

Two saints, two institutions

Richard McBrien | Jun. 16, 2009 Essays in Theology

The Catholic church will commemorate the feasts of Sts. Aloysius Gonzaga and John Fisher on June 21 and June 22 respectively.

Although both saints lived all or part of their lives in the 16th century, there are striking contrasts between them, primarily in their personalities and achievements in life, but also in the institutions which have taken their names.

One is in the Jesuit tradition, Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington; the other, St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, was established by Basilians.

In 1887 when Father Joseph Cataldo, an Italian-born Jesuit, founded his school, it seemed fitting to him to name it after his fellow Jesuit and fellow Italian. It is today the only Jesuit university in the world named after St. Aloysius.

According to the biography on the Gonzaga University Web site, Aloysius (the Latin form of his baptismal name, Luigi) was born in Italy in 1568 into a family of great wealth and prestige. As the first-born son, he would have inherited his father's title of Marquis.

He was only 8 years old when his parents sent him to the court of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco de' Medici, in Florence. Aloysius later traveled to Spain with his parents (in the company of the empress of Austria) to join the court of Philip II in Madrid.

It was in Spain that young Aloysius expressed a desire to join a newly founded religious order known as the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits. His father opposed the idea and a struggle of wills ensued, but Aloysius eventually prevailed. He renounced his right to his father's title and to the vast wealth that he was destined to inherit, and entered the Jesuits in Rome at age 17.

While studying in Rome, Aloysius would regularly go into the streets of the city to care for the victims of the plague. He himself contracted the disease and died on June 21, 1591, at age 23, six years short of his ordination to the priesthood.

According to the Gonzaga Web site, Aloysius was known for his "love of prayer and fasting." His spiritual director was another saint-to-be, Robert Bellarmine. When Bellarmine was dying, he asked to be buried next to Aloysius.

What the Web site does not say is that Bellarmine once commented that Aloysius's example of piety was so extreme that others should not be encouraged to follow it. Indeed, Aloysius was excessively scrupulous in prayer, almost masochistic in acts of self-mortification, often uncommunicative, frightened of women, and obsessed with the hope of an early death.

Some commentators have attributed these odd personality traits to a determined reaction against his privileged upbringing.

Aloysius Gonzaga was beatified in 1621, canonized in 1726, and declared patron saint of youth in 1729.

By contrast, St. John Fisher died a martyr at age 66. He had become chancellor of Cambridge University at age 35, bishop of Rochester (the smallest diocese in England, his having declined appointments to larger and wealthier sees), and then a cardinal. A decade after his ordination to the priesthood, he became chaplain to the king's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, and was later appointed the first Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge.

John Fisher was a famous preacher, chosen to preach at the funerals of King Henry VII and Lady Margaret herself. But he was always a scholar, having built up one of the finest libraries in all of Europe. He wrote four volumes against Martin Luther and his theological works were influential at the Council of Trent, following his death.

He opposed Henry VIII's plans for divorce and re-marriage and his newly fashioned title as "Supreme Head of the Church of England." He was subsequently arrested as a traitor and imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he refused to take an oath in support of the king's claims against the pope.

Pope Paul III named John Fisher a cardinal, but Henry VIII had him beheaded on June 22, 1535. He was so debilitated by his prison experience that he had to be carried to his execution on a chair. He pardoned his executioner and declared in a clear voice that he was dying for the faith of the church. He then recited the Te Deum and a psalm.

His naked body was left on the scaffold all day and subsequently buried without rites or shroud. His head was displayed on London Bridge for two weeks and then thrown into the Thames.

John Fisher was beatified in 1886 and canonized in 1935. His English diocese and the city of Rochester, New York, are linked in the naming of St. John Fisher College.

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[Editor's note: This is a corrected version of the column posted June 15 which incorrectly identified St. John Fisher as a Jesuit. Fr. McBrien asked us to apologize for the error and thank the alert readers who pointed out the error to us.]

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