusement park. They do not hate their own home (St Aloysius did not hate this life or this world); it is rather that they are looking forward to seeing something even more magnificent. This eager anticipation runs throughout St Aloysius’ letter to his mother. He goes so far as to tell his mom that she should rejoice for him – he is telling her to rejoice at his death. Continuing with the little analogy, it would be like the child telling his mom to be happy when he gets to the zoo or the amusement park, even though she won’t be with him, at least not right away, but that she can certainly come if she chooses to do so. Notice too that his love of God certainly does not preclude love of his mom; no, very much the opposite is true. It enhances, purifies, his love of his mom, so much so that he is offering her genuine comfort while he himself is the one dying – a complete absence of any self-interest.

If a person gets past outright rejection of St Aloysius’ description of his own interior, the next question will be: how do I even begin to develop this. I will mention only a couple of broad things. First, if you’d like to read more about St Aloysius and his interior life, Fr John Hardon provides an excellent biography centered on precisely that. It is available here, online: <https://hardonsj.org/life-saint-alloysius-gonzaga/>. Secondly, it is the usual means of sanctification that lead us to it, something we have spoken about over and over again. But most of all, I want to emphasize here that an essential part, we could even say the main part, is choosing to reject temptation and correct my thinking in everyday life. We could practice all kinds of devotions – and we should, and those will be helpful – but if we leave out the hard work of catching my thoughts and motives in everyday life and then choosing to change them, it will be like rain falling on a tent over grass; the life-giving water is there but it never reaches the grass under the tent; the grace will be there for us, but we never make use of it or never allow it to really penetrate us. As just a simple example to help illustrate the meaning of “catching and changing my everyday (habitual) thoughts” – suppose I really start paying attention to times when I experience intense anger or irritation or frustration. And then I ask myself, why did that happen, what was really going through my mind at that time? (Incidentally, this takes real effort.) With rigorous honesty, brought about by the desire to experience the real freedom that St Aloysius had, what I might find (and in fact will *likely* find) is that I desired something of this life and this world too much. I treated it (i.e., thought of it as), or clung to it as, life itself. But what (i.e., who) is *really* life itself? Of course, *only* God, only our Lord. Ah, I say, yes it was/is an idol for me. I will change that. There is great progress in that realization. I can, for one thing, take it to Confession, which will help get rid of it. But then I also have to say: I’m going to watch and catch myself from now on so as to form the habit (which takes time) of not allowing that motive to dominate me, but rather live by a greater and higher motive (this is a firm purpose of amendment). Now I might be tempted to say: but if I do that, I won’t get my way. In a sense that’s true. You probably won’t “get your way” relative to your worldly desires. But what will happen is that your desires will change; and for something that is already yours for the having, if only you seek it. That is to say, you *will* “get your way,” not because your current worldly desires have been fulfilled, but rather because your desires have changed. Love of God is the reparation needed in our world today. Will you huddle closely to the Lord in order to make up for the many offenses committed against Him?

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.