

Saint John of God Story

Welcome to the Saint John of God Story. Adapted from "John of God - Father of the Poor " by Brother Brian O'Donnell, OH

8th March 1550

On Saturday, 8 March 1550, the city of Granada in southern Spain awoke to the expected, but unwelcome, news that "John of God has died. The Father of the Poor is dead!"

Amongst the first to receive the dreaded tidings were John of God's companions, and the poor and sick, at his hospital on Los Gomeles Rise. Then the news spread rapidly through the market place and streets of the city and people began to make their way to Casa de Los Pisa, the family home of Don Garcia de Pisa, where John had died.

By nine o'clock the crowd in front of the Casa de Los Pisa overflowed into the nearby Plaza Nueva. As they milled about in the plaza the poor were asking one another: "What will become of us? Who will look out for us now that our Father has been taken from us?"

No-one could answer those questions and the conversation increasingly focused on the man whom they had loved in life and already missed death. Many of them could recall his arrival at Granada twelve years before when he appeared in the streets of the city hawking books from door to door. Later he secured some space in the market that flourished near the main entrance to the city - the Elvira Gate. There he sold his books from a modest bookstall erected under a tarpaulin fixed to the wall against which he propped his larger volumes.

His speech bore a trace of the Portuguese accent of his childhood and, in the beginning, they had called him 'El Portugués'. It became known that he had peddled books in the countryside around Gibraltar before coming to Granada.

John was a very private man but during the years that followed his appearance in Granada, often in conversations around the cooking fires and water cisterns of his two hospitals, he revealed enough of himself for people to be able to piece together the story of his life before he came to live amongst them.

Birth and Infancy

They learned that in 1495 at Montemor O Novo in Portugal, he had been born into the family of Andrew Cidade. His parents named him João (John) and lovingly nurtured him as their only child. The family was middle class and young John seemed destined to live a comfortable, ordinary sort of life, eventually taking over the family business - the marketing of garden produce.

John's destiny was shaped by the event that, effectively, destroyed the Cidade family. When he was only eight years old he was taken from the Cidades by a cleric and transported some 300 kilometres, across the border, into Spain and to the domain of Count Fernando Alvarez de Oropesa where his upbringing was entrusted to Don Francisco de Herruz, a gentleman who owed allegiance to the Count

The Granadinos, when they recalled that part of John of God's story, could be forgiven for exchanging knowing looks. Cidade was a family name that indicated Jewish origins. In the 'ethnic cleansing' of Jews (even those converted to Christianity and known as Conversos) that took place in the early 16th century on the Iberian Peninsula, children were sometimes removed from unfavourable circumstances and placed with a 'good Christian family' with a view to ensuring their proper upbringing in the faith and their ultimate salvation.

Childhood and Adolescence

Don Francisco de Herruz lived at Torralba de Oropesa and made a place in his home there for John. When John reached adolescence he was put to work as a shepherd under the tutelage and supervision of a flock-master whom everyone referred to as 'el-mayoral' (the boss). Taught his trade and guided by el-mayoral, John grew out of adolescence and passed to manhood as a shepherd. As the flock-master's right hand man, in the management of flocks, John was engaged in a serious enterprise. (Before the development of the colonies in the New World the production of wool and mutton was the basis of wealth and power in Spain).

Early Manhood

In 1523 Spain's Emperor Charles V was at war with France's Francis I. Their armies joined battle at Fuentarrabia in the north of Spain. The Count of Oropesa, no Don Francisco Alvarez de Toledo y Pacheco, because of the allegiance he owed the Emperor sent a company of men-at-arms from this estates to take part in the conflict. The eldest son of Don Francisco de Herruz, Don Juan Herruz, who had had military training was put in command of the contingent and John, now well into his twenties, was included in this force and travelled with it to war and (in his mind) to adventure.

Military Campaigns

First military Campaign

Two events at Fuenterrabia profoundly affected John's future. They were episodes that brought him face to face with the fragile and transient nature of life.

One of these events occurred when John, foraging near the French lines, was thrown by a horse. The fall knocked him unconscious. On regaining his senses he realised that he was in mortal danger of being captured. In fear and desperation he prayed to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, for rescue or for the strength to save himself. Gradually his head cleared and he was able to crawl, and then hobble, back to his own lines. For the remainder of his life he attributed his deliverance to the intercession of Mary.

The second occurrence put his life in even greater danger. In camp he was posed as night guard over some booty taken from the French. During his watch, the goods he was supposed to be guarding were stolen. His immediate superior, enraged by the loss, exercised his battlefield rights and ordered the execution of John as a sentry who had failed in his duty. John was standing on the scaffold, noose around his neck, when another officer rode by and stopped to ask what was happening. When he learned the circumstances, he asked that the sentence be revoked. His prestige was such that his request was agreed to and John was reprieved. However, he was immediately 'dishonourably discharged' from his unit and sent home. It was a humbled John who made his way back to Oropesa where he resumed the only trade he knew - shepherding.

Second Military Campaign

In 1532 Charles V was involved in another war that was to impinge on John's life - a campaign to resist the Ottoman invasion of central Europe by Turkish troops under Sultan Suleiman II who had reached the outskirts of Vienna. John learned of Count Alvarez's preparations to serve his liege lord by leading the Oropesa contingent to battle and "made up his mind to join the retinue of the Count as, in effect, he did ".

John went off to war again, not as an infantryman this time, but as a soldier-servant in the Count's headquarters party. John had no misadventures and came to be well regarded by the rest of the expedition. The campaign ended successfully with the Turks in retreat and John, after witnessing the Emperor's triumphal entry into Vienna, returned with the Count by ship to Spain where his party disembarked at the northwestern port of La Coruña.

Return to Oropesa

John decided that, rather than return directly to Oropesa, he would like to visit the scene of his early childhood in Portugal. With the Count's approval, he made his way south to Montemor O Novo - a distance of some 550 kilometres.

On arrival there he unsuccessfully sought his parents. Eventually he found an old uncle who told him that both his parents were dead. His mother had died a few days after his abrupt departure for Spain and his father, suddenly both a widower and childless, had entered a Franciscan monastery to live the life of a monk until he died.

John was deeply disturbed by what had happened to his parents and decided that, as the only surviving member of his family, he should put his life at God's service.

He felt that, like his father, he had to leave familiar places in order to find God's will for him. John and his uncle, who did not expect to meet again, sadly took leave of each other and John once more left the village that he had known so well as a child.

To Seville Region

John went back to Spain but not to Oropesa. Instead he continued making his way south towards Andalusia and its

capital Seville. On his 250 kilometre journey from Montemor O Novo to Seville John earned his nightly shelter and food by doing odd jobs. Like many adventurous Portuguese and Spaniards of his time, John may have felt attracted to the Indies or the Americas. If this possibility entered his head, he would have had to pay for his passage.

To earn money for this, or some other purpose, John took employment as a shepherd for a few months on the estates of a noblewoman named Dona Leonor de Zuniga near Seville. He later told people that, while working for her ladyship, he was struck by the great care that people would give to their animals while remaining quite unconcerned about the needs of poor and sick human beings.

To North Africa

The Spanish Inquisition regarded Conversos as unreliable conveyors of the Christian faith to the newly discovered native peoples of the New World and had established a screening process at Seville to prevent them from going to the colonies. However, King John III of Portugal only introduced the Inquisition into his country in 1536 so up until then and for a while after, it was possible for John, as a Converso to go to a Portuguese colony.

John went to Gibraltar with the intention of crossing the Strait of Gibraltar to the Portuguese colony of Ceuta on the North African coast. There John met a Portuguese knight, Don Luis de Almeida who was preparing to cross to Ceuta with his wife and four unmarried daughters. John attracted perhaps by the prospect of free passage and a livelihood in Ceuta, entered the service of Don Luis and sailed to that city with the Almeida family.

Ceuta

John's new master had promised him good treatment and a generous wage. However one Don Luis de Almeida and his family settled at Ceuta they quickly used up their modest supplies and finances and became destitute. Given his situation and the fact that all members of his family had fallen ill, Don Luis had to ask John to help the family in a way that went well beyond a servant's obligations.

John had to obtain survival money for the household of Don Luis by taking work on the fortifications that were being erected at Ceuta to protect the city against pirates. John was on the 'pick-up' line each morning offering himself for work on the fortifications and he handed over his pay each evening to Don Luis, thus enabling all of them to eat enough to keep body and soul together.

Work of the harbour walls under a North African sun and harsh overseers, was hard and the hired labourers were treated more like convicts than employees. The lash landed on free backs just as readily as it did on those of the chain gangs. From time to time John and his companions were so badly treated that they talked about giving it all up. However they were virtually destitute in a penal colony and lacked the money necessary for a berth on a ship to the mainland. Some of them, in desperation, escaped by taking refuge in the nearby Muslim City of Tituan where they, of necessity, converted.

When one of John's friends did this, he reacted by blaming himself and asking, almost in despair, "How shall I answer for this Brother of mine who has, in this way, chosen to separate himself from the body of holy Mother Church and deny their truth of his faith just because he did not want to suffer a bit in his work?"

John's emotional reactions were never half-measured and in this case his distress was so great that he felt tempted to go in search of his runaway friend.

In the midst of this emotional turmoil, John spoke with a Franciscan friar who, recognising the state that John was in and that both his faith and life could be in danger, advised him to leave Ceuta immediately and return to Spain.

John, in an act of obedience that required him to commit the de Almeida family to God's providence, returned to Gibraltar.

Peddler of Books

John's experience at Montemor O Novo and Ceuta had made him more thoughtful about spiritual things and he spent his first days in Gibraltar visiting its various churches. His desire to give his life to God was growing stronger but he could not see yet how he was to do that.

Then, while sauntering through the market place one day he noticed some books and religious pictures on sale. He had a small amount of money and he decided to invest it in some of the books and pictures and to make a modest profit by re-selling them in the villages and castles of the Andalusian countryside.

John was never slow to put his plans into action and he immediately embarked on the life of an itinerant book peddler. It was a life that he found quite satisfying. He liked to travel and he liked people and now he was in constant contact with people from all walks of life. He was able to help some of them in ways that went beyond just bringing good literature into their lives. He began to carry a few secular books to attract the interest of people who were not immediately drawn to the religious. After a while, John concluded that he could make God better known and loved by selling holy books and that this might be God's plan for him.

John was now in his forties and, as the seasons changed from summer through autumn to winter, "it seeming to him to be rather burdensome to be always going up and down dale, from place to place with his back (of books), he decided to go to Granada and settle down there."

Why Granada? No doubt John had often heard the glowing accounts of this city which had seen the reunification of Spain as a Christian nation. Legend would one day offer a mystical explanation for John's choice of Granada. A future superior of the Brothers at Granada inserted into John's story the myth that, one day, while John was on the road peddling his books, he rested by a small stream near the village of Gauzin about 50 kilometres north of Gibraltar. On the bank of the stream he saw a small boy who held out a pomegranate (granada, in Spanish) to him saying, "John of God, know that Granada will be your cross and through it you will see Jesus in glory."

In the iconography of John of God this scene, reproduced by many artists, represents his decision to go to Granada - a decision that certainly changed the direction of his life and his future.

Granada

John's Granada was a 'tense, turbulent, dangerous city. A constant stream of travellers passed through it en route to the colonies of the new Americas via the ports of Seville and Cadiz. The streets teemed with mercenaries, adventurers, beggars, prostitutes and petty thieves. It was only a few years since Granada had been taken by the Spanish from the Moors...."

John's Granada was a city in transition. It was home to some 200,000 inhabitants. From its beginnings Granada had been an Islamic city and many traces of Islam remained in the structures and life of the city, especially in its many fountains and waterways. Mosques were converted into churches, and other institutions such as the Royal Hospital and the Royal College, were established as part of the Royal efforts to Christianise the city as quickly as possible.

Some of the initiatives were slow in producing the desired result and the Royal Hospital was one of them. Commenced in 1504, its construction was slow and sporadic and the first patients were not admitted until 1526. Even then, its utilisation was limited to the admission of about 30 syphilitic persons twice a year (in spring and autumn) for as long as mercury in their treatment lasted - not long! For a good part of the year the hospital was empty, until in 1535 (three years before John of God came on the scene), the Emperor ordered that one of the back wings of the hospital should be given over to the containment and treatment of mentally ill people.

The people of Granada knew the first part of John of God's story from his own words and from hearsay: The second part - what he had done after arriving in their city - they know from observation. They had seen him go from being a stranger, to a newcomer, to a madman, to an eccentric, to a good fellow, to (yes, they were prepared to say it now), a saint. They remembered that it has all begun when John had only been in Granada a short time.

Conversion

John, at his bookstall, was one of the first to hear of any news that circulated in the city. He was particularly interested to hear that the noted theologian and spiritual director, Master John de Avila, was to preach the occasional sermon at the solemn celebrations of the feast of St. Sebastian "that the city of Granada then observed at the Hermitage of Martyrs." This hermitage, established by the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, commemorated the Christians who had died for their faith during the centuries that the Moors governed Granada. It was situated on the slopes of the Alhambra - the Moorish complex of citadels, palaces and gardens that dominates the city.

Father John de Avila had been living in Granada for two years and was a good friend of the Archbishop, Don Gaspar de

Avalos, whom he was helping to establish a university. During his time in Granada a group of disciples, priests and laity, drawn by his sermons and teachings, had gathered around de Avila. They assisted him in many ministries and some of them formed what might be called 'the fish market group' that carried out a mission of charity to the poor who congregated in that central area of the city'.

The feast day of Saint Sebastian, January 20, dawned and John the crowd of other Granadinos that was moving down Elvira Street, through the Plaza Nueva, and up the 'Los Gomeles Rise' towards the Alhambra. When John arrived at the Hermitage he visited its small church and then went outside to where the sermon would be preached. He found a place near the podium on which the preacher would stand. Father John took his place at the lectern and began his sermon. He focused his remarks on what our human condition would be if God had not come down from his greatness to share our human nature. He emphasised the folly of anyone who refused to be healed of his or her physical and spiritual sickness by such a merciful Lord. He spoke of the blessedness of the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the hated and the reviled. He pointed out that the rich, the endowed, the well-regarded are not to be envied because they have already received their consolation in this world.

John's reaction to the words of the preacher was extraordinary and unexpected - and not least by himself. He had a sudden insight into the values of the gospel and how different they were to what he had so far assumed. He suddenly grasped that success in this world is not an indication of God's favour and that persons who seem to be worth nothing in the eyes of society can be those who are most precious in the sight of God. The sermon both brought John to this realisation and challenged his attitude to life and his way of living it.

John accepted the challenge. No sooner was the sermon ended than he rushed away from the crowd shouting appeals for God's mercy. Completely overtaken by the love of God and newly aware of the significance of his past sins he began to punish himself by rolling about on the ground and hitting his head against the walls of the church. Observers concluded that he had lost his reason. This seemed confirmed when he leapt to his feet and ran off down the hillside towards the town. Some young men who had been loitering outside the church followed him.

They, seeing more chance of being entertained by a bookseller gone mad, than by the bustle of people around the hermitage, ran after John as far as his lodgings, shouting after him: "Crazy, crazy."

At the head of this shouting, jeering crowd John reached the place where he slept and stored his merchandise. He burst through the door and began ripping apart his romantic novels and books on secular subjects. However he took care not to destroy, but to give away, his books on religion and the lives of saints. Finally he tore off most of his clothing, leaving himself wearing only a shirt and a pair of trousers against the infamously cold Granada winter temperatures.

In this state he went into the streets again, shouting that he wanted to be stripped of everything so that he could imitate Jesus who died destitute and naked on the Cross. Some of the crowd followed to see what he would do next. They saw him go into the main church of the city where he knelt down crying out: " Mercy! Mercy, Lord God, on this great sinner who has so offended you !"

Not everyone in the crowd was amused at John's actions. Several good men (perhaps members of Avila's group?) took hold of him and began to lead him towards the house where Father John de Avila was staying. John went quietly with them and when they arrived they explained to the priest what had happened since John ran from his sermon. Father John de Avila took John away to a room where together they talked alone for a while. John told his life story to Avila who was also of a Conversos family. Perhaps that was one of the reasons that these two men began to forge a life-long bond that would exist between them. Avila was so impressed by this dishevelled looking penitent that, before their meeting ended, he had accepted him as a spiritual son and agreed to guide his spiritual growth.

The nature and outcome of this meeting puts the 'madness' of John of God into proper perspective. Certainly, the casual observer in Granada that day concluded from John's dramatic reaction to Avila's sermon that he had gone mad. However, in the midst of the behaviour that gave that impression, John met with an insightful and experienced master of the spiritual life who decided that he was really quite rational and likely to benefit from spiritual direction.

Avila's words to John encouraged him to follow the path along which the Lord had begun to lead him. They also intensified John's desire to subdue his body and pride. He had discovered, almost accidentally, how easy it is to being scorn and derision down on oneself. In his new zeal for penance he wanted to be taken for a madman - someone who in those times was despised and derided, rather than someone who had received a great grace. So, going back into the nearby Plaza Bibarrambla, he hurled himself to the ground and rolled about in the mud. Putting some of the slime from

the ground into his mouth he shouted out all the sins that he remembered having committed: "I have been a great sinner against my God and I have offended Him in this and that. Well then, what does a traitor like me deserve for having done that? Above all he should be hurt and abused and regarded as the lowest in the world. He should be thrown in the mud and slime where the slops are dumped."

John kept this up for three days; often falling exhausted from hunger, cold and lack of sleep. His actions and appearance convinced many Granadinos that they had a madman loose in their streets.

Hospitalisation

Psychiatric illness was a mystery to the times of John of God. However not everyone in Granada saw it as something frightening and deplorable. Christianity at that time was able to incorporate individuals and groups known as Holy Madmen (Locos Santos) and Granada had a strong Islamic heritage of seeing mentally ill persons as 'touched by god'.

Finally two men who were not repulsed by John of God's behaviour rescued him from a situation that seemed to be doing no good to anyone and took him to the Royal Hospital where, for the last few years, the insane of the city had been admitted and treated (provided they were signed by one of the Hospital's Visitors - and there was room). They entrusted him to the care of the superintendent, asking him to treat John with kindness and to put him in a room on his own where he would not see anyone and would get some rest.

The Superintendent of the Hospital had already seen John in his 'madness' around the town and had reached his own conclusions. So, instead of putting his new patient in a quiet place he immediately handed him over to the warders for appropriate treatment. The prevailing common therapy for mental illness was a programme of floggings and drenchings with cold water. The objective was to inflict enough pain to shock the patient out of his or her madness back into sanity. So John was quickly stripped naked, tied up and given a lashing with a double knotted whip.

John was ready to accept this treatment for himself as a form of penance but seeing it inflicted on other - especially since it had such negligible results - upset him. On behalf of his fellow patients he reproached the warders and asked them why they took so much satisfaction in inflicting pain on those in their care. He told them that it would be more therapeutic to wash these sick people, and feed them and treat them like human beings. He reminded the warders that the revered Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel, had endowed the hospital so that the poor would receive proper treatment in their illness.

Meanwhile, Father John de Avila, knowing the reason and motivation for John's behaviour sent one of his followers to visit him and find out if he were happy about his situation and to give him the message: ".... Whilst you have time, start testing yourself for when you will go out into the world..." Being remembered by his spiritual director when his previous friends and acquaintances had forgotten or distanced themselves from him touched John deeply.

John saw the negative experiences of his hospitalisation as a way of taming the flesh that had led him astray in the past. He used to say to the warders while undergoing 'treatment' at their hands:

"Brothers, give it to this treacherous flesh, enemy of what is good, that has been the cause of all my wickedness - having obeyed it, it is only right that we both pay, because we have both sinned."

John's time in hospital gave him a sense of purpose and direction which he expressed in a prayer that he used to offer at that time :

"May Jesus Christ bring me to the time, and grant me the favour, of having a hospital where I can receive the poor and abandoned mentally ill and serve them as I wish."

In this prayer John indicated the contribution that he would make to the ministry of healing and to the field of health care in general: "and serve them as I wish". His wish was to both alleviate their pain and to help them transform it into something that brought them closer to God, who made Man, shared their experience of suffering.

To realise his prayer John needed to leave the Royal Hospital and he knew that his release depended on his showing clear signs of rationality. He desisted from his 'mad' behaviour and began to act sensibly. When the warders noted this they congratulated themselves on the effectiveness of their treatment and removed his shackles so that he could move about the hospital. He immediately began to do what he could to improve the conditions of his fellow patients by cleaning the wards and latrines.

John was always happy to help people wherever he found them in need and spent some months more in hospital, acting as a kind of unpaid auxiliary nurse. This was his situation when, on the afternoon of 16 May 1539, the funeral cortege of the Empress Isabel, wife of Charles V, reached Granada from Toledo. Her body was to be buried in the Royal Chapel.

Father John de Avila came to Granada for the Empress's obsequies and preached at the Cathedral on 26 May. He met John at this time and suggested to him that it was about time to ask the Rector of the Hospital, Father Miguel Muñoz for a certificate of discharge from care. John did that and at the same state as he had arrived at the hospital - in threadbare clothing, bareheaded and barefooted - he departed with the good wishes of the warders and patients for the home of his spiritual father at Baeza, a town situated a little more than 100 kilometres from Granada, where Avila had gone to establish a university.

Guadalupe

Father John de Avila, from Baeza and during his return visits to Granada, kept in touch with the group of his followers who worked with the poor around the city's fish market. He saw John as a future member of his group who, because of his recent experience of nursing and medical treatment, would be particularly sensitive to the needs of the sick. With this in mind Avila worked out a programme of spiritual and technical preparation that John should complete before returning to Granada. John spent from June to November at Baeza where Avila, as a preliminary step to his establishing a university there, had started a school for boys.

Avila's programme for John was that he should learn what he could at Baeza on both the spiritual and academic levels and then go north to Guadalupe in Extremadura in the west central part of Spain. This would give John an opportunity to deepen his spirituality in prayer at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which just happened to be surrounded by a number of excellent hospitals where he could learn some nursing and medical skills.

Guadalupe had eleven hospitals at that time - four of them being what we would call today 'general hospitals' and seven being a combination of specialised hospitals and hostels for pilgrims.

On foot, John made the 300 kilometres journey to Guadalupe, travelling during most of the month of November 1539. The weather was cold and his clothing unsuitable. The road was rough and he was without shoes. He had no money so he had to beg, or work, for his food along the way. From his experiences as a traveller he had developed the practice of gathering as he went along, a bundle of firewood to give those who provided him with food and lodging. If, when he arrived somewhere for the night, he found a hospital in the place, he would do directly there and hand firewood and ask for the food and shelter that would satisfy his very simple needs.

John was soon working in one of the hospitals. There he would have been able to learn some healthcare skills in an environment influenced and shaped by the guidelines followed by the hospital personnel of the Jeronymites' Guadalupe hospitals. (The Jeronymite Friars, who were responsible for the shrine and its associated hospitals, although it was against Canon Law, had received permission from Pope Eugene IV to practise, and teach the skills of physicians and surgeons). These described a well ordered hospital as one that: provides good food and a comfortable bed; a good physician who knows the patients and a good administrator and charitable carers - all of which will convert the evil of pain into something good.

After some time at Guadalupe, feeling ready for the mission that he and Father John de Avila had planned, John returned to Baeza to report to his spiritual father. Then, with his encouragement and blessing, he continued on to Granada.

Return to Granada

John arrived back in Granada as dawn was beginning to light the sky. He waited for a church to open and then assisted at mass. His fast still unbroken, he went up on the slopes of Sacro Monte to gather a bundle of firewood to sell. As he was coming down to the city he began to think about the reception he was likely to get in a place where he would be remembered as "El Loco". The dread of being received as a fool overcame him and he could not force himself to go any further. Seeing a poor woman who looked to be in need, he gave the bundle of firewood to her and went hungry back up onto the mountainside where he remained for the rest of the day. He spent the day agonising over his cowardice.

The next morning, determined to be stronger than his emotions this time, John arose early, attended mass and gathered another bundle of firewood. Making his way to the city he again began to feel ashamed. Realising how important it

was to overcome this psychological obstacle to his ever having an effective presence in Granada, he berated himself saying:

"Don Ass, who does not want to enter Granada with firewood because it embarrasses you and threatens your honour. Well, you've lost this one so take yourself off, with your firewood, to the main square where you can be seen and recognised by all those who know you. That will take away your self-conceit and your pride."

Thus motivated John went into the city and to the central square where everyone quickly noticed him. As he had expected, some people began to jeer at him and ridicule him. His gaunt appearance and ragged clothing made a poor impression.

He took all this in good part and, always liking a pun or riddle, answered good-humouredly with a remark that nobody present understood: " Brothers and sisters, what you see before you in me is like the game of Birlimbao, the game in which you plainly see three galleys and a ship but in which the more you see the less you know what is really happening ." He was referring to a Portuguese children's game in which the main player's eyes are covered and he or she has to ignore the numbers being chanted to them in doggerel while the other children make representations of a different number of vessels pass in front of them.

John was saying, obliquely, to the people of Granada that there was more to him and his life than they could hope to judge from appearances.

'Sleeping Rough' in Granada

Tolerated, if not welcomed, in the streets of Granada, John provided for his most basic needs at this time by gathering and selling firewood. He had nowhere to live and, although temperatures were mild, 'sleeping rough' was risky.

Father John de Avila had instructed John: "As soon as you get to Granada go immediately to the confessor I spoke to you about. He will be your spiritual director and you should not undertake anything of importance without first consulting him about it". Soon after his first visit to the confessor, Fray Domingo Alvarado (another member of the 'Avila circle' in Granada.), and perhaps on his recommendation, an important man of the city - Don Miguel Aviz Venegas, offered John shelter at night.

Casa Venegas

Don Migel, the grandson of Boabdil (originally Abu Abdallah) the last Moorish King of Granada, was respected and wealthy. His family home was really a palace. We do not know how John and Don Migel came to know one another. Don Migel may have been one of Avila's "circle" or Fray Domingo Alvarado could have been his confessor.

In any case, he told John that he could shelter at night inside the vestibule of his house. This gave John a safe place in which to sleep and he was grateful for it.

John was now moving in a circle of poverty in which he met other men and women who, unlike him, had no place to sleep. He felt that he could not go home at night and leave those of them who were sick and weak to spend the night crouched in doorways being hunted off by the watchmen.

His first reaction was to resolve to do something about this situation as soon as possible. His second reaction was, in the meantime, to share his good fortune with the weakest and sickest of them by inviting them to come and shelter with him in the entrance to the Venegas house.

This arrangement soon came to an abrupt end. Don Miguel came home one night to find the vestibule of his house so completely taken up with the people whom John had brought there that he was unable to manoeuvre his horse through them to his own front door. This, together with the complaints that he had been receiving from his family and servants, convinced Don Miguel that John's good impulses should be directed away from the Venegas house to a more appropriate part of the city.

Fish Market

Don Miguel was aware that Avila's "fish market group" was still working with, and for, the poor who, at night, huddled away from the cold under the closed stalls of the market and the work-benches and scaffolding around the cathedral

which was then under construction.

This group, under the leadership of Juan Loatre, had set up a shelter in the area of the fish market "to which they brought all the destitute ones that they came across in the streets." They had tried this out for a month in premises at the rear of the Star Inn. Their initiative attracted such a multitude of very sick people" that it was decided to take another, bigger, house in a street in the vicinity of the fish market.

Father John de Avila (perhaps at the behest of Don Miguel) told John to go to the Loarte shelter and exercise his charity there where he himself could sleep and where he could bring 'home' the poor people he encountered as he went around the city.

Lucena Street

This shelter was in or near Lucena Street and, since the other members of Avila's "fish market group" were occupied in business or studies and John had no such commitments, he soon took over responsibility for it: that is, the admission of needy people, the organisation of the services and the collection of alms for their care.

Soon this shelter became crowded with people, many of them too sick to leave the next morning after they had sheltered for the night. On the advice of Father John de Avila, John of God rented other larger premises.

John bought some second-hand blankets and rush mats for his residents to sleep on. Some charitable women of the city gave John some beds so that the sick would be more comfortable and his refuge gained the extra dimension that made it into a hospital.

The function of a hospital in John's time could be quite broad and he described his hospital in these words: "This house is of a general nature and it receives all sicknesses and every class of person: here there are cripples, defectives, lepers, dumb, mad, paralytics, people with skin troubles as well as aged folk and many children."

A Hospital

People recognised that John was doing something good in taking in needy and sick people and looking after them. But that, in itself, was not something new. Throughout history, especially Christian history, men and women had often done what John was doing. When John established his hospital, there were already some 14 hospitals in Granada. These included the Royal Hospital, the Charity Hospital for women, the Corpus Christie Hospital for the physically injured and the Diocesan Hospital of St. Ana for acute infections.

Typically, in John's times, a hospital had between 20 and 50 beds and addressed a particular pathology. Many hospitals were established and endowed by an individual as a result of a vow or in thanksgiving for a divine favour received. The person who received the endowment and ran the hospital often developed a vested interest in seeing that there would be surplus left over from the patron's annual grant to the hospital for their own enrichment. Such administrations would not take more patients than the number of endowed beds; and they would not take people with an illness that did not come within the terms of the endowment.

It was in this respect that John of God made an impression. He refused no one, and he took in people with all kinds of sickness. Plainly his aim was to help the poor and the sick - not to have a budget surplus. This made him noteworthy and talked about throughout the city and the surrounding countryside.

There was also something new about the relationship that John had with his patients. He did not act like a benefactor towards them. He related to them as their Brother. He was in solidarity with them and gave priority to their needs rather than his own preferences and convenience.

People started to recognise the worth of John's contribution to the care of the poor and sick in their city and merchants began to give him credit so he could buy some of the things his hospital needed. Help also began to reach John in the form of donations of blankets, sheets, pillows, clothing and other items.

Questing

The people John was helping could not contribute much, if anything at all, to what was necessary for their sustenance and care, so John had to go out begging for them in the streets of the city. He invented a new way of doing this.

Instead of standing with a begging bowl, or extended hand, by church doors in the centre of the city like other beggars, each evening John went from house to house with a large basket over his shoulder and two pots in his hands. As he went along the streets he called out: "Brothers and sister, who want to do themselves some good? Who wants to do some good for the love of God?" This was a clear reference to the Christian gospel imperative of storing up treasure for oneself in heaven by doing good works on earth. The point was not lost on the people of Granada.

They responded generously to John's appeal for help. As Granadinos, they had a strong tradition of alms giving. Granada had been an Islamic city for seven centuries and one of the five essential duties of Islam is to give alms generously. Christians, in a time when there were virtually no state health or social services, took it for granted that they had to offer charity when and where it was required.

John, in his evening questing, received money, pieces of bread or whole loaves, meat or leftover from the family's own meal.

When he arrived back at the hospital with what he had collected he would come through the door calling his 'family' together with the words: "God bless you Brothers and sisters. Pray to the Lord for those who have been good to you." Then he would heat up what he had brought back and share it out.

After the meal was over he cleaned up, tidied the house and brought back fresh water for the night from the nearby public well. John had the support of Avila's "fish market group" and other persons but, in his earliest days, he was the only one with a 24-hour day commitment to his work.

The Page Boy

Even though Father John de Avila and his disciples in Granada encouraged John, the general population had its suspicions, or at least reservations, about this unusual man. This attitude changed significantly after an incident that occurred when he was begging alms from people gathered in the patio of the Palace of the Inquisition.

In the centre of the patio was a fountain and, excited perhaps by derogatory remarks about John from some of the bystanders, an impish page boy came up behind him and shoved him into the water. John, soaked to the skin, got out of the pool and people watched to see what would happen. John showed none of the anger that the crowd expected to see. He said a few quiet words to the pageboy and departed in his wet clothes.

People who saw this incident were impressed by it and the story quickly circulated in the city. From that day John's reputation improved steadily amongst his fellow citizens.

Prostitutes

John's spirituality, like that of his contemporaries, was centred on the passion and death of Jesus of Nazareth. From the time of his conversion he was always conscious of being in the presence of a God who loved him enough to die a tortured death for him.

John, as a consequence of that realisation, felt that there was only one thing worthwhile in life - to eliminate evil and promote good.

In addition to his other activities John now began a practice that, at best, raised eyebrows and, at worst, caused him to be suspected anew and criticised. Every Friday, the day on which he was most conscious of the death of Jesus, he visited one or other of the brothels of the town. His purpose was to persuade at least one of the women to give up her dehumanising and sinful way of life.

His technique was to enter the brothel and go up to one of the women and say: "My child, I will pay you what any other would pay and a bit more. All I ask is that you listen to a couple of words from me in your room."

Once they were in her room he invited her to sit down. Then he knelt and held between them a small crucifix. Next, without any reference to her misdeeds, he started to accuse himself of his own sins and ended by praying for God's pardon. Often the woman would be moved by this experience to reject her life of vice and agree to leave the brothel with John.

For some women that was easier said than done - they were in bondage to the brothel-keeper and needed to be

bought out of their situation. John would brook no obstacle to the liberation of the women and he would either get the necessary money from amongst the noble and wealthy ladies of the city or sign a promissory note for the amount in question.

The restoration of a prostitute to normal life was a serious endeavour. John persevered in the task until he brought it to a satisfactory conclusion. Some of these women became helpers in his hospital and cared for the children he had taken in. Others felt drawn to a life of repentance and he placed them with convents and nuns. Most wanted to marry and he found husbands and provided dowries for them. His Friday visits to the brothels were only the first (and easiest) acts in some long-running life dramas in which John of God became involved. Once, after an absence from Granada seeking alms, he returned in time to be present at a ceremony in which sixteen of his 'ladies' married at the one time.

'Robbed' by a Marquis

John once said that if something in his possession were asked of him in the name of God, he had to give it over in its entirety. It was as though he had made a private vow to that effect! If someone asked him for ten ducats, and John had them, the person would get the ten ducats, and not be fobbed off with, say, five or seven.

There are many examples of that attitude in John's story. One such is the story of the night that he called on Don Pedro Enriquez, Marquis de Tarifa, who happened to be staying in Granada, to ask him for some money for his work. He found Don Pedro gambling with some friends. They all responded to John's appeal by putting together a purse of twenty-five ducats that John took away with him, well pleased with the evening's work.

Don Pedro, on the spur of the moment decided to test John's sincerity and honesty. He quickly disguised himself and hurried off to waylay John on his way back to his hospital in the darkness. Keeping his face covered and changing his voice he stopped John saying:

"Brother John, I am a gentleman of some standing, but an out-of-towner and poor. I am here in connection with a lawsuit and I am in dire straits because I need much to maintain my honour. I have been informed of your charity and I beg you to give me some help so that I do not fall into giving some offence to God."

John noted the man's appearance and words and replied: "Give me to God! (a common saying of his), let me give you what I've got on me." Taking the twenty-five ducats from his bag he offered them to the man who took them, thanked John, and went on his way.

When Don Pedro returned to his friends at the gaming table and told them what had happened they all congratulated themselves that they had met a truly honest man.

The next morning the Marquis called on John, having sent word that he wanted to see his hospital. When he arrived he began to tease John saying: "What's all this, Brother John, that they tell me about your having been robbed last night?" John replied: "Give me to God, nobody robbed me."

From John's point of view someone has asked in God's name and he had given in God's name. Where is the robbery in that?

The Marquis returned home and arranged for a hundred and fifty loaves of bread, four sheep and eight chickens to be sent around to John's hospital. He continued this practice as long as he remained in Granada.

The Basis of a Brotherhood - Reconciliation

John of God, long before he established his second hospital on Los Gomeles Rise, was attracting some men to him who not only wished to help in his works but also wanted to follow his example of a life completely committed to helping the poor. Eric Hoffer, the American philosopher, said: "It is not so much the example of others we imitate as the reflection of ourselves in their eyes and the echo of ourselves in their words."

Two of the men whose lives were changed by seeing themselves reflected in the eyes and words of John were Antón Martín and Pedro Velasco.

At the same time as John of God was beginning his work of charity in Granada these two men were engaged in a very different matter. Pedro Velasco was the scion of a wealthy Granadino family and, in a falling out over women and

money, he had killed another Pedro - Pedro of Aragón who was the Brother of Antón Martín.

Antón had come to Granada from Aduanas on Spain's east coast where he was employed as a city watchman. His life's purpose had become the prosecution of Velasco for the murder of his Brother.

Pedro Velasco had many relatives and friends in Granada and they exerted their influence to slow down the judicial process, hoping that Antón would either tire of the matter or be persuaded to withdraw his charge. Antón did run out of money and, to live, became a protector of prostitutes in the area that took in the western corner of the fish market and the Bibarrambla Square.

It is most likely that John, coming and going through the fish market and its adjacent square, and knowing many prostitutes from his work amongst them, sometimes met and got to know Antón Martín.

One day John and Antón encountered one another in Calle Colcha - a street named after the quilts made and sold there - and John, probably not for the first time, asked Antón to forgive the killer of his Brother. However, this time in desperation John dropped to his knees in the street and implored Antón, by the Passion of Christ, to forgive the man who had wronged him and his family.

Antón was moved to forgiveness by John's actions and words and the two went together to the prison of the city where Antón withdrew his accusation and Pedro was released. Both men, reconciled as a result of John's intervention and repenting of their previous actions, went to live with him at his hospital and became his first and closest companions.

Although John had not gone out recruiting followers to live with him and serve the poor, he accepted with equanimity the spontaneous formation of Brotherhood (hermandad) around him. Such was not unusual at the time - in fact so many Brotherhoods came into existence that, about twenty years after John of God's death, Pope St. Pius V felt impelled to bring some order into the situation by publishing the "Bull Lubricum Vitae Genus" that required such groups to decide whether or not to adopt a recognised Rule, take vows and become Religious Congregations.

Los Gomeles Rise

Soon after Granada had been taken from the Moors and the process of its Christianisation launched by royal command, a community of Franciscan Nuns had come from Castile to live at the top of the steeply sloping street leading to the Alhambra called Los Gomeles Rise. This location proved unsuitable for the Sisters and by 1540 they had moved to a better location near the Los Molinos Gate. Their empty convent became available for other purposes.

Some of John of God's supporters, including Dóna Francisca de Cáceres whose daughter, Leonor de Cáceres had facilitated the transfer of the Sister to a new location, recommended to him that this building be bought so that he could transfer there from the centre of the city. He, seeing the advantages of the new site, agreed and, with money that he had collected and donations from his benefactors, the property was purchased for 400 ducats.

The move to 'Los Gomeles' was the watershed in the process of John of God's acceptance by the people of Granada. After moving to his second hospital John never looked back as far as public acceptance and support was concerned. While still near the fish market he had been seen by some people as a dubious character, who had been treated for psychiatric illness and attracted to himself the riffraff of the city. We can also note that the Los Gomeles Rise was in a much better part of the city than that occupied by the fish market and its environs. The willingness of his wealthy supporters to set him up at Los Gomeles shows their confidence in what he was doing, and its basic integrity and permanence. It was unlikely that John's efforts would embarrass them.

Name and Dress

Although John may have called, and thought of himself as, 'Don Ass', his fellow Granadinos had a much higher opinion of him. One day, John forwent his simple meal at home to dine with his friend Don Migel Muñoz, who had known and supported him from his earliest days in Granada when, as a long time disciple of Father John de Avial and Rector of the Royal Hospital, he had overseen John's admission to the hospital and had signed his certificate of discharge.

Muñoz was a zealous pastor who, on 28 January 1540, had been nominated Bishop of Tuy - a city some 80 kilometres from Granada. As Bishop of Tuy, the Emperor called on him to assist in the government of his realm by serving as President of the Chancellery of Valladolid. When the appointment of a President of the Chancellery of Granada was delayed, Don Migel Muñoz served, for some months, as Visitor of that Chancellery.

At dinner Muñoz asked John how people referred to him in the city. The man whom some had already dubbed "John of the Poor" replied that he was known simply as 'John'. The bishop said to John that he should be called 'John of God'. John acquiesced to that, saying: "If God so wished". From then on everyone began to call him 'John of God'.

Many people in John's time were called "of" somewhere or something, e.g., 'de Avila', 'de los Cobos', 'de Córdoba', 'de Toledo', 'de Africa', etc. John's social history, as known in Granada, did not identify him strongly with any particular place. Ciudad, the Spanish version of the surname Cidade, with Castro never mentions and which we do not hear from John's own lips, would have pointed to Jewish ancestry and compromised his work and popular support. John had gone past the stage of being called 'the Portuguese' and even less 'el Loco'. It seems that the bishop thought that John needed some sort of patronymic and, given John's evident orientation and the danger of reattaching to him the Conversos name that he seems to have avoided using, was inspired to say that the surname most appropriate for him would be "of God".

John did not exclusively enjoy the appellation "of God", which can sound somewhat awkward at first hearing to the ears of English-speakers. In Spain, and probably elsewhere in Europe, the words "of God", were sometimes given as a surname to foundlings, or applied to people of outstanding goodness.

The bishop also seems to have been in a mood to settle, while still in Granada, how John would be seen, called and dressed in future. John of God was prone to exchange whatever he was wearing at the time with poor men whom he met on the street who needed new clothes. The bishop pointed out to John of God that his clothing could disgust and repulse people who were devoted to him and invited him to their table.

So the bishop said: "Brother John of God, just as you take that name from here for the rest of your life, you will take also the way to clothe yourself. So now you are to dress yourself in underwear, serge trousers and a flannel tunic."

John of God agreed to this and so the bishop immediately sent someone out to buy these items which were readily available in the market place and he presented the articles to John of God with his own hands. John of God wore this form of dress until the day he died. And those of his companions who emulated his ascetical and dedicated lifestyle did the same.

More Space Needed

Even the new larger premises at Los Gomeles did not meet the demands made on John of God's hospitality. Besides caring for vagrants, itinerants and the sick, John of God helped widows, orphans, the ashamed poor, people with lawsuits, wounded soldiers and farm labourers who were unemployed because of the disastrous drought of that time.

He did his best to help everyone that came to him and tried never to send anyone away disappointed. He generously gave whatever material help he could. When he could not help people materially he listened to them and encouraged them to have hope.

At the initiative of Doña Francisca de Cáceres a wing was added to the hospital to increase the available space. This wing was constructed hurriedly and in wet weather. It collapsed before the end of the year in which it was built.

A Third Hospital Conceived

Doña Francisca de Cáceres was upset, naturally, by the collapse of the wing she had added to the hospital. In December that year, although the exchange of Christmas visits preoccupied the nobility of Granada, time was found for a meeting at the Alhambra between the Marquis de Mondéjar, Doña Francisca and Leonor Cáceres (mother and daughter), and Father Diego de Linares, the Prior of the Jeronymite Friars.

They soon called in Father John de Avila and then went to talk things over with Archbishop Gaspar de Avalos. In this meeting it was decided that no further additions should be made to the Los Gomeles hospital but that they should look for land on which to build a new hospital for John of God. They expected to begin the construction of such a hospital with funds that could be made available for such a purpose for the legacy of a bishop of Gaudix for whom Don Gaspar de Avalos, although no longer Archbishop of Granada, was executor.

The following year work began on the construction of the new hospital on land that had been made available by the Jeronymite Friars through the good offices of Prior Diego de Linares.

The land given by the Jeronymites was insufficient for the planned hospital and Doña Francisca's request and gave land that could have been set aside for a public street to be used for the construction of the hospital.

Although John of God knew that this was happening he seems to have given all his attention to the day to day problems of maintaining the existing hospital.

Ashamed Poor

John of God had plenty to keep him busy within his hospital. However, his concern for others was limitless and, for some reason, he was particularly sensitive to a group of people that could be called the ashamed poor. These were people who had not been born into poverty but had been made poor by a phenomenon that overtook Spanish society at that time.

The inflow of wealth for the New World, and the demands of its colonisers for supplies and equipment from home, brought about the imbalance between available currency and available goods that we know today as inflation. It was a new experience for the Spain of John's times and people on a fixed income saw its purchasing power shrivel to almost nothing. Amongst these were spinsters and single mothers and retired clerks and other functionaries. Their previous experience of life and their treasured standing in the community made it very difficult, if not psychologically impossible, for them to beg. When John of God heard about such people he would go to see them and he took many of them under his wing. He begged for them also and bought them bread, meat, fish, charcoal and other things they needed to survive.

Having seen to their bodily needs, John of God turned his attention to how these people occupied themselves at home. He was no friend of idleness. He went to the merchants and got for them silk, wool and linen from which the women could make clothes. He would visit them from time to time to talk about their work and also spiritual matters.

John of God always wished to offer hospitality to others in a particular way. What was his way? To answer that question it is only necessary to watch a day unfold in what was being called John of God's hospital on Los Gomeles.

A Day in John of God's Hospital

The day began with John of God coming out of his little room at dawn and calling out to everyone in the house: "Brothers and sisters let's give thanks to Our Lord just like the birds are doing."

Then John of God led the patients and residents in saying some prayers while one of his Brothers went to the itinerants' kitchen and did the same there. John of God, who knew what it was to be an itinerant, would speak to each of them before they departed, giving them whatever help he could, especially in the way of clothing that had been given to him for that purpose.

Not all the itinerants would be planning to leave that day so John of God would say to the younger of them: "Come on Brothers, let us go and do something for Christ's poor people!" Then he would lead them up onto the slopes of the Alhambra or Sacro Monte to collect firewood. Each of them, John of God included, would bring back a big bundle of firewood for the house or the poor.

For itinerants and beggars who did not need nursing John of God had set up within his hospital a 'night shelter'. It could comfortably accommodate up to two hundred people and had its own kitchen.

Once breakfast was over and he had made his rounds of the house, before going out into the city begging, John of God used to walk up Los Gomeles and go through the Imperial Gate into the grounds of the Alhambra. Waiting for him in the woods, strolling around and trying not to look as though they were seeking charity, would be some of his 'ashamed' poor. John of God helped them in any way that he could. Some of them looked more prosperous than he did. If anyone, seeing that, was to say to him that he was being duped by some of these people he would reply: "They are not cheating me. That's something for which they themselves are answerable. For my part, I am simply giving for the love of God."

Before leaving the house to seek the alms and help that the hospital needed John would make sure that everyone knew what he or she had to do during the rest of that day. His own questing often took him away from the hospital for long hours and then he would not return home until late at night. Before retiring to pray and sleep he would go around and

visit each patient with a few friendly words and an enquiry as to whether they needed anything for the night.

Another Juan de Avila

John of God's closest companions and some volunteers helped him look after the poor and the sick who came into his care. However, he saw the need for someone, left relatively free from the daily routine of the hospital, to accompany him as he went about the city and into the countryside and, at other times, to stand in for him, as major-domo, when he was away from the house. So, he employed a man whom he had come to know for his practical bent and his holy life. The man's name was Juan de Avila. This was the same name as John's spiritual guide and, initially, caused some confusion. John solved this eventually by giving his employee a nickname: Angulo. The relationship between the two men was one of deep affection and trust. It lasted until John's death. Then Angulo continued to serve John's hospital for many years.

As the years went by John of God, by his complete dedication to the poor and the sick and his untiring efforts to help them and involve others in his charitable works, imprinted himself on the life of Granada and became one of its most widely recognised citizens. However, newcomers and visitors to the city sometimes came to know him by reputation before they came to know him by sight.

This was the case when, late one morning, John of God, weighed down by a basket full of supplies that he begged for his hospital, was making his way up the Los Gomeles Rise. A haughty gentleman, at the head of a small retinue of servants, came towards him. The street was crowded and John's basket accidentally caught the corner of man's cloak and pulled it from his shoulders. The man angrily turned on John and abused him for not looking where he was going.

John of God patiently replied : "Will you pardon me Brother, I was not watching what I was doing." This reply infuriated the man because of John's 'presumption' in addressing him, a gentleman, as 'Brother'. John used to address everyone this way!

In his anger he struck John on the face. John responded to the blow by saying : "I'm the one in the wrong, that was well deserved. Give me another!" Since John continued to speak to his attacker in a familiar way he ordered his servants: "Lay into him, this ill mannered villain!"

At that moment one of John of God's neighbours, Don Juan de la Torre, came along and, seeing John at the centre of a milling throng of people, asked : "Brother John of God, what is going on?" When the offended man heard the reference to John of God he was aghast at what he might have done and asked: "Is this the 'John of God' that everyone is talking about?" Told 'yes', he apologised profusely.

When John of God also apologised, the man invited him to dinner. John, understandably, pleaded other commitments but they parted good friends. Later in the day the gentleman made some amends by sending to the hospital alms of fifty gold escudos.

Toledo Adventure

Not all John's contacts with the ladies of easy virtue of Granada had perfect endings. Four women once approached John telling him that they had decided to give up their immoral life as prostitutes. However, they would only feel free to do this if he first saw them safely to Toledo where they had some matters to settle. After that, with a clear conscience, they would do whatever he thought best for them.

Accompanying these ladies to Toledo would mean a journey of over 300 kilometres. Persuaded by the ultimate good to be obtained, John agreed to take them. He himself went everywhere on foot but he knew that suitable transport would have to be hired for the women. This he left to his major-domo, Angulo, who would go with them to Toledo.

Angula hired two donkeys and some other gear, John committed his hospital to Antón Martín, and the party started for Toledo. As it made its way through the various towns along the route this unusual group of travellers attracted a lot of attention. The two men, poorly dressed and barefooted, looked low types, and the four women, by their clothes and overuse of cosmetics, looked very much what they were, or had been. Consequently, the party's passage through each town drew from the bystanders comments and jeers that ranged from the obscene to the pejorative. People, called the two men pimps and asked the ladies what they charged, and even more intimate questions.

John, with great patience remained silent and let it all pass over his head, but Angulo, less accepting and provoked by

what was being said about them, reproached John saying: "What is it all for, this expedition with these contemptible persons who have brought down so many insults on us - especially since I saw one of them slip away from us when we passed through Almagro?"

Worse was to come. The moment they arrived at Toledo two of the remaining women vanished down a side street. This brought an explosion from John's companion: "What madness this has been! Didn't I tell you that you could only expect this sort of thing from such wicked people? For goodness sake leave them to themselves and let's go home. They are all the same."

John answered him: "My Brother Juan, what if you went to Motril for four cases of fish and on the way back three of them went bad and only one stayed fresh? When you threw away the ones that had gone bad, would you throw the good one away with the others? Well then, of the four women that we brought along, one has stayed with us and shows good intentions. Be patient with the way life unfolds, and we will go back with her to Granada. Let's hope in God that, by keeping our word to this woman, our journey will not have been in vain and without some benefit."

And so in due course they returned to Granada with the sincere woman who had put her affairs in order in Toledo. At Granada John found a good man to marry her. Around 1580, when Angulo showed Castro his notes on this expedition, he said that the lady was still alive, but a widow, and living a praiseworthy and exemplary Christian life.

To Valladolid and the Court

From his first days in Granada John of God was always under the guidance of a spiritual director. The first, appointed by Father John de Avila, was Father Domingo Alvarado. Father Luis Perez Portillo later took his place. Avila was in Granada most of the first half of 1548 so he probably assisted, with John of God, at the funeral of Father Alvarado on the 6th April 1548.

John's debts grew rapidly again and it is likely that he was encouraged by Avila to go to the Court at Valladolid to get financial help from the Prince Regent and his courtiers. Accordingly, he entrusted the overall management of the hospital to his companion Antón Martín and, late in the spring of 1548, he set off on foot the 500-kilometre journey to Valladolid. Although his destination was Valladolid John of God visited several other centres on his way there. On the journey he sought alms, not only for his own immediate needs but also for his poor.

Toledo

Toledo is situated half way between Granada and Valladolid. When John arrived there he found that his fame had gone before him and people wanted to meet him and give him alms. John had it brought to him that the poor in Toledo were just as needy as the poor of Granada and he resolved to do what he could to help them. When he eventually returned to Granada, he sent a member of his Brotherhood, Ferdinand, to Toledo in early 1549 to set up a refuge for transients and emarginated people. In time this became a hospital like that of John of God's at Granada.

Oropesa

West of Toledo was Oropesa and John included the scene of his youthful years in his itinerary. He was welcomed back 'home' as a favourite son who was remembered for the charitable works he had carried out while still a shepherd. John's good humour, ready smile and unflinching trust in providence caused his old friends and companions of Oropesa to refer a different appellation to John of God. They said that he should be called "John Hope-in-God".

Salamanca

Salamanca was John of God's next important stop on his way to Valladolid. Its university, founded in 1218 and with an enrolment of almost 7000 students, made Salamanca the most sophisticated city that John had ever visited. The citizens and students were amazed at John's appearance and actions. They had never seen or heard of such a way of seeking alms - going about bareheaded and barefooted, basket on shoulder, and inviting people to do themselves some good by giving something to the poor!

The turning point in Salamanca's attitude to John was when they saw how he reacted to a syphilitic patient being refused at one of the city's hospitals - Santa Maria la Blanca. John asked that the patient be entrusted to him and he carried the sick man to another hospital, San Bernardo, where he asked for a place where he could personally care for the patient. This he did and his fame grew in this city which had been a centre of culture and learning since the beginning of the 13

th century.

During his stay at Salamanca John was seen and sketched by a young artist Alonso Sánchez Coello. Some years later, as an established artist, Coello executed a portrait from this sketch. A copy of his image of John of God is conserved at the Granada Basilica.

Valladolid

Valladolid was always John's destination so he travelled northeast from Salamanca and he arrived at Court about two months after he had left Granada. Valladolid, where Christopher Columbus died, served as the capital of Spain until 1561 when Philip II moved the Royal Court to Madrid.

When John of God arrived at Court the Count de Tendilla and other nobles who knew John told the Prince of his coming and of what he was doing in Granada. The Prince gave orders for John to be brought to him and they spoke together at some length. At the end of their conversation he ordered his quartermaster, a man whose family name was Angulo, to give some alms to John. The sisters of the King, with their ladies-in-waiting, were also at Valladolid and John went to see them every day. They too gave his alms and jewellery that he used to help the poor of Valladolid.

When the Prince and John of God met for the first time, John said, "My Lord, I am accustomed to calling everyone my Brother or sister in Christ, you are my Sovereign and Lord and King and I owe you obedience, how would you have me address you?" The Prince replied: "John, address me as you wish." Then, because at that time he was Regent and not yet king, John of God said: "Then I shall call you good Prince." He goes on, seeming to make a pun of the words 'prince' and 'beginning' which are similar in Spanish: "May God give you a good beginning in your reign, a good right hand in your governing and then a good end in which you are saved and gain heaven."

Besides his general appeal for alms John had a particular matter that he raised with the Prince. Amongst his ashamed poor at Granada was a woman named Luisa de la Cruz. She had been left a widow with five children, the eldest of whom had gone to serve in the galleys of the Spanish navy. The Moors had captured him in battle and were offering him for ransom. The Prince responded to John's story by commanding that the boy's ransom be added to the alms he had ordered to be given to John.

One of the ladies-in-waiting to the Princesses at Valladolid was the mother of the Duchess of Sessa, one of John's best friends and supporters. She was Doña Maria Mendoza Sarmiento, a widow and generous benefactor of many causes. She took John of God into her home and provided for all his needs while he was at Valladolid. She also gave him alms, which he, in turn, distributed to the poor of the city.

It seemed paradoxical to some people that John of God was giving away at Valladolid the alms that he was collecting there to resolve his debt problems at Granada. One of those persons asked him: "Brother John of God, why don't you keep your money and take it back to your poor at Granada?" His reply was: "Brother, to give it here or to give it at Granada, it's all for God who is everywhere."

John of God's visit to Valladolid was, financially, quite rewarding. However, the flow of donations began to dwindle and John, who had spent most of the summer and early autumn months at Valladolid, wanted to be back in Granada before winter began to exert its special pressures on his people.

He took his leave of his new friends at the Royal Court and started on the return journey to Granada. John did not return empty handed. So that he could not give away what he had collected before he arrived home, Doña Maria de Mendoza Sarmiento and the Marquis de Mondejar and other nobles had given him promissory notes that could only be cashed in Granada.

The Ascetic

Anyone who met John of God during that return journey to Granada would have known immediately that they had met an ascetic. John of God travelled everywhere on foot he never wore coverings on either his head or feet with the result that, on a journey, his feet became scarred and stubbed and his scalp became sunburned and scaled. Since he wore nothing but a pair of rough woollen breeches with a tunic tied around his waist by a cord the lack of an under-shirt meant that his thick tunic stuck to his skin and irritated it.

At the table, when he was away from home and invited to dine with others, he always chose the least preferred

portions. (At home he usually ate a baked onion or some other common sort of food.) On prescribed fast days he skipped breakfast and ate little during the rest of the day. On Fridays he took only bread and water.

He was used to sleeping on a coarse mat on the floor with a thin blanket as covering. (At home he slept in a small alcove beneath the staircase on a trolley that had belonged to a cripple.)

The true asceticism of his life, however, was brought about by his complete dedication to serving the needs and welfare of others.

Other Torments

In John of God's time the presence and malicious activity of the devil was kept in the public consciousness by religion, folklore and art. The Inquisition made its own unique contribution to this state of affairs. Many stories circulated about John being visited and afflicted by the devil. He himself always countered such stories by changing the conversation and passing on to other matters. We will do the same.

Back Home

Granada warmly welcomed John of God back from Valladolid and the Royal Court. The poor had missed him most. After all, he was like a father to them and they had begun to call him "Father of the Poor". The ordinary citizens of Granada also were happy to see John of God back amongst them again. They recognised that he served their city and added lustre to its image and reputation.

John of God immediately settled the debts that had been worrying him when he went to Valladolid. Nevertheless, the life of his hospital had not stood still while he was away and he found himself responsible for a new set of debts. And it was John who had to deal with the more difficult situations and personalities.

A Difficult Client

John of God exercised some caution in his relationship with women, but overall, he had good rapport with the opposite sex and he was not loath to spend time in their company. There was woman, however, who was a constant trial to him. He had helped her to give up prostitution and found her a suitable husband. Whenever she needed anything she immediately had recourse to him and he would give her whatever she asked for.

This of course, brought her back for more. On one occasion John had nothing for her. He had just given his own cloak away and, feeling rather sick, he was sitting wrapped in a blanket. He told her to come back later and she flew into a rage saying: "You're a bad man, you sanctimonious hypocrite!" He answered her saying: "Here, take these two coins and run down the plaza and shout that out loud." She continued to rail at him, but he looked at her and said: "I am going to have to pardon you sooner or later, so I forgive you right now." At his funeral, this same woman was one of those who proclaimed that John of God's goodness and example had saved them from a life of sin and sorrow.

John of God's motivating force in all he did - a great love of God - found its expression in a desire to serve Him in all creatures. His basic life principle was that he could render glory and honour to God by "caring for the (neighbour's) body as a means of caring for the soul.

The Angulo Wedding

With less than a year to live John of God, on May 14, 1549, had the happiness of seeing his friend Angulo married to Beatriz de Ayvar. By special permission from the Vicar General of the Archdiocese the marriage ceremony took place at John of God's hospital and, undoubtedly, in his presence. The first fruit of the marriage was a boy, called (of course) John, who was born the following year, only 12 days after John of God's death.

Fire at the Royal Hospital

Some three months after that wedding another festivity in Granada was to have a less happy result. At the Royal Hospital, on July 3, 1549, there was a banquet in honour of Dōna Magdalena de Bobadilla. In the kitchens of the hospital a big fire was lit to roast an ox stuffed with small birds and various spices and seasonings. About 11 am, the fire got out of control and began to spread through the hospital.

When John of God heard of the fire he rushed to the scene. His intimate knowledge of the layout of the hospital enabled him to go immediately to the place where the psychiatric patients were housed. Ignoring personal danger he began to get them out of the building.

When he had rescued the patients John rushed back to where the fire was raging to help put it out. He began hurling beds and bedding from the windows. Suddenly a great sheet of flame engulfed him and billows of smoke poured out onto the people outside. Everyone concluded that the flames had consumed John of God. Then he emerged from the building without a mark on him, except for singed eyebrows. Many people who saw all this considered that he had had a miraculous escape from the fire and death.

Drowning

As his life ran out in his last year John of God was not only tested by fire but also by water. Worn out by his labours and travels John of God had become quite ill. He was in no fit state to react as he did to the news that recent heavy rains had put the bitterly cold Genil River 'in flood' and that it was sweeping through the city carrying unusual quantities of logs and branches that could be sold, or used, as firewood.

Throughout John's life the free firewood that he had gathered had come to seem like a manna that, gathered and sold, helped to sustain him and 'his' poor. There was no question of allowing this firewood to be lost, even if that meant his having to ignore his illness to lead some of the stronger men and bigger boys to the river bank to reap this transitory harvest.

The river, fed by snow and sleet, was ice-cold. One of the youngsters with John of God fell into the river and was swept away. John plunged in to rescue him but was unable to do so and the boy drowned. This sad experience left John depressed and soaked to the skin. It aggravated his illness and, from that day, his health deteriorated rapidly.

John of God was forced to take to his bed, however he was still in immediate contact with 'his' poor and he was able to encourage and guide his companions and fellow workers. He continued to serve the poor but from a prone position.

Summoned

John was no stranger to criticism but this time it was from people who should have known better. With John confined to bed, some well meaning busy-bodies who did not understand his way of doing things felt they that they now had a chance, even a duty, to rectify an aspect of his administration of which they did not approve. They went to the Archbishop, Don Pedro Guerrero, and told him that at John of God's hospital there were some men who were quite capable of working and should not be allowed to stay there and that, similarly, there were some worthless women around the hospital who, forgetful of all the John had done for them, disparaged him whenever they did not get their way. These people told the Archbishop that he was the only one who could remedy the situation and that it was his responsibility to do so.

The Archbishop, recommended for his post by Father John de Avila and with a certain "watching brief" over John of God and his activities, took note of the complaints and, not knowing that John was ill in bed, sent for him. When John of God received his summons he immediately got out of bed and went to the Archbishop.

The Archbishop said to him: "Brother John of God, I have been led to understand that your hospital shelters men and women who give bad example and are trouble makers, and who give you much work because of their ill-breeding. So, send them away and clear the hospital of such persons so that the poor who want to live in peace and quietness are not afflicted and maltreated by them."

John of God listened carefully until the Archbishop had finished and then he replied: "My Father and good Prelate, it is I alone who am wicked, incorrigible, useless, and deserve to be thrown out of the house of God; and all the poor people who are in the hospital are good and I do not know anything bad about a single one of them. God suffers the bad and the good every day He lets his sun shine on them all. There is really no reason the throw the abandoned and the afflicted out of their own house."

John of God's response, full of sympathy for 'his' poor and assuming any blame that had to be assigned, moved the Archbishop deeply. He told John: "Blessed of God, Brother John, go in peace. I give you permission to do in the hospital as you would in your own home." John of God went back to his hospital, and his poor, healed in spirit if not in body.

A Last Duty

In February 1550, feeling that his life was slipping away, John of God still had one essential task to carry out. He had to put his financial affairs in order so that his creditors would not lose their money when he died. One morning John took a clerk with him and called on his creditors throughout the city. Some of them had forgotten that he owed them anything. He listed his debts and creditors and, back home, had a copy made. He then tucked the original into his tunic and placed the copy in the hospital's safe so whatever happened his creditors' entitlements would be remembered and honoured.

Final Sickness

John of God had been a 'man-about-town' in a very literal sense. He had gone out into the city or the surrounding countryside almost every day. He was in and out of the Archbishop's Palace, the dwellings of the clergy, the palaces of the nobility and the homes of the wealthy and the poor; he visited inns and brothels, lawyers' offices, merchants' counting houses, shops, the market place, the prison and so on.

There were several households in Granada that John visited almost daily. One, that of the 'Casa de Los Pisa' was the household of Don García de Pisa. On his way home from questing, John would turn into the courtyard of this house and sit by the fountain, taking a drink of water and chatting to the mistress of the house, Doña Ana Osorio, or anyone else who was around. More often than not he got something here for his poor. From this house it was only a few minutes walk to his hospital on the Los Gomeles Rise.

Towards the end of February several days passed without John of God appearing at Casa de Los Pisa. Doña Ana enquired as to what had happened to him. She was told that he had become so sick that he was confined to his bed at his own hospital. Doña Ana immediately went to visit him. She saw that the constant stream of people coming and going from his room, asking for help and advice, prevented him from getting the rest he needed.

She begged him to come to her house, where he could have a bed and everything he needed. There, in his own hospital, he was just lying on a plank with his basket for a pillow. John declined her invitation because he wanted to die, and be buried, amongst his own people. However, at Doña Ana's prompting, the Archbishop intervened and ordered him to go to her house to be nursed.

Doña Ana sent a sedan chair to transport John to Los Pisa. As soon as he got into the chair his poor realised that he was being taken from them. They surrounded him to try and prevent his departure. John dissolved into tears when he saw 'his' poor so distraught. He said to them: "My Brothers and sisters, God knows that I want to die here amongst you. However, God is better served if I do His will and die out of your sight."

His last words to 'his' poor and his companions were a blessing: "Remain in peace my children. Should we never meet again, pray to Our Lord for me." As the people around him began to cry and lament he slumped unconscious in the chair. As soon as he recovered sufficiently the servants of Doña Ana lifted him and carried him to Casa de Los Pisa.

Death Bed

On arrival there he was taken to a room that was brightly lit by an outside window and was put to bed in a clean nightshirt and prepared for a visit by the family physician.

The eight children of the Pisa family (five boys and three girls) were warned not to make too much noise and a watchman was put at the foot of the stairs with instructions not to let any of the poor disturb John with their troubles. Two of the Pisa children, Cristobel and his little sister María, one day crept into his room and, seeing John kneeling up in bed as though he was on the floor, asked him why, so thin and weakened by his illness, he had taken that position. John answered them that what he was doing was necessary and that he needed to do it.

Archbishop Guerrero, hearing that John of God had arrived at Casa de Los Pisa, went immediately to see him. Speaking kindly to John he encouraged him to get ready to set out on his final journey. As part of this preparation he invited John to tell him if he had any worries so that he could take care of them for him. John of God replied: "My good Father and Pastor, three things give me concern. Firstly, I have served Our Lord so little, while I have received so much from Him. Secondly, there are the poor people to whom I have been especially attentive - those who have given up wicked and sinful lives, and those who are shamed by their poverty. My third concern is the debts that I owe, that I have

entered into for the sake of Jesus Christ."

Then John passed the list of his creditors and debts to the Archbishop who received them saying: "My Brother, with regard to what you say about not having served Our Lord, trust in the mercy of Him who will make up for all your failures with the merits of His Passion. As for the poor, I accept them because I am under an obligation to take them into my charge. As for the debts you owe, I will quickly ensure that they are all paid off. I promise you that I will handle everything just as you would have yourself. So be at peace now and do not give another thought to anything except your salvation and recommending yourself to Our Lord."

The Archbishop's visit and promises greatly consoled John of God. The two men spoke a few words of farewell and John kissed the Archbishop's hand and asked for his blessing. This given, the Archbishop left John's bedside and went straight to his hospital where he told John's 'family' of the imminence of their father's death and gave what he could in the turmoil caused by the realisation that John of God would not be seen back in his hospital again.

During the first days of March John of God's condition deteriorated to the point where he could no longer take Holy Communion but he received the sacrament of reconciliation. As the first week of March came to an end he called for his companion Antón Martín, who had been with him since the Lucena Street days, and entrusted to him the care of the poor - especially the orphans and those who felt shamed by their poverty.

Death and Interment

About thirty minutes after midnight on Saturday March 8, 1550, John of God felt the moment of his death be imminent. The women and priests keeping a vigil in his room saw him climb out of bed and kneel on the floor holding, and gazing, on his crucifix. Then with the whispered words: "Jesus, Jesus, into your hands I commend my soul" he was gone from them, and this life, into the next.

John of God's body did not fall forward or sideways in death - it remained in a kneeling position, so that he seemed to be meditating or praying. Those present silently and respectfully left him like that for about fifteen minutes before laying him out in the normal way.

Back to the Plaza Nueva

This was the story that, in fragments, the poor people in the Plaza Nueva recounted to each other on the morning they waited for the funeral arrangements to be completed and the final earthly journey of the 'Father of the Poor' to begin.

Word came back to them that John of God's body was beautifully laid out on a bed in the room where he had died. Three altars had been set up and masses were being celebrated by the clergy of the city.

There was a stir as the Governor of Granada and his officials arrived and took control of the proceedings.

Soon afterwards the news was passed along that the pallbearers had been selected. They were the Marquis De Tarifa, the Marquis De Cerralvo, Don Pedro de Bobadilla and Juan de Guevara.

Next, everyone was told to let through the poor people from John of God's hospital and the women for whom he had arranged marriages, and the spinsters and widows whom he had befriended. They were to lead off the procession.

The procession began inside the house, in the room where John of God had died, when the pallbearers lifted the deceased upon their shoulders and carried him down into the street below. There Father Carcamo of the Order of Friars Minor, stepped forward with eight of his friars and said: "It is fitting that we should carry this body, because during his lifetime he imitated so closely our Father, St. Francis, in his poverty, penance and divestment."

These friars were allowed to carry the coffin for a while and then it was passed on to the religious of other orders who took turns in carrying it until they arrived at the Church of Our Lady of the Victory where, since his own hospital had no church, John was to be buried in the tomb that had been prepared for Doña Ana.

The procession was lead by the residents and walking patients of John of God's hospital, followed by the women John of God had befriended. Weeping, they carried lit candles and loudly proclaimed John of God's goodness to them. Then, bearing their crosses and banners, came the city's many confraternities. The city clergy and the different orders of friars followed them. John's hospital was located in the parish of Santa Ana and its clergy had a special place in the

cortege. Finally, immediately before the bier, came the dignitaries of the Church.

Then, following the bier, came the Council of Twenty-four and the Justices of the city with their wives and the knights and gentlemen with their ladies. The officials and lawyers of the Royal Tribunal followed these and, last of all, came the multitude of people who had waited their turn in the Plaza Nueva.

Not only did the old Christians mourn John of God, but his funeral was attended by the Moriscos as well. These, watching the body of John of God being carried by, spoke of their experiences of John of God's kindness, generosity and good example. In their own Arabic language they called down a thousand blessings on him.

Every bell tower in the city, from the Cathedral to the parish churches and monasteries, tolled his passing.

When the cortege arrived and halted at the entrance to the church of Our Lady of the Victory people pushed forward to touch the body with their rosary beads, prayer books and various things that they could take away as a relic.

At last the remains were taken into the church and placed on a decorated catafalque during the requiem mass at which a Franciscan Minim Friar preached a sermon in which he spoke about how God raises up the humble and scorned of this world.

John was buried in the vault of the chapel of the García de Pisa family. His life on this earth had ended but, from heaven, he would continue to be, for Granada and the whole world.

From the Saint John of God Story. Adapted from "John of God - Father of the Poor " by Brother Brian O'Donnell, OH