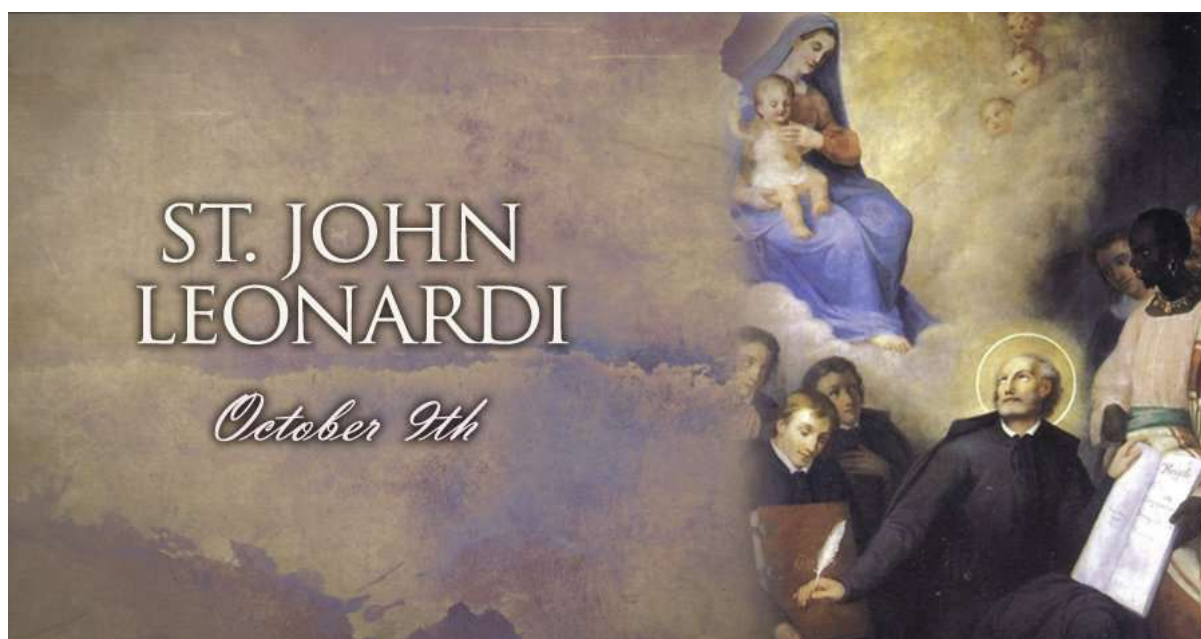


St. John Leonardi



On Oct. 9, the Catholic Church honors the memory of Saint John Leonardi, who studied to become a pharmacist but eventually chose the life of the priesthood. He founded a religious order, and helped establish the Vatican department now known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Declared the patron of pharmacists in 2006 because of his original career path, St. John Leonardi was hailed by Pope Benedict XVI during a 2009 general audience as a “luminous priestly figure” whose life offers a model for contemporary clergy. In that address, the Pope highlighted the saint's Christ-centered approach to the social and spiritual problems of his day.

The 16-century Italian priest saw that humanity “stands in extreme need of Christ,” Pope Benedict recalled. Thus, St. John Leonardi's apostolate proceeded in the knowledge that “there is no area that cannot be touched by his power; there is no evil that cannot find a remedy in him, no problem that is not resolved” in the person of Jesus Christ. Born to middle-class parents during 1541 in the Tuscan region of Lucca, John (or Giovanni) Leonardi was the youngest of seven children. He enrolled at age 17 in courses to become a pharmacist, studied diligently for 10 years and became certified to practice the trade. But the young apothecary had long been interested in the priesthood, and soon turned to the study of theology to prepare for ordination.

Ordained in 1572, John soon became the spiritual director to a small group of young men looking to pursue vocations to the priesthood. They organized a communal form of life near a local church, and began the process that would lead to the formation of the present day Order of the Mother of God (also known as the Clerks Regular of the Mother of God). Civic leaders in Lucca opposed the formation of a new religious order, however, and acted to stop its formation. While ultimately ineffective, their efforts forced John Leonardi to spend most of the remainder of his life outside Lucca, with special exceptions granted by its government under the influence of the Pope.

In keeping with the spirit of the Catholic Counter-Reformation launched by the Council of Trent, John Leonardi and his congregation of priests sought to deepen the knowledge and practice of the faith among clergy and lay Catholics. In a letter written to Pope Paul V during the early 17th century, he stressed the universal call to holiness of life for all members of the Church. “As regards the remedies required by the Church as a whole, its reformation must be undertaken among high and low alike,

among its leaders as well as its children,” he told the Pope. But he believed that priority should be given to the formation of pastors, “so that reform begins among those from whom it should be communicated to others.”

John received Papal approval for the Order of the Mother of God in 1595, and he was also appointed to oversee the reform of two important monasteries. Although the order's work was largely limited to Italy, John followed the suggestions of his spiritual director St. Philip Neri by founding a seminary for foreign missionaries, which became the present-day College for the Propagation of the Faith.

St. John Leonardi died in Rome on Oct. 9, 1609, having contracted a deadly illness while caring for victims of a plague outbreak. Pope Pius XI canonized him in 1938.