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# SERVANTS OF MARY

*Reflections on the Servite  
Saints and Blessed*

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## INTRODUCTION

Not long ago on the evening news a man was interviewed on the occasion of his one hundredth birthday. The reporter asked him to name the biggest change he had seen in his lifetime. The man had to think for a minute. He had seen so many changes. Finally he said that he believed that the biggest change he'd seen was the introduction of electric lights everywhere. Cities and towns glow with so many bright lights that it's nearly impossible nowadays to find anyplace that gets as dark at night as it used to get almost everywhere when he was a boy. The old man chuckled, "You know, I'm probably one of the few people still around who knows what the word 'dark' really means!"

It's true that very few of us can look back over a hundred years of changes, as this man could. Yet even if our memories go back only ten or fifteen years, we can still put together an impressive list of changes that have taken place in the world in which we live: all the new products that have come into the marketplace; new ways of making a living and of spending leisure time; new attitudes about the purpose of life and what's right and wrong and how we should be educated and what our churches should look like. Just how many threats to the future of our planet and how many dangers to our health have scientists uncovered during the last ten years?

Such reflections might lead us to wonder what possible value there could be in exploring the lives of the saints and blessed of the Servants of Mary. These men and women come from a time and place far removed from our own. All of them lived in Italy. All of them had died by the time the Wright Brothers discovered how to get an airplane off the ground. Most of them had died by the time Christopher Columbus learned how to sail a ship.

We can't deny that the people who appear in this book lived in a different environment than we do. But as Christians there's something else we can't deny either, something that was written in The Letter to the Hebrews when some members of the community thought that the original message about Jesus had grown obsolete. The message was: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Even though it's always necessary to explain the Gospel in ways that people of a particular time and place can understand, the basic struggle to reform our

lives and put into action the values that Jesus proclaimed remains remarkably the same in every time and place.

Because there is so much at the center of our faith that doesn't change, it's worth flipping through the 750 years of Servite history and reflecting on the lives of those Servites who have been recognized by the Church as holy people. All of the Servite saints and blessed sought the Lord in prayer and in service to their brothers and sisters. In their prayer and in their service, they tried to follow the timeless example of Mary the mother of Jesus; for it was through Mary's inspiration that Servites came to be and continue to exist.

I've found the example of these men and women to be a big help in my life. I hope you will too.

## ST. ANTHONY PUCCI

January 12

Why am I not a saint? Is my life so mundane that I lack the opportunity to do something great for God? Do I lack the ability to do something "saintly"? Or, do I simply fail to take seriously the potential that is within me? The life of St. Anthony Pucci shows us that we can all become saints. It's hard to point to any great thing that Anthony did or any gift he possessed in an extraordinary degree. What made Anthony "saintly" was that he never underestimated the significance of anything he did in God's service.

Born in the town of Poggiole, Italy in 1819, Anthony spent his entire life as shepherd of a flock. He tended the sheep on his father's farm until he was eighteen. Then, after ordination as a Servant of Mary, he pastored the parish of St. Andrew in Viareggio for forty-five years.

Many people when they first met Anthony probably thought he should have stayed on the farm. He did not look like or sound like a leader of people. He was small and timid, possessed an unpleasant speaking voice, and had great difficulty giving a talk on any subject if he had not already memorized it word-for-word. Worst of all, public confrontations over politics and religion made him extremely uncomfortable. But because he really gave himself to God in his ministry, he found

himself doing things that people his "type" do not normally do. At Viareggio God led Anthony where he did not expect to go.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Viareggio had been a typical Italian fishing village. The people were loyal to their parish church and to their Catholic faith. By the time Anthony arrived, however, the simple life of Viareggio had begun to change. Wealthy people from the cities had started to vacation at the town's magnificent beaches. These people brought with them their own brand of entertainment — ways of having fun that were enough to turn more than one fishing family "topsy turvy." On top of that, there was now a strong "anti-church" attitude among the town's leaders. People in town who wanted to get ahead found it politically advantageous to reject the Church.

Anthony's way of meeting these troubled times in his parish was simply to do the duties of a parish priest as well as he could. He began by dedicating his parish to Our Lady of Sorrows, and he urged his parishoners to make their faith visible by displaying the image of Our Lady in their homes and on their boats. Realizing that much neglect of the faith grew out of ignorance, Anthony organized classes of religious instruction for parishoners of all ages at all possible hours. He encouraged parishoners to band together to perform works of charity, so that political leaders could not claim that the Church was not really interested in the welfare of the people. He made home visits a daily part of his ministry. Sometimes the timid little man on his rounds even stepped into the middle of the fights and brawls that would break out among drunken fishermen.

No sacramental celebration that Anthony was involved in was rushed through or taken lightly. He spent long hours in the confessional — guiding and counseling, and sharing with parishoners the Lord's gift of forgiveness. Perhaps, most important, Anthony was a man of integrity. He practiced what he preached. His death came partly as a result of his giving his own coat to a poor man during the middle of winter.

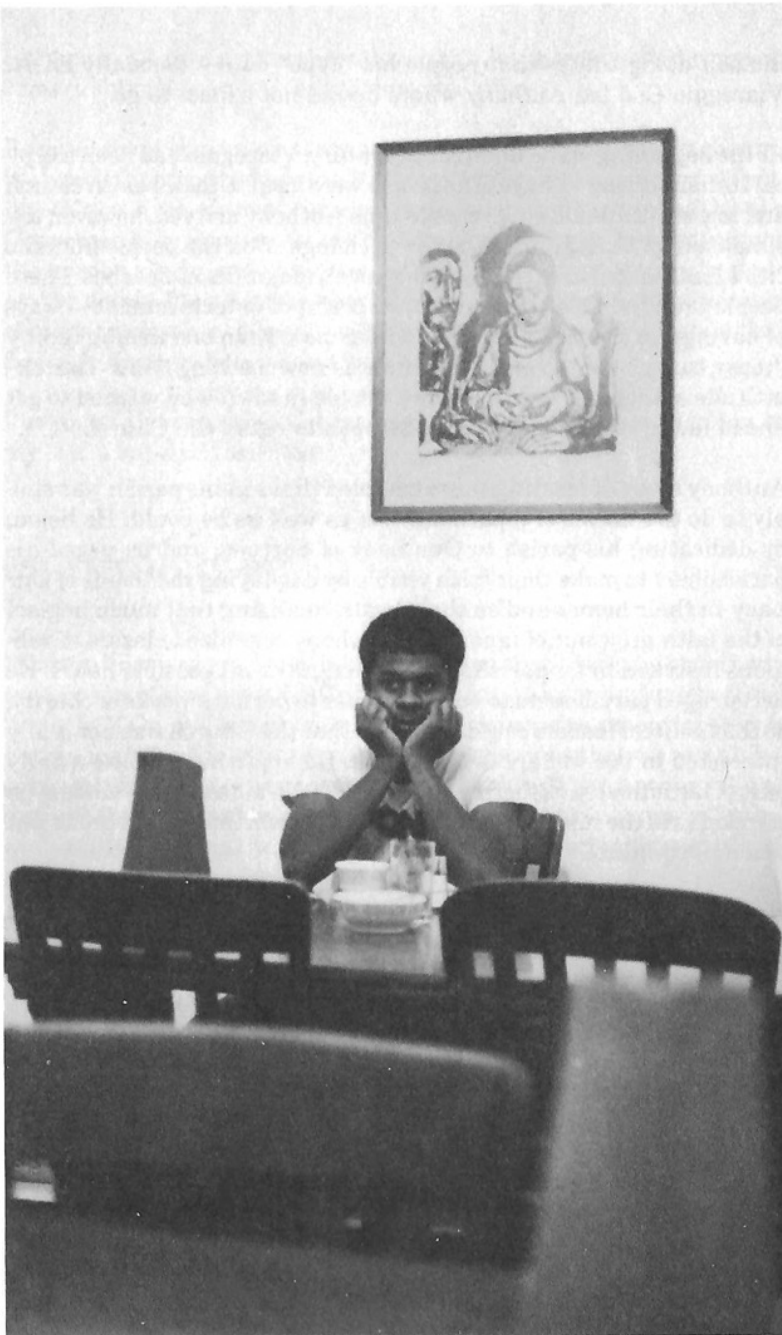
Anthony did nothing dazzling; but in his careful and deliberate way he rebuilt the parish. He said that his daily prayer gave him the strength to do what he had to do. By the time of his death in 1892, he was the most respected man in town. On the day of his funeral, all work stopped so that everyone in Viareggio could attend the Funeral Mass.

Sometimes when we have been doing a pretty good job of keeping the commandments, we let ourselves believe that we're doing all we can as a follower of Jesus. It doesn't occur to a lot of us to ask Jesus, "What more can I do? What do I still lack?" Still fewer of us are going to be open to the answer Jesus might give us. There was a rich young man in the Gospels who got as far as asking the question; but when Jesus said in reply, "You lack one thing; go sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven," the young man went away sad for he had "many possessions." Many centuries later a rich young man named James heard Jesus challenge him to do more. And James *did* give all he had to the poor — including his very life.

James was born in Città della Pieve about 1270. While he was growing up, James often attended Mass at a nearby Servite church. He felt a mysterious attraction to this Order that was dedicated to Mary and was actively serving the poor.

James went to Siena to study law. While at Siena he noticed the works of charity performed by the religious brothers at La Scala Hospital. How important such work is! How sad it was that the hospital and chapel near his hometown had fallen into disrepair. James took a serious look at himself, at his aims and his purpose in life. Was not God asking *more* from him than obedience to the commandments? Did not the easy life of a rich young lawyer "lack" something when compared to the sacrifice Jesus made — surrendering his whole life out of love for others? God had given James the financial means and a mind keen enough to transform the crumbling ruin of a hospital back home into a place where much needed care could be given the poor. Should he not put his gifts at the service of others?

James returned to Città della Pieve and affiliated himself with the Servite church there by becoming what we would today call a Secular Servite or Third Order Member. Then, not only did James sell what he had to pay for repairs to the local hospital, but he dedicated himself completely to the care of the sick. He personally fed and bathed the sick, treated their wounds, and prayed with them for healing and strength.







## THE SEVEN HOLY FOUNDERS

February 17

“The Times, They Are A-Changin’”. The title of this popular song of the 1960’s pretty well sums up what was going on during that decade. Throughout the world old barriers between races and ethnic groups were collapsing, dress codes were being stripped away, and traditional values about war and industry and education were stirring up riots and sit-ins. The future of everything seemed uncertain. Even the Church found itself in the midst of more change and upheaval than it had seen in centuries. The question was, “How do we live the message of Jesus in this strange new world?” Everybody in the Church seemed to have a different answer to this question.

The early thirteenth century was also a time of upheaval and change. Serfs were moving from the countryside into the growing cities; trade and exploration were booming; and new approaches to education and new ways of thinking abounded. The Church of that day also found itself struggling to catch up with the world. The Church which had long organized itself around farming villages and monastery schools suddenly found itself out of touch with the new city population and their problems. Crime and corruption, poverty and materialism, urban gangs and urban violence — all these found new expression in the thirteenth century. And with growing prosperity, war became possible on a much larger scale.

In the midst of this upheaval, many men and women of faith turned to prayer and penance, the recipe that Jesus recommends when nothing else seems to work against the power of evil. By refusing to take part in any money-grabbing or war-making, they hoped to turn people’s attention back to God. Among these groups who were trying to do something about the direction that civilization was taking were seven wool merchants living in Florence. They were members of a group of penitents dedicated to the service of Our Lady. Their leader was named Bonfilus. In addition to having a special devotion to Mary, they tried to recapture the simplicity of life that characterized the first Christian community.

By the year 1242 this group of seven had begun to live community in a more intense way. They had left their jobs and their families and moved into a dwelling at Cafaggio, just outside the walls of Florence.

A few years later, under the spiritual guidance of St. Peter of Verona, the small group sought even greater solitude at nearby Monte Senario. Here these seven men had the space and the quiet needed to take in new members. St. Peter helped the new group to deepen their relationship with Mary and to adopt a Rule or way of living in community.

After this time of retreat, the Servants of Mary were ready to come down from the mountain and undertake an active ministry. Friars once again established a community at Florence, then opened one at Siena, and then, during the next seven hundred years, spread to every continent save Antarctica. As the Order expanded, the friars dedicated their churches to Mary and honored her in their liturgical service. They continued to witness to the importance of prayer and the importance of being unencumbered by the world's goods. In time, groups of women who shared the vision of the Seven Founders, came to be Servants of Mary.

We know very few details about the lives of the first seven Servants of Mary. Some had been married before coming together in community, while some had not. Some eventually chose to become priests, but at least one did not. In a way, though, details of their individual lives are not that important. Servites who followed in the way of the Seven have preferred to honor them as a group, because their holiness grew out of the fraternal love they shared in community. In 1888 Pope Leo XIII chose to canonize them as a group (The Seven Holy Founders): the only time in history that the Church has canonized an entire founding community.

## BLESSED ELIZABETH

February 19

A person can spend a whole lifetime searching for fulfillment, looking far and wide for meaning and purpose in life. We probably know some people who are doing just that. They are perpetually dissatisfied with their job; they hop from one city to another; and they are always on the lookout for a new friend or a "new relationship." Blessed Elizabeth, though, found fulfillment by going only a short distance from her home and looking no further than the center of her own heart. Elizabeth did the one thing that Jesus said is required of us — to

focus our whole being on his love.

Elizabeth was born in 1428 and grew up in the town of Mantua. Her father was a steward to the Marquis Gonzaga. Since her father's job brought him into contact with quite a few members of the local nobility, he realized that he might have the opportunity of marrying off his daughter to a member of one of the leading families. Such a marriage would certainly have elevated the family fortunes and vaulted Elizabeth into the role of one of the leading ladies of the Court. Elizabeth, however, was not interested in the genteel life. She rejected all of her father's handpicked suitors, saying that she preferred to imitate the chastity and humility of the Blessed Virgin.

Elizabeth had grown close to the Servants of Mary when she was attending school at Mantua. She went to the Servite church of St. Barnabas for services and for spiritual direction. When she was twenty she became a member of the Order by taking the habit of the Mantellate Servite Sisters. At the time in which Elizabeth lived, it was quite common for religious women to continue to live at home after they had taken the habit. This Elizabeth did, living first with her parents and then (after their death) with a married sister. During these years she lived a quiet, hidden life of prayer and penance.

In the last three years of her life, Elizabeth began to attract the attention of the friars of St. Barnabas because of her faithfulness to prayer and the sacraments. She went to confession and received communion every day. Although we of the late twentieth century might consider receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation every day a bit excessive, what attracted the attention of Elizabeth's contemporaries was the fact that she was a daily communicant. In Elizabeth's time only an exceedingly holy person dared to receive communion every time she went to Mass.

Elizabeth's life-long devotion to Mary continued to deepen. She was so close to Mary that people came to regard her as a spokeswoman for the Blessed Mother. People literally besieged her to pray to Mary for special favors. They knew that Elizabeth's prayers begging for Mary's intercession did not go unanswered.

For a fifteenth century woman, Elizabeth had an unusual amount of freedom. She could have chosen from any number of suitors and chosen

to live in any number of places. She chose Jesus Christ above all her suitors, and she chose to abide with him at Calvary. There, with Mary his mother, she offered her life of prayer and penance, hoping to continue in her time Christ's work of saving the world. Even as her health began to deteriorate, she refused to relax her daily schedule of prayer and fasting. Finally she was stricken with colic. She suffered terribly for nine days. On her face, though, there was only a radiant peace — the kind of peace that Jesus gives. Elizabeth died on February 19, 1468.

## ST. PEREGRINE

May 4

Some of the greatest saints have started out as vigorous enemies of the Church. The most famous of these saints is Paul of Tarsus, who in his own words "went to extremes in persecuting the Church of God and tried to destroy it." We see time and again that God can make use of anything and anyone to bring his kingdom to life. Even anger against the Church and its servants can become a blazing fire for Christ. That happened to Paul of Tarsus. It also happened to Peregrine of Forli.

Peregrine was born in 1265. In those days the Pope was the head of government for a large portion of central Italy — in addition to being chief shepherd of the church. Peregrine's hometown of Forli was in a section of these Papal States that was in revolt against the Pope. Trying to act as peacemaker in the dispute, Philip Benizi, the future Servite saint, went to address an angry mob on the streets of Forli. He urged the people to make peace with the Pope and return to the Sacraments.

Philip was literally run out of town by the mob, one of whose most violent and outspoken leaders was the eighteen year old Peregrine. Yet when Peregrine saw Philip respond to the taunts and violence of the crowd by prayerfully interceding before God that they be forgiven, Peregrine suddenly felt ashamed of his behavior and the aimless life he had been leading. His hostile and violent behavior betrayed a lack of peace of soul, a peace that this Servant of Mary seemed to enjoy. It appeared that by giving of yourself rather than grabbing things for yourself you gained much more.

Peregrine continued to search for direction in his life; but as time went by he thought more and more about the Servants of Mary. Finally, Peregrine asked the Servites at Siena if he could enter the Order. He was accepted. After his period of formation, Peregrine was assigned to the priory in his hometown of Forli, where he was to spend the remainder of his life.

As a Servite brother, Peregrine cut quite a different figure than he had as a young rabble-rouser. He spent his time ministering to the sick, the poor, and others on the fringes of society. During the famines that swept Italy in the early fourteenth century, Peregrine was a tireless advocate of the needs of the hungry. Several miraculous multiplications of food were attributed to his ardent prayer for those who were starving. The courage, the energy, the firmness which had always characterized Peregrine's life had found a new purpose and goal in God.

Conscious of his sinful past and desiring now to serve God alone, Peregrine pursued rigorous penitential exercises. He would stand in prayer for long periods of time, after having spent a tiring day among the people of Forli. Over the years this constant standing took its toll on Peregrine's body. When he was sixty open sores developed on his right leg, which a physician diagnosed as cancerous. The leg would have to be removed. The night before the operation, Peregrine dragged himself to the community room and prayed before an image of Christ on the cross until he fell asleep. When he awoke the next morning, his leg was completely healed.

Word of the healing spread rapidly among the people whom he loved and served so well. When he died twenty years later, Peregrine was already being venerated as a saint. He was officially canonized by Pope Benedict in 1726. He is now the patron saint of all those who suffer from cancer.

that it's easy to become attached to even the scantiest of possessions, Benincasa refrained from accepting alms from any of his visitors. Nor would he store extra food in his cave. He used to say, "Our enemy is more easily overcome by those who own nothing."

Benincasa died in 1426 at the age of fifty, while still living in his cave. His body was brought down the mountain and placed in the Church of St. Martin in Montichiello. As a sign of their gratitude for all the blessings the town had received from Benincasa's presence on the mountain (and which the town continued to receive after his death), the townspeople erected a priory for the Servites near the Church of St. Martin.

## BLESSED FRANCIS

May 12

As human beings it's next to impossible to do something for one reason and one reason alone. We decide for or against some course of action (even very good actions) for a variety of reasons, some of them better than others. A candidate for political office, for example, might decide to run because he wants to bring more jobs and better housing to the people of his district. At the same time, he may also be running because he likes seeing his name in the newspaper and he enjoys the applause after a speech. To begin to understand ourselves and what God really wants of us, we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit (who is with us as a result of our baptism).

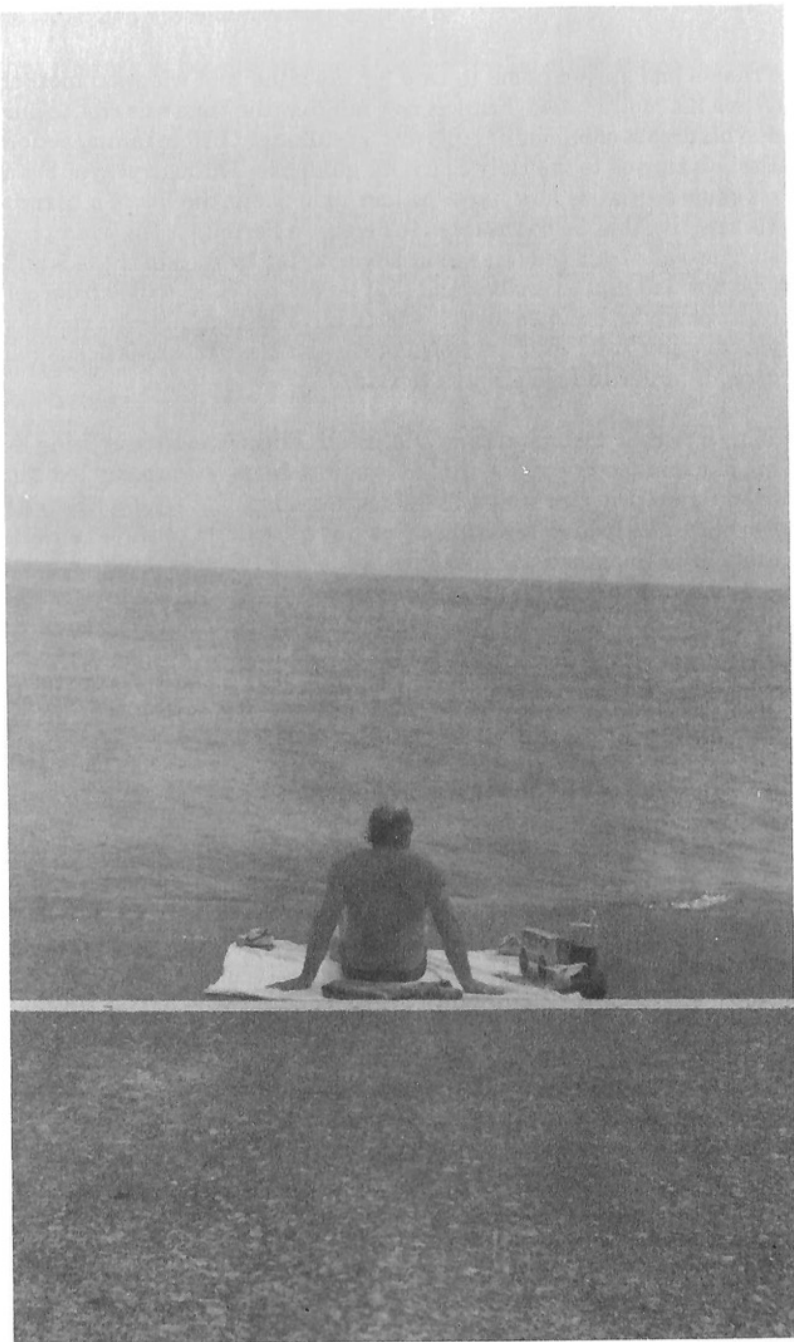
One dream that Francis had when he was growing up in Siena was that someday he would be a hermit and would have God as his constant companion. Now there have been many men and women (including a goodly number from the Servants of Mary) who have been called to the solitary life and have grown very close to God that way. The life of a hermit is not the route that God has mapped out for all his Servants, however. As Blessed Benincasa would be glad to attest, it takes a special grace from God to fend off the demons who attack us when we are alone. Francis made this discovery only after he had reached the age of twenty-two, an age at which most young men of the thirteenth century would have settled on a course in life.

Francis had stayed home to care for his blind and widowed mother. When his mother died, Francis now felt that the time was ripe to pursue his dream of becoming a hermit. Fortunately, before taking action, Francis turned to the Holy Spirit for guidance. Through prayer Francis came to realize how naive he had been about the life of a hermit. He saw, too, that he had wanted to become a hermit for the wrong reason: he was afraid that he would be corrupted by the sin of the world. God now led him to understand that he did not have to flee from corrupt society in order to keep his faith alive. In fact, his real vocation was to enter fully into the world of sin and corruption, as Jesus had done, in order to lead sinners to God.

With a clearer understanding of himself, Francis went searching for his place in God's service. His devotion to Mary eventually led him to become a priest in the new Order of Servants of Mary. As a Servite, Francis quickly discovered that God had gifted him in ways he never thought or imagined. He spent the rest of his life preaching, counseling, and ministering to all sorts of people — especially the poor and homeless. Although he found himself very busy in his ministry, he never surrendered his life-long love of prayer and solitude, for they were the source of the kindness and the wisdom that made his ministry so effective. He looked upon everything he did during the day as an expression of his devotion to Mary.

Francis died in 1328 at the age of sixty-two, after celebrating the Mass of the Ascension.





## BLESSED JAMES PHILIP

May 30

How many of us really enjoy what we do in life? For how many of us does “life” begin when we get off from work, or out of the house, or away from our responsibilities? Many of us struggle to escape from the things in our life that we did not choose for ourselves. Saints and blessed, though, tend to take a different attitude toward things not of their choosing. Someone once said that happiness doesn’t come from having what we want but from wanting what we have. In the lives of holy people we see over and over again how they were able to find God (and true happiness) in what might seem to be the most confining of circumstances. Blessed James Philip, for example, spent almost his entire life in the Servite priory; yet he found joy there — simply living the Servite life.

James Philip was born in 1454 in the town of Cello di Monte Chiara. At the age of two, young James was stricken with epilepsy. James’s father made a vow to God that if his son were healed of his illness, he would dedicate his son to God. James did return to health, and, faithful to his vow, his father presented James to the Servants of Mary at Faenza when James was nine years old!

We might imagine that being shunted off to live a monastic life would have been a terrible bore to this nine year old; but James quickly adjusted to the quiet and the atmosphere of prayer in the Servite community. He grew into an even-tempered and reserved young man who found in the singing of the psalms and the celebration of the Mass a joy and a strength that carried through all he did. James took great interest in the proper way of celebrating each of the liturgical rites, saying that “nothing should be called small which concerns the worship of God.”

James avoided idleness. In his spare time he would read and meditate on the Scriptures and on the works of the early bishops and teachers of the Church. He would sometimes mold small clay figures as he meditated, so that even his hands would be busy praising God.

Because of his love for the Mass, James Philip was a natural candidate for the priesthood. Indeed, after his ordination the reverence and devotion with which he celebrated Mass was an inspiration to his

fellow Servites and to the people of Faenza who were in attendance. While celebrating Mass he would sometimes sink into a deep state of contemplation. At other times he would be moved to tears as he reflected on the love being poured out to us in the Eucharist.

Within only a few years of ordination, his brothers began to notice that James did not look well. James refused to speak of ill health. Whenever anyone asked him how he felt, he would reply, "Well, because God wills it." He grew weaker, but he never missed Mass or Divine Office. When death was very near, James visited each one of the friars, asking them to forgive him anything he might have done to hurt them. He also asked each one to pray for his soul the next day. James died May 25, 1483. Miracles began to occur through his intercession soon afterward.

## ST. JULIANA

June 19

There are many families of sisters who refer to their foundress as "mother" because she formed the first gathering of sisters into a clearly defined congregation with a motherhouse, a charter, and a rule of life. At first it may seem surprising that Servite sisters and nuns throughout the world would invoke St. Juliana as "mother," because in her own lifetime Juliana founded no religious family of her own. As far as anyone can tell, she established no convents and never sought the Church's approval for a new congregation. Yet we know that when it comes to the workings of God's Spirit, what is recorded on paper (or parchment) tells only part of the story. Juliana continues to lead the Servite sisters now just as she led the religious women of her own time and place — by the force of her example.

Juliana was born to a wealthy family in Florence towards the end of the thirteenth century. According to the story that has come down to us, when Juliana was fifteen she heard one of the Servite Founders, St. Alexis, preach on divine judgement. His reflections on what God considers to be the truly valuable and enduring achievements of life impressed Juliana so much that she resolved to turn away from the life of wealth and ease that had been laid out for her by her family. She learned more about the new Order of Servants of Mary, and

eventually asked the friars to bestow on her the habit of the Order.

Soon Juliana was joined by a number of other young women who offered their life to Christ under the protection of Mary. These women gathered for worship daily at the Servite church near Florence; they followed a strict regiment of fasts; and they did what they could to help the poor. In serving the poor, these women always wore a simple black garb. In this way they hoped to witness against the opulent and showy manner in which the wealthy women of Florence dressed. In prayer, in penance, and in service, Juliana was the leader of the Marian sisters of her time.

When Juliana's life was drawing to a close, she earnestly desired to receive communion once more. But she was already too weak to consume anything by mouth. So the priest placed the host over her heart. This method of "receiving" Communion was quite common in the Middle Ages for those no longer able to swallow the host. The priest would pray that God who had placed the soul in the body might sanctify the sick person through the Body of Christ. After the host had been placed on Juliana's heart, her face began to beam with delight. She died peacefully. Then it was noted that the host was nowhere to be found. Her desire to receive the Eucharist had been granted!

Juliana died in 1341. Pope Clement XII canonized her in 1737.



## BLESSED THOMAS

June 27

Where can we find Jesus today? The answer to this question isn't very difficult if we just follow the directions Jesus gave us when he was still on earth. He said that if we ever wanted to find him, we need only to look for someone who is without enough to eat or drink, or is without enough to wear, or a place to stay, who is sick or in prison and is not being visited. That is where we find Jesus. Finding Jesus is not hard at all. The hard part is getting rid of the clutter in our minds and hearts so that we can recognize Jesus when we see him. If we decide we need some help getting rid of the clutter and simplifying our lives, we can turn for guidance to Blessed Thomas. For finding Jesus in the brother and sister in need was the story of his life.

Thomas was born in Orvieto about the year 1300. His devotion to Mary led him to seek admission to the Servites as a lay brother. He did not want to be considered for ordination to the priesthood or for any office or honor in the Order. Not surprisingly he proved to be a popular member of the community. His gentleness and compassion and his total lack of ambition made him a likable companion and a valuable support in time of trouble.

In his prayer Thomas frequently meditated on the heart of Jesus, the great sign of God's love for us. God had loved us so much that he had gone so far as to become a poor and helpless baby in order to win us back to him. Thomas's prayer gave him a great love for the poor. If Jesus was poor, then there is surely no shame in being seen by the world as poor. So Thomas undertook the work of begging for food for the Servite community. He went from door to door seeking alms, and he accepted without complaint the abuse that is always heaped upon beggars. In actual fact, Thomas gave to the needy as much as he took in. The people in need whom he encountered on the street he supplied as best he could with the necessities of life. On more than one occasion he was seen joyfully handing over his portion from the table to someone who was without food.

Because of Thomas's yearning to help anyone who was in need, God saw fit to work several miracles for him. According to one story that has been featured in paintings and drawings, Thomas is seen offering a branch of plump figs in the middle of winter to a pregnant woman



## BLESSED CLELIA

July 13

One of the things we probably underestimate or take for granted is the impact our parents have had on our life. We might be vaguely conscious of the practical things we learned at home. We are perhaps less aware of the influence our family has had on the values we hold and the particular way we view the world. Most of us are who we are because of our parents. That's especially true when it comes to our Catholic faith. Yes, we learned a lot of information about our faith from religion books and religion classes and parish priests; but the fact that we believe in God at all — we probably owe that to the people who raised us.

Take, for example, Clelia Barbieri. Clelia was born near Bologna in 1847. Her family was very poor. In fact, her father fell victim to the cholera epidemic and died when Clelia was nine. Still, Clelia picked up from her parents the art of surviving on very little: how to sew and cook, to scrimp and save and make ends meet. She also learned at home that however difficult life became, God was never to be neglected. Family prayer and Sunday Mass were part of the rhythm of life through thick and through thin.

After taking part in Vespers on Sunday evening, Clelia and three companions (all teenagers) who taught catechism in the parish would meet to talk about their faith and their experience of prayer. This time they spent together on Sundays was for all of them a highpoint of the week and it sped by all too quickly. One of the experiences that they shared with one another on Sunday evening was that each one had felt a call to religious life.

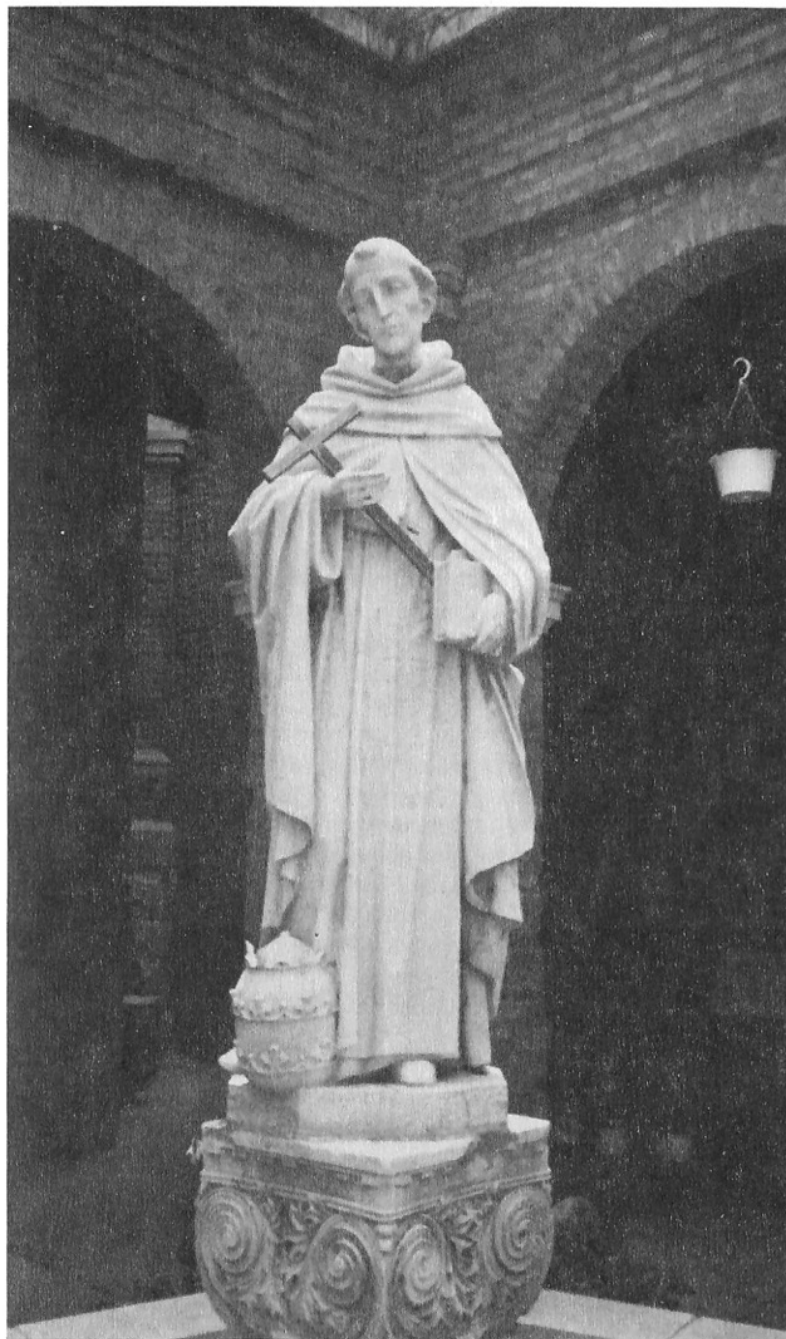
Clelia believed that none of the established Orders of Sisters would accept them because they were "so poor." So they began to explore the possibility of creating a community themselves. Under the guidance of their pastor, the four girls moved into a small dwelling called The House of the Master. Soon afterwards Clelia wrote a Rule of Life for the tiny community. They placed themselves under the patronage of the Sorrowful Virgin, a devotion which had been fostered by the Servite Friars of Bologna. They called themselves the Minims of the Sorrowful Virgin.



The community took as their special apostolate the care of orphaned or abandoned girls. They gave these girls training in the domestic arts and in the practice of the Catholic faith — those things which they had been fortunate enough to receive from their families.

Clelia grew rapidly in the intensity of her prayer life. In her "Letter to Jesus, My Beloved Spouse," Clelia wrote, "Oh, great God, you see my constant longing to love you and never displease you. Lord, open your heart of love, that I may be consumed with a like love."

As Clelia grew in holiness, though, the symptoms of tuberculosis began to appear in her body. Gradually she grew weaker. Finally she was confined to bed. Clelia died at the age of twenty-three on July 13, 1870. Her last words to her community were, "Be of good cheer! I'm going to Paradise, but I'll always be with you, and never desert you."



## ST. PHILIP BENIZI

August 23

"You are the light of the world." We've heard these words of Jesus to his followers many times. When we hear them we think, "He's not talking about me. I'm just an ordinary person. I'm a sinner." Precisely. Jesus knows his audience very well. What he means when he says "You are the light of the world" is that he has put his light within us. Jesus is the true light of the world; but his light continues to shine through ordinary human beings like us. And if Jesus has given us a particular gift, a particular light that the world needs in order to see the path to him, then Jesus wants us to let that light shine. If we try to hide our light, then the whole world suffers.

One of the great lights among the Servants of Mary was St. Philip Benizi, and his light almost went undetected. Philip was born in Florence in the early thirteenth century. God blessed Philip with great intelligence and imagination. Coming from a wealthy family, Philip had the opportunity to develop his natural aptitude at the finest schools. Philip, though, was not particularly impressed with himself. He thought himself very small compared to the greatness of God. In other words, Philip understood perfectly the first stage of humility (how unimportant we are by ourselves), but he had not yet arrived at the second stage of humility (how great we can be when filled with God's Spirit).

Philip applied to the Servites as a lay brother. For four years apparently none of the Servants knew about his intelligence or education. But Philip could not hide his light forever. A remark here, a suggestion there: these served as little hints that there were resources within Philip that were not being tapped. It was not that there was anything shameful or second-rate about the life Philip had chosen within the Order. It was simply that the Order desperately needed someone who could be their leader.

As is often the case when a new group begins to rally around God, the group's enthusiasm and vision outrun the attention given to practical aspects of building a solid foundation in the Church. The Founders were dying, and with them was dying the initial call from God that bound the group together. How should the Servites organize themselves within the Church? Where should they live? What work should they do? How did Mary, who had touched the lives of the Founders so

deeply, fit into the lives of those who followed the Founders? These were questions that had to be answered if the Servants of Mary were to continue. And it was Philip's ability to grapple with these questions that made him seem like a gift sent by Mary to her Servants.

Once his light came out from under the bushel, Philip quickly rose to leadership in the Order. In 1267 he was elected prior general, an office he held practically to the day of his death in 1285. His gifts once brought forth were so luminous that he was even considered for pope.

Philip was responsible for increasing the number of communities in the Order and organizing them into provinces. He completed the Rule of Life and used all his gifts of wisdom and discretion to pave the way for the final approval of the Order by the Roman Curia. Through it all, Philip never saw himself as anyone other than "Brother Philip." That's the way he commonly introduced himself. After completing his service as head of the Order, he moved to Todi, the poorest house in the Order.

Several miracles were attributed to Philip during his lifetime. Once when a community was without food, Philip prayed and two baskets of bread appeared at the priory door.

At his death Philip's contemporaries quickly proclaimed him a saint (He was canonized in 1671). Yet those who called him a saint based their belief not on his historical importance or his brilliance or his diplomatic skills, but on his genuine concern for his brother Servites. An ancient document about St. Philip says simply, "He loved his brothers."

## BLESSED ANDREW

August 31

When we read the Gospel accounts of the call of the first disciples, it all sounds so smooth and orderly. Jesus saw some fishermen and said, "Come follow me." They left their nets and followed him. And yet how much of a struggle must it have been for those disciples to leave "everything" and follow Jesus! How many times did they want to go back to what they knew and were comfortable with, rather than continue

this vagabond life with a man who claimed to be the chosen one of God? How many times did they want to compromise their commitment and say, "I'll leave *some* of my possessions" or "I'll follow you part of the way"?

The General Chapter of the Servants of Mary was held in Borgo Sansepolcro in 1278. During the time of the meeting St. Philip Benizi preached a sermon to the people of the city based on the text "None of you can be my disciple unless he give up all his possessions." In the congregation was a certain young man of comfortable means who was listening very closely to what St. Philip was saying. Even though there were a lot of people in church, this young man felt that Philip's words were really meant for him. What could the young man do, then, but apply to the Servants of Mary?

The Servites gave the new friar the religious name of Andrew because his story sounded so much like that of the apostle whom Jesus called away from his nets. In the community at Borgo, Andrew was humble, peace-loving, and got along well with his brothers. Still he felt that God was calling him to "give up" even more of what he had. Somehow he had not yet obeyed the command he heard through the mouth of St. Philip. Therefore, he asked permission to go to a hermitage which was affiliated with the Borgo community. There Andrew pursued the life of a hermit, away from everyone and everything he had been accustomed to as a youth.

Even in a lifestyle in which communication is very limited, genuine holiness has a way of making its presence known. It was not long before Andrew's unencumbered desire to serve God began to have its affect on the other hermits in the area. He became a kind of spiritual father and guide to the hermits — listening to them describe their struggles with temptation, their difficulties with prayer, and their problems finding their way to God. He just seemed to know the way. In fact, Andrew's reputation as a spiritual counselor was so great that entire settlements of solitaries near the cities of Alessandria and Asta affiliated themselves with the Servants of Mary. Everybody went for help to "Andrew of the Mountain."

According to the testimony of other hermits, Andrew knew when his death would take place. He died while at prayer in his hermitage in 1315. His body was carried down to the church at Borgo Sansepolcro by a group of his followers, amidst much weeping and mourning.

## BLESSED JOAN

September 1

How do I know that I am really following Christ? How can I be sure that I am really doing what God wants me to do? The psalmist once asked, "Who has known the mind of God?" The answer, of course, is "nobody." We do have an idea of what God wants from scripture, from prayer, and from our collective experience through the centuries. Still, anyone who has ever desired to serve God has had to wonder at one time or another what God's dream for his people really is. Are my puny human initiatives really leading me and my brothers and sisters to God? Or, am I just wasting my life? These kinds of questions nearly exhausted one servant of God, a certain Joan of Florence.

Joan was one of the earliest of the holy women called "Mantellates" who frequented Servite churches, took part in the community prayer, and received the habit of the Order. Joan, who lived during the first century of the Order's existence, affiliated herself with the Servites in Florence. Under the direction of the friars, she promised to lead a life of prayer, penance, and service, and to forego the attractions of the world.

Many saints and blessed and other genuinely holy people have had to face opposition from political authorities, from members of their family, from friends, and even from other people who are vowed to serve God. But Joan's nemesis is perhaps the most trying to the soul and the spirit. Her great burden as a Servite sister came not from other people but from temptations from within, temptations that struck at the very heart of her religious commitment. She was tempted to doubt the reality of the sacraments; she was tempted to believe that fasting and sacrifice were useless; and, most frightening, she was tempted to believe that her commitment to virginity was opposed to the commandments of God.

Joan may have led what seemed to others a very serene life — a life free of stress and strain, a life removed from the responsibility of motherhood. It was anything but serene to her. Yet, God's promise to each of us is that we are never given more than we can bare. When Joan was racked by these temptations, she would always call forth God's help. By making the sign of the cross, she was able to conquer the force that was pulling her away from God. Then, having scattered the

temptation, she would commit herself once more to serving God and the Virgin Mary.

A less sincere person than Joan might have abandoned her vows completely, deciding that the mental anguish was not worth it. Joan, however, did not run away from life. Nor did she allow herself to become paralyzed by what was going on in her mind. She continued to serve and she continued to believe. In works of art Joan is often depicted as holding a lily, a symbol of her faithfulness to the promises she made.

## **BLESSED BONAVENTURE OF FORLI** September 6

Some people never get in a rut. They are always dreaming new dreams, imagining new places to go, taking on new kinds of work, and experimenting with different ways of living. They seem never to be bored or to bore those around them. And however old they may live to be, they retain the sparkle of youth.

In the annals of Servite history, one such character was Bonaventure, native of Forli. Bonaventure was born in the early fifteenth century and entered the Servites in 1448. During the next forty-three years, Bonaventure was (in turn) a student of theology in Venice, prior of a community in Rome, provincial of the Province of Bologna, an intenterant preacher, a hermit, the vicar for a group that followed the Servite Rule more strictly, a consultant for a task force on the restoration of religious discipline, and a peacemaker within the Servite Order.

Some people who bounce from one job to another lack the discipline to concentrate on any one thing long enough to learn how to do it well. Others give the impression that they just want to avoid getting involved in anything very deeply. But that was not true of Bonaventure. He had the ability to apply himself to all these ministries and to do them well. What made him so effective in so many things was his utter simplicity of life. There was no pretense in his speech or his appearance. He wore the poorest clothes, went barefoot in winter and summer, avoided meat and wine, and customarily slept on the bare ground or on wooden planks. Because he so clearly wanted nothing for himself, he was accepted everywhere. The zeal of his commitment to simplicity of life

was especially important in restoring within the Order some of the old-time dedication to prayer and poverty.

Bonaventure's greatest influence seems to have been as a preacher. Off and on for forty years, he travelled up and down the countryside, calling people back to the practice of the faith and their obligation to care for the needy. Once in the middle of the panic and chaos of a plague at Perugia, Bonaventure was able to convince the people not only to implore God's help and to do penance as a sign of their sincerity, but he also got them to organize a relief effort to help the sick and their families. A contemporary said in admiration of Bonaventure's seemingly boundless energy, endless travelling, and spirited preaching, "He is another St. Paul."

While preaching a Lenten sermon in Udine in 1491, Bonaventure suddenly collapsed. He died several days later. The many years of doing penance and working for the Lord had finally worn out his system.





## BLESSED JOHN ANGELO

October 25

More and more people are realizing that if we want to understand ourselves and why we do certain things, we have to return to our roots, to the place where we began. There is something about going back to our roots that clears our eyes and renews our spirit. It helps us see what is essential to our existence and what can be discarded. This quest for his roots as a disciple of Jesus and a Servant of Mary is the story of John Angelo Porro.

John Angelo was born in Milan about 1451. While in his early teens, he entered the Servites in his hometown. John remained in Milan for five years, but he felt a strong yearning for a life of greater solitude. He spent some time exploring the solitary life in a hermitage along the Adda River before being summoned to Florence to complete his studies for the priesthood.

As a student and then as a priest in Florence, John partook fully in the community life of prayer and service; yet he still felt that God was calling him to a more solitary existence. A group of friars had returned earlier in the century to restore the original Servite hermitage at Monte Senario. It was in the quiet and solitude of Monte Senario that the first Servants of Mary had come to know their particular call from the Lord. Now, two hundred years later, a new group of Servites had returned to their roots to listen once more for the movement of the Spirit.

Not surprisingly, John asked to join this group of Servite hermits. In and through his life of penance and contemplation, John spent time with the Lord and grew in His love. Although John was recalled to Florence for a time to instruct the Servite novices, and on several occasions he had to leave the mountain for reasons of health, he always returned to the mountain with gratitude and joy.

Yet the story of John Angelo does not end at Monte Senario. In 1495 John was elected prior of the community at Milan. He remained at Milan until his death in 1505. While retaining his love of solitude (a biographer says that John lived in a room "a little removed from the others"), he plunged himself into the clatter of the bustling city. John took a great interest in teaching children the basics of their Christian

faith and how to live as a follower of Jesus. On feast days John would stand at the church doors or wander through the streets of Milan striking up conversations with groups of children and telling them about the life of Jesus.

Talking with children may sound like an odd way for a man like John to spend his last years. Here was a man who loved prayer and solitude, a man who had come to know the height and depth and length and breadth of the love of God in the quiet of Monte Senario. While on the mountain, though, John must have discovered the truth of what Jesus once told his followers: "Trust me when I tell you that whoever does not accept the kingdom of God as a child will not enter into it." Unless each of us can return to the simple openness to God in the heart of a child, we can never know God the way he wants to be known. By returning to his spiritual roots, John was able, like Mary, to "proclaim the greatness of the Lord."

## BLESSED JEROME

December 10

One of the expressions that parents often use on their children is "try to make something of yourself." Sloppy dress and poor report cards can bring on a full-scale panic about the future. On the other hand, if a child begins to exhibit great gifts of intellect, parents are inclined to dream that some day their offspring will rise to great heights of fame and fortune. The parents may begin to plot how they can get the kid admitted to the best schools and introduced to influential people.

Jerome, a native of Sant'Angelo in Vado, showed great promise as a scholar and as a leader. But Jerome's parents were faith-filled people. They taught their gifted son that our talents and abilities come from God and that the really successful people are those who put their gifts at the service of God.

Jerome, who was born in the early fifteenth century, learned his lesson well. When he began to show an interest in religious life, he received his parent's blessing to enter the Servants of Mary in his native town. His Servite brothers quickly recognized his potential for studies and sent him to Bologna to obtain a degree in theology. After

ordination Jerome remained in Bologna a short while, but continued academic advancement held little attraction to him. His desire as a religious was to do charitable work unobtrusively. So Jerome returned to his hometown priory at Sant'Angelo to dedicate himself to prayer and penance.

Although those of a more worldly frame of mind might look upon Jerome's decision as "wasting his talents," it was in this attempt to lead a subdued life that he actually began to "make something of himself." His knowledge of human nature, his keen insight, and his burning love for God soon made him a much sought-after confessor and counselor. He would spend many hours in the confessional every day helping people grow in self-knowledge and in their awareness of the ways of God. Jerome possessed the gift of discerning spirits — the ability to help people discover the particular thing that the Lord is asking them to do at that moment in their life.

Jerome offered solid spiritual advice to his clients, and good advice is something that everybody needs. The rich, the poor, the old, the young, the saintly, and the not-so-saintly: they all sought help from Jerome. The rich and the influential saw John as a real prize. Busy people in important places are always on the lookout for intelligent and honest advisors. So Jerome received several job offers to leave general practice and become a full-time advisor to some distinguished person.

Frederick, Duke of Urbino, who sought Jerome's advice quite often, offered the Servite confessor a permanent position in his court. Certainly the material comfort and the prestige of being a member of the court are not easy to turn away. Even Jesus had to do battle with these kinds of temptations. But Jerome had the courage to refuse the Duke's offer. Our integrity as God's servant can disappear in a hurry when we are beholding to a worldly power. Besides, Jerome saw himself as the servant of *all* God's people.

Jerome spent his last years in near total solitude, far from the pagentry of the Court. He died about 1468.

## BLESSED BONAVENTURE OF PISTOIA

December 15

Jesus once told Nicodemus, "Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Nicodemus had a hard time figuring out what Jesus meant by being "born again." To be honest, it's nearly impossible to explain what being "born again" means; but we can recognize it when we see it happen in somebody's life. Take, for instance, the life of Bonaventure of Pistoia.

Bonaventure was born in about the year 1250. As a young man Bonaventure was drawn into the political and religious conflicts that were raging in his city at the time. His violent and vengeful temper was enough to boost Bonaventure to become the leader of the Ghibelline party (the faction in opposition to the Pope). The Servite General Philip Benizi visited Pistoia in 1276 and took the opportunity to preach to the people of the strife-torn city a message of peace and understanding. He reminded them of the importance of remaining loyal to the Pope.

Philip's preaching would later soften the heart of an angry man named Peregrine. But in the city of Pistoia that day, Philip's words stung the young Ghibelline leader to the core. Bonaventure's conversion was almost immediate. He went to Philip after he finished speaking and asked to be received into the Servite Order and to become a priest. Philip, aware that a quick conversion can be followed by just as quick a relapse, told Bonaventure that, as a sign that he had really changed, he must first ask forgiveness from his former enemies and return four-fold anything he had stolen. The born-again Bonaventure joyfully complied with Philip's request.

Bonaventure remained close to Philip throughout the remainder of Philip's life, often accompanying the Servite leader in his travels to various houses of the Order. Bonaventure, who had been so fiery and quick-tempered, grew in the Spirit to be a man of foresight and understanding. Philip asked Bonaventure to be one of his advisors when he undertook the delicate work of seeking approval for the new Order of Servants from Pope Martin IV in 1285. Bonaventure's gifts of wisdom and understanding earned him the respect of his brothers. He was appointed prior of the community wherever he went — at Bologna, at Pistoia, at Montepulciano — and finally he became provincial of the

Roman Province. He who had once been so intolerant of opposing view points now made a deliberate effort to look at issues from the other person's point of view.

Bonaventure never forgot the source of his own conversion. Because Philip had boldly proclaimed God's truth, Bonaventure had been saved from his futile ways. So Bonaventure devoted a considerable amount of time to preparing and delivering sermons in the same enthusiastic style that had made such an impact on his own life. His message to the people, based on his own experience of coming to know the Prince of Peace, was responsible for getting others to lay down their arms and enter the Servants of Mary.

Bonaventure died at Orvieto about 1315.