

# SAINT ALOYSIUS GONZAGA

(1568-1591)

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In a time of terrible wars, when the passions excited by the false Reformation were still at red heat, but while the effects of the true Reform were making themselves felt throughout Europe; when St. Pius V. was in the Chair of Peter, and Elizabeth was reigning in England, St. Aloysius was born in his ancestral castle at Castiglione in Lombardy, on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1568.

Don Ferrante, his father, was not only Marquis by title, but also the sovereign of his little state. He was besides a gallant soldier. Aloysius was his eldest child. Our Saint's mother, a lady of high family in Piedmont, had met her husband at the Court of Madrid, when she was maid of honour to the Queen Isabel, who had brought her in her train on coming from France.

The Gonzagas of Castiglione were a junior branch of the historic family which had made so great a name for itself. By inter-marriages they were connected with the Hohenzollerns, the Bourbons, the d'Estes, the house of Aragon, the Guises, the Medici, and all the chief families of Christendom, and Aloysius was himself related to some twenty Cardinals. The rival powers of France and Spain had made Lombardy in those days the battlefield of their jealousies. Open wars or secret intrigues had necessarily demoralized the peoples of those lands. The Gonzagas held high positions in the service of Spain and Germany, and were famous alike in court and in camp, and not less so in the field of Arts and Letters. But the taint of the times was on them, and their domestic history bears traces of wild ambitions and strong passions such as were stirring in those days of struggle and contest.

The birth of St. Aloysius was attended with such danger to the mother and child alike, that she vowed a pilgrimage to Loreto, and the babe was baptized almost before it was born.

There seems to have been a special grace about the child from its earliest days, and the mother, who was very pious, and who longed above everything to foster a like spirit in her baby boy, was delighted to notice his fondness for prayer. But the father's pride was to bring up his son to be a soldier like himself, and as he had to drill a large muster of troops enlisted in the service of the Emperor Charles V. for the expedition of Don John of Austria to Tunis, he took Aloysius away with him, though not then five years old, to the camp. There he was delighted to see his little son marching in the front rank at the reviews in a suit of light armour, and with a diminutive pike upon his shoulder.

Aloysius thoroughly entered into the spirit of the thing, and showed a daring that delighted, though it now and again alarmed, his father. He burnt his face one day while firing off a musket; and on another occasion, at the time of the mid-day siesta, he took some powder from a soldier's pouch, and actually loaded and discharged a small field piece. The report startled the whole camp from its afternoon sleep and he was very nearly run over by the recoil of the gun.

When the Marquis marched away with his troops, Aloysius was sent home, and it was soon found that the child had picked up from the soldiers a coarse expression of which he did not know the meaning, but by which, on being reprimanded by his tutor, he was so horrified that even when accusing himself in subsequent confessions of the fault, he could not bring himself to repeat the word. This and the theft of the powder were subjects of his life-long repentance, the only faults of any gravity of which he could accuse himself.

About the age of seven, when reason dawned more fully on his mind, such a wonderful spiritual light came to his soul, with so clear an understanding of the things of God, that he ever spoke of that time as the period of his conversion. Nor in fact did he ever look back in his swift ascent to perfection. He began each day to say long prayers, of which the Gradual and Penitential psalms were but a part; and even though he got one of the wretched fevers so common in the Lombard plain he would not abandon this pious practice.

When the valour of Don John of Austria had won the day at Tunis, in 1573, Don Ferrante came back to Europe; but he stayed two years at the Court of Spain. On his return home, he found Aloysius completely changed and given up to holy thoughts. The first symptoms had already shown themselves of that terrible scourge of the plague, which during the following year was to devastate Milan, and thus to call forth the devotion of St. Charles Borromeo. The Marquis

determined to seek shelter in the deep valleys and richlywooded hillsides of the Baths of Lucca. He hoped also there to find relief from gout, as he was a great sufferer, and to leave his sons, Aloysius and Rodolph at Florence, to acquire the exquisite accent for which that cultured city was so famous. The Grand Duke would have taken the two boys into his palace, but their father was anxious that they should attend to their studies, and only consented that they should go to Court on Sundays and holidays. At the palace, St. Aloysius had, amongst other children as his play-mates, Mary de' Medici, the future Queen and Regent of France. He had to join in their sports and amusements, but he much preferred to build up and decorate little altars out of devotion.

Florence was always dear to our Saint, and he ever after looked upon that bright city as the cradle of his sanctity. He had come across a book by a Spanish Jesuit, a work familiar in old days to the persecuted Catholics of England, on the Rosary; and it filled his young heart with a high idea of that precious devotion and taught him to know and to love better our dear Lord and His Blessed Mother. In the Church of the Servite Fathers is an ancient painting of the Annunciation, and tradition tells us that an Angel finished the head of our Lady, which it had baffled the skill of the artist to complete. This shrine was an object of much devotion, and Aloysius, who lived not far off, loved to pray before it. Once while at his devotions, St. Aloysius was moved to dedicate his virginity to God by vow, and from that moment he became more like an angel than a man, and never was troubled in mind or body by a shadow of those wild storms which are the heritage of man's fallen nature. The Roman tribunal which examined his case for canonization declared that his innocence was not only rare, but that no like case was recorded.

At his first confession to a Jesuit Father at Florence, Aloysius was so filled with shame at the sight of his sins, and of reverence to the minister of so mighty a grace that he fainted at the feet of his director, and his tutor had to lead him home dazed and confused. He returned the following day, and made what he called a general confession, and from that time began seriously and steadily to study the defects of his character, with a view to correcting them. He felt the chief source of his faults to be his hot temper and an inclination to speak unkindly of others. But he bridled his strong character with so firm a hand that he never after felt any rebellion, except perhaps when he chanced to be praised. And in order to forestall faults of the tongue, he withdrew as far as possible from society, and though never morose, became as silent as a Carthusian.

After two years at his beloved Florence, Aloysius and his brother were summoned to the brilliant court of his relative the Duke of Mantua. Here a troublesome and dangerous illness obliged him to diet himself very strictly, and he learned to love at that early age a fast worthy of the Fathers of the desert. And when his ailment had departed, he still insisted on continuing an abstinence which seemed to leave little room for his stricter fasts on several days during the week. Meanwhile the thought of leaving the world was taking clearer shape in his mind, and he fully determined to assign to his younger brother, the headstrong Rodolph, the heirship of his ancestral states. Aloysius kept away from theatricals and fêtes of the Court, and found his delight in reading the Lives of the Saints, by Surio, or talking with holy people whose thoughts ran in the same channel as his own. But his father heard how feeble and thin his son had grown, and sent for him to the bracing and breezy heights of the Castle of Castiglione. It looked down on the spacious precincts of the town, with its open spaces and many gardens and over the intervening hills to the lovely Lake of Garda, 'the bluest of all waters.'

The Marquis was indignant with the boy's tutor at the state of St. Aloysius, but he found that neither he nor even the fond mother could make the child alter his ways. On the contrary, God drew him nearer to himself. Hitherto St. Aloysius had only employed vocal prayer. Now, without human teaching, he learnt the method of meditation. He seemed unable to withdraw himself from its attraction. He spent the greater part of his day shut up in his room; and when the servants peered through the chinks of the door to see what their young master was doing, they saw him on his knees with his eyes fixed on a crucifix, his arms outstretched or crossed on his breast, while he sighed and sobbed as if he had been standing on Calvary, and was witnessing the tortures and death of his Lord and Love. His tears were so constant that not only were his clothes wet by them but they flowed down on the floor. Even when going about the house he was continually absorbed in prayer.

Just at this time B. Peter Canisius' little work of Daily Meditations, which had been published a year or two before in Mantua, fell into his hands, and taught him the time he ought to spend in mental prayer, giving him valuable hints as to how to practise it. He came across another work also, the "Letters from India," three series of which had

appeared in Venice. Like our “Annals of the Propagation of the Faith,” it gave the reports of the progress of the Church by the Missions of the Society of Jesus in India and America. It fired him with a desire to do what he could for souls. He used to frequent the Sunday School, and there to help to teach the little ones and the ignorant among his father’s vassals.

God and the things of God were the only topics of which he cared to speak. Once when his mother took him on a visit to the widowed Duchess of Milan, whose beautiful portrait by Holbein adorns the collection of the Duke of Norfolk, the attendants were amazed at the heavenly wisdom of his remarks, for, as they said, if they had not seen him, they would have thought it was an old man that was speaking.

This year 1580 was specially blessed, because the holy Archbishop of Milan, St. Charles in making a visitation of the dioceses of his suffragans, came and stopped at Castiglione.

The Cardinal refused the hospitality of the Castle and stayed with the parish priest. There St. Aloysius went to see him, and the two saints soon understood one another. St. Charles found the boy had not, though twelve years old, made his first Communion, and seeing how fit he was, asked to have the privilege to give It to him with his own hands. This he did on July 22. We have no record of the fervour with which the Saint received his Divine Guest, but his devotion to the Mystery of Love ever after tells us how great it must have been. St. Charles bade St. Aloysius farewell by a fatherly and fervent blessing. He had recommended strongly to our Saint the Catechism of the Council of Trent, which had then but lately appeared, and St. Aloysius became so fond of the solid and beautiful instructions it contains that he spoke highly of it in turn to others.

Shortly after, the Marquis, who was at his post at Montferrato, as Governor for the Duke of Mantua, ordered his wife to come and join him with the two boys. As St. Aloysius and Rodolph were crossing a ford of the river Ticino in a flood, the carriage, one of the clumsy vehicles of the period, broke in two, and while the horses dragged the front part safe to shore with Rodolph who was seated in it, the back part with our Saint and his tutor was swept down the stream. It was providentially stopped by the trunk of a tree, which the torrent had brought down, and, drenched and half-dead, the two were rescued in succession by a man on horse back, who got them off safe. It was at Montferrato, in company with the Barnabite Fathers and the Capuchins, his constant companions, that St. Aloysius’s resolve about religious life was finally made. He envied them their freedom from the ties of the world, their joyful hearts, their entire devotion to God and their indifference whether to live or to die. People noticed how more than usually absorbed and abstracted he had become, and his religious friends read in his face what was going on in his mind.

On his return to Castiglione, in 1581, St. Aloysius continued with more rigour than ever his life of penance and prayer. The love of our Lord, as it always does when it is genuine, made him unwilling to live in comfort and without pain. He shunned the bright charcoal fire in the braziers, which are the sole defence against the sharp winter beneath the frozen Alps. Even if forced out of civility to approach, he took care not to enjoy the warmth, and his hands were chapped by the severe cold. When his father took him to see a great review at Milan, he went into a back seat and turned his eyes from the brilliant sight.

In the autumn, Mary of Austria, the daughter of Philip II. of Spain, and widow of the Emperor Maximilian, was returning to her beloved country, and her royal father ordered the princes and nobility of Italy, who were his subjects, to accompany her. Leaving their younger children behind, the Marquis and Marchioness of Castiglione, with Aloysius, Rodolph, and their only daughter went to meet the imperial party as far as Trent, and accompanied them by Genoa and Marseilles. There our Saint honoured the relics of St. Mary Magdalen.

The Empress and her suite took ship at Marseille and landed at Collioure on the Spanish coast. They went across the country to the mountain sanctuary of Our Lady of Montserrat, and to her other shrine almost as famous, of “The Pillar” at Saragossa.

At Madrid St Aloysius and his brother Rodolph were installed in the palace as pages of honour to the boy prince Diego, heir to all the Spains. Under the guidance of his tutor, St. Aloysius pursued his philosophical studies, natural science, the globes, logic, and the ethics of that marvellous but eccentric genius, Raymond Lull. Aloysius happened to pass through Alcala when a “public act” or defence of theology was going on under the celebrated Jesuit theologian, Father Gabriel Vasquez, and though but fifteen or sixteen years of age, our Saint was invited to object. He did so with such skill as to give promise of a brilliant future.

But neither the charms of study, nor the splendours of a court, the most punctilious and magnificent in Europe, consoled Aloysius for the inroads made on time which he would have liked to give entirely to God. He found his devotions somewhat chilled by his absorbing duties, and he resolved, without neglecting what he was bound to do, to draw a sharp and definite line, beyond which nothing but absolute duty should compel him to go. He refused to make any calls of mere ceremony, and would neither learn to dance, nor practise gymnastics like his younger brother. He kept so strict a guard over his eyes that though every day that the Empress Mary was in Madrid at the royal Convent of the Discalced Franciscans — she stayed some twenty days in the capital — he accompanied the Infante to make her a formal visit, he never once looked at her, and did not know whether her hair was dark or grey, nor could he have recognised her again. The nobles and gentlemen of the court respected his presence, and never ventured on a light word when he was near. “The little Marquis of Castiglione,” they used to say, “is not made of flesh and blood.”

The young prince Diego was once standing at a window, and a violent wind annoyed him. “Stop, wind,” he pettishly cried, “and do not bother me.” St. Aloysius playfully yet seriously reminded his young master that though he was lord of men, he was “not lord of the wind, which owned no master but their common Creator.” But with all Aloysius’ gravity and dislike of state or of amusement, the Prince was still very fond of his admonitor.

The Saint, faithful to his resolve, gave himself up with new fervour to his prayers and austerities. A fresh reason made him redouble his endeavours and his supplications. Steadily the conviction had been growing upon him that God wished him to leave the world entirely. Now it had come merely to the question as to what Order to enter. The Society of Jesus had a special attraction for him, because it seemed to bar the way to any ecclesiastical dignities. He was naturally drawn to a life of retirement and external austerity; but his mother assured him that his health would be sure to sink under it and he would be forced to give up the dearest wish of his life.

On the feast of Our Lady’s Assumption, 1583, for which he had prepared with special fervour, he was praying after Holy Communion, in the chapel of our Lady in the great Church of the Jesuits at Madrid, now called San Isidro, when suddenly a distinct voice came to him bidding him to enter into the Society of Jesus, and telling him to inform his confessor as soon as possible of what had occurred. That feast is a day specially sacred to the Society, as upon it the first vows of St. Ignatius and his companions were made at Montmartre, and upon it too St. Stanislaus went to his reward in the very year of St. Aloysius’ birth. St. Aloysius hastened to his confessor, Father Paterno. The Father was no doubt well aware of his fitness, and that his calm judgment protected him from delusion. He told him however that he must necessarily first receive his father’s approval before he could be received. St. Aloysius went to break the news to his mother. She took his side earnestly, and pleaded his cause so strongly with her husband, who was furious at the announcement, that he suspected her of favouring Rodolph and of wishing to supplant Aloysius in the Marquisate.

When his son came himself to speak to Don Ferrante on his own part, the Marquis broke into a violent passion and drove him out of his sight. He even threatened to have him stripped and flogged for his audacity. St. Aloysius’ only reply was: “Would that I could have the privilege to suffer something for God.” Don Ferrante sent for Paterno, and vented his rage upon him, accusing him roundly of putting this idea into his son’s head, upon whom were centred all the hopes of his family and of his states. The Father succeeded in calming the Marquis and showed him that the boy’s life was quite enough to tell anyone which way his thoughts were tending. The Marquis avowed that he would not have made such strong objections to his entering any other Order, because his son could by that means have obtained some dignity in the Church fitting his high birth. But as St. Aloysius assured his father, this was just the very thing he sought to avoid.

It was a weary and long struggle for the Saint. This however winnowed his vocation, and left it pure from any imperfect motive. It proved that it came directly and entirely from God. His father tried to persuade himself that it was a mere passing fancy, and that in opposing his son’s wishes he was not opposing the will of God. The little prince Diego had died of small-pox and so Aloysius was now free but his father, anxious to delay, promised him through his cousin, the Father General of the Friar Minors of the Observance, that he would be at liberty to follow his call, if he would return with him to Italy. People at the court imagined that the whole thing was but a mere scheme of St. Aloysius to scare his father from gambling, a pursuit by which he was impoverishing himself; and they praised his knowledge and tact.

As they were sailing on their return voyage along the coast of Southern France there was an alarm of Turkish

pirates, and they were chased by the Bey of Algiers to the very port of Marseilles. St. Aloysius at once exclaimed, "Would that we might be martyred!"

In the July of 1584, St. Aloysius was back again in Castiglione, and hoped soon to be released. But his father said he must first go on a tour of visits to the princes of Northern Italy with his brother Rodolph. He hoped that a life among brilliant courts would give his son new tastes, and would wean him from his design. But though our Saint won the affection and esteem of all, he only showed more than ever how fixed was his heart in its love of higher things, and in contempt of all the brave gaieties of Florence and Ferrara. He would not even wear the splendid clothes, all heavy with gold embroidery, which the Marquis had ordered for him to appear before the Royal Duchess, Ann of Austria, Infanta of Spain, and wife of the reigning Duke of Savoy. Rodolph had to wear them in his place, and they suited well his fine figure. The journey was spent by St. Aloysius like a pious pilgrimage, in spite of the almost royal honours with which he was received, and of the number of attendants who accompanied him. He found his chief delight in the houses of the Society, paying there always his first visit to his Sacramental Lord. He never omitted either his fasts or exercises of devotion; and at night if he had to stay at an inn, he shut himself up in a room, and before an improvised cross, which he drew with a morsel of charcoal on a piece of paper, he spent a good hour and a half in prayer.

At a house of the relatives of his mother at Turin, an old gentleman dared to begin in presence of St. Aloysius a loose conversation with a number of young men that were there. "How dare you, an aged man of your station of life, speak of such things to these young gentlemen? This is a scandal and evil example," exclaimed the Saint, as he turned on his heel; and taking up a religious book, he went into a room some way off, to show his displeasure.

Another time, when invited to an uncle's house at Chieri in Piedmont, he found a ball had been got up in his honour. He could hardly stay away under the circumstances, but he went into the ball-room upon the express condition that he should not be asked to dance. However he had hardly sat down when a lady came up to him to invite him to be her partner. Aloysius at once rose and left the hall. Some time after, his uncle, who could not find him anywhere, chanced to pass through one of the servants' rooms, and there he noticed his nephew, hidden between the bed and the wall, absorbed in prayer. On his return to Castiglione, Don Ferrante only made fresh endeavours to turn St. Aloysius from his resolve. Everyone of weight and influence, relatives and strangers, priests and laymen, whom Don Ferrante could enlist in the work, were employed by him, but in vain, to shake his vocation. Aloysius' only weapon was renewed prayer and increased penance.

At last the chance sight of his son disciplining himself to blood wrung a tardy consent from his father, and Aloysius at once used every effort to procure from the Emperor on whom his states depended, the necessary transfer of the fief to his brother. Meanwhile he went to Milan on some business for his father, who was unable through the gout to see after his affairs. There he astonished everyone by his aptitude and skill. At the same time, he pursued his studies, and used to go to the Jesuit College to attend lectures on science, dressed simply in a cloak, without even a sword, the obligatory mark of gentle birth in those days. In a grand cavalcade during the Carnival, in which all the young men of fashion took part on valuable horses richly caparisoned, accompanied by a large number of attendants, to show how utterly he had given up the world and how he contemned it, he rode through the street where the procession was passing on a miserable old mule and followed by only two servants.

When awaiting orders to return home, his father quite unexpectedly arrived one day in Milan, and, as a last resource, he begged Father Achilles Gagliardi, a Jesuit of great name and the friend of St. Charles Borromeo, to test the vocation of his son. This the Father consented to do, as the Marquis promised him to stand by his decision. His arguments were so powerful and apparently so genuine that Aloysius was somewhat disturbed, for it seemed to him that Gagliardi, whose opinion he so much valued, was opposed to his entering the Society. However our Saint answered so wisely, and so thoroughly, that even his father was forced to admit that the vocation was a true one.

But still the day was not won. Before returning to Castiglione, Aloysius sought strength and light in a retreat at the Jesuit College at Mantua. When he came home he led the life of a solitary in the castle, so strict was his silence, so severe his fasts, so rigorous his penances. His only director was his fervour, and one of the arguments his mother used to induce the Marquis to give his consent that Aloysius might be allowed to enter religion, was that he would be there protected from his own indiscretion, and his life prolonged; for he had grown so weak that he could hardly stand.

But the Marquis in answer to the Saint's fresh request, told him plainly that he never would give his consent until

his son was twenty-five, and that if he chose to go without his leave, go he might, but he would cease to own him as his son. This was a crushing blow to St. Aloysius; and his first thought was to write to the Father General of the Society and ask his advice. But Don Ferrante pressed him so hard for a reply that he had to act on the spur of the moment. He told his father accordingly that he consented to the delay, but only on two conditions, that he should spend the interval in Rome, and that the Marquis should write to the General at once and declare that he had given his consent. St. Aloysius himself wrote a letter to Father Acquaviva, the General of the Society, to tell him what he had done. That Father could sympathise with the young man, for he himself had left high place to enter the Order. Meanwhile arrangements were being made for the Saint's stay in Rome, in a position fitting his high rank. He openly lamented to his intimate friends that he had not been born a simple peasant boy, for then he would have met with no difficulties, if anxious to become a religious. Suddenly, in the midst of his earnest prayers, Aloysius felt an impulse which he could not resist. He followed it, and entering the room of his father, who was confined to bed with the gout, said to him with the greatest firmness: "Father, I leave myself entirely in your hands, you can do what you like with me; but I tell you positively that God has called me to the Society of Jesus, and in resisting my wishes you are resisting the will of God." Then he left the room without another word.

The Marquis turned his face to the wall, and broke out into such a fit of grief that his sobs and cries could be heard outside. He sent for St. Aloysius. "My son," he said, "you have stabbed me to my heart, for I love you and have always loved you, as you indeed deserve. In you I have put all my hopes and those of our family. But as God calls you, I do not wish to keep you. Go where you please, and I give you my blessing."

St. Aloysius thanked his father, and escaped from the room lest he should increase his grief. He hurried to throw himself on his knees, and thank God for this favour so long delayed. The news soon spread through the town, and all were deeply grieved to lose their good young master. Some ventured to press him to stay and be their prince. "I want," he answered, "to be a prince in Heaven. It is hard for a sovereign to save his soul." As the carriage bore him off to Mantua, the poor people filled the air with loud laments over their loss.

There was weary waiting yet. His mother was at the court of the newly wedded Duchess of Savoy, and all the possible heirs expectant to the Marquisate were, by order of the Emperor, to be present at the solemn renunciation. An additional difficulty was, that by the deed, the Marquis had settled a sum of money on St. Aloysius for his own private use. But this was contrary to the rule of St. Ignatius, and, for fear of invalidating the whole, fresh changes had to be made.

At last, on All Souls' day, 1585, in the vast palace of the Gonzagas, in a hall then bright with the creations of Mantegna, a brilliant family gathering were listening to the long document which transferred the succession irrevocably from Aloysius to his young and hot-blooded brother. Don Ferrante was in tears the whole time, while Aloysius was full of joy. As he signed this act of renunciation, he said to Rodolph, who could not conceal his boyish delight, "Well, brother, which of us is the more pleased? I am sure that it is I."

Next day, he bade good bye to his father and mother, and on his knees begged reverently their blessing, but his heart was too full of joy for any grief to show itself in his face: and on the fourth of November he set out for Rome with a suite of attendants which his father had provided for him. Rodolph went with him as far as the riverside; there they parted and the party took boat for Ferrara.

Rumour had gone before as to what he was and what his errand, and the crowds of pilgrims gazed at the young prince, who had made so hard a fight to be poor with Christ. The journey was to him one long prayer, sweetened by penance. At the early dawn, before starting, he made a brief meditation and next recited the day hours of the Divine Office with his chaplain, and the "Itinerarium" or prayers for travellers. He then mounted, and rode on alone, absorbed in thoughts of God, and if ever he called the priest to his side it was only to talk to him on holy things. While the horses baited, he broke his fast, and then said Vespers and Complin, and mounted again. His mind flew off to the rigorous life he hoped to spend in religion, and to lands where dangers and death awaited him in his zeal for souls. Did England and the gibbet of Tyburn come before his mind? It was then ennobled with fresh Martyrs' blood.

When the evening came on sharp and cold, he would never warm himself at the inn fireside, but spent two hours in prayer, and scourged himself as was his wont. After this he said Matins and Lauds; and only then came down to partake of a very poor supper. But for the prohibition of his confessor, he would have continued his regular and

constant fasts.

Towards the close of November, Rome appeared to the travellers, not crowned as now by the mighty dome, but suggestive as ever of the devout thoughts which it recalls to the pious millions who have trodden its sacred soil. The party went to the house of the Patriarch, Scipio Gonzaga.

After a short rest, St. Aloysius hastened to the old house, then standing in all its poverty, wherein St. Ignatius and his first companions had lived, and where the holy founder, B. Peter Favre and St. Francis Borgia had died. Father Acquaviva came down to meet him in the garden; and the Saint threw himself at his feet and renewed the offering of himself. The General raised him up, and kissed him affectionately on the forehead.

On Saturday, November 23, St. Aloysius went to an audience of the Holy Father. As he was waiting in the ante-chamber a crowd of courtiers gathered round him and looked with wonder upon one who turned his back upon wealth and honours. Pope Sixtus V. asked Aloysius if he had weighed well the difficulties and wearisomeness of a religious life, but when the Saint had told him that he had considered the matter thoroughly and for a long time, the Pontiff encouraged him to persevere, and gave him a hearty blessing.

On Monday, the feast of St. Catherine, the Saint with his attendants went up the Quirinal hill to the Noviciate of Sant' Andrea, then fresh with the memories of St. Stanislaus. At the door, St. Aloysius bade good-bye to his faithful household, giving them a message to his father and mother. "What shall we say to Rodolph?" they asked. "He who fears God, will do good," were the Saint's well-timed words. The Patriarch stayed to say Mass and give Holy Communion to his dear relative, and then remained to dine with Father General, who had come there to meet them. When all the guests were gone, and St. Aloysius was led to the room where he was to spend in solitude the first days of his religious life, he burst out into those fitting words: "This is my rest for ever, here will I dwell, for I have chosen it." He then went on his knees and thanked God for the grace which had come at last, and St. Catherine's feast was ever after a marked day in his calendar.

In the early days of his religious life, his father died, and died too, as he had lived since his son's entry into religion, a most exemplary and edifying life. Aloysius, though he wrote a letter of condolence to his mother, so mastered his grief that it seemed as if he had forgotten his father and his father's house.

His novice-master at Sant' Andrea, as at the Gesù, was a man of very signal virtue. To him he unveiled his whole heart, and the very simplicity and humility of Aloysius only made the Father reverence him the more deeply. It fell out that the superior's health broke down, and to save his life the doctors ordered him to be carried in a litter to Naples, and three of the weakest novices were ordered to keep him company. Of these was George Elphinstone, of good Scottish family, whose uncle had died a saintly death but a short time before as a novice in the Society at Naples; St. Aloysius was another, and as he was the weakest, Father Pescatore, the novice-master, would have him with him in his litter. The Saint tried to evade the luxury, but when ordered to accept it, was delighted to be privileged with the company of one so holy and so learned in the science of the soul, and as the Father poured out his rich seed of spiritual knowledge on so well prepared a soil, Aloysius owned that he learnt more in that journey than in all the noviciate together.

At Naples he had for his companion the Blessed martyr, Charles Spinola, who was to give his life so gloriously for God in far-off Japan, and the memory of St. Aloysius was fresh in his mind during the horrors of his terrible prison at Omura. At Naples as at Rome the thirst for lowliness and suffering was the conspicuous characteristic of the Saint, and God chose to allow him to suffer some unintentional neglect during a long and dangerous attack of erysipelas. He was as radiant and joyous under it as always.

Another six months saw St. Aloysius back in Rome, but this time in the great Roman College, then fresh from the hands of its magnificent builder, Gregory XIII. It was at that time, as it has been with some sad intervals till the taking of Rome in 1870, a sort of Catholic University, where the students of the National Colleges, gathered under the shadow of the Vatican, drank in theology at its fountain head. There came the new recruits for England's conversion, the future martyrs and confessors and controversialists, to whom the venerable College of St. Thomas of the English gave, thanks to the generosity of the Roman Pontiff, what was refused to them at Oxford and Cambridge. And in the lecture rooms of the Roman College, no less than ten, who were to witness by their blood on English scaffolds to the faith delivered by St. Augustine, sat for some time by the side of St. Aloysius<sup>1</sup>. And with them was Matthew Kellison,

who for 28 years was president of the English College of Douay; Father Blount, the first Provincial of the English Province of the Society, and the well-known Father John Gerard, S.J.

St. Aloysius now began, at the age of 19, his final studies of theology, the queen and mistress of all others; hardly could he have been under better auspices, for Suarez, Vasquez, and Azor were among his professors. Those who knew him best said that he was to them a loving picture of what St. Thomas of Aquin must have been when young. His piercing intellect, his brilliant memory, his docile respect for his professors' views, his horror of eccentric opinions, were the least remarkable points of the likeness. His burning ardour in prayer, his strict fidelity to his spiritual duties, the constant union of his heart and thoughts with God, his genuine contempt of himself, were still closer traits of resemblance; and above all, the marvellous purity of his soul. So intimate was his union with God, that when asked by his superior, St Aloysius was forced to own that for six months, the period which the question regarded, the length of all his distractions together would not amount to the space of a Hail Mary.

And his prayer only made him more ready to oblige, ever happy and joyful at recreation, though his talk was always of God, ever at the service of any and of all, always anxious to bear another's burden, to serve the sick and poor in the hospitals, or the cook in the College kitchen, and never more pleased than when in poor and old clothes, engaged on lowly and distasteful work.

On St. Catherine's day, 1537, our Saint bound himself still closer to God by his first religious vows; and in the following year, on four successive Sundays, received the four Minor Orders in the Basilica of St. John Lateran. The surplice in which he is represented reminds us of this. A Martyr shared with him this fourfold privilege, the Maronite Abraham Giorgi, who, in 1605, gave his life for his God on the shores of the Red Sea.

But a rude interruption of our Saint's studies was soon to occur. He was resting for a few days from the heat and toils of Rome with his companions on the green uplands of Frascati, when Ven. Father Bellarmine was sent by the General to bid him to leave at once for Lombardy. His brother Rodolph had been deprived of his rightful succession to the Castle and property of Solferino. His uncle Horace had left it away from him by will to the Duke of Mantua, in spite of imperial law, and the Duke held it by right of might. The impetuous Marquis of Castiglione, impatient of all delay, was determined to try his quarrel by an appeal to arms, and the Duchess of Mantua and Lady Martha, the Marquis' mother, wrote to the Father General to beg him to send Aloysius, as the only hope of staying a fratricidal war.

In a quarter of an hour our Saint was on his way; He travelled in company with a lay brother, and though his delicate health and the urgency of the business required that he should go on horseback, he journeyed in as lowly a way as his superiors would allow. He inspired everyone with reverence; the very ostlers listened to his holy words, and revealed to him the secrets of their souls, nor could they tear themselves away from him. Much against the wish of Aloysius—his arrival at Castiglione had been announced beforehand—he was welcomed by ringing of bells, by salutes of artillery, and still more by the loving reverence of prince and people. And he met with similar marks of honour from his uncle Alphonsus, in his town of Castel Goffredo. But he lived with the greatest simplicity in his mother's house, refusing to be treated otherwise than as a poor guest.

Though the Duke of Mantua had steeled his heart to any arguments from others, one hour and a half of conversation with Aloysius made him come to terms and render up the castle of Solferino at once to the Marquis. And in a still more delicate affair was our Saint equally successful. Rodolph had fallen in love with a rich and beautiful girl of his States, had carried her off to his castle, and married her there. But the marriage was kept a profound secret, as his uncle, Alphonsus, wished him to espouse his daughter. Rodolph feared, as the event proved, lest if he knew of the wedding he should try to transfer his fief from him, the lawful heir, to his own child. St. Aloysius, like the rest of the world, was ignorant of the marriage, and he implored his brother to put an end to a grave scandal. He pressed him so hard that he avowed his marriage. The Saint insisted further that, to remove the scandal, his brother was bound to make the marriage public. He gained even this point, and persuaded Alphonsus and the rest of the Gonzaga family to acknowledge the bride.

Meanwhile the Saint, to his joy, got back to religious life at the great College of the Society, the Brera of Milan. There he was so fond of sweeping the corridors and dusting down the walls, when any person of distinction happened to go by, that to see Aloysius, broom in hand, was enough to show that some distinguished visitor was in the College.



Yet among his own brethren, so clearly did his talents and remarkable capacity for affairs shine forth that he was called the little General; and grave Fathers looked upon him as destined one day to hold high office in his Order. Those who knew best the secrets of his soul found that he had climbed to heights of holiness which are never even dreamt of but by a few.

There came to him while at the Brera a distinct intimation that the next year was to be his last, and that he must in consequence strive to give the finishing touches to his perfection. Just then arrived a letter from the Father General summoning him back to Rome. "If," he said in a letter, on receiving the news, "we have a country on earth, I know of none but Rome." It was a time of terrible famine, of which thousands were dying in the cities and in the country. The horrors of want were increased by the plague of brigands, which burst forth as soon as the stern hand of Sixtus V. was relaxed by death. His companions on the road remarked to St. Aloysius how fortunate for them it was that they had not been born in poverty, and the Saint at once replied, "How much more fortunate not to have been born among the Turks!"

After visiting the house of Saint Catherine, at Sienna, and approaching Holy Communion in her house, they set out with a large party, gathered together, no doubt, out of fear of the brigands. A storm broke over them, and the river Paglia, which flowed beneath the hills, grew at once to so furious a torrent that some eighteen who attempted to pass were swept away down the stream. Suddenly a man was seen crossing at a spot where never ford was known to be. St. Aloysius urged them to pass over by that way. They did so and in safety; and as they did not meet with the man, they felt sure he must have been the guardian-angel of our Saint.

On reaching Rome, St. Aloysius parted even with his theological notes, as the one thing he had kept and cared for on earth; and he begged for a room which was so dark and small that it was never tenanted before. There he lived more than ever abstracted from the things of earth. He used to say that he feared the dignity and responsibility of the priesthood, and would be glad if God would call him away while yet in His grace. His wish was soon to be granted. A fearful contagion, the child of famine, supervened, and Father Acquaviva opened a hospital for the poor and went to serve there himself. St. Aloysius volunteered for the work. Not content with going about the streets to beg for their support, and writing to his mother, and the Marquis, his brother, he went into the thick of the work, specially revolting as it was, and choosing by preference the most loathsome cases. He undressed, he washed the poor sufferers, put them to bed, brought them their food, and prepared them for death. He found on his way to the hospital, one day, a poor wretch in filthy rags, lying on the ground, stricken by the plague. He raised him up, and gently and tenderly he led him to the hospital. The contagion struck the weary and worn youth, and on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1591, he was forced to take to his bed, and within a week he received the last Sacraments, rejoicing that the foresight was verified, and that he was going to God.

His sufferings were to be prolonged as a source of merit to himself and of example to all around. He bound himself by vow, if he did recover, to return to the plague stricken. He sipped the nauseous drugs given to him, nor did he ever speak to anyone of the terrible bed sores which he had contracted. Now and again he got up, but only to spend a long time in prayer at the foot of a crucifix, or to kneel, as when a child, between the bed and the wall.

An old Father was dying in another part of the house, who was deeply attached to St. Aloysius. He asked the infirmarian to bring the Saint to his bedside, and there he humbly begged him to give him his blessing. This St. Aloysius stiffly refused, and the dying man was able only to extort from him a compromise. A few nights afterwards three times did old Fr. Corbinelli appear to St. Aloysius in his sleep. He strove to make light of these dreams, and even blamed himself for paying any heed to them. No one told him the fact that the Father had died that night. But St. Aloysius had a firm conviction that the departed soul was with God; and he asked Father Bellarmine, his confessor, if there were any who went straight to heaven. The Father was not afraid to tell him, not only that some there are who do so, but that he thought that Aloysius himself would be one of those. In a rapture of delight, the Saint lay awake all that night full of the thoughts of Paradise. The time passed by as a moment, and it was revealed to him then that he would go to his reward on the octave of Corpus Christi.

The news of this revelation got about, and all his brethren were anxious to receive his parting words and to give him their commissions for heaven.

He would not hear a word, since he took to his bed, but of God and of the things of God. He was deeply grateful

when anyone would say for him the Penitential Psalms while he gazed upon his crucifix, or if they would read to him some other psalms of his own choice, such as “I rejoiced at the things that are said to me, I go into the house of the Lord,” or prayers from St. Anselm or St. Bernard.

He caused two letters to his mother from his sick bed, to be written, and others to three of his special friends in religion, one of whom was his former master of novices. When Father Vincent Bruno, who had special charge of the sick, had told him that his end was near, he begged one of his brothers to join him in a hearty *Te Deum*. His latter hours seemed one long ecstasy, and he kept an indulgenced crucifix for the last three days tightly clasped to his heart.

The morning of the octave day had come, and brought no nearer sign of death; but St. Aloysius said quietly in reply to all good wishes, “I shall die tonight.” The morning passed. All the time he had been rapt in prayer. During the day he begged for Viaticum, but the infirmarians rejoined that he had received it once, and it could not be repeated. The new Pope, Gregory XIII., was told of his state by his relations, and during the afternoon, he sent him his blessing. St. Aloysius was so confounded, in his humility, at this mark of honour, that he hid his face in his hands, and the Father who bore the message had to calm his trouble by saying that his Holiness must have heard of his illness by chance. In the evening, a Father and old friend of his, came from Sant’ Andrea, and the Saint begged him to intercede with the Rector that he might have the Viaticum. The favour was granted, and with a beaming face he prepared for It by saying the Litany of the Blessed Sacrament. Then his Lord came to give His faithful servant His last embrace. After his Communion, Aloysius bade a long good-bye to each and all present. Just then the Father Provincial arrived to see him; “How fares it, Brother Aloysius?” he playfully enquired. “We are going,” was his reply. “And where?” said the Father. “To Heaven.” “To Heaven?” asked the Provincial. “If my sins do not stop me, I hope in God’s mercy to go there,” broke in the dying Saint. The Father turned to those around, and said in a low voice: “Just listen! He talks of going to Heaven, as we would talk of going to Frascati.” As Fr. Ceparì, his future biographer, was holding up his wearied head, that he might look upon the crucifix, the Saint took off his cap out of reverence to his Lord. Night fell and there was no sign of death, so only two or three were allowed to stay with him. One of these was the future Cardinal Bellarmine. “Now, Father,” said St. Aloysius at last, “it is time!” And they recited the prayers for a departing soul. But the infirmarian soon dismissed even Father Bellarmine, as he did not think his patient would die that night; and the Saint was left with but two Fathers.

Ever and anon a word or so of Holy Writ came from his lips, or he kissed the crucifix, while the Fathers suggested to him some holy thought. His pains increased, and he would fain have been moved, but his assistants did not dare to do so, and encouraged him to drink bravely the last dregs of the cup. He gazed hard at the cross, and seemed to gather from that look strength to bear and to conquer. Then his speech failed him, and they placed in his chilled hands the lighted candle, the beautiful figure of constant faith; and as he fixed his eyes on the Crucified, and strove to utter the Holy Name, he quietly passed to his reward.

It was between nine and ten on the night of the 20<sup>th</sup> June, the first vespers of the first Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi, the future feast day of the Sacred Heart, and, in the Church’s reckoning, the 21<sup>st</sup>. That frail body, glorified by many miracles, lay some time in a humble tomb in the “Church of the Annunciation” of the Roman College. St. Mary Magdalen of Pazzi, while in a rapture, proclaimed his glory in heaven. God quickly honoured his servant. Paul V., in 1605, declared him Blessed, and his sepulchre was made glorious in the new church of St. Ignatius at Rome. In 1726, Benedict XIII. canonized him on the same day as his brother in religion, St. Stanislaus Kostka, and declared him to be the patron and pattern of all young students. And now, with St. John Berchmans, they form a “*triplex funis*”, a triple cord, to guard our young against the threefold snare of the World, of the Flesh, and the Devil.

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