

# Saint John of God

Passages from the book: *Ritratti di Santi* by Antonio Sicari ed. Jaca Book



To be born towards the end of the fifteenth century, just three years after the discovery of the "New World" meant inevitably to assimilate from a very young age, a taste and yearning for adventure, that which characterised the sixteenth century.

Moreover if you were born in Portugal, the land of the great navigators; Bartolomeo Diaz who discovered the "Cape of Tempests" and the "Cape of Good Hope" in 1486, Vasco de Gama who in 1497 sailed around the Cape and arrived in Calcutta; Alvares Cabral who discovered Brazil in 1500; Magellano who arrived at the Great Strait to sail into the Pacific Ocean and circumnavigate the globe.

John Cidade Duarte was born in 1495 in Montemor-novo (*Montemaggiore Nuovo*), a village with a prominent name.

Adventure is difficult when a father is only a modest shop-keeper who sold fruit on the corner of a street, even if he is known to be a dreamer who would have wished to enrol in Vasco de Gama's expeditions; having a wife and son hindered him.

Very little is known about John as a child, until at the age of eight he meets a wayfarer; a wayfarer who came to his home asking for lodgings and entertained his hosts with tales of his journeys.

It is not possible to know what happened, but the morning after his parents realise that the wayfarer has left and that the child has escaped with him; escaped or perhaps kidnapped. Who knows!

One thing is certain and that is that they are unable to trace him, and his mother, broken-hearted from the anguish, died about twenty days later. His father will end his days in a Franciscan Convent.

Little John will make a long journey on foot to Madrid, with beggars, acrobats and jugglers, learning these strange professions.

When they were near Toledo, the wayfarer abandoned the boy, who was perhaps worn out, to the care of a kind hearted man of the place, Francisco Majoral, who was the supervisor of the herds of the Earl of Oropesa, a man of whose kindness and virtue are known.

For six years, John will be educated like a son: then, from the age of fourteen to twenty-eight, he will live as a shepherd, in loneliness in the mountains and in contemplation of nature, following the herds.

Finally, when it seems that he can settle down by marrying Majoral's daughter, with whom he had lived as a brother from the age of eight years old, John escapes again.

Charles V is enrolling troops to fight against the French who have taken Pamplona (where Ignazio of Loyola, the heroic defender, had been injured and where, on the other side, Francis Saviours elder brothers had fought).

John Cidade wanted freedom: "Such freedom, is written in his biography, that only those who follow wars, running the wide road (even if it costs fatigue) of vice".

We are in an epoch in which, after the Medieval Knight, the figure of the "soldier" is beginning to appear.

However, for our adventurer military life only reserves misfortune. Once, while galloping on his horse, it became restive and threw him against rocks on the side of the track, John remained for a long time, unconscious, as though he was dead.

Another episode: he was put on guard of the soldier's loot and imprudently let himself be robbed: he was degraded and condemned to death; he was granted pardon thanks to the intervention of the pity of an important man.

Both were physical experiences of death and grace, which sunk deep in his conscience.

He thus returned to his old master, Majoral, after an interminable journey on foot of about six hundred kilometres, a failure, and began, against his will, his old job as a shepherd.

Two years went by. In 1527 he heard that the Sultan of the Turks, Solimano 11, has entered Hungary and was about to attack Vienna. His desire to fight in battles returns.

In 1532, Charles V began to prepare a Crusade against the Turks and recruits men wherever it is possible.

John enrolled and began to travel once more; his troop is sent to Barcelona, and is then transferred across the sea to Genoa, they then move towards the Lake of Garda where all the Imperial troops are concentrated. From here, the army moves towards Verona, Trent, Bressanone, and Innsbruck. Then finally, by boat they sail down the Inn and to the Danube.

Thus, Charles troops can enter Wien in September 1532.

A real battle was not fought, but the danger of the Turks was avoided for a while.

After a few months, the troops began their return journey, taking the same roads, but John Cidade's company was given orders to cross Germany, and at Flanders to hire a ship for Spain.

They went ashore at the port of La Coruna, not long from Santiago di Compostela, where they all went on pilgrimage. The company then broke up.

Only then, suddenly, did John think of returning to his hometown that he had abandoned as a child; he walked the six hundred kilometres that separated him from Montemoro-novo. When he arrived in the town, he looked for his parent's house, hoping to find them still alive.

When he found out what had happened to them, he was shocked and full of pain and guilt. He felt responsible for their death: "I am so bad and guilty, he says, that I must spend my life, the Lord's gift, doing penitence and serving Him".

He went then to Siviglia where he begins to deal in livestock: in fact, he goes to work for a rich Lady as a shepherd. This work will last only for a few months.

He is restless. He goes to Gibraltar and thinks of enrolling in one of the Charles V expeditions against the Tunisians.

In Ceuta he puts himself to the service of an impoverished nobleman, but ends up taking care of the family who are reduced to poverty, keeping them with what he earned. Charity opens his heart: he finds a spiritual guide who recommends that he read the Gospel and other spiritual books.

He returns and emerges in reading spiritual texts: he spends all his savings to buy books for himself and others and starts travelling from village to village selling books to the cultured and holy images to the unlearned and youth.

Before he sold them, he read as much as he could; then, he put other types of literature on view to sell but when the young boys came to buy them he would discourage them and would advise them to buy the spiritual ones. He went as far as to open a bookshop.

The fact that John had learned is evident; six long letters written by him remain today, which contain numerous quotations from the *Gospel* and *The Imitation of Christ*.

At forty-three years of age, he is in the position to live comfortably in his shop in Granada.

God is waiting for him in that month of January of 1539, the feast of Saint Sebastian, when, one of the most famous preachers of the time, John d'Avila, the Andalusian apostle, arrives in the city.

John is among the listeners and hears the words, that everyone must "anchor himself or herself to the will of suffering and even dying rather than commit sin, which is the most dangerous plague".

Everyone understands the referent, because the region is devastated by the plague.

On hearing this comparison, our "book seller" is caught in an uncontrollable sense of petition; images of his disorderly life pass before his eyes, and the sins he has committed since he was a young boy.

From the middle of the crows of listeners, he began to shout: "Mercy, my God, Mercy".

He seemed to have gone crazy: he threw himself on the ground, beat his head on walls, and tore his beard. He then ran towards his shop, followed by a crowd of children who running behind him shouted: "Crazy! Crazy".

He gave his money to whoever wanted it, he gave away his holy books and pious objects, he tore up, using his teeth also, the profane books he had, he went as far as to deprive himself of his clothes.

He then went to John d'Avila, made a long and complete confession, after this he went to the Town Square where there was a big quagmire; he rolled in the mud, and started to confess his sins publicly.

The children threw more mud at him and John then went away: happy, with a cross in his hand, which he offered everyone, he met, to kiss.

Some biographies say that he did this in order to appear to be mad "for the love of Christ".

Whereas others maintain that in fact he had gone truly mad: too much of an experience, too much tension, too much darkness and too much light, too much hardness and too much tenderness, and above all too much need of love and the absence of real objects that were worthy of love.

In fact, he ended up in an asylum: one of those asylums of the times where the cure consisted in chaining the over agitated, and calm them with huge doses of lashings!

However, this man was strange, even in his madness.

When he was whipped, he coaxed the 'nurses' to continue "because it was right that that body that had sinned be punished".

However, if they whipped some other poor patient, he would become angry and chide the nurses. "Traitors, why do you treat these poor creatures so badly and with such cruelty, they are my brothers, who are in this same house of God and in my company? Would it not be better to have compassion on them in their trials, keeping them clean and giving them food to eat with more charity and affection than you do"?

He also reminded them of the salary they received; it was to take care of the ill and not to ill-treat them.

The result was that he received in return a double ration of lashing.

But John said: "I pray that Jesus Christ will one day grant me the grace to have a hospital where I can receive the abandoned and the poor wretched souls who have lost their sense of reason, in order to serve them as I desire".

The great Spanish poet, Lope de Vegas dedicated a poem to Saint John of God, in which he commented the episode of his madness and the humiliation he underwent:

"To be Portuguese and humiliated is frightening; because to receive whipping insolence and to suffer such dishonour by the Castigliani, on a Portuguese is something unheard of; in fact the Portuguese are so honourable that, if God had not taken on himself that dishonour on His honour, I do not know how it could have been tolerated. Thus the dishonour was divided between God and him, because, if it had not been so, John being a Portuguese would never have been able to endure it".

A few days later he went to the director of the asylum and says:  
"Blessed be the Lord God, I fell in good health and free from all anguish".

To prove this he asks to be allowed to serve the other patients and shows amazing serenity and charity in carrying out his task.

When he was dismissed from the asylum he undergoes another shock: in front of the entrance to the hospital a funeral procession is passing, it is the funeral of the beautiful Empress Isabelle Augusta, Charles V's wife, who is being accompanied to her burial in the Granada royal chapel.

In the same manner as the Earl Frances Borgia had decided to take up the way of sanctity, that sight definitely convinced John, if it was still necessary, to dedicate his life to the service of Our Lord, taking care of the poor.

He was forty-four years old and he had only eleven years left to live. Nevertheless, in such a short time, he will become "the Father of the Poor", "the patriarch of Charity", "the Magnificence of Granada", "the Honour of his Century"; he will be endowed with all these titles.

He began working, gathering and selling wood, until he had the means to buy a hovel in front of the fish market, where he will gather is first forlorn.

At the market he will ask for the fish which has not been sold, it was impossible to conserve it in those days, and he cooked it for his patients, so much so, that he became an expert in preparing fish soup.

Every evening he would go to the richer areas of the town, with a pannier on his back and two pots hanging from each side, held by a cord which he passed around his shoulders, shouting:

"Does anyone want to do themselves good? My brothers, for the love of God, do good to yourselves!".

This is the significant motto that, today gives his religious Order its name: "Fatebenefratelli", (which means: do well, my brothers). The expression originally did not mean that one had to take care of the poor, but that it was necessary "to do good" being good to your neighbour.

It is not possible to really love the poor if first we have not discovered our own incredible poverty, our duty to enrich our own miserable lives, doing good to ourselves by doing good to others.

The Saints that loved poverty and the poor had seen richness in that love that filled their existence more than any treasure could have done.

The motion of charity never moves from a rich person to a poor person but from one poor person to another; from a person who has discovered his poverty notwithstanding his riches and that these have been given in order to "buy a treasure in Heaven" doing good here on earth.

The first donations began to arrive and so he could enlarge the house. John began to accept the sick selecting and distributing them according to their illness: a room for those who had a fever, one for the wounded, one for the invalid; the ground floor was reserved for the wayfarers and beggars who could not find a roof to shelter them.

All this was happening in times when in hospitals all patients were gathered together without distinction, with more than one or two in the same bed.

Our Lombroso, who was certainly not tender towards the Church, defined John Cidade "the creator of the modern hospital".

He personally took care of everything: he received the wanting, he washed them, he looked for the food and did the cooking, he did the cleaning, swept the floors, washed clothes, and he went for the water and wood.

The visitors were highly impressed by the order and cleanness.

If they considered him 'crazy' when he began this task, now they called him: "The Saint".

The donations and credits increased: some were willing to help him and to share his fatigue; the poor themselves who were fit to do so became nurses.

Another prelate in Granada began to protect him; one day however, he ordered him to change his clothes and to wear a sober but clean tunic. He then gave him a name: "You will be called John of God", he said. "Oh yes, replied John, if God likes to".

His biography reads: "He had pity on the slightest sufferings of all his neighbours, as though he himself lived in comfort and richness".

His aim was always clear. He used to say: "Through the bodies to the souls!".

For this reason, he called the best priests to collaborate with him in his hospital.

When he had to explain about his charity, because he did not keep count of anything, even of the fact of being robbed or deceived, he would use a beautiful expression, strange but beautiful: "Robbed? No! I give myself to God!".

The most famous image that remains of John is that which Murillo immortalised and which tells of a famous episode.

One winter evening when he was returning home with a basket full of food, leaning with his other hand on a walking stick and carrying a poor sick person on his back, who he had found on one of the streets.

The street was up-hill and he was making his way with fatigue, while the rain poured down.

John slipped and fell. On hearing the shouting of the sick man, some people came to their windows to see John who was beating himself with the stick on the shoulders, while shouting:

"Mister donkey, stupid, weak, lazy, haven't you eaten today? Then why don't you work? The poor are waiting for you and look at what you have done to this poor dying soul!".

He then lifted the dying man and put him on his shoulders, he gathered the basket and slowly made his way to the hospital.

His first stable collaborator was Anthony Martin, whose brother had been assassinated for motives of honour and he had spent his entire life preparing revenge.

Nothing would have stopped him; it was an obligation of honour and blood.

Nevertheless, Anthony was a kind and generous man to the poor. John of God's wish was to obtain "the conversion of this Christian".

He spent an entire night in prayer and whipping; the morning after he went to Anthony and throwing himself on his knees he showed him the Crucifix: "Look, my brother Anthony, he said, this is He who will forgive you if you forgive, but if you revenge your brothers blood, the Lord will vindicate His blood that He pours everyday because of your sins, on you".

The answer he received was through falling tears: "Brother John, I not only forgive, but for the love of God I give myself to you and the poor".

He thus became his friend and successor. He will found the hospital in Madrid naming it: "Our Lady of God's Love".

Another who will become his collaborator is the assassin, Peter Velasco.

John gave particular attention to those sinners that especially attracted his mercy and tenderness: prostitutes.

Every Friday, in memory of Christ's passion, he would go to a brothel and choose a woman who seemed to be the most insolvent and say to her: "My child, I will give you anything, and even more than

anyone else would give you. I only ask you to listen to two words, here in your room". While the woman remained looking at him, he would fall to his knees before his Crucifix and start to cry and accuse himself of his multiple sins, he would then say: "Just consider, my sister, the price that Our Lord paid for you".

Some of them repented, but the situation remained irresolvable, tied as they were to debts and threatening.

So John would go to some noble dame to ask for money: "My sister, I know a prisoner of the demon, please help me, for the love of God to free her and we could tear her away from that miserable slavery".

If he did not succeed, he himself would pay all the debts that the poor soul had accumulated.

What he had to undergo, dedicating himself to such an apostolate, goes far beyond all imagination, but John believed that his apostolate was particularly necessary.

When the accusations and calumny to his person became intolerable, he would say to his offenders: "Sooner or later I will have to forgive you, so it is best that I forgive you immediately".

He had to beg also for his poor, and this took him to Valladolid's Court.

His begging was always a failure: he asked for money for his hospital in Granada, but then he would spend it for all the poor that he found in the city where he had gone to beg.

This question became so ridiculous that the Earl of Tendilla thought of an idea that would resolve the problem, by giving him a Letters of Credit that could be paid only in Granada.

He was literally burned by the fire of charity.

When the huge hospital in Granada was destroyed by fire, John went through the flames and smoke in order to save the patients.

On his feast day, the old Breviary commented this episode as follows: "Teaching what charity was, John showed that external fire had less force on him than the fire that burnt within him".

This scene was represented in the Glory of Bernini on the day of his canonisation.

Meanwhile, his hospital was flourishing.

John writes in a letter:

"The number of the poor who come here are so many that many times, I myself, cannot feed them, but Jesus Christ provides for all their needs and gives them food, because the cost of wood alone is seven or eight reali a day; because the city is big and very cold, especially now that it is winter, many are the poor who come to this house of God; between the sick and healthy, the people who are at our service and the wayfarers, there are more than a hundred and ten in all. There are benumbed, mutilated, lepers, dumb, lunatics, paralytics, people affected with ringworm, and a lot of old people and children; and without counting many more wayfarers and wanderers who arrive, and receive fire and water and salt and recipients for cooking and eating, for all this there is no income; but Jesus Christ provides for all... In this way I am in debt and prisoner only for Jesus Christ".

He would say. "I have not the time for a Creed of breath".

In the beginning of 1550, he becomes grievously ill; one of his noble beneficiaries finds him in his poor bed, which was a nude wooden board, his begging basket for a pillow, with a high fever.

She obtained permission from the Archbishop, and an order for John, to take him to her noble palace. While they were taking him away, the poor people shouted and protested gathering around the litter, John was distraught. He blessed them, crying and said: "God knows, my brothers, that my desire is to die here with you! But as it is His will that I shall die without seeing you, let His will be done".

In his bed that John considered too comfortable, John revealed to the Archbishop, three things that were anguish for him:

“The first: that I have served Our Lord so little, while I have received so much.

The second: the needy, the people that have left their sinful ways and the poor that I have taken under my care.

The third: the debts that I have contracted for Jesus Christ”. In addition, on saying this he put the register of debts that he carried close to his heart, in the Archbishop’s hands.

He could not find peace until the Archbishop promised personally to take care of the question.

Towards dawn of the 8<sup>th</sup> March, when no one was yet at his bedside, he got out of this ‘too comfortable bed’, he knelt on the floor embracing his Crucifix close to his heart and passed away at the age of fifty five.

They found him in this position; he had been dead for some time, but was still kneeling. The funeral rites were impotent; four gentlemen of high rank carried the coffin, but in front of the procession were the poor of his hospital.

Lope de Vegas, in the poem that we have already mentioned, writes:

“He loved poverty to such an extent, that if he had met an angel or a poor person, he would have discarded the angel and embraced the poor person”.

And again:

“In Bethlehem God the Child loved you in his manger, at the hospital God the infirm in His bed”.

Whereas, a recent biography synthesises his strange adventure, acutely like this:

“He was a man who needed to meet someone like Saint John of God; he discovered him in himself”.