

St. John of God
(Portugal/Spain) 1495-1550

*Patron Saint of Nurses and Nurses' Associations
declared by Pope Pius XI in 1930.^{1 2}*

*His followers formed the Brothers Hospitallers of St. John of God,
a world-wide Catholic religious institute
dedicated to the care of the poor,
sick and those suffering from mental disorders³*



St. John of God is one of two saints who were declared patrons of nurses and nursing associations by Pope Pius XI in 1930. He was born on March 8, 1495, in Portugal, to poor devout Christian parents. He left home and worked as a shepherd in Castille for the count of Oropeusa. At age 22, to avoid marriage to the shepherd's daughter, he enlisted in the Roman Emperor's army where he lived a dissolute life. He left the army in 1535 and went to Andalusia in 1536. He repented of his past sins and began exercises of prayer and mortification. With some companions he planned to go to Africa to help the slaves and perhaps suffer martyrdom. While enroute and in Gibraltar, he was waylaid to help a gentleman along with the gentleman's family who had been condemned to banishment by King John III who had confiscated their estate. He journeyed with them to Ceuta supporting them by what he made from day-labor.

He returned to Gibraltar and worked as a peddler selling little pictures and books of devotion. In 1538, at age forty-three, he opened a shop in Granada selling his increasing stock. Here he heard a sermon preached by St. John D'Avila, Doctor of the Church, on the soldier St. Sebastian's day, which caused him great anguish in regards to his past sins. He exhibited so much anguish and remorse and was physically self destructive that he was placed in a "madhouse."

There St. John D'Avila came to visit him and convinced him to be more moderate in his mortifications. John of God remained in the hospital until 1539 when he was released on St. Ursula's day. He focused on doing something for the poor. He went on pilgrimage to our Lady of Guadalupe asking her intercession. He began selling wood to feed the poor. He soon rented a house of harbor for poor sick persons. Thus in 1540, he began the foundation which would become a world wide ministry. He cared for the sick day and night while the townspeople brought him all the necessities for his little hospital. The archbishop of Granada, seeing the great charitable work, was also a benefactor. The bishop of Tuy bestowed upon him the name, John of God, and gave him a habit. The marquis of Tarisa tested his charity by disguising himself and asking for alms. When he observed that John gave all he had, the marquis returned this money along with 150 crowns of gold and daily sent bread, sheep and hens to the hospital. When the hospital caught fire, St. John of God walked through the fire to carry out on his back the patients. He was seen to stand in the fire and was not burned.

Additionally, he assisted many person exposed to misfortune in their own homes. He provided doweries for young maidens who otherwise would not be able to marry and he helped remove others from desolate living. He fell sick after ten years of hard service in the hospital. The cause of his illness was severe fatigue after attempting to rescue, in full habit, a person in danger of being drown in a flood. The lady Anne Osorio found him confined in his bed with a basket under his head for a pillow, covered by an old coat for a blanket. She notified the Archbishop and had him removed to her home. She with her own hands and her maids fed him broths and read to this the history of the passion of our Lord.

The archbishop ordered him to give the city his dying benediction. The archbishop heard his confession, gave him viaticum and extreme unction, promised to pay his debts and provide for the poor. St. John of God died on March 8, 1550. He was buried by the archbishop. His followers formed the Brothers Hospitallers of St. John of God, a world-wide Catholic religious institute. The rules were drawn up in 1556, six years after his death. Religious vows were introduced in 1570. His order of charity to serve the sick was approved by Pope St. Pius V (1566-1572).⁴

St. John of God was beatified by His Holiness Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644)³ in 1630 and canonized by Pope Alexander VIII (1689-1691)³ in 1690. His relics were moved into the church of his brethren in 1664. St. John of God is the patron saint of nurses and nurses associations, hospitals, hospital workers, the sick and dying. (Memorial - March 8).¹

*“Labor without intermission to do all the good works in your power,
while time is allowed you.”*

*“In the twilight of life, God will not judge us on
our earthly possessions and human success,
but rather, on how much we have loved.”*

*“Lord, Thy thorns are my roses,
and Thy sufferings my paradise.”*

The following is from the *original* Reverend Alban Butler's Lives of Saints (1883) republished in 2020 by Loreto Publications:⁵

Title: St. John of God, Confessor “Founder of the Order of Charity.

St. John, surnamed of God, was born in Portugal, in 1495. His parents were of the lowest rank in the country, but devout and charitable. John spent a considerable part of his youth in service, under the mayoral or chief shepherd of the count of Oropesa in Castile, and in great innocence and virtue. In 1522, he listed himself in a company raised by the count, and served in the wars between the French and Spaniards, as he did afterward in Hungary against the Turks, while the emperor Charles V was king of Spain. By the licentiousness of his companions, he by degrees lost his fear of offending God, and laid aside the greatest part of his practices of devotion. The troop which he belonged to being disbanded, he went into Andalusia in 1536, where he entered the service of a rich lady near Seville, in quality of shepherd. Being now about forty years of age, stung with remorse for his past misconduct, he began to entertain very serious thoughts of a change of life and doing penance for his sins. He accordingly employed the greatest part of his time, both by day and night, in the exercises of prayer and mortification, bewailing almost continually his ingratitude towards God, and deliberating how he could dedicate himself in the most perfect manner to His service. His compassion for the distressed moved him to take a resolution of leaving his place, and passing into Africa, that he might comfort and succor the poor slaves there, not without hopes of meeting with the crown of martyrdom. At Gibraltar he met with a Portuguese gentleman condemned to banishment, and whose estate had also been confiscated by King John III. He was then in the hand of the king's officers, together with his wife and

children, and on his way to Ceuta in Barbary, the place of his exile. John, out of charity and compassion, served him without any wages. At Ceuta, the gentleman, falling sick with grief and the change of air, was soon reduced to such straits as to be obliged to dispose of the small remains of his shattered fortune for the family's support. John, not content to sell what little stock he was master of to relieve them, went to day-labor at the public works to earn all he could for their subsistence. The apostasy of one of his companions alarmed him, and his confessor telling him that his going in quest of martyrdom was an illusion, he determined to return to Spain. Coming back to Gibraltar, his piety suggested to him to turn peddler and sell little pictures and books of devotion which might furnish him with opportunities of exhorting his customers to virtue. His stock increasing considerably he settled in Granada, where he opened a shop, in 1538, being then forty-three years of age.

The great preacher and servant of God, John D'Avila, surnamed the Apostle of Andalusia, preached that year at Granada on St. Sebastian's day, which is there kept as a great festival. John, having heard his sermon, was so affected that, melting into tears, he filled the whole church with his cries and lamentations, detesting his past life, beating his breast, and calling aloud for mercy. Not content with this, he ran about the streets like a distracted person, tearing his hair, and behaving in such a manner that he was followed everywhere by the rabble with sticks and stones, and came home all besmeared with dirt and blood. He then gave away all he had in the world, and having thus reduced himself to absolute poverty that he might die to himself and crucify all the sentiments of the old man, he began again to counterfeit the madman, running about the streets as before, till some had the charity to take him to the venerable John D'Avila, covered with dirt and blood. The holy man, full of the Spirit of God, soon discovered in John the motions of extraordinary graces, spoke to him in private, heard his general confession, gave him proper advice, and promised his assistance ever after. John, out of a desire of the greatest humiliations, returned soon after to his apparent madness and extravagances. He was, thereupon, taken up and put into a madhouse, on supposition of his being disordered in his senses, where the severest methods were used to bring him to himself, all which he underwent in the spirit of penance, and by way of atonement for the sins of his past life. D'Avila, being informed of his conduct, came to visit him, and found him reduced almost to the grave by weakness, and his body covered with wounds and sores; but his soul was still vigorous, and thirsting with the greatest ardor after new sufferings and humiliations. D'Avila, however, told him, that having now been sufficiently exercised in that so singular a method of penance and humiliation, he advised him to employ himself for the time to come in something more conducive to his own and the public good. His exhortation had its desired effects, and he grew instantly calm and sedate, to the great astonishment of his keepers. He continued, however, some time longer in the hospital, serving the sick, but left the hospital entirely on St. Ursula's day, in 1539. This his extraordinary conduct is an object of the fervor of his conversion, his desire for humiliation, and a holy hatred of himself and his past criminal life. By it he learned in a short time perfectly to die to himself and the world, which prepared his soul for the graces which God afterwards bestowed on him. He then thought of executing his design of doing something for the relief of the poor; and, after a pilgrimage to our Lady in Guadaloupa, to recommend himself and his undertaking to her intercession, in a place celebrated for devotion to her, he began by selling wood in the marketplace to feed some poor by the means of his labor. Soon after he hired a house to harbor poor sick persons in, whom he served and provided for with an ardor, prudence, economy, and vigilance, that surprised the whole city. This was the foundation of the order of charity, in 1540, which by the benediction of heaven, has since been spread all over Christendom. John was occupied all day in serving his patients: in the night he went out to carry in new objects of charity, rather than to seek out provisions for them; for people, of their own accord, brought him in all necessaries for his little hospital. The archbishop of Granada, taking notice of so excellent an establishment, admiring the incomparable order observed in it, both for the spiritual and temporal care of the poor, furnished considerable sums to increase it, and favored it with his protection. This excited all persons to vie with each other in contributing to it. Indeed, the charity, patience and modesty of St. John, and his wonderful care and foresight, engaged everyone to admire and

favor the institute. The bishop of Tuy, president of the royal court of judicature in Granada, having invited the holy man to dinner, put several questions to him, to all which he answered in such a manner as gave the bishop the highest esteem of his person. It was this prelate that gave him the name of John of God and prescribed him a kind of habit, though St. John never thought of founding a religious order, for the rules which bear his name were only drawn up in 1556, six years after his death, and religious vows were not introduced among his brethren before the year 1570.

To make trial of the saint's disinterestedness, the marquis of Tarisa came to him in disguise to beg an alms on pretense of a necessary lawsuit, and he received from his hands twenty-five ducats which was all he had. The marquis was so much edified by his charity, that, besides returning the sum, he bestowed on him one hundred and fifty crowns of gold, and sent to his hospital every day during his stay at Granada one hundred and fifty loaves, four sheep, and six pullets. But the holy man gave a still more illustrious proof of his charity when the hospital was on fire; for he carried out most of the sick on his own back, and though he passed and repassed through the flames, and stayed in the midst of them a considerable time, he received no hurt. But his charity was not confined to his own hospital: he looked upon it as his own misfortune if the necessities of any distressed person in the whole country had remained unrelieved. He therefore made strict inquiry into the wants of the poor over the whole province, relieved many in their own houses, employed in a proper manner those that were able to work, and with wonderful sagacity laid himself out every way to comfort and assist all the afflicted members of Christ. He was particularly active and vigilant in settling and providing for young maidens in distress, to prevent the danger to which they were often exposed, of taking bad courses. He also reclaimed many who were already engaged in vice, for which purpose he sought out public sinners, and holding a crucifix in his hand, with many tears exhorted them to repentance. Though his life seemed to be taken up in continual action, he accompanied it with perpetual prayer and incredible corporal austerities. And his tears of devotion, his frequent raptures, and his eminent spirit of contemplation, gave a luster to his other virtues. But his sincere humility appeared most admirable in all his actions, even amid the honors which he received at the court of Valladolid, whither business called him. The king and princes seemed to vie with each other who should show him the greatest courtesy or put the largest alms in his hands; whose charitable contributions he employed with great prudence in Valladolid itself and the adjacent country. Only perfect virtue could stand the test of honors amid which he appeared the most humble. Humiliation seemed to be his delight; these he courted and sought and always underwent them with great alacrity. One day when a woman called him hypocrite and loaded him with invectives, he gave her privately a piece of money and desired her to repeat all she had said in the marketplace.

Worn out at last by ten years' hard service in his hospital he fell sick. The immediate occasion of his distemper seemed to be excess of fatigue in saving wood and other such things for the poor in a great flood, in which, seeing a person in danger of being drowned, he swam in his long clothes to endeavor to rescue him, not without imminent hazard of his own life, but he could not see his Christian brother perish without endeavoring at all hazards to succor him. He at first concealed his sickness that he might not be obliged to diminish his labors and extraordinary austerities, but in the mean time he carefully revised the inventories of all things belonging to his hospital, and inspected all the accounts. He also reviewed all the excellent regulations which he had made for its administration, the distribution of time, and the exercise of piety to be observed in it. Upon a complaint that he harbored idle strollers and bad women, the archbishop sent for him and laid open the charge against him. The man of God threw himself prostrate at his feet, and said: "The Son of God came for sinners, and we are obliged to promote their conversion, to exhort them, and to sigh and pray for them. I am unfaithful to my vocation because I neglect this; and I confess that I know no other bad person in my hospital but myself, who, as I am obliged to own with extreme confusion, am a most base sinner, altogether unworthy to eat the bread of the poor." This he spoke with so much feeling and humility that all present were much moved, and the archbishop dismissed him with respect, leaving all things to his discretion. His illness

increasing, the news of it was spread abroad. The lady Anne Osorio was no sooner informed of his condition but she came in her coach to the hospital to see him. The servant of God lay in his habit in his little cell, covered with a piece of an old coat instead of a blanket, and having under his head, not indeed a stone, as was his custom, but a basket in which he used to beg alms in the city for his hospital. The poor and sick stood weeping round him. The lady, moved with compassion, dispatched secretly a message to the archbishop, who sent immediately an order to St. John to obey her as he would do himself, during his illness. By virtue of this authority she obliged him to leave his hospital. He named Anthony Martin superior in his place and gave moving instructions to his brethren, recommending to them, in particular, obedience and charity. In going out he visited the blessed sacrament, and poured forth his heart before it with extraordinary fervor; remaining there absorbed in his devotions so long, the lady Anne Ossorio caused him to be taken up and carried into her coach in which she conveyed him to her own house. She herself prepared with the help of her maids, and gave him with her own hands, his broths and other things, and often read to him the history of the passion of our Redeemer. He complained that while our Savior, in his agony, drank gall, they gave him, a miserable sinner, broths. The whole city was in tears; all the nobility visited him; the magistrates came to beg he would give his benediction to their city. He answered, that his sins rendered him the scandal and reproach of their country; but recommended to them his brethren, the poor, and his religious that served them. At last, by order of the archbishop he gave the city his dying benediction. His exhortations to all were most pathetic. His prayer consisted of most humble sentiments of compunction and inflamed aspirations of divine love. The archbishop said mass in his chamber, heard his confession, gave him the viaticum and extreme unction, and promised to pay all his debts, and to provide for all his poor. The saint expired on his knees, before the altar, on the 8th of March in 1550, being exactly fifty-five year old. He was buried by the archbishop at the head of all the clergy, both secular and regular, accompanied by all the court, noblesse, and city, with the utmost pomp. He was honored by many miracles, beatified by Urban VIII in 1630, and canonized by Alexander VIII in 1690. His relics were translated into the church of his brethren in 1664. His order of charity to serve the sick was approved by Pope Pius V. The Spaniards have their own generals, but the religious in France and Italy obey a general who resides at Rome. They follow the rule of St. Austin.

One sermon perfectly converted one who had been long enslaved to the world and his passion, and made him a saint. How comes it that so many sermons and pious books produce so little fruits in our soul? It is altogether owing to our sloth and willfull hardness of heart, that we receive God's omnipotent word in vain and to our most grievous condemnation. The heavenly seed can take no root in hearts which receive it with indifference and insensibility, or it is trodden upon and destroyed by the dissipation and tumult of our disorderly affections, or it is choked by the briars and thorns of earthly concerns. To profit by it, we must listen to it with awe and respect, in the silence of all creatures, in interior solitude and peace, and must carefully nourish it in our hearts. The holy law of God is comprised in the precept of divine love, a precept so sweet, a virtue so glorious and so happy as to carry along with it its present incomparable reward. St. John, from the moment of his conversion, by the penitential austerities which he performed, was his own greatest persecutor; but it was chiefly by heroic works of charity that he endeavored to offer to God the most acceptable sacrifice of compunction, gratitude, and love. What encouragement has Christ given us in every practice of this virtue by declaring that whatever we do to others he esteems as done to himself! To animate ourselves to fervor, we may often call to mind what St. John frequently repeated to his disciples, "Labor without intermission to do all the good works in your power, while time is allowed you." His spirit of penance, love, and fervor he inflamed by meditating assiduously on the sufferings of Christ, of which he often used to say: "Lord, thy thorns are my roses, and thy sufferings my paradise."² *From his life, written by Francis de Castro, twenty-five years after his death, abridged by Baillet, p. 92, and F. Helyot, Hist, des Ordes Relig. T. 4, p. 131. AD 1550.*

References:

- 1) "Patrons of nurses." Patrons of the Faith. CatholicSaints.Info. 21 January 2022. Web. 28 May 2022. <<https://catholicsaints.info/patrons-of-nurses/>>
- 2) The Monks of Solesmes (1960). *The Human Body: Papal Teachings*, Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 189.
- 3) Catholic Online. Accessed 28 May 2022. https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=68
- 4) The List of Popes (1911). In the Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved May 28, 2022 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12272b.htm>.
- 5) Reverend Alban Butler (1883). March 8, St. John of God in *The Lives of the Saints* as republished by Loreto Publications: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2020. Book Two, Volume II & III - October and November, 330-340.

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls*. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka