



St. John of God

BORN 1495; DIED 1550
RELIGIOUS
FEAST DAY: MARCH 8

THOSE WHOSE LIVES are a chronicle of sin and whose hearts are far from God may believe that they are beyond hope, and that their lives will never be worthwhile. St. John of God was a man who may have felt the same way, but who demonstrates that God always welcomes back the sinner and that every person is necessary to build up the Kingdom of Heaven.

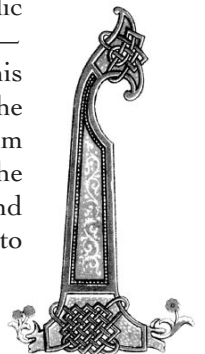
John was born at Montemoro Novo east of Lisbon, Portugal, but nothing is known of his early life or of his peasant parents, except that they were devout. At the age of nine, he left home to follow a Spanish priest to Oropeza near Toledo (in modern central Spain), who put John in the care of the village's chief shepherd. At this stage of his life, he faithfully sought God and carefully carried out his duties. When grown, he enlisted in the army of Spain to avoid marrying the chief shepherd's daughter, serving as a soldier in wars between Spain and France as well as in the defense of Vienna against an attack by the Turks. His army experiences led him to abandon the practice of his faith, and he fell into serious sin for many years. When the army was disbanded, he worked as a shepherd near Seville, Spain.

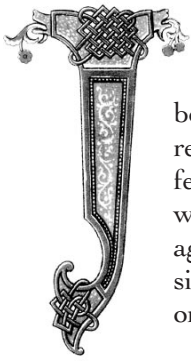
By age forty, he had begun to repent of his



sins and to seek a way to serve God. His heart was touched by the distress of Christian slaves in North Africa, so he decided to go there in hopes of assisting them and perhaps even attaining martyrdom. At Gibraltar, Spain, however, he encountered a Portuguese family that was being forced to live in exile and, out of pity, went with them to North Africa and began to serve them without asking for wages. Because of the illness of the father of the family, he worked as a day laborer to provide funds to help support them all. His confessor, however, advised him that his quest for martyrdom was not real and that he was to seek salvation not in one glorious moment but in the day-to-day living out of a vocation of charity.

Returning to Gibraltar, within a few years John opened a shop selling religious books and articles. Following a vision, he moved northeast to Granada, Spain, doing the same thing. One day, after hearing an especially powerful sermon by Bl. John of Ávila, he experienced a full conversion of his heart to God. The immediate consequence of his conversion was public repentance — in the church, in the streets — which seemed so strange, as if he had lost his wits, that he was locked up in an asylum for the insane. The same preacher who had led him to repentance eventually advised him that, as he had before, he was behaving impractically and should, instead, seek something more useful to





both himself and others in need. His behavior returned to normal, and he began caring for his fellow patients in the hospital until he himself was discharged as “cured.” He made a pilgrimage to a Marian shrine and only there, in a vision, finally learned that his true vocation was one of service.

John began to sell wood so that he might have money to feed the poor. The brutal regimen of “treatment” that he had experienced was the inspiration for him to found a hospital where he himself could care for those in need, which he did with great wisdom, zeal, and efficiency. He did not wait for sick people to come to him but, instead, went throughout Granada, plucking them off the streets and, if necessary, bearing them on his own back. He received the help of the saints of Heaven, especially the angel St. Raphael, in the early period when he worked mostly alone, and on one occasion saved his patients from a fire that he walked through unharmed. From an impractical man who aspired but failed to attain extravagantly glorious martyrdom, John became renowned for his modesty, common sense, and prudence. Together with two other men, he laid the foundation for what became, after his death, the religious order of the Brothers of St. John of God.

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The remainder of John’s life was one of great charity, not only at his own hospital but to everyone in need whom he could reach. He did not merely wait to hear about someone’s distress, however, but developed an organized system to inquire about the needs of others and found suitable ways to help them all. This included not only those who had need for food, shelter, care, protection, or employment, but those who were living lives steeped in sin, whom he sought to bring to repentance.

John’s life of charity was sustained by long hours of contemplative prayer and austerity in his own way of living, and blessed by mystical ecstasies and visions.

His deep humility was in no way affected by the honors heaped upon him by royalty. Thirteen years after he had begun his ministry, he died on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament.

John found his vocation only in the middle of his life. Yet repentance of a dissolute life, following the counsel of his confessors, and full conversion of the heart were not enough. The missing ingredient was listening for God’s call in prayer. Once he heard and responded to that call, the glory he had sought in martyrdom he instead found in caring for the most neglected members of the Body of Christ.

