

March 8

St. John of God

1495–1550 • Portugal

When John was only eight years old, he was kidnapped from his home in Portugal and abandoned in the streets of Spain, where he wandered hungry and alone. A kind farmer took him in, and the grateful John worked hard on the farm. He worked so hard, in fact, that when he grew older, the farmer wanted John to marry his daughter. But John did not want to get married, so he ran away and joined the army.

For many years, John was a soldier and lived a sinful life. Sometimes his conscience troubled him. Memories of his early life with his parents, who had loved God and taught their son to be good, came back to him. He knew that they would be disappointed with how he lived his life. So John returned to Portugal to find his parents, but he learned the sad news that both of them had died. He then left behind his life as a soldier because he knew his life was empty. He was starting to realize that only God could fill his emptiness.

Looking for a way to serve God, he first went to Africa, hoping to become a martyr. But he returned soon to Spain at the advice of a priest. Next, he started a religious bookstore and traveled from town to town selling books as cheaply as possible so that everyone could afford to read about God. It was during his time as a bookseller that the Infant Jesus appeared to John in a vision. Jesus gave him the name “John of God” and bid him to go to Granada. At Granada, John heard a powerful sermon from a holy priest that inspired in him a deep sorrow for the sins of his past life. John’s sorrow was so deep that he ran out into the public square and confessed his sins with loud cries, begging forgiveness. He would not stop lamenting his sins, and so people thought he was crazy and sent him to the Royal Hospital. There the holy priest visited John and told him that he should serve others instead of worrying over past sins that God had already forgiven.

And serving others is what John did. He rented a house and turned it into a hospital; he opened homeless shelters; he fed the hungry; and he clothed poor children. One day the Royal Hospital caught on fire. No one dared to approach the blazing flames—except for John. He rushed into the fire and rescued all the patients. Another time, a young man was drowning, and John dove into the river to rescue him. Soon after, John caught pneumonia from the cold water. The city officials all gathered around his bed to thank him for serving Granada’s poor. He died a holy death, and the city honored him with a beautiful burial. St John of God, help me love God and serve others more!

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