

THE LIFE OF  
ST. JOHN OF GOD

FOUNDER OF THE ORDER OF HOSPITALLERS

1495-1550

Gaude Maria Virgo,  
cunctas haereses sola interemisti in universo mundo

*Antiphonarium Ecclesiae*

BY

PIETRO CIANFOGNI

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**Nihil Obstat**

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To the regular clergy of the Catholic Church in England, the successors and spiritual children of generations of martyrs, who, by their cheerfulness in holy poverty, their diligence in obscurity and under oppression, their unexampled confidence in the truths they taught, their forgiving charity towards ungenerous opponents, and their self-denying kindness towards those whom their prayers, their sacrifices, and their sufferings rescued from the darkness of error, have preserved to their country, together with the precious example of their own virtues, the unfailing light of the Catholic Faith, and the hereditary devotion to the Holy See, which distinguished the pilgrims and saints of Saxon times, and the princely builders of our Norman churches.

St. Wilfrid's

Translation of St. Thomas of Canterbury, 1847



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## Preface

The first life of St. John of God was written by Francesco Castro, Superior of the Hospital of Granada. It was published about thirty years after the death of the Saint, and translated into Latin, French, and Italian, the latter version being by Giovan Francesco Bordini, Priest of the Roman Oratory and Archbishop of Avignon.

Antonio Govea, Bishop of Cyrene and Apostolic Visitor in Persia, published a second Life about 1630: and from these two Jean Girard de Villethierry, Priest of the diocese of Paris, compiled a third, which was rendered into Italian and considerably enlarged by Pietro Cianfogni, Canon of St. Lorenzo and Member of the Academy of Florence, at the request of the *Fate-bene-fratelli*, as the Brothers of the Order of Hospitallers are called in Italy. The following pages are translated from Canon Cianfogni's work, which was published at Florence in 1747.

The Oratory, London,  
*Feast of St. Scholastica*, 1875.



## BOOK I

THE HISTORY OF HIS LIFE,  
TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF HIS HOSPITAL  
IN THE CITY OF GRANADA.





## Chapter 1

**THE VIRTUES OF ST. JOHN OF GOD IN GENERAL.**

God, Who loves His Church, and provides carefully for all its wants, has always sent men of extraordinary abilities and singular merit to govern, defend, instruct, and edify it, and to give it shining examples of virtue, such as might renew in it that spirit of holiness which is its peculiar characteristic, and ought to distinguish it in the midst of this corrupt world.

Thus at first He raised up the holy apostles who were its fathers, who founded it on a firm rock, and traversed the whole world to shed over it the light of the Gospel; who, forgetting themselves, laboured only to establish the empire of Jesus Christ, having no other desire than that of carrying the glory of His Name to the ends of the earth. He has fostered in her bosom an innumerable number of faithful souls of every age and sex, who, full of zeal and fervour, confronted tyrants, despised their threats, and suffered with joy the most horrible persecutions, bearing by their constancy a shining testimony to the truth of the faith, and not fearing to shed their blood to the last drop, thus making it evident that their love was stronger than all the powers of earth, and death itself.

He has also provided for its instruction, for He has always given it pastors and doctors eminent in learning and piety, who, penetrating the most profound mysteries of our religion, have explained them with clearness to all its people,

and have continually distributed to them the bread of His Word, while they shone as sacred lights to all in His house. He has also in all ages appointed certain persons to serve for examples and models to all those who were willing to practise virtue, and for this reason has loaded them with graces and benedictions. Thus He led into the desert the Antonies, the Hilarions, and the Benedicts, that they might become the leaders of all who were willing to sanctify themselves in solitude and separation from the world. He rendered illustrious the Agnes', the Agathas, and the Cecilias, and inspired them with a special love of purity, in order that other virgins might learn from them what their obligations are, and what they ought to do in order to fulfil all the duties of so holy and sublime a state. He willed that St. Francis should render himself illustrious by his poverty, and carry it as far as possible, in order that he might be as it were the master and guide of all those who are poor according to the Gospel. In these last ages He has not failed to raise up many illustrious saints who have imitated the zeal, the courage, the penance, and the holiness of the first Christians, in order that they might serve to awaken the children of His Church, who were living in fatal lethargy and drowsiness, and whom their example might induce to re-enter the paths of justice. Such was the great Saint whose actions, with the divine assistance, we propose to describe.

He entered the vineyard of the Lord towards the evening only, for he appeared as late as the sixteenth century, but he was made equal to the greater part of the other labourers who were called in the morning, that is to say, in those

happy times when Christianity still retained all its fervour; for we shall make it abundantly clear that he was not inferior to them in zeal and charity, and that he imitated all their virtues. In truth he held all the goods of the earth in utter contempt; he neglected the opportunities of acquiring them, and preferred poverty to all the advantages he could hope for in the world.

He imitated the fervour of those penitents of old, so distinguished in our annals, who punished themselves for their sins with such great severity, for what did he not do in order to chastise his body? With what rigour did he not treat himself? And did he not of his own accord, also, impose upon himself heavy penances, heavier perhaps even than those formerly required by the canons for the greatest enormities? He shared in the glory of the most pure virgins, since not only did he refuse to engage himself in marriage, but he took flight as soon as it was proposed to him, and preferred the troubles and fatigues of a poor and laborious life to the repose he might have enjoyed in the house of the rich man who offered him his alliance.

The most famous deserts have scarcely seen solitaries more humble and more dead to themselves than this great Saint, as we shall see when we consider all that he did in order to make himself appear as nothing, and to render himself vile and contemptible; and how much more he laboured to lower himself than worldly persons to attain to the greatest honours.

We shall see that he was always very submissive to his directors, and those who had the care of his conscience. He

undertook nothing without having consulted them, and was very exact in following all their orders. He had no other will but theirs, and he allowed himself to be conducted by them with as much docility as if he were still in the first years of childhood.

He did not apply himself to the study of ecclesiastical authors, nor to the discussion of dogmatic theology, because his days were spent in work, and he could have said with the prophet that from his youth up he had lived in poverty and toil. For all this he was not deficient in light, but on the contrary, if we examine all his proceedings, we shall acknowledge that he was greatly enlightened in the way of salvation, that he possessed the science of the saints, and deserves to be ranked with the greatest doctors, because of his perfect knowledge of Jesus crucified, which is the height of wisdom.

As for his charity, we shall be surprised at it, and have difficulty in comprehending how a man without credit or authority could establish a large hospital in the midst of the city of Granada; how, having neither possessions nor revenues, he was able to support so many poor persons; why he did not give way under the pressure of affairs which poured in upon him from all sides; and why he was not discouraged in the midst of so many objects which were revolting and contrary to nature.

We may add also that he merited the crown of martyrdom; for besides that the holy fathers teach us that penance has the power of making martyrs, we shall see in the following history that in fact he did seek after martyrdom. He traversed

several provinces in order to find an opportunity of shedding his blood for the faith of Jesus Christ; and if executioners and tyrants did not take away his life, this was against his own will, because he eagerly desired it, and had already made the sacrifice of it within himself. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that God, Who knows our most secret thoughts, accepted the preparation of his heart, and has allotted to him in heaven the same reward as to all His other martyrs.

All these circumstances lead us to say that Divine Providence destined him to appear in these latter times, in which the charity of the faithful has grown cold, according to the prediction of Jesus Christ, in order that the example of his virtues might serve to contribute to their conversion and rekindle their fervour.

It is fitting to warn our readers that in these first chapters we shall not give the name of John of God to our Saint, but content ourselves with calling him John, until we have explained what was the occasion which procured him the honour of bearing the illustrious title of John of God. We must also say that we shall not imitate those historians who strive in all things to exalt the character of those whose actions they are describing, by dissembling their weaknesses and defects, and who go out of their way to excuse and justify all that they did, imagining that it is to the honour of great men, and above all of saints, to have done nothing but what is great, distinguished, and perfect; for such conduct does not appear to us lawful. On the contrary, we believe that sincerity is the first quality required in an historian; he ought to confine himself strictly to the truth; and if he

conceals or disguises from his readers important facts, under the pretext that they do not contribute to the glory of those in favour of whom he is writing, he no longer deserves credit in other things, and ought to be regarded as a foolish flatterer.

We will, then, simply state events as they happened, and not strive to make John of God appear an impeccable and invulnerable hero. We will praise in him what is really worthy of praise, and find fault with what appears to us to deserve it; leaving to the judgment of our readers those things which appear doubtful or capable of a different interpretation. By these means we shall endeavour to avoid the reputation of being partial, and too much prejudiced in favour of the subject of our book. We hope that his children, who have induced us to undertake this work, will not be grieved at seeing the actions of their holy father in their natural colours. This itself will be very useful to them, for in it they will study the ways of the Lord; they will see in it that man can do nothing of himself, and that he is only capable of falling and of going astray, as long as he is not supported by Him Who is all our strength; they will learn from it how we must rise again when we have fallen; and they will accustom themselves to praise the mercy of our God, who supports His saints in their wanderings, gives them time to return to themselves, strikes them in kindness and in order to warn them to change their evil habits, and receives them as soon as they return to Him with a contrite and humble heart.

## Chapter 2

**THE BIRTH OF JOHN.  
WONDERS WHICH ACCOMPANIED IT.  
HIS EARLY EDUCATION.**

John had none of the advantages of birth and fortune, which serve to recommend men to worldly-minded persons; for his family was not one of distinction, and his parents held no high rank in the world. Still we must not suppose them to have belonged to the lowest class, nor say, as some do, that they lived in a state of utter wretchedness and degradation; for one of the first writers of his life expressly mentions that they were of the middle class, and lived honourably. Their property corresponded with their state in life; they were neither too rich nor too poor, and while not exposed to the dangers and temptations which almost always attend excessive poverty, they were also free from the vices and dissipations which are very often a consequence of affluence. It was also remarked that their manners were exceedingly regular, and their conduct exemplary. They took care to occupy themselves with some employment, not only in order to derive profit from it, but also to fill up all their time, and to avoid idleness, which is so contrary to virtue.

The name of John's father was Andrew Ciudad; but we do not know that of his mother, either because she was anxious to live in silence and obscurity, or because historians neglected to ascertain it, not judging it of importance to

the glory of her son. They lived in a city of Portugal called *Montemor-O-Novo*, situated in the archbishopric of Evora. Their piety led them to practise hospitality as much as they could consistently with their means, and to receive into their house pilgrims and travellers, and, above all, ecclesiastics and religious. When they had satisfied this work of charity, so much recommended in Scripture and by the holy fathers, they employed what remained of their money in giving alms, and assisting poor persons who were ashamed to beg.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century our Lord blessed their marriage with happy fruitfulness; for in the year 1495 He gave them a son, who came into the world on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, and received at the font the name of John. They received this gift from heaven with all the gratitude they were capable of, and looked upon it as a fresh pledge of the love of God, which obliged them to redouble their zeal, and to serve Him with more fidelity than ever.

We must not omit to mention the prodigies which happened at the birth of this child. Historians declare that at the very moment he first saw the light there appeared on the roof of his parents' house a column of fire, which was seen by everyone, and was doubtless a presage of the future. When our Lord Jesus Christ was born, a bright star was sent from heaven, to point out to men that this divine Infant would be the light of the world. When St. Ambrose, still in his infancy, was asleep, a swarm of bees entered his mouth, and lodged in it without doing him any harm, which made his father pronounce that he would one day be a great orator, and that his speeches would be as sweet as honey.



William, Abbot of St. Thierry at Reims, relates that hardly was St. Bernard conceived than his mother had in her sleep a vision which was destined to make known to her what would happen to her child; for she thought she had within her a little white dog, rather red on the back, which barked continually; in great alarm she consulted a man of noted piety, who at that very hour was filled with the spirit of prophecy with which David was animated, when, speaking of holy preachers, he said to God, "The tongue of thy dogs shall be red with the blood of thy enemies;" and seeing her trembling and disturbed, he answered her: "Fear not, all will be well; you will be mother of an infant, who as a faithful dog will one day keep the house of God, and bark loudly in its defence against the enemies of the faith; for he will be an excellent preacher, and, like a good dog, will heal with the medicine of his tongue the wounds of a great number of souls."

We know, further, that the mother of St. Dominic also imagined in a dream that she was carrying within her a little dog bearing in its mouth a lighted torch, with which it set fire to the whole earth; whence she concluded that the infant she was to bring forth would be distinguished for holiness, and that by the example of his life, and the power of his eloquence, he would kindle the fire of charity in the hearts of men; a prediction which, as every one knows, was abundantly fulfilled.

We can then say, since the result has proved it, that the column of fire which was seen at the birth of John was not merely a natural meteor, but that it was created by Divine

Providence to declare to men that the heart of this infant would one day be consumed by the ardour of love.

Another remarkable occurrence is also mentioned by his biographers. The bells of the church of Nuestra Senora del Obispo, the parish where he was to be baptized, rang of their own accord in sweet and pleasing harmony, which surprised the whole city, and caused different thoughts to spring up in people's minds. Some were inclined to say that the sound was caused by an earthquake, but there was no appearance of this, because the same thing had not happened in the neighbouring churches. Others feared some trick; but the majority judged that it was connected with the column of fire mentioned above, and that these two marvels portended something great respecting the new-born child. One historian relates that they spoke as the inhabitants of Judaea did when they heard of the wonders that accompanied the birth of St. John, the son of Zachary, "What an one, think ye, shall this child be? for the hand of the Lord was with him."

All these circumstances raised in some of them a desire to consult a hermit of great reputation, who lived apart from men, at some distance from the city, on the mountain of Oca, in order that they might know from him what he thought of this son of Andrew Ciudad who was just born. The holy solitary, inspired no doubt by the Spirit of God, foretold to them very great things of him, declaring that he would be an extraordinary man, that his piety would shine forth on all sides, that his life would be a kind of miracle, and that the Lord would make use of him to execute His

Will, and to accomplish a work as difficult as it would be useful. And in order to confirm the truth of his words, and remove from them all suspicion that he was relating visions without foundation, he spoke of the ringing of the bells, which he certainly could not have heard, being too far from the city. He told them that God, by a particular grace, had given him knowledge of it, and confirmed them in the idea that this harmony was supernatural, produced by the angels themselves, and that it was a mark of the joy which these blessed spirits felt. He likewise exhorted them to be very attentive to all that might happen to this child of miracle.

So many wonders rendered John very dear to his father and mother, and greatly strengthened the love of him which nature had implanted in them. Being gifted also with great piety, they reflected that he belonged to God more than to themselves, and they believed it to be one of their chief obligations to use all their efforts to second the designs Providence might have upon him. For this reason they gave their whole attention to bringing him up well. As soon as he was able to speak, they accustomed him to pronounce the Name of God, in order thereby to sanctify, and in some sort to consecrate, his tongue. They lost no time in training him up in all the exercises of piety of which his tender age was capable, and took care that he should be instructed in the rudiments of Christian doctrine. They endeavoured, above all, to give him a good example, and to keep him away from all that might make a bad impression on his mind. They were careful to make him love Jesus Christ, and to teach him early the duty of serving Him from Whom he had his being. They took every precaution to secure him against

the shipwreck which children often make, when from want of proper instruction they lose the grace of their baptism before they even know it.

Their care was not fruitless, and they had the consolation of seeing that they were not sowing in vain; for their son profited daily by their instructions. He learned very easily the principal mysteries of our religion, and received without difficulty the feelings of piety which they wished to instil into him. They never found him opposed to their good intentions, but remarked, on the contrary, that he was inclined of his own accord to virtue, that he did not fall into the ordinary faults of children, but was beyond his years in all things, and showed a disposition which led them to hope everything from him when he should have arrived at a more mature age. This filled them with joy, and induced them to address themselves continually to God, to thank Him for all the mercies He had shown them, and to pray Him to shed His grace and benediction more and more on their son, whom they wished to render perfect only in order that he might be better able to serve and honour Him.

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