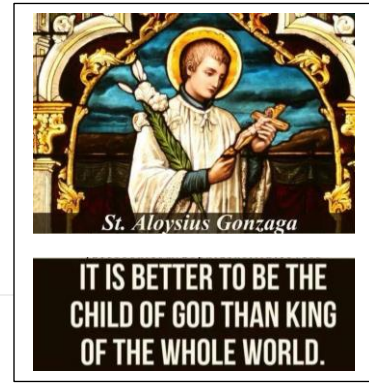


Saint Aloysius Gonzaga

Saint of the Day for June 21

(March 9, 1568 – June 21, 1591)



Saint Aloysius Gonzaga's Story

The Lord can make saints anywhere, even amid the brutality and license of Renaissance life. Florence was the “mother of piety” for Aloysius Gonzaga despite his exposure to a “society of fraud, daggers, poison, and lust.” As a son of a princely family, he grew up in royal courts and army camps. His father wanted Aloysius to be a military hero.

On March 9, 1568, in the castle of Castiglione delle Stivieri, in Lombardy, Luigi Gonzaga entered this world. (“Aloysius”, as he was later known, is the Latin form of the given name Luigi). He was born into a branch of one of the most powerful families in Renaissance Italy. His father, Ferrante de Gonzaga, was the Marquis of Castiglione and his mother was Marta Tana di Santena, daughter of a baron. His mother was a lady-in-waiting to Isabel, the wife of Philip II of Spain.

As the first-born son of seven children, he was in line to inherit his father's title and status of Marquis. His father assumed that Aloysius would become a soldier, as that was the norm for sons of the aristocracy. At age 4 he was given a set of miniature guns and accompanied his father on training expeditions. He grew up amid the violence and brutality of Renaissance Italy and witnessed the murder of two of his brothers. Aloysius decided that he was less interested in his father world and more attracted to a very different kind of life.

At age 7 Aloysius experienced a profound spiritual awakening. His prayers included the Office of Mary, the psalms, and other devotions. At age 9 he came from his hometown of Castiglione to Florence to be educated; Aloysius was shocked by the violent and frivolous lifestyle he encountered there. When he returned home at age 11, he met Cardinal Charles Borromeo and from him received First Communion on July 22, 1580. After reading a book about Jesuit missionaries, Aloysius felt strongly that he wanted to become a missionary. He started by practicing by teaching catechism classes to poor children, fasting three days a week, and practicing great austerities. When he was 13 years old, he traveled with his parents and the Empress of Austria to Spain and acted as a page in the court of Philip II. The more Aloysius saw of court life, the more disillusioned he became, seeking relief in learning about the lives of saints. Aloysius withdrew into himself, refusing to participate in what he saw as an essentially corrupt environment. He made a vow never to offend God by sinning.

Aloysius became interested in entering the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), and after living in Spain his decision became final. Now began a four-year contest with his father. Eminent churchmen and laypeople were pressed into service to persuade Aloysius to remain in his “normal” vocation. Finally, he prevailed, and in November 1585 was allowed to renounce his right to succession and was received into the Jesuit novitiate in Rome.

Like other seminarians, Aloysius was faced with a new kind of penance - that of accepting different ideas about the exact nature of penance. He was obliged to eat more, and to take recreation with the other students, asked to limit prayer to stated times, and in general reduce his penances. Because of the severe religious practices that Aloysius had already adopted for himself, he found novitiate life less demanding than the life he had imposed upon himself at home. He accepted these revisions with the same single-minded obedience

as he had his early extremes. He spent four years in the study of philosophy and had Saint Robert Bellarmine as his spiritual adviser.

In 1590 Aloysius is said to have had a vision of Archangel Gabriel who told him he would die within a year. In 1591, a plague struck Rome. Aloysius volunteered to serve in the hospital. It was not long before he came down with the plague himself. After receiving another vision, St. Aloysius told several people he would die on the Feast of Corpus Christi, (Body of Christ). The Feast of Corpus Christi fell on June 21 that year. In the morning he seemed fine, but he grew weaker quickly. St. Bellarmine gave him the last rites and Aloysius died just before midnight at the age of 23 with the cross in his hands and the name of Jesus on his lips. St. Aloysius was beatified in 1605, only fourteen years after his death and canonized on Dec. 31, 1726, by Pope Benedict XIII.

Patronage

In 1729, Pope Benedict XIII declared Aloysius de Gonzaga to be the patron saint of young students. In 1926, he was named patron of all Christian youth by Pope Pius XI. Owing to the manner of his death, he has been considered a patron saint of plague victims. For his compassion and courage in the face of an incurable disease, Aloysius Gonzaga has become the patron both of AIDS sufferers and their caregivers.

Reflection

As a saint who fasted, scourged himself, sought solitude and prayer, and did not look on the faces of women, Aloysius seems an unlikely patron of youth in a society where self-discipline is confined to training camps of football teams and boxers, and sexual permissiveness has little left to permit. Can an overindulged and air-conditioned society deprive itself of anything? It will when it discovers a reason, as Aloysius did. The motivation for letting God purify us is the experience of God loving us in prayer.

Iconography

In art, St Aloysius is shown as a young man wearing a black cassock and white surplice, or as a page. His attributes are a lily, referring to innocence; a crown of the marquis, which Aloysius has relinquished, a cross, referring to piety and sacrifice; a skull, referring to his early death; and a rosary, referring to his devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.



There is a colossal painting by Guercino hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (pictured at right) that shows, in allegory, the moment of Luigi's decision. From contemporary portraits we know a little of what Luigi looked like, and the painting depicts him with the long nose and slim face of the Gonzaga family. Covered by a marble arch and standing under a canopy of lute-playing cherubim and seraphim, Aloysius, in a black Jesuit cassock and white surplice, looks intently at an angel, who stands in front of an altar and points to a crucifix. Far in the distance under a blue Italian sky is his father's castle. At Aloysius's feet lies the symbol of chastity, a lily. Behind him, on the ground, is the crown of the marquis, which Aloysius has relinquished. A cherub hovers in the sky, holding above the young man's head a crown of another kind, the crown of sanctity

References: <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-of-the-day/saint-alloysius-gonzaga>,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aloysius_Gonzaga
<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2015/06/21/who-was-real-st-alloysius-gonzaga>