

Saint Cajetan, Or Gaetano, Confessor

Founder of the Clerks Regular (the Theatines)

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FOUNDER OF THE CLERKS REGULAR (Theatines).

DIED in a.d. 1547.

SAINT CAJETAN was son of Gaspar, Count of Thienna (Tiene), and Mary di Porto, of the nobility of Vicenza, Italy, where he was born in 1480. Two years later, his father was killed, fighting for the Venetians against King Ferdinand of Naples, and his widow was appointed guardian of Cajetan and his two brothers. The admirable example and teaching she gave her sons of her adoration of the Almighty bore quick and abundant fruit, and Cajetan in particular was soon known for his unusual goodness. His love of prayer taught a constant recollection, and the application of his mind to eternal truths made him shun all loss of time in amusements or idle conversation: for no talk was interesting to him, unless it tended to raise the mind to God. His affections were accordingly sweetened into a loving charity towards all men, particularly the poor and all that were in affliction. He went for four years to the University of Padua where the long exercises of devotion, which he daily practiced, were no hindrance to his studies, but sanctified them and purified his understanding, enabling him the better to judge of truth. He distinguished himself in theology, and brilliantly took the degree of doctor in civil and canon law in 1504.

He then returned to his native town, of which he was made a senator, and in pursuance of his resolve to serve God as a priest, he received the tonsure from the Bishop of Vicenza. Out of his own patrimony, he built and founded a chapel-of-ease at Rampazzo, for the instruction and benefit of many on his mother's estate there who lived at a considerable distance from the parish-church. In 1506, he went to Rome, not in quest of preferment or to live at court, but because of a strong inward conviction that he was needed for some great work there. Soon after his arrival, Pope Julius II conferred on him the office of proto-notary in his court, with a benefice attached. Happily, the saint had the art to join interior recollection with public employments, and to live retired among distractions, for his office was no sinecure. He became, unconsciously, an expert consultor for the ecclesiastical authorities, who often confidently referred disputed questions to him, so wide and exact was his knowledge. Moreover, Venice having been attacked by the League of Cambrai on behalf of the Pope, he was active and successful in negotiating for reconciliation and peace.

A contemporary, the Archbishop of Taranto, wrote: It is impossible to tell the difficulties, contradictions and tiresome obstacles which Cajetan had to meet and overcome... The arduousness of the business was beyond description... The Venetian ambassadors found in him great prudence, strong and impressive authority, opportune and wise counsels...

On the death of Julius II in 1513 he refused his successor's request to continue in his office, and devoted three years to preparing himself for the priesthood, for he was still only a cleric in minor

orders; he was ordained in 1516, being thirty-three years old, and was in retreat for three months before celebrating his first Mass, at Saint Mary Major on Christmas day. He returned to Vicenza in 1518 to visit his dying mother.

Cajetan had joined, and perhaps founded, a confraternity in Rome, called 'of the Divine Love', which was an association of zealous and devout clerics who devoted themselves by pious exercises and regulations to labor with all their power to promote God's honor and the welfare of souls. At Vicenza, he now entered himself in the Oratory of Saint Jerome, which was instituted upon the plan of that of the Divine Love but consisted only of men in the lowest stations of life. This circumstance gave great offence to his friends, who thought it a reflection on the honor of his family. He persisted, however, and exerted his zeal with wonderful fruit. He sought out the most distressed persons among the sick and the poor over the whole town and served them with his own hands, and cared for those who suffered from the most loathsome diseases in the hospital of the incurables, the revenues of which he greatly increased. But his primary concern was for the spiritual life of the members of his Oratory; he gave them frequent conferences and encouraged them to frequent Communion, then not at all customary. He set them on fire with divine love and his fellow-citizens were proud to follow where he led. 'In this Oratory', he said, 'we try to serve God by worship; in our hospital we may say that we actually find Him.'

He founded a similar Oratory at Verona and then, in obedience to the advice of his confessor, John-Baptist of Crema, a Dominican friar of great prudence, learning, and piety, Cajetan went in 1520 to Venice, and taking up his lodgings in the new hospital of that city, pursued his former manner of life there. He was so great a benefactor to that house as to be regarded as its principal founder, though his chief care was to provide the sick with every spiritual help possible. It was the common saying at Rome, Vicenza, and Venice, that Cajetan was an angel at the altar and an apostle in the pulpit. He remained in Venice three years, and introduced exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in that city, as well as continuing the promotion of frequent Communion; 'I shall never be content till I see Christians flocking like little children to the priest to feed on the Bread of Life, and with eagerness and delight, not with fear and false shame,' he wrote.

The state of Christendom at this time was not less than shocking. The general corruption weakened the Church before the assaults of Protestantism and provided an apparent excuse for that revolt, and the decay of religion with its accompaniment of moral wickedness was not checked by the clergy, many of whom, high and low, secular and regular, were themselves sunk in iniquity and indifference. The Church was 'sick in head and members'. The obscure friar John-Baptist of Crema saw this and was distressed; then he had an inspiration from God: he told his holy penitent Cajetan to go back to Rome and once again to associate himself with the Oratory of Divine Love there, the principal members of which were no less eminent for their learning and prudence than for their goodness. This he obediently did in 1523 and he deliberated with them on some effectual means for the reformation of life among Christians, grieving that the sanctity of religion should be so little known and practiced by the greatest part of those that professed it.

All agreed that this could not possibly be done otherwise than by reviving in the clergy the spirit and zeal of those holy pastors who first planted the Faith, and, to put them in mind what this spirit ought to be, and what it obliges them to, a plan was formed for instituting an order of regular clergy upon the model of the lives of the Apostles. The first associates of Saint Cajetan in this design were John Peter Caraffa, afterwards pope under the name of Paul IV but at that time bishop of Theate (Chieti); Paul Consiglieri, of the family of Ghislieri; and Boniface da Colle, a gentleman of Milan.

Those among them who had ecclesiastical livings asked Pope Clement VII for leave to resign them with a view of making such an establishment. His Holiness made great difficulties with regard to the Bishop, but at length gave his consent. The plan of the new institute was drawn up, laid before the Pope, and examined in a consistory of cardinals in 1524. In order to break down and avoid avarice, always fatal to the ecclesiastical order where it gets footing, and to establish in the hearts of those engaged in that state a spirit of disinterestedness and entire disengagement from the world, the founders wished it to be observed, not as a precept but as a counsel, that this regular clergy should not only possess no property but also should be forbidden to beg, content to receive the voluntary contributions of the faithful and relying entirely upon Providence. The cardinals objected, not unnaturally thinking it inconsistent with prudence. But their opposition was overcome by Cajetan, who urged that Christ and His apostles having observed this manner of life, it could be followed by those who were their successors in the ministry of the altar and of the word. But a clause was added, that if a community should be reduced to extreme necessity they should give public notice of their distress by tolling a bell. The institute therefore was approved by Clement VII and Caraffa was chosen the first provost general. From his episcopal name of Theatensis, these clerks regular came to be distinguished from others as Theatines.

On September 14, feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the four original members laid aside their prelatical robes and made their profession in Saint Peter's in the presence of the papal delegate Monsignor Bonziano, Bishop of Caserta. The principal ends which they proposed to themselves were to preach sound doctrine to the people, assist the sick, oppose errors in faith, restore the devout and frequent use of the sacraments, and re-establish in the clergy disinterestedness, regularity of life, sacred studies (especially of the Bible), preaching and pastoral care, and the fitting conduct of divine worship.

They lived at first in a house in the Campo Marzio, which belonged to Boniface da Colle, but soon moved to another, on the Pincian, where their life and work attracted the attention of many visitors and several religious works were entrusted to them. But the success of the new congregation was not immediate, and in 1527, when it still numbered only a dozen members, a calamity happened which might well have put an end to it. The army of the Emperor Charles V, which was commanded by the Constable of France, marched from Milan to Rome, and took it by assault on May 6, 1527. The Pope and cardinals retired into the castle of Sant' Angelo, while the German and other Catholic and Lutheran mercenaries plundered the city and were guilty of greater cruelties and excesses than had been committed by the Huns and Goths a thousand years before. The house of the Theatines was rifled, and almost demolished, and a soldier who had known Saint Cajetan at Vicenza as a member of a rich family, gave information to his officer to that effect; whereupon he was barbarously abused to extort from him the wealth, which he had not got.

After all had suffered great hardships he and his companions left Rome, with nothing but their breviaries and their clothes, and escaped to Venice, where they were kindly received and settled in the convent of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino. Caraffa's term as general expired in 1530, and Saint Cajetan was chosen in his place. He accepted the office with reluctance, but did not let its cares abate the energy with which he worked to inspire the clergy with his own fervor and devotion, and his charity was made most conspicuous during a plague, which was brought to Venice from the Levant, and followed by a dreadful famine. Moved by his example, Saint Jerome Emilian founded another congregation of regular clerks, called Somaschi, from the place where they lived between Milan and Bergamo, the object of which was to bring up orphans and such children as were

destitute of means of education, and Cajetan himself helped Jerome in his foundation. He was at this time also at work with Caraffa and others on the revision of the Divine Office, whose length and complication was a serious tax on busy priests.

At the end of the three years of office, Caraffa was made general a second time, and Cajetan was sent to Verona, where both the clergy and laity were tumultuously opposing the reformation of discipline which their bishop was endeavoring to introduce among them. He induced the people to see that the proposed reform was one of which they themselves would reap the advantage. Shortly after, he was called to Naples to establish the clerks regular there. The Count of Oppido gave him a large house for that purpose, and tried to prevail upon him to accept an estate in lands; but this he refused. In vain, the Count, backed by the religious of the city, pointed out that the Neapolitans were neither so rich nor so generous as the Venetians. 'That may be true,' replied Cajetan, 'but God is the same in both cities'.

A general improvement at Naples both in the clergy and laity was the fruit of his example, preaching, and labors, and he was foremost in the successful opposition to the activities of three apostates, a layman, an Augustinian, and a Franciscan, who, respectively Socinian (Trinity denying), Calvinist, and Lutheran, were corrupting the religion of the people.

In 1536, Caraffa was created cardinal by Paul III, and in 1540, Cajetan went back to Venice, being made general a second time; here he had again to cope with the Lutheran friar Ochino, whose errors were for a long time not recognized by the authorities. Then in 1543, at the request of its citizens, he returned to Naples, and governed the house of his order in that city until his death. During the last years of his life he established with Blessed John Marinoni, the benevolent pawnshops (*montes pietatis*) sanctioned some time before by the Fifth Lateran Council. Worn out with trying to appease a civil strife, which had broken out in Naples, and disappointed by the suspension of the Council of Trent from which he hoped so much for the Church's good, Cajetan had to take to his bed in the summer of 1547. When his physicians advised him not to lie on the hard boards but to use a mattress in his sickness, his answer was: 'My Savior died on a cross, allow me at least to die on wood.'

He lingered for a week, the end coming on Sunday, August 7. Many miracles wrought by his intercession were approved at Rome after a rigorous scrutiny, and he was beatified by Urban VIII in 1629 and canonized by Clement X in 1671.

Saint Cajetan was one of the most outstanding figures among the pre-Tridentine Catholic reformers, and his institution of clerks regular, priests bound by vow and living in community but engaged in active pastoral work, played a very great part in the Counter-Reformation. Today, with the one tremendous exception of the Jesuits, all their congregations have been reduced to small bodies, but continuing their original life and work. Thomas Goldwell, Bishop of Saint Asaph and last survivor of the old hierarchy of England and Wales before its final abolition by Queen Elizabeth I, was a Theatine, who entered their house of Saint Paul at Naples in the year of Saint Cajetan's death.

The example of this saint displays that disinterestedness which Christ has laid down in His gospel. He teaches us that all inordinate desire or care for the goods of this world is a grievous evil prejudicial to Christian virtue; he impressed upon his followers in the strongest terms the duty of fighting against it, showing them how avarice steels the heart against charity and even common humanity, and excludes all true ideas of spiritual and heavenly things. Disinterestedness and contempt of the world, necessary in all Christians, is more essentially the virtue of the ministers of

the altar: it formed the character of every holy priest. But it is not unknown for the idol of covetousness to find a place even in the sanctuary itself, to the scandal of the faithful and profanation of all that is sacred or good. New barriers have been often set up against this evil, but all become useless for those who do not try to ground their souls in the true spirit of the opposite virtue.
