

# ST. JOHN OF GOD

The Champion of Charity

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest oppressions besetting man today is materialism. Man is more than a mere material being, he has a spirit, a soul, and this elevates him to a plane where mere materialism, devoid of the noble ideals of religion, degrades him to nothing more than the level of the animal.

Man looks for something more uplifting than the "good life", for his spirit must be satisfied in order to make him a fully integrated being. Many have learned to their sorrow that material comforts do not fully satisfy them and often bring about a void in their lives which craves to be filled.

Young people especially often search for heroes with whom they can identify. They are not always wise in the choice of those they emulate or admire. But man needs heroes to admire, it is part of his psychic make-up.

The Church holds up to us, as concrete examples of how sanctity is possible, her own great heroes. We call them, the saints.

A paradox of Christianity is that its heroes are chosen, not for learning, science, bravery or art, as the world chooses its heroes, but for one thing alone - holiness. The saints have had all the above mentioned attributes, but it was precisely because they practised heroic sanctity that they became saints.

St. John of God's life story merits special attention today when psychoanalysis can be used to discover and discuss the troubled depth of the human spirit. These days, mankind is seeking new heroes, men and women it can identify with. John of God is a man from the past, but his influence is as vital in the world today as it was four centuries ago. He was such a human man, so much like us in many ways, he suffered greatly and his sufferings were both mental and physical. John overcame his anguish and trials by bearing them manfully, not like a stoic, but in unison with the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

The story of John of God is one of the glories of the Church of the Counter-Reformation. A loyal son of the Church, he never questioned the teaching authority of the Pope or bishops. He possessed the insight to see his own shortcomings and sought the means to overcome them. He brought glory to the Church at a time when half of Europe became estranged from it. He did this, not by scholarship, preaching or teaching, but by giving his life totally to following in the footsteps of Christ the Good Samaritan. His life is relevant today because it helps to more clearly and happily discern the splendour of humanity.

John of God did not live a life of mere humanism or naturalism, he was not just a 'do-gooder'. He saw Jesus Christ in the person of those he served. He served God and humanity simultaneously, seeing one in the other. This put him in a different sphere to the mere humanist, it made him a Christian humanist and that made all the difference.

## 1—OBSCURE ORIGIN

Often the lives of saints devote much space to the circumstances of the birth and childhood of their subjects. St. John of God is a notable exception, for many simple questions remain unanswered when his origin is investigated.

John was born in 1495 in the little Portuguese town of Montemor O Novo, to humble peasants, Andrew and Teresa Cidade. Apart from that, little more is known of his early childhood until the age of eight. Then an extraordinary event occurred. A pilgrim, some say a priest, visited the town and stayed overnight as a guest of the Cidades. The next morning he left for Spain and took the young Cidade boy with him. This episode is shrouded in mystery, and in spite of much conjecture, has to be left at that.

We next hear of young John Cidade at Oropesa in Spain, where he was adopted by a good Christian man named Francisco Cid Mayoral. This kind man was of some means, being the overseer of the flocks of don Juan Ferruz, captain of the troops of Count Francisco Alvarez of Oropesa.

The circumstances which prompted Mayoral to adopt the boy are also not known. Did John "spin him a yarn" about being an orphan or abandoned? Such a conjecture would certainly throw grave misgivings on the boy's home-

life and upbringing. Again the mystery persists. Whatever the circumstances, Mayoral was impressed by the little boy from Portugal and became his protector and patron.

Young Cidade studied his school lessons at home with Mayoral's only other child, a daughter. But John was more inclined by nature to an outdoors life rather than to study. When his formal schooling ended, Mayoral allowed him to attend the flocks. Already in his late adolescence, John was content to be a shepherd. He loved life in the open air, it was uncomplicated, healthy and peaceful. As Mayoral's adopted son he had security, yet in spite of this he showed little ambition to take on Mayoral's responsibilities. He also showed little interest in taking a wife and raising a family. This worried the good Mayoral who nurtured the desire that his daughter might one day become John's wife.

The young shepherd was to know many happy years in the Mayoral household, and in the solitude of the Toledo hills and the company of his flocks, he grew to manhood. Like that other shepherd David, John was close to nature, close to God. Like David, the shepherd of Oropesa would one day have to leave his flocks to take up the sword. Like David he would lose his innocence. And like him, he would repent.

### **Soldier of Spain**

Spain and France were at war and Emperor Charles V commanded his nobles to give him troops to fight the French in Navarre. The Count of Oropesa instructed Captain Ferruz to recruit his men. John Cidade was drafted into the army and marched north with the Oropesan regiment.

The war in Navarre had already been in progress for two years and the tide of battle had turned in favour of the Spaniards who were driving the French back over the Pyrenees.

The twenty years spent in the Christian environment of Mayoral's home had protected Cidade, who, while not being overtly religious, was at least dutiful in fulfilling his religious obligations. Removed from this wholesome atmosphere his spiritual decline was rapid.

Army life opened up an entirely new world of experience to John Cidade. At the moment the fruit of his newly-found freedom seemed sweet to him, but he was soon to discover how quickly it would turn bitter. In later life he would remember his military days with sorrow for the offences he committed against God. But for the moment, sinner he was, and small wonder when his companions were so morally lax.

Although Cidade had neglected his religious duties, he had not lost his faith. This seems to have undergone an eclipse at this time, but it is quite evident that it was not far away when danger presented itself. This danger came, not from the enemy, but from his own companions.

A great deal of loot captured from the French was stored in a special compound. Cidade was assigned to guard-duty of the booty. Somehow, during the night the booty was stolen. Whatever the cause, asleep on duty or negligence, the guard was held responsible for the loss. The officer in charge was furious and sentenced the sentry to death there and then.

As Cidade stood with the noose about his neck a higher ranking officer rode up and enquired into the matter. Sensing that an injustice had been perpetrated, he ordered the condemned sentry to be released and commuted the death sentence to instant dismissal from the army.

Chastened by his close encounter with death, John Cidade's thoughts turned to happier days. Life at Oropesa did not seem so bad after all. There he had peace of mind and soul. There he had a family that loved him. In the army John had found disgrace. In his disgrace he had found peace once more with God.

Returning to Oropesa, John was welcomed home by Mayoral and for a further eight years, resumed his work as a shepherd. We are now in the year 1532 and Cidade is thirty-eight years of age. Charles V. was about to set out on a crusade against the Turks who had invaded Europe as far as the gates of Vienna.

The question of marriage with Mayoral's daughter was no longer an issue and John was free to do as he willed. The situation was far different since his sorry attempt at soldiering eight years previously. Again he enlisted in the regiment of the Count of Oropesa and went off to the war in Austria.

The decisive battle which won victory for the Christian forces took place on 25th September, 1532. It lasted for only one day and the Turks were forced to withdraw from Europe utterly defeated. Charles V. reviewed his victorious troops in Vienna the following day. Among those on parade was John Cidade. The Oropesan regiment marched

overland to Flanders and then took ship to La Coruna in the north-west of Spain. Here they were disbanded and John Cidade decided that he would not return to Oropesa but make a pilgrimage to the famous shrine of Santiago of Compostela.

### **Spiritual Awakening**

At Compostela, John made his confession and received Holy Communion. He had reached a stage when his religion began to assume a larger dimension in his life. No longer would he take his faith for granted for he was beginning to realise that Christianity meant far more than simply calling oneself a Christian: it meant the actual following of Jesus Christ. This spiritual awakening resulted in an awareness and concern for others. He was beginning to show traits of that characteristic generosity which will develop and become more evident later on.

It was at Compostella that John decided to visit Montemor O Novo, the village of his birth. Leaving the shrine of Santiago, he followed the road through two-thirds of the Kingdom of Portugal and arrived at his destination in the middle of summer. During the journey he had plenty of time to contemplate what he had seen over the past year. He detested the horrors of war and the misery of the poor and sick people he encountered in the towns he had visited moved him as much as the victims of the war.

All these experiences were stirring his conscience and were enkindling that concern which would eventually become active when he would come to realise his vocation in life.

At Montemor O Novo he enquired about his parents. The only surviving member of his family was an old uncle, Alphonsus Duarte, brother of John's mother. The old man told John that soon after his disappearance from home as a child, his mother was overcome with a terrible depression and shortly died. After his wife's death, Andrew Cidade went to Lisbon in search of his small son. He finally entered the Order of St. Francis as a lay brother and died a holy death. His parents' tragedy haunted John for the rest of his days. In an agony of remorse he decided to spend his life doing penance for his sins.

### **Worker in Africa**

John Cidade was still very restless. He left Portugal and went to Gibraltar. On the way, he stayed some time to help at a hostel for sick travellers at Ayamonte. If John had already expressed some sentiments of sympathy and compassion for the poor and sick, as indeed he did at Compostella and Ayamonte, such manifestations were simply the expression of a tender heart open to compassion. It was a natural compassion, yet to be fired and charged with the supernatural love which will result in his eventual vocation. At this time Cidade was confused. He sensed the sufferings of the underprivileged, yet did not know what he could do for them. He had still a long way to go to resolve his own personal problems before he would be in any position to help others.

In 1535, John Cidade crossed the narrow Strait of Gibraltar and disembarked at the fortified Portuguese town of Ceuta. Although Ceuta was a Portuguese colony, it had none of the attractions or glamour of Portugal's other colonies in the Indies or Brazil. This North African outpost had nothing to attract the free settler. It was a fortress and base to protect the home waters. Because of its situation, Ceuta was a very convenient penal colony for the deportation of criminals.

At Ceuta, John met an exiled Portuguese nobleman. This gentleman was sent into exile with his wife and four daughters by the king. This family was destitute and the father was too ill to work for his wife and daughters. John Cidade took pity on them and decided to support them.

John took work as a labourer on the city's fortifications. Conditions were terrible and the cruel overseers made little distinction between the freemen, convicts and slaves, who worked upon the moat and wall of Ceuta.

In 1538 John was overjoyed to see the exiled noble family pardoned by the king and return to their homeland. He also was only too happy to quit this terrible place and made directly for Gibraltar.

Cidade was now forty-three, he was bearded and burned by the African sun. Tall and strong in physique he had nothing but his uncrushable energy to maintain himself. For a while he took work on the docks and various labouring jobs in the city and was able to accumulate a little money.

## **Successful Bookseller**

With the money he had earned as a labourer, John Cidade decided to go into business. This venture into the commercial world is rather surprising since he had no previous experience in buying or selling. More surprising still was the choice of merchandise he chose to sell, for he became a travelling vendor of books and stationery.

After a period of about three months in which he hawked his wares about Gibraltar, John decided to set out for Granada where he arrived towards the end of 1538. There, in the rich and splendid city once ruled by the Moors, Cidade's wanderings finally came to an end. In an alcove near the medieval city wall, he set up his humble stall that soon became the best known bookshop in Granada.

Students, priests, nobles and merchants gathered there to listen to John's tales of adventure, his war experiences and his wanderings. Business began to prosper and John Cidade was well on the way to becoming a substantial citizen. He was happy to be able to settle down at Granada and with a shop of his own, he enjoyed the security that his livelihood afforded him. Although his shop was small, it was well situated for business, being close to the busy Elvira Gate, the main entrance to Granada.

Early in January 1539, notices began to appear throughout the city advertising the popular feast-day of St. Sebastian to be celebrated on January 20th, in the Church of the Martyrs.

The preacher engaged to deliver the occasional sermon on St. Sebastian's Day was Father John of Avila. Only thirty-nine years of age, this diocesan priest from Seville had already gained a wide reputation for preaching since embarking on a special mission to Andalusia nine years previously.

## **2—BREAKDOWN**

John Cidade was in the church to hear Father Avila on January 20th. As the famous preacher told the story of St. Sebastian's martyrdom and his loyalty to Christ, all John's remorse for his early life and his past neglect of his religious duties burst into a great emotional upheaval. He realised that he could no longer remain in his comfortable complacency. Somehow he felt that God had used the words of Father Avila to awake in him a new conversion of spirit.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. The preacher's words triggered something in Cidade's psyche. Falling to his knees he groaned and sobbed and began telling everyone what a great sinner he was.

People began to gather about him, some were amused, others annoyed. Leaving the church, he continued to shout aloud his sins and threw himself to the ground. At first it seemed nothing more than an embarrassing spectacle, but when the apparently demented bookseller refused to cease his strange antics, the crowd's sympathy turned to ridicule.

In minutes a rabble was at John's heels, bawling that he had gone mad and showering him with stones and the filth of the gutters. Only when a few of his patrons managed to fight their way through the brutal mob was he finally snatched to safety and taken to meet Father John of Avila.

Alone with the priest, John calmed down and told him the story of his life. The learned and holy priest saw how genuine he was and promised to give him spiritual direction. But no sooner was the interview over and John was once again out on the streets, that he once more started to act as before.

Running towards his shop, John was pursued by the howling mob. Arriving at his little business, the frenzied proprietor tore down the shutters and commenced to smash the fixtures and stock. The crowd emptied the shop of its contents in moments, then rushing into his lodgings, poor John re-emerged and gave away all his clothing and personal effects to the grasping hands of the mob.

Nobody hated the 'poor bookseller, they could not understand his strange behaviour, so what they could not understand they feared. In their ignorance they attacked the cause of this fear. Cidade did not conform to normal behaviour and as a consequence he bore their wrath. Finally, a few kind friends forced their way through the crowd and rescuing John, they had no alternative than to take him to the Royal Hospital where a special section was reserved for the insane.

## **Cruel Treatment**

Discount any idea you may have of a hospital when you observe the type of institution that passed for that name in

the 16th century. They were fearsome places with damp halls and dark cells, reeking institutions where the insane were herded to keep them away from society. They were usually endowed by kings, bishops, nobles or wealthy merchants and were regarded as charitable foundations for the destitute. The wealthy shunned them.

Upon being locked away in the insane section of the hospital, John Cidade found himself introduced to a nightmare' world he had hitherto never imagined. During his many travels he had experienced the sight of the feeble minded and demented, even soldiers who had broken down in the face of battle; but this was nothing in comparison to the horrors he now experienced.

Here all sorts of mentally ill persons of both sexes were thrown together in utter squalor and neglect. Manic and violent cases were chained to rings set into the walls or to large stone blocks. Dank straw and fetid mattresses were the sleeping quarters for these unfortunates and the whole place reeked with the stench of putrefaction and excreta.

Those who admitted Cidade to the hospital requested that he be well treated. However, this request was not granted for he was subjected to especially cruel treatment. For the first three days he was left alone in a tiny cell. Finding two small sticks, John fashioned a crude cross and placed it upon the wall. He was entering his Gethsemane and prayed to God for the strength to endure his mental anguish with fortitude and courage.

In this terrible place, John Cidade sensed that God was about to reveal to him the vocation that had so long eluded him. Gone was the maniac behaviour he had so recently demonstrated. He now found himself alone with his thoughts and his God,

After three days Cidade was removed from his cell and given the standard treatment for the insane. He was stretched naked upon the floor and given blows from a knotted whip. This followed with freezing water showered upon him. He bravely bore this cruel treatment but was revolted by the sufferings of his fellow inmates.

The attendants who administered this treatment were really no more than keepers of the insane. They were often men of base character who cared very little for those whom they were supposed to care for. John saw this and pointed out to them that they were keener to administer this cruel treatment than perform the more obvious things such as cleaning and feeding the sick. He accused them of betraying the trust of the authorities and this only made them turn upon him with vehemence and hatred. But John would not be silenced and told them that "it would be better to have compassion on the sick in their trials. Clean them and feed them better and show them greater charity and love." This reprimand only served to aggravate the guards further and they vented their spleen on John with renewed vigour.

John also reprimanded the attendants for their graft and mismanagement of public funds intended for the welfare of the inmates. In time John's floggings ceased and he was given freedom to move at liberty within the confines of the hospital. This was precipitated by his remark to the attendants about the misappropriation of charitable funds. This severely jolted them for they were aware that Cidade was a friend of Fr. John of Avila and it was now quite clear that he was not as insane as they had presumed, but only too aware of what was going on about him.

From now on these bullies began to secretly fear this strange man who had dared to reprimand them. As a result of John's initiative, the other patients began to receive better treatment and within a few months a transformation had taken place in the insane wards of the Royal Hospital. The sick were washed and the filthy communal beds cleansed. Some obstacles still remained in John's way, but hope had been restored to many unfortunates in that frightening place, simply because one man really cared for their welfare.

The changes for the better did not go unnoticed by influential observers, who, to the embarrassment of the hospital's directors, were also interested in John Cidade. These men were his friends, his former clients at the bookshop, who had admitted John to the hospital five months previously. They informed Father Avila of John's progress who set the machinery in progress for his release.

In May 1539, John Cidade was released from the insane section of the Royal Hospital of Granada. It was in this depraved place that John finally discovered his true vocation to fight for the rights and dignity of the sick in both body and mind.

### **3—HOUSE OF HOSPITALITY**

John Cidade was determined to go ahead with his resolve to devote the remainder of his life to serving the underprivileged and the sick. However, before attempting to put his plan into practice, he set out to see Father Avila at

Baeza for spiritual direction and then went on to make a pilgrimage to the famous Marian shrine at Guadalupe in Extremadura.

This pilgrimage had a twofold purpose for John. Firstly, the spiritual experience of visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and secondly, to learn from the Jeronymite monks who conducted it, the techniques of medicine and nursing the sick. John spent three months learning as much as possible from the monks at Guadalupe and returned to Granada at the end of 1539.

Although he had Father Avila's full support, John had no money to start his enterprise of charity. However, he did have some influential friends, thanks to Father John of Avila, and among them was Archbishop Gaspar de Avalos of Granada and Bishop Sebastian Ramirez of the Royal Chancellery.

Father Avila introduced John to a wealthy merchant, don Miguel de Venegas, who permitted him to use the courtyard of his villa as a temporary refuge for the destitute. Soon John brought so many sick and derelicts there that Venegas offered to pay the rent for some suitable premises.

John was able to rent a large house in the Calle Lucena near the fish markets and he moved his guests there just before Christmas 1539. The Archbishop of Granada and Bishop Ramirez both gave John their blessings and the latter gave him enough money to buy forty beds to furnish his house of hospitality.

The building had two storeys with a courtyard containing a fountain. From the very beginning it was a self-help institution under the guidance of John. With the money given by Bishop Ramirez, John installed single beds for he would not tolerate the evil communal beds used in other hospitals at that time. This was only one of many hospital reforms that John was to undertake.

Another innovation in hospital care was the custom John introduced at Lucena, of insisting that each patient had to be received with kindness and given a foot bath. He was able to employ some help with the money his benefactors gave him, and he told them that this cleansing had a twofold purpose. Apart from making the guest welcome, the washing, symbol of physical cleanliness, also symbolised the importance of the Sacrament of Penance, spiritual cleanliness. John had the physical welfare of his guests at heart and he also had their spiritual welfare in mind, for he said that the way to reach the soul was through the body.

John had that wonderful gift which brought out the best in people, a gift which four centuries later would become a recognised science. John Cidade was practising applied psychology. This washing exercise had yet another purpose. John used it to make his helpers recognise the importance of human dignity even in the most degrading cases. He explained that it was really the feet of Jesus Christ that they washed. So great was his personal belief in this, that he always sought to render this service himself where possible. "Through the body to the soul" became John's motto. This was a sound theological maxim and clearly showed this great Christian humanist had more than the mere physical welfare of his guests at heart.

John's hospital was a real house of hospitality, where the poor helped the poor and the infirm aided those in greater need than themselves. His hospital received anyone who was sick or destitute, and it was especially the mentally disturbed who had the greatest cause to be grateful to John for his Christian love and understanding. At John's hospital there were no bleeding backs or tortured screams.

The impetus behind the enterprise of charity came from John, who personally saw to it that the fifty or more guests had enough to eat and ample bedding and clothing. From the beginning of his hospital in January 1540, the people of Granada became familiar with the sight of its founder going about the city each evening begging for his guests. John's catch-cry was "Do well for yourselves brothers, do well for yourselves!" John reasoned that whoever gave generously to the poor sick would receive spiritual benefits in return. "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40). John adopted this injunction of Christ's to remind the citizens of Granada of their duty as Christians to help the poor and needy.

### **A New Name**

Bishop Ramirez was so impressed with the work of Christian love being performed by John Cidade at his house of hospitality, that he summoned him to the Chancellery in order to give public recognition to him. He told John that he should adopt a new name more in keeping with the life of charity he had embraced. The bishop knew his man well, he

knew John as a man of God, a man totally dedicated and committed to the service of God and suffering humanity. He told John that he had chosen a name for him, a name that signified and summarised the highest human qualities he knew he possessed. He asked John Cidade to henceforth call himself John of God.

John did not suggest the name to the prelate, nor did he ever think of appropriating it for himself. John of God! The name came quite spontaneously to the bishop. Certainly it was an inspired name and one he had no hesitation in bestowing upon John.

Bishop Ramirez had given John a new name in keeping with his mode of life, a name that commanded dignity and respect. However, the bishop was disconcerted that John's attire did not distinguish him from the ragged guests at his hospital. Consequently he gave him a distinguishing habit. This was not a religious habit, but a suit of unbleached woollen trousers with a long tunic that came to the knees and was tied about the waist with a chord.

It is important to note that this investiture and new name did not represent an initiation into any religious society, nor for that matter, the beginning of a new one. Neither the bishop nor John had the slightest intention of forming a new religious congregation. John took no vows and to the day he died remained a layman in the Church. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit would soon inspire many generous men to follow John of God in his way of charity and these would soon form the religious family which would proudly bear the name of the Brothers of John of God.

All his life John had been a pilgrim in search of his true vocation, now, with this public approval by the bishop, he knew for certain that his calling in life was to serve the poor, sick and destitute. John of God had peace of mind and was happy in the certain knowledge that he was doing what God willed him to do. At last he had found the vocation that had eluded him for so many years.

### **The First Companions**

Nobody was excluded from the charity of John of God. He rescued many women from a sinful life in the city's houses of ill fame and gave them refuge at his house of hospitality at Lucena. In many cases he was successful in placing them in honest employment and was able to find husbands for others.

Others to benefit from John of God's Christian love were the orphans and abandoned children. He had a special love for the disturbed children and those with mental deficiency. All Granada was amazed at the way John of God's house of hospitality actually ran itself. John's generosity begot generosity in others and the guests helped each other. It was a truly therapeutic community in every sense of the meaning.

But all of John's time was not entirely absorbed in begging and performing the endless duties that called for his attention at Lucena. All this was the manifestation of his love of God finding its expression in the service of his neighbour. For John of God the neighbour was all humanity, but especially suffering humanity, so explicitly illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

### **A Man of Prayer**

John of God obtained the strength to carry out his charitable works by his intense life of prayer. Sometimes he would spend the entire night and before dawn would slip out to attend Mass at a nearby church. During the activities of the day, John was constantly aware of the presence of God in all he did. He implored God's mercy and help in all his needs. Such abiding sorrow for sin and his intense spirit of prayer were the means of basing his spiritual life on a sound foundation.

Soon others came to John of God and sought admission to his company to live like him and serve the poor sick. The first two brothers to be welcomed by John of God were men very much like himself. Anthony Martin and Peter Velasco were both worldly young men and notorious sinners. Through the influence of John of God they saw the error of their ways and returned to God's friendship. Simon of Avila was not a wealthy man, but like Martin and Velasco he too was a repentant sinner. A well-to-do Genoese merchant, Dominic Piola, also sought admittance into John's community of brothers after the death of his wife. Another to join John's company was a former hermit, John Garcia. Others came, and although they were not a religious congregation at this time, they all dressed in similar garb to John of God and were known as the Brothers of John of God. These companions of Brother John of God formed the nucleus of what will eventually become the Hospitaller Order.

By 1547, the little hospital at Lucena was so crowded that John had to find new quarters. A large villa was obtained in the Calle Gomez at the foot of the Alhambra. Meanwhile, despite the gifts from benefactors, John's debts were mounting and he was forced to borrow large sums of money, saying frankly to his creditors that "Jesus Christ is my only security".

So great were John of God's debts that he decided upon a bold plan to seek alms. In 1548, he set out for the royal court, then situated at Valladolid. The Regent, the future King Philip II and his two sisters received him and were generous in their help.

On his way to Valladolid, John founded another hospital at Toledo and arranged to have some brothers from Granada to go there to staff it.

By the time he returned to Granada his health was fast failing under the constant toil, debts and the ignorant hostility of some of the "respectable" citizens who were suspicious of his work for the destitute.

At this time the Royal Hospital of Granada caught fire. The hero of the day was Brother John of God, who ran into the blazing building and rescued most of the trapped inmates.

Soon after the incident at the burning hospital, the River Genil which passes near Granada, burst its banks in flood. Brother John of God plunged into the freezing water in a vain attempt to rescue a drowning man. As a result of these heroic feats, his health completely collapsed.

### **His Last Days**

It was obvious to the brothers that their Father John of God was dying. He was confined to his bed and in great pain. However, he still had to suffer the anguish of false testimony. Some of the "respectable" citizens of Granada had reported to the Archbishop that John was harbouring malingerers and loose women at his hospital. With a tremendous effort he rose from his bed and had to be carried to the Archbishop's residence. The slander was immediately disproven, but it was the final blow. A few days later Brother John of God collapsed and death seemed imminent.

The dying Brother was taken to the nearby home of a benefactress, dona Ana de los Pisa where the Archbishop and many nobles as well as the clergy of Granada and his own brothers kept constant vigil. Then an extraordinary thing happened. With a mighty effort he rose from his bed and knelt upon the floor clasping his crucifix in his hands. With all the voice he could muster, he said, "Jesus, Jesus into your hands I commend myself," and so saying his soul left his body to take its flight to the God he so loved and faithfully served.

Brother John of God came to Granada only twelve years prior to his death. He was then unknown, unloved. At his death the whole city mourned and his was one of the greatest funerals ever seen there. John once said, "Granada is my Cross", but it also proved to be his glory. Today his remains are enshrined in the magnificent Basilica of St. John of God at Granada.

### **True Holiness**

John of God's life is an example of how a man can rise from mediocrity and sin to become a leader for Christ and a champion for the underprivileged. He overcame many difficulties, he suffered what we euphemistically call "a nervous breakdown". He underwent a genuine religious conversion, and from that day forward he discovered for the first time in his life, real happiness.

That happiness increased with his Christian maturity and communicated itself to those who became his followers. Looking back over the last twelve years of John of God's life and comparing them with the years preceding, it is not difficult to see why the Church declared him a saint.

Saints are certainly not sad people. On the contrary they are happy and their happiness stems from the presence of God permeating their entire beings. Such was the case with John of God who found true happiness in serving God by caring for the corporal and spiritual welfare of the downtrodden and neglected members of humanity.

Unlike the people of Granada, who already called John a saint from the day he died, the Church was more cautious in officially declaring him as such. Before the honour of sainthood was bestowed, a most careful scrutiny and judgement of John's life had to be made. This was a long and drawn out procedure. At the conclusion of the first proceedings, Pope Urban VIII issued a bull of beatification on 21st September, 1630, declaring him Blessed John of God.

The happy day of canonisation took place in St. Peter's, Rome, on 16th October, 1690, when Pope Alexander VIII ratified that Saint John of God was a saint in heaven and worthy of public veneration.

In 1886, Pope Leo XIII proclaimed Saint John of God, together with St. Camillus de Lellis, to be co-patrons of the sick. Pius XI extended Saint John of God's patronage to include nurses, nursing associations, hospitals and hospital auxiliaries.

Nihil Obstat:  
Bernard O'Connor,  
Diocesan Censor

Imprimatur:  
✠ James R. Cardinal Knox  
Archbishop of Melbourne 1st July, 1973

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