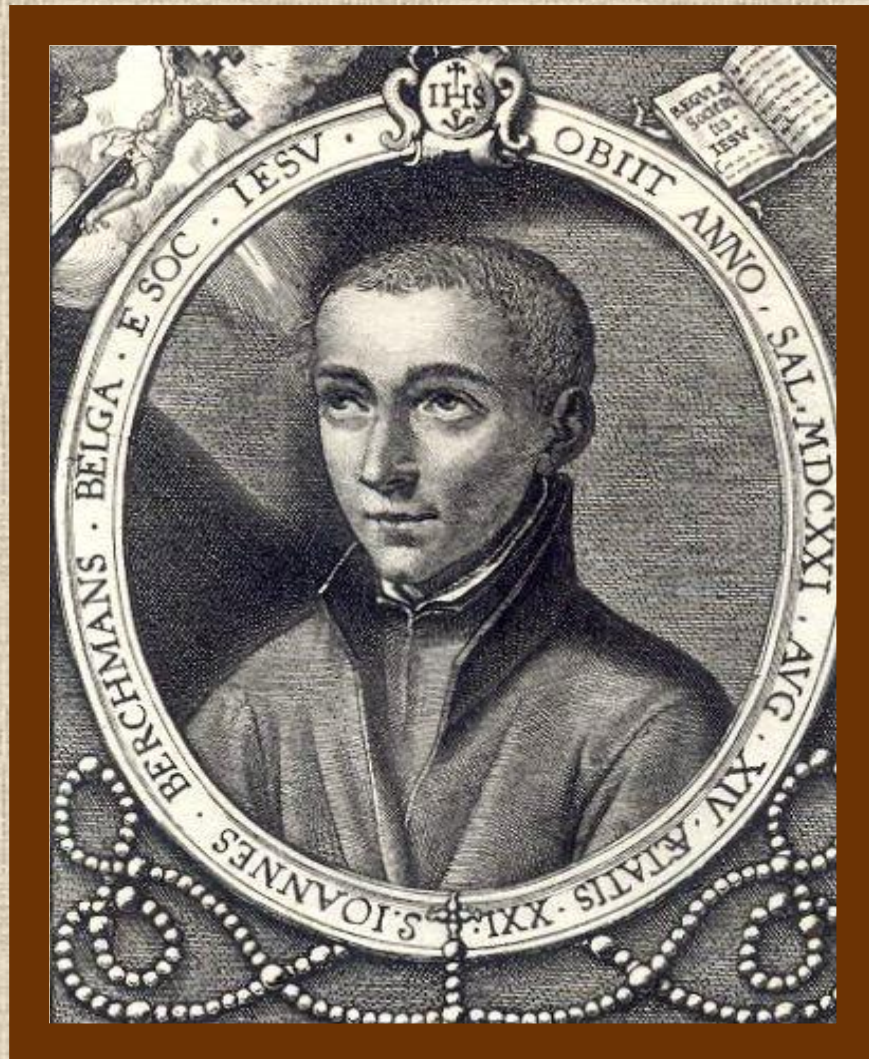


The Life of Saint John Berchmans



The Life of Saint John Berchmans

(Author Unknown)

COVER ART: Engraving of Saint John Berchmans.

SOURCE: Alfred HAMY, Galerie illustrée de portraits S.J., 1893. This image is in the public domain because its copyright has expired. This applies to Australia, the European Union and those countries with a copyright term of life of the author plus 70 years.



* This work is in the public domain in countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 70 years or less.

THE ANGEL SAINTS

THE BEAUTIFUL title of “The Angel Saints” has been given to that triad of exquisite flowers of dazzling purity that bloomed in the garden of the Society of Jesus: Saint Aloysius, Saint Stanislaus, and Saint John Berchmans. These three blossoms unfolded their stainless petals just sufficiently to let us dimly guess at the beauty that lay concealed within their hearts to be unfolded as these radiant blossoms developed into full flower. “Angel” was the term applied to them by those amongst whom these holy youths lived and died. It was the highest expression of the wonder and admiration of those who knew them. It conveys to us, with marvelous force and accuracy, the impression the Saints produced on those around them. If one of the angelic spirits who surround the Throne of God was permitted to come down on earth in mortal guise, it seemed to men that he would look like these whose earthly forms reflected the beauty of their souls.

Eminent sanctity is ever and always attractive, but it is especially so to the children of men when to it is allied the ineffable charm and grace of early youth united to the most stainless innocence. The hardest-hearted, and the most worldly, are touched by this supernatural sight and, driven as they are to seek an explanation for the phenomenon in supernatural causes, they apply the term that so fittingly describes it, “Angel.”

BIRTH OF SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS

MIDWAY BETWEEN Antwerp and Maestricht lies Diest, an ancient town with a fine market place; narrow, medieval streets; and strange old houses, with curious pointed gables. Diest is a sleepy old Flemish town of the Middle Ages and there is nothing within its walls to arrest the attention of the ordinary tourist. However, to the Catholic it possesses the supreme interest of being the birthplace of a saint—one of the “Angel Saints.”

Leading from the market town is a narrow street, on the left of which a house, three stories high attracts the traveler’s attention, not indeed, because of anything remarkable in its architecture. It is unassuming in style and the front seems of recent construction. However, in the center of this house is a niche. Within this niche is the statue of a youth in the habit of a religious holding in his clasped hands a book, a rosary, and a crucifix. Underneath an inscription tells us this is “The house of Blessed Berchmans.” Our Saint was born here on Saturday, the 13th of March in 1599. The room where he first opened his eyes upon earthly scenes is still shown, but it is in a sadly dilapidated condition.

PARENTS OF SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS

TOWARDS THE CLOSE of the sixteenth century, there dwelt in this house, then known as the sign of “The Great and the Little Moon,” a worthy citizen of Diest named Charles John Berchmans. He was a man of stainless integrity and stood high in the esteem of his fellow townsmen, by whom he was elected to some of the most important posts in the Municipal Council. The reigning sovereign, Archduke Albert, had appointed him echevin, or one of ten magistrates appointed to keep the peace of the city. His father had held the post and so had two of his brothers.

The Berchmans were among the best families in Diest but, like all the Flemings, they did not disdain trade. Hence, Charles Berchmans followed the avocation of a cordwainer, or shoemaker, at the sign of “The Great and the Little Moon.”

Berchmans’ wife, Elizabeth Vanden Hove, was a member of a rich and influential family in Diest. Although not of older or gentler descent than the Berchmans, the Vanden Hoves, by means of their wealth, had attained to a far higher position in the social world. We are told that no cordial relations would seem to have existed between the two families. Hence, we may infer that the wealthy Vanden Hoves resented the marriage of a poor Berchmans with a daughter of their house.

Charles and Elizabeth Berchmans were regarded by the people of Diest as models of piety and virtue. They had four sons and one daughter and the pious couple spared no effort to train these souls committed to their care, from their earliest years, to walk in the paths of holiness and virtue.

SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS’ CHILDHOOD

ON THE DAY FOLLOWING his birth, John was taken to the parish church of Saint Sulpice and baptized, receiving his father’s second name. The old church, much defaced by the storms of troublesome times through which it has passed, still stands in the market place and in the yellow pages of the ancient baptismal register the entry of the saint’s baptism may still be traced.

From his earliest years, John manifested the most unalterable sweetness of disposition. Long afterwards, when he had passed away to heaven, those who had known him in his early years loved to recall how visibly God had set his seal upon him even from infancy.

Of a joyous and bright disposition, his sunny brow was never clouded by childish petulance or ill humor. Naturally vivacious and ardent, he was never seen to give way to temper or impatience. Even when abused and ill treated by other boys, as will, of course, sometimes happen amongst boys, John bore all meekly and without complaint.

He was sent, when very young, to a day school. It sometimes happened on his return that his knocks at the house door passed unnoticed, whereupon the holy child would steal away to the church of Saint Sulpice. There, kneeling at the foot of Our Lady's statue, he would recite five or six rosaries. When not yet seven years of age, he was in the habit of rising before daybreak. When his grandmother remonstrated with him for getting up so early, the little fellow answered, "Oh! Dear Grandmamma, I must serve my two or three Masses before school time. What better place could there be to win knowledge quickly and surely?"

HIS MOTHER'S ILLNESS

JOHN HAD barely reached his ninth year when his mother was stricken with a mortal malady that for eight weary years confined her to a bed of suffering. Our Saint loved his mother tenderly. He was at her side constantly and ministered to her, cheered her, and consoled her with such words of saintly wisdom as filled those who heard him with amazement. In her moments of greatest suffering, the presence of her angelic little son soothed and consoled the poor mother.

John was indeed the most winning and attractive of boys. Everyone loved him, but, child as he was, he shrank from observation and shunned society. He never left his home except to go to school or to the church. His master bears witness to his retiring, modest disposition. "Nowhere," he tells us, "did he see him so often as in the church and nowhere so seldom as in the streets."

JOHN'S FUTURE GLORY PREDICTED

JOHN BERCHMANS seems to have manifested remarkable talent and aptitude for study from an early age. His master, Wouter Van Stiphout, kept his school in the medieval cloth market, which still, at the present day, is used as the public school. When John reached his eleventh year, he was entrusted to Stiphout's care and in a very short time succeeded in gaining Stiphout's deep and lasting affection. Stiphout loved this beautiful, saintly boy, and admired his brilliant gifts. John was, indeed, a pupil of which to be proud.

Diligent, painstaking, he quickly outstripped all his young companions. "I looked upon him," says Stiphout, "as a sort of natural wonder. I praised him before my scholars and proposed him to them as a model for their emulation. One day, when his father was

asking me how he was getting on, I recollect saying, “How blessed you are in such a son! He will be your consolation and my honor and glory.” Truly, these prophetic words would receive glorious fulfillment in just a few years.

VOCATION FOR THE PRIESTHOOD

OUR SAINT’S vocation was never for a moment uncertain. His pure, spotless heart never held any desire or knew any ambition, save that of serving his God at the altar. His father, urged by Stiphout’s earnest words, consented to allow his son to obey the call of God and to put on the clerical dress.

At that time, the parish priest of the Church of Our Lady in Diest was a Premonstratensian monk named Father Peter Emmerick. This religious had gathered round him at the presbytery a number of pious youths with vocations for the priesthood, thus forming, as it were, a sort of seminary.

At this time, John’s father found himself in strained financial circumstances. Yet, he determined to send his son to Father Emmerick. Charles Berchmans’ lively faith and fervent piety caused him to shrink from no sacrifice whereby his children’s welfare (and above all, their spiritual welfare) might be secured. And God richly rewarded those sacrifices.

JOHN’S NEW LIFE

FROM THE DAY John Berchmans left his father’s house to go to Father Emmerick, he scarcely ever visited his old home again. He continued to attend Stiphout’s school, as it was quite near his old home, but the new home at the presbytery of Notre Dame seems to have filled his heart completely.

Wonderful is the record left to us of this boy’s life during the years spent with Father Emmerick. It was his delight to serve Mass, which he did with the most profound recollection. He loved to hear the Word of God, and he would sit drinking in the preacher’s words with a thoughtful gravity befitting someone older. He was extremely reticent, never speaking but when spoken to, and then his words were very few and measured. Withal he was a merry, bright boy.

YOUTHFUL VIRTUE

JOHN'S OBEDIENCE was prompt and unquestioning, and he was ever ready to serve others. He contrived that a good portion of the servants' work should fall to him. He would sit near the door with his books to attend promptly to the bell. It fell oftener to his turn to read in the refectory than to any of the others. He especially delighted in the Book of Proverbs, the Lives of the Saints, and the Passion of Our Divine Lord.

As a rule, boys delight in eating, but John never thought about his food. He took everything that was given to him, never finding fault with anything. He ate sparingly and when in the refectory seemed so abstracted that those around him used to make jokes, telling him that his mind went to travel whenever he went to the refectory. Despite all the mortification and recollection, our young Saint was not prevented from being the brightest and sweetest of companions. Everyone loved him. Never was he known to dispute or quarrel. He often acted as peacemaker in his companions' quarrels. If he found he could not restore harmony, he would quietly slip away.

LOVE OF PRAYER

WE HAVE SEEN how, even in early childhood, John shrank from going amongst people. This dislike of society grew with his youth. His first master, Stiphout, declared that John's aversion to the world arose from the exquisite delicacy and purity of his conscience. He said, "John was ever so simple and innocent, that he did not even know by name vices that boyhood has too often an inclination. And this was why he kept away so much from his companions."

During the recreation hour, he would stay in his room engaged in prayer or study until his master, fearing the effect of such application upon his health, forced him to join his companions. Sometimes he would be found absorbed in prayer in the most out-of-the-way corners in the house.

FIRST COMMUNION

DURING HIS STAY with Father Emmerick, Saint John Berchmans made his First Communion, being at the time between eleven and twelve years of age. Who can tell with what burning love and fervent piety he prepared to receive his Divine Lord into his pure heart! He made his general confession to Father Emmerick, who was filled with awe and "admiration at the seraphic beauty and purity of that young soul. He tells us that he could not restrain his tears when he saw the "angel who was at my feet, all bathed with

tears, as with deepest contrition he accused himself of the lightest faults.” So great was John’s innocence that Father Emmerick hesitated to give him absolution, as he doubted there was sufficient matter in John’s confession.

When the great day at last arrived, the day so long desired, so ardently looked forward to, the Saint received his Hidden God from Father Emmerick’s hands in the venerable church of Notre Dame. More than ever, like an angel was the holy child at that moment: The venerable priest declared that the boy’s face was radiant shining with the light of purity and the burning love that consumed him. John’s First Communion proved for him, as indeed it does for all children, an epoch in his life. Henceforth, he advanced in the path of holiness with great strides. His love of God grew greater daily. His whole soul was, as it were, on fire with love for his Lord. The sacred Name of Jesus, the first his mother had taught his baby lips to utter, filled him with ecstasy. Let us quote from his master again, “When he began to make progress in Latin versification, I gave him leave to choose a subject for a theme in verse. He brought me a eulogy on the Name of Jesus, so full of meaning, tenderness, and unction, that it was easy to surmise, even then, that one day he would enter the Society of Jesus.” A copy of this poem, in which John strove to express his pure heart’s burning love for Jesus, is still preserved in the Royal Library in Brussels.

While living in the presbytery of Notre Dame, Saint John Berchmans went to confession every week and received Holy Communion twice during the month as well as on all great feasts.

HIS LOVE FOR OUR BLESSED MOTHER

SECOND ONLY to his love for Jesus, was that felt by our Saint for Mary. From his infancy, he had the most childlike trust and confidence in her. The mere mention of our Lady brought a heavenly smile to his beautiful face and when he spoke of her there was a light in his eye and a tenderness in his voice, that revealed the depth of his love. All the witnesses for the cause of his beatification testified to the Saint’s extraordinary devotion to the Immaculate Mother of God. He never passed a statue of our Lady without saluting it and he never left the church without paying a visit to Mary’s altar. He used to deprive himself of a portion of every meal in her honor, and many and ingenious were his contrivances to hide this.

The Queen of Purity showed how acceptable to her was the love and devotion of this spotless young heart. She shielded her favorite from the lightest breath of evil. The lily of spotless purity bloomed in angelic loveliness in John’s heart. Innocent as he was of even the name of vice, a supernatural instinct caused him to shrink with horror from the

slightest thing that could tarnish the luster of his virginal purity. He would never allow anyone to touch him and the least levity in words or action on the part of any of his companions caused John to shun the delinquent's company.

SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF MONTAIGU

ABOUT A LEAGUE from Diest, on the summit of a very high hill, stands the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Montaigu, which is especially dear to the Belgians. The stately church that crowns the hill top was not completed until after our Saint had passed to Heaven. The foundation stone was laid by the Archdukes Albert and Isabella; but the good Albert did not live to see its completion eighteen years later.

John made repeated pilgrimages to the Shrine of our Lady of Moritaigu. There was nothing he loved better than to walk from Diest to the Sanctuary, observing strict silence as he went, meditating on our Lady, and reciting her Rosary.

TROUBLES

CLOUDS WERE gathering over the Saint's peaceful life of prayer and study in the presbytery of Notre Dame. Charles Berchmans' financial difficulties had not lessened. Rather, they had grown greater. His wife's last illness had entailed heavy expenses, to say nothing of the serious loss that the want of her presence and prudent management was to his home. Business was bad and his other children were growing up and required education. In his sore straits, the father's thoughts turned to his eldest son, now nearly fourteen. John was a youth of exceptional talent, so his masters averred. Surely, he could be of some use now. At least he could help his father in his business and relieve him of the burden of his support. Accordingly, John was sent for from school, unaware of the blow about to fall upon him. "You see, my child," said his father, "it is impossible for me any longer to bear the expense of your schooling. Up to this, I have made great sacrifices, but I feel it impossible for me to continue them. It seems to me you must learn a good trade. You will by this means be able to be of great use to us, and, instead of being a burden to your family, be a real assistance."

JOHN'S SORROW

WHO CAN describe our Saint's sorrow as he stood by his mother's bed and heard his father's words? We are told that he threw himself at his father's feet, and, with bitter

tears, supplicated, first his father, then his mother, not to take him from the service of God at the altar. “You know, father,” entreated the weeping boy, “God calls me to the Church. A little longer, and I shall be able to follow that holy calling. In Heaven’s name, do not hinder my happiness. As to the expense, you shall have no reason to be alarmed on that score. I will be content with so little you shall not suffer. I can live on bread and water. But, pray, do not refuse me permission to continue my studies.”

As we know, Charles Berchmans was a man of true piety. He was also a tender father. The sight of his boy’s distress affected him to tears and we cannot doubt but that the suffering mother felt an added pang at seeing her angel son, the solace of her life, so wrung with anguish. Charles raised the weeping boy, and poured balm into his troubled heart by promising to reconsider his decision.

JOHN LEAVES DIEST FOR MECHLIN

CHARLES BERCHMAN held anxious council with his wife as to how their son’s holy desires might be gratified. The result of their deliberations was that the elder Berchmans set himself to seek a place where John would receive board and education in return for his domestic services. To us this sounds a strange arrangement, but it was, it seems, quite usual in those days, where there were but few ecclesiastical colleges. Before long, the desired place was found in the house of a Canon in Mechlin.

Great was the grief of the people of Diest when they found that the angel boy, whom all loved, was going to leave them. His old master, Stipbout, said, “While I was congratulating myself on having such a pupil and, in peace, was enjoying this favor from heaven, with one voice, my townsmen gave him the title of the flower of the school and the pride of the scholars. Some persons who envied my good fortune tried to get his father to send him to Mechlin.”

Poor man! Can you not sympathize with him in his grief at losing his saintly pupil? Years afterwards, when he was called on as a witness in the case of John’s beatification, he revealed how deep and lasting was his sorrow for his angel pupil. “Life has been very bitter to me,” says the old man, “since I lost that holy child.”

Our Saint had a loving heart and we cannot doubt but that he, too, felt the parting from father, mother, and all he loved. Yet, God was calling him and the Saint obeyed that call promptly, without pausing to count the cost, as is the way of saints.

Early in 1614, Saint John Berchmans bade farewell to home and friends, and wended his way to Mechlin, then the primatial city of Belgium.

HIS NEW HOME

JOHN NOW FOUND himself a member of Canon John Froymont's household and the Canon was not long in discovering the treasure of holiness God had sent to him. Like all who came in contact with the Saint, Canon Froymont conceived the warmest affection for John, affection that neither time nor distance ever chilled. The Canon kept a number of boys of good family committed to his care. John, upon his arrival, assumed the lowest place in the household and undertook to perform the most menial offices washing plates and dishes, sweeping the yard, and so forth) The Canon, who soon came to regard John in the light of a dear son, would not allow him to continue in such a menial position. He gave John the charge of three little brothers and, in this manner, satisfied John's scruples on the score of working for his living. Our Saint was, indeed, an earthly guardian angel to those children, watching over them, instructing them, and leading them to God with true and unwearied care.

As at Diest, so at Mechlin, John won the admiration and love of everyone. His modesty, his charming manner, and his beautiful appearance took all hearts by storm. No one could look at the beautiful boy without feeling convinced that a soul of dazzling purity and holiness dwelt in the angel-like form. He lived for God alone and, in all places and at all times, his heart was turned to Him as a flower turns to the sun. Young men of the highest families in Mechlin sought John's company, lowly as was his position. John was affable and courteous to all, but no amount of notice could disturb his deep humility or cause a breath of vanity to ruffle his pure heart. He maintained a calm reserve, was ever courteous and obliging, and was willing to spend himself for others.

John devoted Sundays wholly to prayer and God's service. He used to hear two, and sometimes three, Masses, kneeling, without moving and was always present at the Sunday sermon and vespers.

SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS ATTENDS THE JESUIT COLLEGE

IN 1615, the Jesuit Fathers, at the request of the civil authorities, opened a public college in Mechlin. John and some other Canon Froymont's pupils were among the earliest alumni of the new college. Upon presenting himself, John, who attended as a day scholar, was judged fit to become one of the "Rhetoric" class, the highest in classical studies.

In this new sphere, the Saint redoubled his zeal. He was a model to the whole college of every virtue. He scrupulously obeyed his masters, even in the most trivial points. He was the most fervent and edifying of the members of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin.

Every day, we are told, he recited, prostrate on the ground, the Office of the Blessed Virgin; whilst on Saturdays, and the eves of her great feasts he fasted in our Lady's honor. He always remained for two or three hours in prayer after receiving Holy Communion. One Good Friday, he contrived to slip out of the Canon's house at night and to make the Stations of the Cross in his bare feet. Here again, we have proof of John's humility and horror of notice, for we are told that on these occasions, to avoid remark, he wore shoes without soles and stockings without feet. The Saint had a great horror of idleness. He was never known to lose a moment of time. Sometimes he studied the whole night long. This unwearied application and his brilliant talent enabled him to distance all competitors and to carry off the first prizes.

JOHN DECIDES TO ENTER THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

IN 1616, John wrote to his parents that he felt convinced that it was the will of God he should enter the Society of Jesus. He had come to this conclusion after much consideration and long and fervent prayer. His confessor, Father de Greef, fully approved of the Saint's resolution. Referring to his saintly penitent's vocation, Father de Greef stated, "John Berchmans, my pupil and penitent all the time he was attending our college, opened his mind to me about entering the Society. For the same end, by my advice, he used to go to Communion every Sunday, holy day, and, later on, every Thursday even when there were no feast days... Whatever bad behavior might be in class, he was ever the same—modest, attentive, hardworking, never a shadow on his brow, and his face was wreathed in sweetness always. He was always good-natured and kind to all. One would have said he was an angel in the flesh. In conversation, when he had to do or say something, he was always trying to find out what would be the most perfect. Indeed, once or twice by the ardor of his consideration, he lit up in my cold heart some flames of divine love, though feeble, and the very thought of them to this day fills me with confusion when I recall several practices that I suggested to him, and that I have read of in his life."

John's design met with great opposition from his parents, especially his father, who wished his son to become a secular priest; but, convinced of God's Will, the Saint remained firm, and finally triumphed over all obstacles.

"I am greatly surprised," he wrote to his father, "that you, in place of loving and thanking God for the great favor that He has willed to do (to not only myself, but also yourselves) in calling me to holy religion, and to such an Order, where men lead the lives of angels, should counsel me to not listen to our dear Lord and to put off my vocation for five or six months. It is not right, as you well know, that to obey you, I should be disobedient to God. Our dear Lord, when He called a young man to follow Him, would not let him go

to bury his father who had just died, though this was a good work, and one that needed but a short time. When He called another, He forbade him to say good-bye to his friends, saying, ‘No one putting his hand to the plough, and afterwards looking backwards, is fit for the kingdom of God.’ Why do you think He said this, if it was not to show us that we must follow our vocation, then and there, without delay? So then, my ever-honored parents, that I may obey God, our Lord, that I may make my salvation sure, and that I may avoid that fearful sentence: *Vocavi et renuisti; quoque in interitu tuo ridebo*—I called and you refused; I also will laugh at your destruction. I mean, with God’s grace, in a fortnight hence to share the joys of my brothers in religion.”

ENTRANCE INTO RELIGION

ON SATURDAY, 24 September 1616, on the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy, our Saint bade farewell forever to the world and entered the Novitiate of the Society of Jesus in Mechlin. He was then just eighteen years of age and “his face, always beautiful and beaming, was taking the form and shape of manhood.” He was poorly dressed. “He wore a black cloth doublet and breeches of the same, a grey cloak fell from his shoulders, and a stiff white collar, without frills or plaits, supported by a black stock, ran round his neck.” (Father Goldie). Another young student from Bois-de-Duc entered at the same time. “Come, brother,” said the Saint to this young man, “let us rejoice that we are in the house of the Lord, we must not be found unworthy of so great a favor. May both of us always live in this holy Society of Jesus, where God’s service calls us, and may we meet in Heaven after long and hard work.” Then, noticing a lay-brother digging in the garden, “There,” said he, “we can begin at once. There is no better opening for religious life than humility and charity.” Throwing off his cloak, he went to help the good brother. So great was John’s delight at finding himself in the haven of his desire that, throughout that happy day, he could not cease from weeping from joy.

John repeatedly declared to Father de Greef that, in entering religion, he “aimed at nothing less than the most scrupulous fulfillment of the least of the rules of the institute.” “I want to be a Saint,” he said; “yes, and a great Saint, too! Is it possible to conceive that one should not attain an eminent sanctity with all the powerful means of sanctification the society has at its disposal?”

LIFE IN THE NOVITIATE

SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS, from the very first day of his entrance into religion, began to carry out to the very letter his ideas regarding the life of a true religious. Hence,

it is not surprising to hear that in one month he had made more progress than many made in twenty-four. The novices longest in the house felt and acknowledged that this latest arrival had far outstripped them in the science of spiritual life.

John constantly repeated, “perfection does not consist in doing great things, but in doing well what obedience orders and advises.” Again, he used to say, “Set great store on little things.” Another of his sayings was, “Do great penance for small faults. Be a miser and a merchant in spiritual things.”

All his companions looked upon him as sent by God amongst them to be their model of perfection. One of them, soon after John’s entrance, speaking of him, said, “At the very time when our Lady began to work miracles at Montaigu, she wrought a still more extraordinary wonder at Diest by making an angel come down in the flesh.”

Such was the universal testimony of all who ever knew him—his friends in the world, his companions in religion, even strangers who only caught a glimpse of him as a novice—all called him “the Angel.” No other words could express the impression made upon them by his beauty and the purity that exhaled from him like the fragrance of some rare flower. He was also called Saint Hilarius or Saint Laetus, so bright and sunny was his disposition. Gloom and sadness were dispelled by his mere presence. After John’s death, one of the Fathers declared, “I lived two years with him in the Novitiate. Well, I am ready to declare, on oath, I never noticed in him the smallest movement of impatience or anger.”

HIS MORTIFICATION

WITH ALL HIS brightness, his sweetness, and his gentleness, John practiced the severest mortifications. Like all saints, he was severe to himself alone. “A mother to others, a judge to myself.” Obedience was the only limit to his penance and mortification and, in his intense desire to imitate his crucified Lord, he actually wrung from his confessor permission for penances that seem to us beyond the powers of mortal endurance.

We are told, “in the Novitiate of Mechlin, part of a rough and prickly hair-shirt was kept that he usually wore and cloths with which he had staunched the blood his scourgings made to flow. During the keen frosts of a Flemish winter, he hardly ever went near a fire though his hands and ears were cruelly chapped by the cold.”

“My penance above all others,” he used to say, “is common life. May I die rather than violate deliberately the smallest order or rule. I would rather lose my health altogether than not keep a rule in “order to preserve it.” Again, he says, “Rather die than for health’s sake break a single rule.”

HIS HUMILITY

OUR SAINT, as we have already seen, regarded humility as the foundation of all perfection. Hence, he loved and sought everything that could foster and strengthen the growth of this virtue in his soul—the lowest and most menial offices, the poorest clothes, reproofs, and corrections. He repeatedly begged that his faults might be “known publicly.”

At last, his request was granted and Father Banters tells us, “I told all the novices, then more than one hundred, to jot down and give me in writing any defects they had noticed in Berchmans’ conduct. I got these notes and, upon opening them, found that not one had been able to observe the smallest defect in him.” Truly, this was a marvelous testimony to John’s holiness of life. John’s confessor encouraged the Saint in his love for humiliations and his great desire to be looked upon both by God and man, as nothing. In this way, he prepared himself for the close union with God that he continually enjoyed.

HIS LOVE OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT

HOW CAN we describe the love of this pure heart for Jesus in the Adorable Sacrament of the Altar? Seven times a day, at least, he visited the Prisoner of Love in His Tabernacle, and he always paid a last visit just before retiring to rest. This practice, initiated by the Saint, is still observed in many houses of his Order.

HIS MOTHER’S DEATH

TWO MONTHS after the Saint’s entrance into religion, his mother’s long life of suffering ended. She died on 1 December 1616. After her death, Charles Berchmans resolved to devote the remainder of his life wholly to God. He seems at first to have had a great desire to enter the Society of Jesus; but, doubtless, his advanced age prevented the realization of his wish. On 14 April 1618, he was ordained priest and, as a mark of his fellow citizens’ esteem, was made Canon in the church of Saint Sulpice, where John had been baptized.

Charles, the Saint's youngest and favorite brother, entered the Society of Jesus four years after John's death, lived to a ripe old age, and died in the odor of sanctity. Adrian, the second son, also became a religious of the Augustinian Order. He, too, died a saintly death, following John into eternal life nine years later.

FIRST VOWS

ON 25 SEPTEMBER 1618, John made his first vows. A few days later, he received orders to go to Antwerp to enter on his course of philosophy. The College of the Society at Antwerp, where our Saint resided for two months, is now a military hospital.

At Antwerp, as wherever he went, John made the same deep and lasting impression of profound holiness on everyone who came in contact with him.

In 1622, the Superior of the House declared under oath that he "as well as many others, having only known Berchmans during those few days, regarded him as a fervent Jesuit, a perfect servant of God, a real saint."

On 18 October, the joyful news was communicated to the Saint that his Superiors had decided to send him to Rome for his philosophical and theological studies. His departure was fixed for the following Monday. With his superiors' permission, he wrote to his father asking him to meet him at Mechlin on the 20th, to say farewell. When John reached Mechlin, the news awaited him that his father had been already dead a week. It was a great blow, but John was a saint and, to saints, all that comes from the hand of God is sweet and welcome. When told the sad news, he raised his eyes to heaven and exclaimed in the words of Saint Francis of Assisi, "Then, I can henceforth really say, "Our Father, Who art in Heaven."

HIS NOVICE MASTER'S TESTIMONY

FATHER BAUTERS, the novice-master at Mechlin, writing of the Saint after his death, said, "During the whole time he lived in the Society in Belgium he was a striking and, as far as nature allows, perfect model of religious observance, a mirror of regularity All of us who had the happiness, to live with him, have been of one opinion on that subject. In our midst, he led a truly angelic life by the great innocence of his heart, the modesty of his behavior, his wondrous courtesy and gentlemanly manner, his peaceful way of acting, his perseverance in all the good he undertook, his perfect and prompt

obedience, his rare prudence on every subject, and the fervor displayed in all he did, without ever losing sight for a single moment of the presence of God, like the angelic spirits who walk ever in His sight. He has made him a saint. He has crowned him with a crown of glory.”

ARRIVAL IN ROME

ON THE last day of 1618, after a long and weary journey from Antwerp, John and Bartholomew Penneman, the young scholastic who accompanied him, entered the House of the Gesu. They were received with fatherly kindness by Father Vitelleschi, the sixth General of the Society of Jesus. A few days later, the new arrivals went to their future home, the Roman College, situated close by. The Rector of the College was then Father Cepari, who afterwards wrote the Saint’s life, as he did also that of Saint Aloysius.

LIFE IN THE ROMAN COLLEGE

OUR SAINT’S time on earth was drawing to a close. However, three short years remained to him before exchanging earth for heaven. How rich were those years in every fruit of sanctity and virtue! We have seen our Saint in his childhood home, in the Novitiate at Mechlin, ever growing in holiness, and ever spreading around him the sweetest perfume of spotless innocence and purity. His various confessors, from Father Emmerick of Diest to Father Cepari, who received his last sigh, all declared that John had never lost baptismal innocence. Let us listen to Father Cepari as he describes the Saint during those last years of life in the Roman College.

FATHER CEPARI’S TESTIMONY

“JOHN’S PERFECTION was so great that it extended not merely to one or two virtues, but to all, and to each virtue in particular. This is a thing so unusual as to astound anyone who understands what it means to be full of the virtues that are called those of “purified souls,” which Saint Thomas rightly teaches are not to ‘be found but with the blessed in Heaven and a few most perfect souls on earth.’ This is what we all admired in him, that in every virtue he showed himself to be perfect. . . . He used to, of his own accord and twice every month, give me, as his superior and father, an account of his conscience . . . his every thought, feeling, and wish. I remember once while he was telling me what God was doing for him and how he was corresponding with these graces, I was quite overcome, and I said to myself, ‘O happy youth in whose soul God is so well pleased! O

blessed child, to whom God has given a privilege like that gift of grace and original justice He conferred upon Adam!’ In our eyes, he was so consummately exact and faultless that no one has ever been found who could say that he had noticed in John the smallest moral fault, or observed even a little imperfection in what he did.”

FURTHER TESTIMONY TO JOHN’S SANCTITY

FATHER JOHN BAPTIST Ceccotti was confessor and spiritual Father to the juniors during John’s time in the Roman College. “I can say with truth,” he declares, “as regards the inner life of John that I have never found a soul of greater purity and spotlessness than his . . . His brethren loved and revered him as an angel from heaven . . . I cannot find words to express the idea I have of the angelic purity and innocence of so spotless a religious. . . . I firmly believe that upon his blessed soul leaving his body it went forth so cleansed and spotless that it flew straight up to Heaven without touching Purgatory.”

LAST ILLNESS AND DEATH

WOULD THAT we could trace at greater length the life of this angel on earth. Space forbids us to linger, but enough has been said to convey some idea of Saint John Berchmans’ wondrous sanctity.

Our Saint was seized with illness on 5 August 1621. At first, no fatal results were apprehended, but the Saint himself seemed to have received some interior warning that the end was near.

“On Friday, the 13th of August, 1621, with his eyes fixed on the crucifix, clasping in his hands his beads and rule-book, and pronouncing the sacred names of Jesus and Mary, his pilgrimage came to a happy close. He gave back in peace his blessed soul into the hands of his Creator, leaving us all edified by his innocent and holy life, and consoled by so “precious a death.” (Father Cepari).

MIRACLES

THE PRECIOUS remains of Saint John Berchmans were placed in a wooden coffin, which was laid in a new vault of the Chapel of Saint Aloysius. While his angelic body still lay awaiting burial, God was pleased by a striking miracle to bear testimony to

John's great sanctity. For three months before the Saint's death, a lady sixty-eight years of age, Catherine de Reccenati, had been affected by almost total blindness. At her request, she was taken to the bier on which the holy remains lay. Father Aloysius Spinola was present and describes it saying, that he "told her to take one of the fingers of John and, with it, to touch her eyes. She did so and immediately cried out, 'I am cured; I can see.' Again she applied the finger and recovered her sight immediately."

PORTRAIT OF THE SAINT

FATHER CEPARI draws a portrait of the Saint, saying, "John was of fair height, a ruddy complexion, an excellent temperament, and by no means thin. His face was really angelic, pink and white, his forehead broad, his eyebrows so thick that they seemed to be black, and the same might be said of his eyelashes. His eyes were bright and lively, but bashful and full of goodness and sweetness, and ever downcast. His nose was regular and slightly aquiline, his lips small and ruddy. There was always a modest smile playing about them. His hair was light . . . His hands were always quiet and composed upon his breast. His walk was neither slow nor hurried, but moderate and grave. His whole carriage was so modest as to strike all who met him . . . People would stand still to gaze at him and enjoy the spectacle of so rare a model of modesty. To sum up all, we may say that God gave a beautiful body to match a pure and beautiful soul and John's outward look was an image of his mind, a form of justice, as Saint Ambrose wrote of Mary ever a Virgin." (Father Cepari, Rector, of the Roman College).

BEATIFICATION AND CANONIZATION

ON 28 MAY 1865, during the Pontificate of Pius IX, the Decree of Beatification was solemnly pronounced in Saint Peter's. On 22 January 1888, Pope Leo XIII issued the Bull of Canonization.

The Saint's precious relics now repose in a magnificent tomb in the church of Saint Ignatius. Among the Saint's papers was found a vow, written partly in his blood, by which he bound himself to defend Our Lady's Immaculate Conception.

PRAYER TO SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS

O LILY of purity and model of the most exact obedience,
Saint John Berchmans!

We choose thee for our special Patron and we entreat of thee to
obtain for us from Jesus and Mary that,
by carefully guarding our senses and
by the faithful discharge of our several duties,
we may jealously watch over and preserve the beautiful flower of purity.

Inspire us with a very tender devotion, such as thou didst cherish,
towards the Queen of Virgins and the angelic youth Aloysius,
whom thou so well knewest how to copy in thyself.

Obtain for us detachment from every earthly thing, so we may,
with our whole strength, love Jesus and Mary, and,
enclosed in their hearts during life,
come to love them and rejoice with them in thy company
for all eternity in Heaven. Amen.

V. Pray for us, Saint John.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

LET US PRAY

O God, who didst bestow on Saint John wonderful holiness,
by the perfect observance of regular discipline and singular innocence of life,
grant by his merits and prayers that,
keeping faithfully all the Commandments of Thy law,
we may secure for ourselves purity of soul and body;
through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

SODALITY OF SAINT JOHN BERCHMANS

FOR

ALTAR SERVERS

A TOWN may have several notable buildings, some distinguished by their architecture or by the treasures they enshrine and others by their associations with the past and the memories they arouse. In every town or village, however, one building stands apart on a plane by itself. Other buildings may be architecturally finer or may have involved a greater expenditure of money in their erection, but this building stands apart as one requiring esteem and veneration all its own. This building is the church, the House of God.

What a wonderful place for a Catholic is his church or chapel. At its font, he was baptized and became a child of God. At its Altar Rails, he received the “Bread of Life for the first time and continues to receive it constantly as the Spiritual Food of his soul.

From its pulpit, he hears the Word of God. In its Confessional, he listens to the sentence of pardon that reconciles him to his Creator after he has offended Him by sin. On its Altar is renewed the Sacrifice of Calvary, the Clean Oblation that is offered up to God from the rising to the setting of the sun. Above all, it is in the church that dwells, in a special manner, Christ his Savior Who, from the Tabernacle, invites him to come for comfort when he is troubled and disturbed by the cares and worries of life. “Come to Me all you that labor and are burdened and I will refresh you.”

How great, therefore, should be our reverence and decorum in the House of God! With what care and respect should we not comport ourselves in this holy place where we are, in a very real sense, under the very Eye of God! Above all, if we are privileged to take part in ceremonies or rites in God’s House, to perform on earth those offices the Angels fulfill before the Throne of God in Heaven, should not our modesty, and entire bearing show that we are conscious of this great privilege?

To impress the dignity and holiness of their work upon those who are thus privileged to serve at the Altar of God and to enable them to carry out their duties with all possible solemnity and reverence is the object of the Sodality of Saint John Berchmans.

This Sodality was founded by Father Vincent Bastile, S.J., who presented a Petition to His Holiness, Pius IX, that it be approved and enriched by special privileges and indulgences.

In an audience granted on 21 September 1865, Pope Pius IX gave his approval to the Sodality and granted the following Indulgences, applicable to the Holy Souls:

A Plenary Indulgence on the day of admission to the Sodality and also on the Feast of Saint John Berchmans, 26 November, on the usual conditions.

A Plenary Indulgence on each of the five Sundays that precede the Feast of Saint John Berchmans, in remembrance of the five years he spent in the religious life.

An Indulgence of 100 days each time a Sodalist serves Mass or makes a genuflection with due reverence in the church or behaves himself with religious modesty therein.

An Indulgence of seven years to such Sodalists as shall recite the five prayers in honor of Saint John Berchmans.

In addition, the Holy Father granted that this Sodality can be established in any place, by any priest, secular or religious, with the approbation of the Ordinary.

Nihil Obstat:

Carolus Doyle, S.J.

Censor Theol. Deput.

Impriimi Potest:

✠ EDUARDUS,
Archiep. Dublinen.,
Hiberniae Primes, Dublini,
die 25 Octobris 1935



“Chorknabe”

Painted in 1854 by German artist, Julius Scholtz, (1825–1893).
The painting is in the Public Domain. *



* This work is in the public domain in countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.



This e-book was produced by:

The Seraphim Company, Inc.

**8528 Kenosha Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000**

www.servi.org