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THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

“Saint John Gualbert: Founder of the Order of Vallombrosa”

What wonderful flowers grow in God’s garden! We can never admire them enough, especially when we consider the lives of the saints handed down to us. In fact, the Church boasts a great wealth of saints, and each of their lives—as well as their deaths—tells us the story of God’s love for those of His children who decided to follow His ways. However, not all of them did so from the beginning.

Such was the case with Saint John Gualbert.

Born in Florence in 985, he came from a noble family. From a young age, he was destined for military service. His father, a warrior, educated the young John in the fine arts and instilled in him an awareness of the dignity and honor of a warrior. However, there is no mention of an education in religious devotion or Christian virtue.

John Gualbert was wealthy, came from a distinguished lineage, and enjoyed his status. Therefore, nothing seemed to indicate that he would later become a fervent man of faith.

Nevertheless, the Lord knew how to reach his heart. Although it was a painful situation, God used it to carry out His plans for him.

It so happened that his only brother, Hugo, was murdered. Their father swore revenge and apparently charged John with killing the murderer.

What happened next has been passed down to us in this account:

It was precisely on Good Friday that the young nobleman Gualbert came upon the murderer of his beloved brother Hugo on a narrow road near Florence. He had been searching for him for some time and had sworn blood vengeance against him, according to the custom of the time. Filled with rage, he drew his sword against the defenseless man. The latter, seeing that he could not flee, knelt down, crossed his arms over his chest, and pleaded: “For the love of Jesus, who today on the cross forgave His murderers, have mercy on me. If I am a murderer, do not become one too. If in the whirlwind of passion I have shed innocent blood, then you with calm wisdom absolve the guilty and forgive the repentant.”

Such a plea stirred such great emotion that Gualbert felt paralyzed. After wrestling with himself for a moment, he threw down his sword, extended his right hand to the murderer—who remained kneeling before him—and exclaimed: “What you ask of me on Good Friday in the name of Jesus, I cannot deny you. May God also forgive my sins!” Then he embraced and kissed him and hurried away.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Gualbert arrived at the monastery of Saint Minias and sent his companion home with the horses. He entered the church, knelt before the image of the crucified Christ, and prayed. As he raised his tear-filled eyes toward the sacred image, the crucified Lord seemed to bow His head and say kindly, “Since you have forgiven, I too will forgive you.”

That was the great turning point in his life. He could no longer return to his former life, so he begged the abbot to let him join the monastery. The abbot hesitated at first but finally allowed him to participate in the night liturgy while dressed in lay clothes.

When his father learned what had happened, he stormed into the monastery in a rage and, under grave threats, demanded that his son be returned to him. The abbot calmly explained what had happened, showed his willingness to help, and led the father to his son. Meanwhile, the son had learned of his father’s arrival. He quickly cut off his curly hair, put on an old monastic habit, took refuge in the church, and knelt before the altar waiting for those looking for him. When the father saw him, dressed in the habit and kneeling before the altar, tears welled up in his eyes. Unable to utter a word, he struggled to contain his emotions, approached him, held out his hand, and... blessed him so that he might devote himself to God!

The miracle of the saint’s conversion was followed by the miracle of his father relenting and allowing him to enter the monastery.

Here we see God’s wonderful intervention in a person’s life to draw him or her to Himself. Those who experience such a conversion often become particularly fervent, as we see in the case of Saint Paul.

The rest of John Gualbert’s life was marked by his zealous observance of monastic discipline, which he embraced with a spirit of penance. After the death of the abbot, when an unworthy abbot took over the monastery’s leadership, John Gualbert withdrew and went to Camaldoli, where St. Romuald was staying. Romuald advised him to settle in the secluded Vallombrosa—“the valley of the shadow”—where he would find two

excellent hermits. These men lived with such perfection that several clergy and laypeople joined them, making it necessary to build a monastery. To this end, the abbot of San Hilario donated meadows, vineyards, and forests to them. Once construction was complete, despite his reluctance, they elected Gualbert as abbot and vowed to observe the Rule of St. Benedict in all its original rigor.

The fame of the holy life led by the monks of Vallombrosa—whose order had been ecclesiastically recognized by Pope Alexander II in 1070—attracted numerous bishops and princes: the former sought help to revitalize declining monasteries according to their religious principles; the latter offered assets to found new monasteries.

Gualbert's zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls knew no rest. In a short time, twelve new monasteries were established, and existing ones adopted the reforms and joined the congregation, which, under the pontificate of Pope Innocent III, already numbered more than sixty monasteries. Until the 17th century, this congregation contributed twelve cardinals, forty bishops, over one hundred writers, and several saints and blessed individuals to the Church.

John Gualbert founded not only monasteries but also hospitals. Even as abbot, he remained humble and lived a life of voluntary poverty until his death. People used to say: "If you want to know who the abbot of Vallombrosa is, look for the most humble, patient, and pious monk."

John Gualbert died on July 12, 1073, at the age of 88. A fruitful life was coming to an end, and we can only praise God for all that can come about through the conversion of a single person.

Pope Celestine III canonized him in 1193.

(Source: Otto Bitschnau, OSB, *The Lives of God's Saints*, 1881, pp. 523–525)

Meditation on the Reading of the Day: <https://en.elijamission.net/the-richness-of-gods-word-part-1/>

Meditation on the Gospel of the Day: <https://en.elijamission.net/the-word-of-the-lord-4/>