

JULY XII.

ST. JOHN GUALBERT,

ABBOT, FOUNDER OF THE RELIGIOUS ORDER OF VALLIS-UMBROSA.

[From his exact life compiled by Blaise Melanisius, General of his Order, with the long notes of Cuper the Bollandist. See also two other lives of the saint, with a long history of his miracles, *ib. t. iii. Julij*, p. 311.]

A.D. 1073.

ST. JOHN GUALBERT was born at Florence, of rich and noble parents, and in his youth was carefully instructed in the Christian doctrine and in the elements of the sciences; but afterward, by conversing with the world, he imbibed a relish for its vanities and follies. While a thirst of worldly pleasure kept possession of his desires, and seemed to him innocent, and while he thought a certain degree of worldly pride the privilege of his birth, he was a stranger to the gospel maxims of penance, meekness, and lowliness of heart; and all arguments of virtue lost their force upon him. But God was pleased by a remarkable accident to open his eyes, and to discover to him his errors, and the extent of his obligations. Hugo, his only brother, was murdered by a gentleman of the country; and our young nobleman determined to revenge the crime by the death of him who had perpetrated it, and who seemed out of the reach of the laws. Under the influence of his resentment, which was much heightened by the invectives and persuasion of his own father Gualbert, he neither listened to the voice of reason nor of religion. The motive of revenge is criminal if it creeps into the breast even in demanding the just punishment of a delinquent; much more if it push men to vindicate their own cause themselves by returning injury for injury,

(1) Amos ix. 4.

and wreaking wrongs on those that inflicted them. But passion stifled remorse, and John was falsely persuaded that his honour in the world required that he should not suffer so flagrant an outrage to pass unpunished. It happened that riding with his man home to Florence on Good Friday, he met his enemy in so narrow a passage that it was impossible for either of them to avoid the other. John seeing the murderer, drew his sword, and was going to dispatch him. But the other, lighting from his horse, fell upon his knees, and with his arms across, besought him by the passion of Jesus Christ, who suffered on that day, to spare his life. The remembrance of Christ, who prayed for his murderers on the cross, exceedingly affected the young nobleman, and meekly raising the suppliant from the ground with his hand, he said, "I can refuse nothing that is asked of me for the sake of Jesus Christ. I not only give you your life, but also my friendship for ever. Pray for me, that God may pardon me my sin." After embracing each other they parted, and John went forward on his road till he came to the monastery of St. Minias, of the holy Order of St. Bennet. Going into the church, he offered up his prayers before a great crucifix, begging with many tears and extraordinary fervour that God would mercifully grant him the pardon of his sins. Whilst he continued his prayer the crucifix miraculously bowed its head to him, as it were to give him a token how acceptable the sacrifice of his resentment and his sincere repentance were. The divine grace made such deep impressions on his heart, that rising from his devotions he cast himself at the feet of the abbot, earnestly begging to be admitted to the religious habit. The abbot was apprehensive of his father's displeasure; but at length was prevailed upon, with much ado, to allow him to live in the community in his secular habit. After a few days John cut off his hair himself, and put on a habit which he borrowed. His father, at this news of the step his son had taken, has-

tened to the monastery, and stormed and complained dreadfully; till after sometime seeing the steadiness of his son's resolution, and hearing his reasons and motives, he was so well satisfied, that he gave him his blessing, and exhorted him to persevere in his good purposes.

St. John devoted himself to the exercises of his new state, in the most perfect dispositions of a true penitent. He was most exact in every religious observance. He subdued his body with much fasting and watching; never gave way to idleness, but kept himself day and night employed almost in continual prayer. His corporal austerities he animated with a perfect interior spirit of penance, or desire of punishing sin in himself, the more powerfully to move God to compassion and mercy towards him; and he endeavoured by them to facilitate the subjection of his passions, which victory he completed by a watchfulness over the motions of his own heart, and heroic acts of all virtues, especially meekness and humility. But assiduous and humble prayer and meditation were the principal means by which this wonderful change was effected in all the affections of his soul, so that he became entirely a new man. Nothing can have so prevalent a power to still the agitation of passion in the breast, nothing is so fit to induce a smooth and easy flow, and a constant evenness of temper, as a frequent application to the throne of grace. This presence of the mind with the Lord is an absence from the body, or from the tumult of carnal passions. The pure and serene tranquillity that springs up in the soul by an intercourse with heaven, shows that here she is nearest the centre of her true happiness, where earthly things lose all their power of attraction. The very preparation of the heart to wait upon God in this solemn exercise is of admirable use to remove that corruption which inflames the passions. Especially a lively sense of God's infinite greatness, and of our littleness and infirmities, powerfully impressed on our minds by

assiduous prayer, soon brings us to a conviction that pride is the root of all our disorders; and enables us to discover its disguises, and to banish it out of our souls. By fidelity and perseverance St. John obtained the victory over himself, and became most eminent in meekness, humility, silence, obedience, modesty, and patience.

When the abbot died our saint was earnestly entreated by the greatest part of the monks to accept that dignity; but his consent could by no means be extorted. Not long after, he left this house with one companion, and went in quest of a closer solitude. He paid a visit to the hermitage of Camaldoli; and having edified himself with the example of its fervent inhabitants, he proceeded further, to an agreeable shady valley covered with willow-trees, commonly called Vallis-Umbrosa, in the diocese of Fiesoli, half a day's journey from Florence, in Tuscany. He found in that place two devout hermits, with whom he and his companion concerted a project to build themselves a small monastery of timber, and mud-walls, and to form together a little community, serving God according to the primitive austere rule and spirit of the Order of St. Bennet. The abess of St. Hilary gave them the ground on which they desired to build, and when the monastery was finished the bishop of Paderborn, who attended the emperor Henry III. into Italy, consecrated the chapel. Pope Alexander II. in 1070 approved this new Order, together with the rule, in which the saint added certain particular constitutions to the original rule of St. Bennet. From this confirmation is dated the foundation of the Order of Vallis-Umbrosa. St. John was chosen the first abbot, nor was he able to decline that dignity. He gave his monks a habit of an ash colour; and settled among them retirement, silence, disengagement of their hearts from all earthly things, the most austere practice of penance, profound humility, and the most universal charity.

Though most humble and mild, he severely reprov'd the least tepidity or sloth

in others. For the virtue of meekness is not further removed from intemperate anger, which clouds or dethrones reason, than from a vicious defect or tameness and stupidity, which beholds vice with indifference. God has committed to every man a kind of trust and guardianship of virtue, whose rights we are obliged to maintain in proportion to our power, not only by example, but also by advice, exhortation, and reproof, as often as it is reasonable. And he who regards the sins of others with a careless unconcernedness, makes himself accountable for them when it is in his power to prevent them. Superiors especially lie under the most grievous obligations to check and chastise the irregularities and faults of those under their immediate care and inspection. Our saint feared no less the danger of too great lenity and forbearance than that of harshness; and was a true imitator both of the mildness and zeal of the Jewish legislator, whom the Holy Ghost calls "the meekest of all men upon the face of the earth." St. John was himself a perfect model of all virtues, and tender and compassionate towards all, especially the sick. This compassion for them he learned by his own perpetual infirmities, and weakness of stomach. Such was his humility that he would never be promoted even to Minor Orders, never presumed to approach nearer the altar than was necessary to receive the holy communion, and never would open the church door, but always prayed one in Minor Orders to open it for him. He was very zealous for holy poverty, and would not allow any monasteries to be built in a costly or sumptuous manner, thinking such edifices not agreeable to a spirit of poverty. He founded the monastery of St. Salvi, that of Moscetta, that of Passignano, another at Rozzuolo, and another at Monte Salario. He reformed some other monasteries, and left about twelve houses of his Order at his death. Besides monks, he received lay-brothers, who were exempt from choir and silence, and employed in external offices.

This is said to be the first example of such a distinction; but it was soon imitated by other Orders. The saint's charity to the poor was not less active than his love for holy poverty. He would have no poor person sent from his door without an alms, and often emptied all the granaries and stores of his monasteries in relieving them. In a great dearth he supplied, sometimes by miracle, the multitudes of poor people that flocked to his monastery of Ruzzuolo. The saint was endowed with the spirit of prophecy, and by his prayers restored many sick persons to perfect health. The holy Pope Leo IX. went to Passignano on purpose to see and converse with this holy man. Stephen IX. and Alexander II. had the greatest esteem for him. This latter testifies that the whole country where he lived owed to his zeal the entire extinction of simony. The holy man at length fell sick of a sharp fever at Passignano. He called for all the abbots and superiors of his Order, and telling them he was soon to leave them, strongly exhorted them to watch vigilantly over the most exact observance of their rule, and to maintain peace and fraternal charity. After this, having most devoutly received the last sacraments, he died happily on the 12th of July in 1073, being seventy-four years old. Pope Celestine III. having caused juridical informations to be taken concerning his virtues and miracles, solemnly enrolled him among the saints in the year 1193.

The eminent degree of penance and sanctity to which the divine grace raised this saint, was the fruit of his mildness in forgiving an injury. Christ not only commands us to pardon all offences, but has recommended this precept to us with his expiring breath, with his head crowned with thorns, and his hands stretched out for us. We renounce the glorious title of being his disciples if, whilst we behold him hanging on the cross, and hear his last prayers, we trample on his sacred law, and harbour malice in our hearts against a bro-

ther whom our dying Redeemer commands us to forgive for his sake. Can we be angry with him who is by so many sacred ties our brother, the living son and member of our common Redeemer and Father, and whom we expect to be the associate of our happiness for all eternity? We owe infinitely more to Christ than any brother can owe to us: the least venial sin is an immense debt. Our Divine Master not only conjures us to forgive our brother for his sake, but also makes it our own infinite interest so to do, promising to pardon us our immense debts in the same manner as we pardon others. Shall we, base worms, who have nothing to boast of before men, only our having concealed from them our baseness and ignominy; and to whom the most cruel outrages from creatures would be too mild a treatment, considering our sins; shall we, I say, complain of injuries which we ought to receive with patience and joy, as the easy means of cancelling our own sins, and procuring for ourselves the greatest graces and mercy?
