

St. John Francis Regis



St. John Francis Regis Confessor of the Society of Jesus June 16 True virtue, or Christian perfection, consists not in great or shining actions, but resides in the heart, and appears to great edification, though in the usual train of common and religious duties constantly performed fidelity and fervor. Such a life has its trials, and often a severer martyrdom than that which stands the test of the flames. This we find in the life of the holy servant of God, John Francis Regis. He was born on the 31st of January, in 1597, at Foncouverte, a village in the diocese of Narbonne in Languedoc. His parents, John Regis, who was descended from a younger branch of the noble house of Deplas, in Rovergue, and Magdalen Darcis, daughter to the lord of Segur, were distinguished amongst the nobility of Lower Languedoc by their virtue. Their eldest son was killed in the siege of Villemur, in a rally made by the Huguenot garrison. Francis was one of the youngest brothers.

At five years of age he fainted away hearing his mother speak of the horrible misfortune of being eternally damned; which discourse made a lasting impression on his tender heart. In his childhood he never discovered any inclination to the amusements of that age. The same disposition made him refuse at his school to join his companions in the innocent diversions of an age generally too eager for play. His first master was one of a morose, hasty temper, under whom this modest and bashful child had much to suffer; all which he bore without the least complaint. The Jesuits having opened a public school at Beziers, he was one of the first whom the reputation of its professors drew to the new college. His gravity increased with his years, nor was he to be seen in the beautiful walks which were chiefly crowded by his school fellows.

Avaricious of his time, he scarcely allowed himself any for necessary relaxation. Sundays and holidays were a most precious time to him, and he divided them entirely between pious reading and devotions at home and in the church. He was often seen on those days retired in a chapel and bathed in tears in the presence of Jesus Christ, the tender object of his affections. His conduct made him for some time the subject of his young companions' score and raileries; which his constancy changed at last into veneration.

He performed many exercises in honor of the Blessed Virgin, with a particular confidence in her patronage, especially after he was enrolled in a confraternity under her name erected in the Jesuits college. He had a singular devotion to his good angel, and improved every escape from any danger into a motive of redoubling his fervor and gratitude towards God. By the influence of his holy example, and by his religious discourses, which were animated with a peculiar unction and divine fire, he inflamed many of his companions with the love of virtue, and reclaimed several from dangerous courses. Six of the most fervent associated them selves with him in the same lodgings, and formed a kind of regular seminary, looking upon him as their living rule, and honoring him as a saint and their master in a spiritual life. In the eighteenth year of his age he was visited with a dangerous sickness, under which his patience and piety moved exceedingly all that came to see him. Soon after his recovery he made a spiritual retreat to deliberate on the choice of a state of life; and finding in his heart a strong impulse to devote himself to labor in procuring the salvation of souls in the Society of Jesus, and being confirmed by the advice of his confessor that this desire was a call of God, he earnestly begged to be admitted, and was readily received by F. Francis Suarez, provincial of the Jesuits, then at Beziers, upon his visitation of that college. The postulant entered his noviceship with great joy at Toulouse, in the nineteenth year of his age, on the 8th of December, 1616. Here being no longer divided between study and prayer, he gave himself to so close a union with God as to seem to he never without attention to his presence. His punctual exactness and fervor in the minutes actions and duties, raised them all to a great value: and by the excellence and purity of his motives, they became steps to an eminent interior perfection. Here he laid the deep foundation of those virtues which formed his distinguishing character during his whole life, humility, contempt of the world, holy hatred of himself, charity to the poor, and love of God, and zeal for his glory. The meanest employs were his delight, such as the most humbling duties of a religious state, to wait at table, and cleanse the house: also to make the beds, and dress the sores of the poorest and most loathsome patients in the hospital, where he considered Jesus Christ in his most afflicted members. He was as austere to himself as he was tender to others, which made his companions say, that he was his own eternal persecutor. He seemed never to do anything to indulge his senses, which he studied to curb and mortify. The spirit of prayer accompanied all his actions. The interior fire of his breast appeared in his looks. He was often seen at the foot of the altar without motion as in a kind of rapture; and he spoke of God with such a feeling unction, that he inspired all that heard him with his holy love, and excited the most tepid to fervor.

After two years of probation, he made his religious vows in 1618, and was then sent to Cahors to finish his rhetoric, and the following year to Tournon to perform his course of philosophy; but to preserve the fire of devotion in his heart under the dissipation of those studies, he

joined to them frequent visits of the blessed sacrament, pious reading, and set times of holy recollection, though he made even his studies a continuation of his commerce with God, in a continual recourse to him by devout aspirations. Such was his fidelity in every action, that his superiors attested they never observed in him the least breach of any college duty; which procured him the name of the angel of the college. Desiring to form himself principally to the sacred function of teaching the poor the ways of salvation he undertook, by his superior's consent, the charge of instructing the menial servants, and the poor of the town of Tournon, to whom he distributed the alms of the college. On Sundays and holidays he preached in the adjacent villages, and summoned the children to catechism with a little bell. The little township of Andance having the happiness to fall under his particular care, it quite changed its face: the saint's zeal soon banished out of it drunkenness licentiousness, and swearing, restored the frequent use of the sacraments and established there first the confraternity of the blessed sacrament, the rules of which this holy man, then only two-and-twenty years old, but full of the spirit of devotion, drew up, and which was afterwards propagated to other places. He regulated families, composed differences, and reformed all manner of irregularities: such was the authority which his sanctity and holy prudence procured him. Having finished his course of philosophy in 1621, he was sent to teach the schools of humanity at Billom, Auch, and Puy; in which employ he spared no application for the assistance of his scholars, both in their studies and in exciting them to virtue, loving them as a tender mother does her children, and being beloved and revered by them as a saint. He was particularly diligent in procuring them all relief in sickness, and by his prayers obtained the sudden recovery of one whose life was despaired of but he was most sensible to their spiritual infirmities. Being informed of a grievous sin committed by one of them, he burst into a torrent of tears, and after a short recollection, he made, in the transport that had seized him, so pathetic a discourse to his scholars on the severity of God's judgments, that the terrors with which it struck their minds never forsook them their whole lives after, as several of them used to say.

The edifying example, simplicity, humility, modesty, and penitential air of the master, was a most moving and continual sermon to them; and such was the powerful influence it had, that they were visibly distinguished from others by the regularity of their lives. To solicit the blessings of heaven for them he always spent some time at the foot of the altar before he entered the school, and implored the assistance of their angel guardians in their behalf. His union with God was perpetual; and from hence flowed his other virtues, particularly his saintly exterior comportment. To animate himself in spirit, notwithstanding the fatigues of his employment, he added many other devotions to the daily hour's meditation, and other prayers enjoined by the rules of the society. He often begged leave of the superior to make extraordinary communions, besides those that were regular in the house; and having obtained it, broke out in transports of joy, which testified his insatiable desire of, and the great comfort he received from that divine food. He prepared himself to receive it by private austerities and public humiliations, and by spending a great part of the night before in the church. On Sundays and holidays he continued to instruct the poor people with wonderful unction and fruit, and even in his familiar conversation turned all to some spiritual advantage. After he had taught the lower classes seven years; two at Billom, one at Auch, and four at

Puy; he began the study of divinity at Toulouse, in 1628, in which, by his assiduity and the pregnancy of his wit, he made an uncommon progress; yet, out of a fear of applause, he sought to make himself contemptible by an affected simplicity and pretended ignorance. In the vacation, at the time which the students spent in their country-house for the necessary relaxation of their mind, Regis withdrew into private places to converse with God almost the whole day; and in the night, after a short sleep, he arose and stole secretly into the domestic chapel; which a companion having discovered, and informed the superior thereof, he received this answer: "Interrupt not the sweet communications of that angel with God." Notice being given him by his superiors, in the beginning of the year 1630, to prepare himself for holy orders, he felt in his breast the struggle of the strongest sentiments of an humble terror and a glowing zeal; but as he saw the will of God intimated in the order of his superiors, his fears were calmed, and he disposed himself for that sacrament, by retirement, austerities, prayer, and fervorous desires. He then longed for the happiness of approaching the altars, so that he promised his superior to say thirty masses for him, because he had hastened the time of his ordination. When ordained, he took time to prepare, by prayer and penance, to offer the divine sacrifice, and celebrated his first mass with the most tender devotion, and in one continued torrent of tears, so that those who were present could not contain theirs, and, by the divine fire which sparkled in his countenance, thought him like an angel than a man at the altar. The same year, Toulouse being afflicted with a violent plague, Francis made pressing instances to obtain leave to serve the sick.

In 1631, after the course of his studies was over, he made the third year of his novitiate, during which he was obliged to go to Foncouverte to settle some family affairs, where he spent his time in visiting the poor and sick, catechizing the children every morning, and preaching to the people twice a day. His begging for the poor, going through the streets followed by crowds of them and children, and carrying upon his shoulders a fagot, a straw bed, or such like things for the necessitous, drew on him many insults, once from the very soldiers, and bitter remonstrances from his brothers and other friends; but he rejoiced in the humiliations of the cross, and answered that they became a minister of the gospel which had been established by them. Their contempt of him was at last converted into admiration, and everyone discerned in his actions a divine wisdom and zeal which differs from worldly prudence, and rejoices with David if its simplicity appeals contemptible to men. He lived among his kindred as one truly dead to the world: not like those religious persons, who, wanting the spirit of a their vocation, seek earthly comforts among them. Having composed the differences his relations, and edified them by his humility and heavenly life, he was ordered to go to the college of Pamiers to supply the place of a master who was fallen sick. In the mean time his superiors, from the experience they had of his vocation and talents for an apostolic life, resolved to apply him solely to the missions; in which he accordingly spent the last ten years of his life, beginning them in Languedoc, continuing them through the Vivarez, and ending them with his life in the Velay, of which Le Puy is the capital. The summer he employed in cities and towns, as the husbandmen then were taken up with their tillage; but the winter seasons he consecrated to the villages and the country.

F. Regis entered upon his apostolic course at Montpellier in 1631 arriving there in the beginning of summer; and immediately opening his mission by instructing the children and

preaching to the people upon Sundays and holidays in the church of the college. His discourses were plain and familiar; after a clear exposition of the Christian truth, which he had taken for his subject, he closed them with moral and pathetic exhortations he delivered them with such vehemence that sometimes his voice and strength failed him; and with such unction that both preacher and audience often were dissolved in tears, and the most hardened left the church with hearts full of compunction. He was always resorted to by a numberless audience of all ranks, though principally of the poor. A famous preacher was astonished to see how his catechisms were admired, and the great conversions they effected, while elegant sermons had so few to hear them, and produced so little fruit. The reason was, the word of God became a two edged sword in the mouth of Regis, who spoke it from a heart full of the spirit of God, whereas it was lost under the pomp of an affected rhetoric. The saint never refused himself to the rich, but he used to say they would never want confessors, and that the poor destitute part of Christ's flock were his share and his delight. He thought that he ought to live only for them. He spent usually the whole morning in the confessional, at the altar, or in the pulpit; the afternoon he devoted to the hospitals and prisons, sometimes forgetting his meals, having, as he once said, no leisure to think of them. He begged from door to door for the poor; procured them physicians and all necessities when sick, and dressed himself their most loathsome sores. He was seen loaded with bundles of straw for them; and when laughed at by the children, and told that this made him ridiculous, he answered: "With all my heart, we receive a double advantage when we purchase a brother's relief with our own disgrace." He established an association of thirty gentlewomen to procure assistance for the prisoners. He converted several Huguenots, and many lewd women; and when told the repentance of these latter is seldom sincere, he answered; "If my labors hinder one sin they will be well bestowed."

Towards winter he went to Sommières, the capital of Languedoc, twelve miles from Montpellier, and with incredible labor declaring war against vice and extreme ignorance, saw his endeavors crowned with the most surprising success all over that country, penetrating into the most inaccessible places, and deterred by no rigors of weather, living chiefly on bread and water, taking sometimes a little milk; always abstaining from fish, flesh, eggs, and wine; allowing himself very little rest at night on some hard bench or floor and wearing a hair-shirt. With a crucifix in his hand, he boldly stopped a troop of enraged soldiers from plundering a church, and another time demanded and obtained of a Calvinist officer the restitution of a poor man's goods which had been plundered, without mentioning the high indignities and ill treatment he had received from the soldiers to the commander's great astonishment. The Vivarez had been for fifty years the center of Calvinism in France, and the seat of horrible wars and desolation. The pious bishop of Viviers, in 1633, by earnest entreaties drew Regis into his diocese, received him with great veneration, and took him with him in his visitation, during which the father made a most successful mission over that whole diocese. The count de la Mothe Brion, who had lived as a wise man of the world, was so moved with the unction of the holy man's sermons, as entirely to devote himself to fasting, prayer, and alms. This nobleman, by his zeal and charities, very much contributed to assist the saint in his holy enterprises; in which he was seconded by another gentleman, named De la Suchere, who had formerly been the saint's scholar. At Puy, Regis undertook the reformation of many negligent

pastors, brought many lewd women, and some the most obstinate and abandoned, to become patterns of fervor among the penitents, and converted a Calvinist lady of great reputation at Usez. About that time God permitted a storm to be raised against his servant for his trial; for amidst these glorious successes he was accused loudly as a disturber of the peace of families by his indiscreet zeal, and as a violent man, who spared no one in his invectives and satires. The bishop defended him, till wearied out with repeated complaints, he wrote to his superior to recall him, and sending for the saint, gave him a severe reprimand; adding that he found himself under a necessity of dismissing him. Regis, who had all along neglected to take any measures for his own justification, answered him with such humility, and with such an unfeigned love of humiliations and the cross, that the prelate was charmed with his virtue; and being undeceived by others in regard to him, he praised him in public, and continued him with his employ till the beginning of the year 1634, when the missionary was ordered by his superiors to repair to Puy, but went loaded with letters full of the highest commendations of his virtue and prudence from the good bishop.

The saint wrote earnestly to the general of the society, desiring to be employed on a mission to the barbarous Hurons and Iroquois in Canada, and received a favorable answer; but at the request of count de la Mothe, he returned early the next year to the diocese of Viviers, to labor in the conversion of Calvinists, and in the instruction of the ignorant at Cheylard, and on the other estates of that gentleman. It is incredible how much the apostolic man underwent in this rough country, in the highest mountains, in which he was once locked up three weeks by the snows, lying on the bare ground, eating only black bread, and drinking water, with the addition of astonishing voluntary mortification,- fasts, disciplines to blood, and hair shirts. The count was so edified, and so moved with the inexpressible fruits of his labors, that he founded a perpetual mission for two Jesuits at Cheylard, giving to it a principal of sixteen thousand livres, and his fine house there for their residence. Regis made his next mission at Privas with equal fruit, and thence was called by the bishop of Valence to St. Aggreve, a mountainous savage place, the nest of heresy in his diocese. Among his heroic actions and virtues here, it is recorded, that one Sunday going into an inn to stop the excesses committed by lewd company assembled in it, he received from one a box on the ear, without any other reply than this: "I thank you; if you knew me you would judge that I deserve much more." Which meekness overcame their obstinacy. After three months' labors in this neighborhood, by the same bishop's orders he repaired to Saint Andre des Fangas, and was from thence recalled to Marlhes in the Vivarez about the end of the year 1635. In the first of these two places, a boy falling from the top of a high pair of stairs to the bottom near the holy man, then at his prayer in a corner, was found without hurt; in the latter, a woman would take his tapered cloak to mend, keeping two rags as relics by applying them to two of her children, cured one of a fever, the other her of a formed dropsy. The curate of Marlhes, in a deposition upon oath, for the process of the canonization of the servant of God, gave this testimony of him: "He was indefatigable, and employed both night and day in his sacred functions. He was under the bitterest affliction whenever he was informed that God had been offended. Then he forgot his natural meekness, and appearing transported with holy anger, he with a voice of thunder deterred the most resolute libertines. He would have sacrificed a thousand lives to prevent one sin. A word from him sufficed to inflame the coldest hearts and

to soften the hardest. After the mission, I knew not my own parishioners, so much I found them reformed. No violence of cold, no snows blocking up all passages, no mountains, or torrents swelled by rains, could be an obstacle to his zeal. His ardor communicated an intrepidity to others; for when he went to any place, innumerable troops followed, and met him through all sorts of difficulties and dangers. I have seen him in the most rigorous season stop in the middle of a forest, to content the crowds, desirous to hear him speak concerning salvation. I have seen him at the top of a mountain, raised on a heap of snow, hardened by the frost, preach and instruct the whole day, and after that spend the whole night in hearing confessions. Winter being over he returned to Puy about the end of April, in 1636, testifying that he found his strength and courage not abated, but increased by his labors. He met at the college here his general's refusal of the mission of Canada, which frustrated his hopes of martyrdom. This refusal he imputed to his sins.

The four remaining years of his life were taken up in missions in the Velay, a mountainous country, the winters in the villages, the summers in Puy, the bishop of which city made use of his counsels and ministry to reform his flock. He preached and catechized at Puy, first in the Jesuits' church; but this being too little, he removed to that of St. Peter le Monstiers, belonging to the Benedictines. His discourses were without art, but clear to the meanest capacities, and delivered with that emotion of heart, and so moving a tone of voice, that he seemed transported by a divine fire above himself; and all who heard him declared, that "Francis preached the word of God as it is in itself; whereas others seemed, in comparison of him, to preach themselves." His audience usually consisted of four or five thousand. His provincial in his visitation, hearing him, wept during the whole sermon. He formed an association of virtuous ladies to relieve the poor, and another in favor of the prisoners; for both which incredible funds were raised; and in times of need God miraculously multiplied the corn he had stored up, three several times: of which verbal processes were drawn up, and juridical information taken before ecclesiastical and secular judges: and these miracles were confirmed by fourteen credible witnesses in the acts of his canonization. His constant readiness and extreme diligence to run to the sick, and his happy success in assisting them in spirituals, were recompensed by several cures effected on the spot by his prayers, the unexceptionable relation of which may be read at length in F. Daubenton's History of his life. Nor were the conversions of many sinners less miraculous. Among these, a certain voluptuous rich merchant had long endeavored to blacken the saint's reputation by his slanders; who in return bought of him all he wanted for his poor. Having softened him to a more tractable temper by these and other good offices, he laid hold of a favorable opportunity of representing to him what could be the end of his pains, and the fruit of all his riches which death must soon bereave him of; the man was struck, and having revolved in his mind all night the reflections the words of the man of God raised in him, came the next day to lay open the agitation of his soul to him. The saint having for some time continued to excite in him still livelier apprehensions of the divine judgments, and conducted him through sentiments of hope and divine love to the dispositions of a perfect penitent, he heard his general confession, which the other made with such a flood of tears that the confessor judged the greatness of his contrition might require a smaller penance. The penitent asked him why he had so much spared his weakness. The zealous pastor answered that he took upon himself to discharge the

rest of his debt, which mildness added still more to the fervor of this repenting sinner. His meekness and patience made a conquest of those souls which were so hardened as to be able to resist his zeal. A young man enraged that the saint had converted and drawn from him the object of his impure passion, resolved to kill him. The man of God discovered by a divine light his wicked intention, and said to him: "Dear brother, why do you bear this ill-will to one that would hazard his life to procure you the greatest of blessings, eternal salvation?" The sinner, overcome by his sweetness, fell at his feet, begged his pardon, and became a sincere convert. Three other young noblemen, on a like occasion, resolved revenge Regis met them with courage, saying to them: "You come with a design upon my life. What concerns me is not death, which is the object of my wishes: but the state of damnation that you are in, and regard so little." The libertines stood as if stunned: Regis embracing them with the tenderness of a parent, induced them to repent; and they made their confessions to him, and led regular lives till their deaths. Addressing drunkards and other sinners, with his eyes all on fire with zeal, he often by one moving sentence reclaimed them from their disorders. When he had received a blow on the cheek, the magistrates could not prevail upon him to denounce the delinquent; but the offender, moved by his charity, became of his own accord his sincere penitent.

The servant of God was extremely solicitous in removing all occasions of sin, and preventing the promiscuous company of young men and women. He converted many prostitutes with the help of charitable contributions, founded a retreat to secure the virtue of such penitents, till his rector fearing that house could not be maintained, forbade him to meddle in it; he moreover gave him many severe reprimands even in public, accused his zeal as too forward, and forbade him to hear confessions, instruct the poor, or visit the sick, only on certain days and at appointed times. Regis suffered many humiliations and mortification under this superior, without even allowing anyone to speak in his justification; till the succeeding rector, convinced of his innocence and prudence, restored to him the care of the refuge, and the whole field of his former labors. His zeal exposed him often to occasions of martyrdom, and to open insults; and once he was cruelly beaten. He was also censured bitterly by many, and even by several of his own brethren; but his rector undertook his defense, and God crowned his labors with incredible success; in which he was seconded by the great vicar Peter le Blanc, his constant friend, without whose counsel he undertook nothing. This is the summary of his transactions at Puy during the four last summers of his missions: the winters he employed in laboring in the country, the most abandoned part of which was his first care and chief delight. The country inhabitants of the Velay in some parts, especially in the mountains, were very rustic, and perfectly savage: Calvinism had insinuated itself, and ignorance and the grossest vices prevailed in many of the wilder places. The boroughs and villages are situated in the diocese of Puy Vienne, Valence, and Viviers. The saint's first mission among them was in the beginning of the year 1636, to Fay and the neighboring places. Hugh Sourdon, LL. D. engaged him to lodge in his house. The man of God finding his kind host's son Claudius Sourdon, aged fourteen years, entirely deprived of all sight for the six months past, from a deflection; upon his eyes, with excessive pain, he exhorted him to confidence in God, and retired into a neighboring room to prayer with some of the family, which he had not ended when the child recovered his sight, and distinguished everybody in the assembly which then met to hear the first catechistical instruction; and from that time never felt any more either of that pain or

deflection, as he attested before the bishops of Puy and Valence, being then fourscore years old. Upon this, another man forty years of age, who had been blind eight years, was brought to the saint, who making the sign of the cross over him, immediately restored his sight. By the fame of these two miracles, this mission was opened with wonderful concourse and fruit. His conduct in it is thus described by Claudius Sourdou, with whom he lodged, in a juridical deposition that grave person gave before two bishops: "His whole behavior breathed sanctity. Men could neither see nor hear him without being inflamed with the love of God. He celebrated the divine mysteries with such devotion that he seemed like an angel at the altar. I have observed him in familiar intercourse become silent and recollected, and all on fire: then speaking of God with a fervor and rapidity that proved his heart to be carried away with an impulse from heaven.