

Saint Joseph Calasanctius

Confessor, Founder of the Piarists.

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DIED in a.d. 1648.

JOSEPH CALASANCTIUS, called in religion 'of the Mother of God' and one of the foremost figures in the educational activities of the Counter-reformation, was the youngest of five children borne by Donna Maria Gastonia to her husband Don Pedro Calasanza. He was born in his father's castle near Petralta de la Sal in Aragon, Spain, in the year 1556 and in due course was sent to study the humanities at Estadilla, where his fellow-students regarded his virtue and religious observances with considerable disrespect. He refused to be moved by their mischievousness and ridicule, and being no less fervent in his studies, he completed his course of rhetoric with distinction at the age of fifteen.

He then returned home, and his father wanted him to be a soldier and start on that career at once; but Joseph had other ideas and induced Don Pedro instead to send him to the University of Lerida, where he took his doctorate in law before going on to Valencia. It is said that he left this university in order to escape the attentions of a young kinswoman, who subjected him to a temptation similar to that undergone by his namesake many centuries before at the court of Pharaoh; certainly he continued his theology at Alcala, and there met Ascanio Colonna, who as a cardinal and viceroy of Aragon befriended him in after years.

In 1579, Joseph's only brother died childless and Don Pedro naturally wished his surviving son to marry and perpetuate the family in the male line. Joseph temporized, for he had not only determined to be a priest but had already taken a private vow of celibacy, and, after graduating, accepted an invitation from Monsignor Gaspar della Figuera, Bishop of Jacca, to be his socius (or associate). After a year, his father required him to return home and renewed his entreaties that Joseph should follow a secular career; these entreaties were checked by a sudden illness, which brought the young man near to death, and Don Pedro was so frightened of losing him altogether that no further objections were raised to Joseph's vocation.

In 1583, he was ordained priest by the Bishop of Urgel, being already twenty-eight years old, and was at once recalled to the service of Monsignor Figuera, now bishop of Albarracin. He was made the bishop's confessor and theologian, and synodal examiner and procurator of the diocese, and when shortly afterwards, Monsignor Figuera was translated to the see of Lerida, Don Joseph accompanied him.

Already the fame of his wisdom, learning, and goodness was spread abroad; he was consulted by Father Aguilar about the reform of the Spanish Augustinian friars, and assisted his bishop in an apostolic visitation of the great monastery of Montserrat, which was disordered by internal disputes. During the course of this work, Monsignor Figuera died and, when the charge had been handed over

to the Bishop of Vich, Joseph resigned his own position in order to go to Calasanza, where his father also was nearing his end. After Don Pedro's death, Joseph remained at home for a time administering the estate and helping its dependents until he was appointed by the Bishop of Urgel as vicar general of the district of Trempe.

He was so successful here that he was sent to deal with the Pyrenean part of the diocese, which comprises the valleys of Andorra of which the Bishop of Urgel was joint sovereign prince (he still holds the title) as well as ordinary. This lonely and inaccessible region was in a terrible state of religious and moral disorder, and Saint Joseph conducted a long and arduous visitation of which the first task was to bring the clergy to a sense of their responsibilities and obligations; on its completion he returned to Trempe and remained there until he was made vicar general of the whole diocese. But for some time he had been listening to an interior call to undertake a quite different sort of work; at length he resigned his office and benefices, divided the Calasanza patrimony between his sisters and the poor, reserving a sufficient income for himself, endowed several charitable institutions, and in 1592 left Spain for Rome.

Here Joseph met his friend of Alcala, Ascanio Colonna, already a cardinal, and for five years, he was under the direct patronage of the Colonnas. He was theologian to the aged and venerable Cardinal Marcantonio Colonna, tutor to his little nephew, Prince Filippo, and spiritual director of the whole family, to which he gave a conference every week in the church of the Apostles.

During the plague of 1595, he distinguished himself by his devotion and fearlessness, and entered into a holy rivalry with his friend Saint Camillus of Lellis as to who should expend himself the more freely in the service of the sick and dying. He was one of the first to welcome to Rome some friars of the new Carmelite reform of Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross, influenced Cardinal Marcantonio in their favor, and helped to obtain for them the church of our Lady della Scala in the Trastevere.

But during these years Saint Joseph never lost sight of the work, which had drawn him to Rome, namely, the instruction of young children, of whom there were many, neglected or homeless, in the most urgent need of interest and care. He had become a member of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, whose business it was to teach the Faith to both children and adults on Sundays and feast-days, and in so doing was brought home vividly to Saint Joseph the state of degradation and ignorance in which so many of the children of the poor lived. He was soon convinced that periodical instruction was utterly inadequate to cope with the situation, and that free day-schools for both religious and secular education were required.

He therefore first of all invited the official parish-schoolmasters to admit poor pupils to their schools without payment, but they would not undertake the extra work without a rise in salary, and this the Roman senate refused to grant. He then approached the Jesuits and the Dominicans, but neither order could see a way to extending its activities, for their members were already fully engaged.

Saint Joseph then came to the conclusion that it was God's will that he should begin the work himself, single-handed if necessary. Don Antonio Brendani, parish-priest of Santa Dorotea, offered him the use of two rooms and his own services; two more priests joined them, and in November 1597, the public free school was opened.

At the end of a week, the school had a hundred pupils and before long many more, and the founder had to engage paid teachers from among the un-beneficed clergy of the city. In 1599, it was moved

into new quarters and Saint Joseph obtained permission from Cardinal Ascanio to leave the Colonna household and take up his residence on the school premises with the other masters; they lived a quasi-community life and the founder acted as superior, with the title of Prefect of the Religious Schools. During the following couple of years the pupils increased to seven hundred, and in 1602 another move was made, to a large house adjoining the church of Saint Andrea della Valle.

While hanging a bell in the courtyard, Saint Joseph fell from a ladder and broke his leg in two places, an accident the effects of which were a source of lameness and pain for the rest of his life; but while he was in bed he had the consolation and encouragement of receiving three valuable recruits for the school in the persons of Doctor Tomasso Vittoria, Canon Gellio Ghellini, and Gaspar Dragonetti. The last named was ninety-five years old, but had still many years of vigorous work before him, and was 120 when he died in 1628.

Pope Clement VIII having made a grant of 200 scudi a year towards the rent and people of consequence having begun to send their children to the school, the parish-schoolmasters and others began to criticize it with some vehemence; complaints of its disorders were made to the Pope and he directed Cardinals Antoniani and Baronius to pay it a surprise visit of inspection. This was done and as a result of their report, Clement took the institution under his immediate protection. In similar circumstances, the same course was taken and the grant doubled in 1606 by Paul V, who also appointed Ludovico de Torres, Archbishop of Monreale, as cardinal protector; but these difficulties were the beginning of trials and persecutions, which beset Saint Joseph until the end of his life.

Nevertheless, during the succeeding five years the work prospered and grew in spite of all opposition, and in 1611 a palazzo, a grand building almost a 'palace', was purchased to house it near the church of San Pantaleone; there were about a thousand pupils, including a number of Jews whom the founder himself invited to attend and encouraged by his kindness.

Two years later, with the permission of the Holy See, Saint Joseph united his informal congregation to the recognized institute of the Clerks Regular of the Mother of God, founded by Blessed (now, since 1938, Saint) John Leonardi in 1574, but this arrangement did not work well. By the beginning of 1617, the Roman schools were in a state of decline, and Joseph was hastily recalled from Frascati where he had been inaugurating a new school. He laid the matter before the Pope, and Paul V revoked the brief of union, at the same time recognizing the priests of the Religious Schools, Joseph's institute, as a separate institute, with simple vows and the obligation of teaching children gratuitously. On the feast of the Annunciation, Father Joseph of the Mother of God received the religious habit from the hands of Cardinal Giustiniani, and himself conferred it on his fourteen assistants.

The Roman school under the new regime at once began to recover, another was opened near Saint Peter's basilica and others were called for at Sabina and Narni; the time was come for the new congregation to have definitive constitutions, and after a retreat for forty days, Father Joseph began to draw them up. They were not finished before the death of Paul V but were at once submitted to his successor, Gregory XV; after some difficulty they were accepted and at the end of 1621 the congregation was recognized as a religious order under the name of the Pauline Poor Clerks Regular of the Mother of God of the Religious Schools, (Pious Schools); early in the following year it was granted the privileges of a mendicant order and Saint Joseph was named its superior general.

The canonical novitiate was opened at Saint Onofrio, but the requirement of new schools in Lombardy and Liguria brought an increase of novices which a few years later necessitated its transfer to bigger and healthier premises. Saint Joseph did not let the cares of the generalate diminish either his numerous religious observances or his care for the needy, the sick, and any to whom he could be of service. About this time there came to Rome, with his wife and family, an English gentleman, Mr. Thomas Cocket, who by abjuring Protestantism had brought himself within reach of the penal laws; him the saint assisted, and the Pope followed his example, assigning a pension to the refugee converts.

For ten years the congregation continued to prosper and extend and spread from Italy into the Empire; at Leipzig the example of the fathers led to wholesale conversions in faith and morals, and the Lord of Strasnitz wrote to the founder: 'This city, this county, and all the neighborhood, might well be called a nest, in which an endless brood of heretical sects was continually springing into life: Calvinists, Lutherans, Picardians, Hussites, Anabaptists, Atheists, and so on. Now, on the contrary, we see almost all of them brought to the one true Faith, full of zeal and devotion, and that in a very short time.'

In 1630 was admitted to the institute at Naples one Mario Sozzi, a middle-aged priest, who in due course was solemnly professed. For several years his forward and perverse behavior made him a great nuisance to his brethren but, having by a show of burning zeal for right faith gained the good will and influence of the Holy Office, he contrived to get himself, in 1639, made provincial of the Clerks Regular of the Religious Schools in Tuscany, with extraordinary powers and independence of the superior general. He proceeded to administer the province in the most capricious and damaging way, harmed as much as he could the reputation of Saint Joseph with the Roman authorities, and, when his ambition had led to his banishment from Tuscany for intriguing in affairs of the state, he denounced Saint Joseph to the Holy Office on the false charge of having instigated the Grand Duke to that action to spite Mario and the sacred congregation. Cardinal Cesarini, as protector of the- new institute and in order to vindicate Joseph, ordered Father Mario's papers and letters to be seized; these included some documents of the Holy Office and that congregation, spurred on by Mario, straight away had Saint Joseph arrested and carried through the streets like a felon. He was brought before the assessors and only saved from imprisonment by the intervention of Cardinal Cesarini.

But Father Mario was unpunished, and continued to plot for control of the whole institute, representing Saint Joseph to be too old and doddering for the responsibility; he managed by deceit to get him suspended from the generalate and contrived that a visitor apostolic be appointed who was favorable to himself. This visitor and Father Mario became in effect in supreme command, and Saint Joseph was subjected by them to the most humiliating, insulting, and unjust treatment, while the order was reduced to such confusion and impotence that the loyal members were unable to persuade the superior authorities of the true state of affairs.

Towards the end of 1643, Mario died and was succeeded by Father Cherubini, who pursued the same policy for his own evil designs. Saint Joseph bore these trials with marvelous patience, urging the order to obey his persecutors for they were de facto in authority, and on one occasion sheltering Cherubini from the violent opposition of some of the younger fathers who were indignant at his treachery.

The Holy See had some time previously set up a commission of cardinals to look into the whole matter, and at length in 1645 it ordered the reinstatement of Saint Joseph as superior general; this announcement was received with great joy but led at once to renewed efforts on the part of the malcontents, who now aimed at having the order reduced to the status of a congregation without vows. They were successful, and in 1646, Pope Innocent X published a brief of which the effect was to make the Clerks Regular of the Religious Schools simply a society of priests subject to their respective bishops. Thus in his ninetieth year Saint Joseph saw the apparent overturning of all his work by the authority to which he was so greatly devoted and the indirect disgrace of himself before the world; when the news was brought to him he simply murmured, 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'

The business of drawing up new constitutions and regulations for the shattered institute of Religious Schools was entrusted to Father Cherubini, but within a few months, he was convicted by the auditors of the Rota of the maladministration of the Nazarene College, of which he was rector. He retired from Rome in disgrace, but returned in the following year to die, repentant of the part he had played and reconciled to Saint Joseph, who consoled him on his deathbed. A few months later, on August 25, 1648, Saint Joseph himself died, and was buried in the church of San Pantaleone; he was ninety-two years old.

There is an obvious parallel between this history and that of Saint Alphonsus Liguori and the early days of the Redemptorists, and during the troubles of his young congregation Saint Alphonsus used to encourage and fortify himself by reading the life of Saint Joseph Calasanctius; he was canonized in 1767, six years before the death of Alban Butler, who only gives to him a brief notice in his *Lives*, wherein he is referred to as 'a perpetual miracle of fortitude and another Job' – a comparison made by Cardinal Lambertini (afterwards Pope Benedict XIV) before the Congregation of Sacred Rites in 1728.

The failure of Saint Joseph's foundation was only apparent. Its suppression was strongly objected to in several places, especially Poland, Germany, and Moravia, and it was reconstituted with simple vows in 1656 and restored as a religious order in 1669. Today the Clerks Regular of the Religious Schools (commonly called Piarists or Scolopii) number over 4000 religious with 350 schools in various parts of the world.
