

**BLESSED JOHN OF VERCELLI**  
**AND**  
**THE MISSION OF THE HOLY NAME**

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In the second General Council of Lyons, the Fathers unanimously passed a decree directing that all Christian peoples show an increased reverence for the Name of the Deity. This resolution was introduced in the closing session of the Council, July 17, 1274, at the insistence of Pope Gregory X. The Holy Father had a two-fold objective in mind: reparation for the insults offered to the Holy Name of God by the Albigensians and other heretics; restriction of the widespread evils of profanity, obscenity, blasphemy, and perjury.

Pope Gregory X did not want this new resolution merely entered into the minutes of the Council and become lost in the dust of unexecuted good intentions. He wanted it to bear fruit among the Christian people of all nations in his own time and for years to come. Consequently he prepared a history-making brief, *Nuper in Concilio*, in which he suggested that this resolution of the Council be put into operation. The one to whom he addressed the brief would have to be a man of tremendous energy and magnanimous spirit. With confidence the Pope chose John Garbella.

John Garbella was a man of small stature. He was a pleasant looking man past his sixties and bore a slight limp. From the physical description of John Garbella it would hardly seem that the Pope had made a wise choice. To understand how this man could be instrumental in spreading love and respect for the *Holy Name of Jesus* so that 680 years later the Society bearing this very title would not be the remnant of a glorious past but a light burning ever more brightly, we must look not to his physical stature but to his indefatigable spirit. We must know him as Pope Gregory X knew him.

Gregory knew him as a preacher obedient to God, to the Church, to the Rule and Constitutions of his Order: he had carried out to the letter every command given to him; and he did this with utmost zeal, diligence and all the eloquence that Divine Providence had bestowed upon him as a member of the Order of Preachers.

Prior to any thought of becoming a preacher, John had been a

professor of both canon and civil law in Vercelli, Italy. Once, when Jordan of Saxony, a Dominican, was preaching in Vercelli, John and several other professors were militant against his exhortations, and bade the students not to listen to him, lest they too, like hundreds of other students, should join the mendicant Friars. But not even such resolute opposition could save the teachers themselves from the spiritual charm of Jordan's words. After hearing of the 'defection' of one of the leaders among the professors, Walter of Germany, and eleven other professors, John immediately "set off alone to the convent, like one crazed." He too wanted to obey the inspiration of God and join the Order of Preachers. Throwing himself at the feet of Jordan, the Master General, he besought permission to receive the Dominican habit.

John Garbella, then about thirty years old, left behind a distinguished and colorful career. He was first educated at his home in Mossa Santa Maria, a small town of Piedmont, Italy. Then he was sent to a monastery in the neighboring city of Vercelli. When seventeen he went to the illustrious University of Paris. Here at a preparatory school for the University, the *Ecole du Parvis*, he took courses in rhetoric and letters. He advanced to the major *Ecole du cloître* after mastering languages and becoming facile in both laws. In 1229 he returned to Vercelli and was greatly renowned as a successful professor of law. This life of false peace was shattered by Jordan of Saxony, the Friar-preacher who inspired him to enter the Dominican Order. For a time thereafter Brother John disappeared into the obscurity of the cloister. He was sent to the novitiate at the Convent of St. Nicholas in Bologna. This was the center of activity in Italy for St. Dominic and it still breathed the fresh pure spirit of its founder. Here John began his progress in the spiritual life of a Dominican.

In the year 1235 the General Chapter for the Order was held at Bologna. This Chapter accepted an invitation to establish a Dominican convent at Vercelli. Fathers Philip Carisio and John were chosen to start the new convent. Hugh, the Bishop there, received them favorably and bestowed upon them a convent and church. Father Philip was made the first superior and Father John, the director of studies.

In 1245 Philip was made Provincial of Lombardy and John became the Prior of the convent at Vercelli. And now the success he had known as a professor was returning to him. He became renowned as a preacher throughout the whole area. His preaching ability, coupled with his learning in law, soon drew the attention of Pope

Innocent IV and in 1251 John was appointed legate apostolic to Lombardy and inquisitor. At this time heresy was a vital issue in Italy and caused disunity between the Pope and the city-states. Hence the post of legate and inquisitor was an important one for the good of the Church and the good of the country. John assumed the responsible office and at Venice he succeeded in making peace between the warring city-states of Lombardy and the Vicar of Christ.

At the General Chapter of the Order held in Milan during 1255, the Master General appointed him Vicar of Hungary. In the war-torn country of Hungary, where the Church suffered greatly from the Tartars of Russia, John accomplished his mission work most favorably.

Upon his return to Italy he was elected Prior at Bologna, one of the most important convents of the Order. Only a short while after the election in 1257, the Provincial Chapter of Lombardy elected him provincial. As Provincial of Lombardy, he was the superior of six hundred Friars and of convents in twenty-eight different cities. During his provincialate he had no set convent in which to live. He walked from house to house in his province and preached as he went; he kept the fasts and other observances of the Order even on his journeys; and everyone along the way recognized him and knew him. He never rode but always traveled on foot, limping along on his crippled leg. In this way he constantly visited the houses and convents under his jurisdiction. During his time as superior, the Province of Lombardy increased remarkably in the number of foundations and members. During this period also, at the request of the Pope, John preached the crusade among the people of Lombardy, supervising the spiritual and financial details of the project.

John, feeling the office of provincial too heavy a burden, wished to be relieved of it. He resolved to ask the General Chapter in Paris, 1264, to accept his resignation. The thirty electors present at the Dominican Convent of St. James accepted the resignation, and then surprisingly proceeded to elect John Master General of the whole Order. The burden of office was now even heavier. John, the fifth successor of the founder of the Dominican Order, was over sixty years of age. At that time he was considered rather elderly for such a position because the office of Master General is exercised over the entire Order, and walking, the only mode of travel for the Friars in those times, taxed the strength of even a young man. Nevertheless the new Master General threw himself into the work with characteristic zeal. He was now acting on a world-wide scale. He visited nearly all the convents of the Order. His small stature and limp made him

appear pathetic rather than terrifying on his visitations. Yet he was known to be very severe after learning of gross negligences.

This continual traveling on foot between the convents in the countries of Europe, with all the discomforts of weather and poor food, caused his health to decline. But through sheer strength of an engraced will he kept doggedly at his tasks.

Gregory X, newly elected to the Chair of Peter, decided to convoke a General Council to care for the affairs of Christendom. But before this council could meet, immediate action was needed to settle the situation in Italy. An able diplomat was required to calm the fierce rivalry that sprang up in Italy between Genoa and Venice, the two most powerful cities of the Italian Peninsula. The Pope knew of John's renown as a peace-maker and appointed him Legate Apostolic in 1272. Genoa was profiteering by selling supplies to the Saracens, who were using the supplies to repel the Christian invasions. The rulers could not be dissuaded from this profit-making business and so were excommunicated by the Pope. Therefore the mission of John was a difficult one. He had to convince the merchants to give up the material profit for a spiritual one, and to persuade the provincial-minded men to give up what was locally advantageous in order that the general good of the Italian people might prosper. John appealed to the leaders and the people with spiritual and practical arguments. The Genoese listened to him and agreed to curb their business affairs with the enemies of the Church. At Venice John met with similar success. He persuaded the Venetians to stop trading with the schismatic Greek Emperor Paleologus.

The next year, 1273, at Budapest, John received a letter from Pope Gregory, asking him to prepare a schedule of discussion for the General Council. He was one of the forty great minds of the Church who were asked to do this work. The Council met at Lyons on May 1, 1274. Under the leadership of their Master General, the Dominicans, especially St. Albert and Peter of Tarantase, later Blessed Innocent V, and Blessed Humbert, helped the proceedings to move smoothly and offered many of the recommendations that were adopted in this important Council of the Church. Nor did the Dominicans end their work when the last session of the Council was completed. They preached all over Europe the wish of the Conciliar Fathers, that of praising and glorifying "His Name both by words and deeds."

It was at this time that Pope Gregory X prepared the brief, *Nuper in Concilio*, and addressed it to John. The papal brief was a suggestion rather than a command—but it was a suggestion that was acted upon with vigor by the man who would lead the heralds of the

Holy Name. Immediately, John directed that a letter be sent to all the Provincials throughout the Order, telling them to "see that the preachers subject to your jurisdiction, carry out the ordination of His Holiness with scrupulous diligence and by methods calculated to persuade." The words display his full spirited stature and may be readily called the summary of his whole life.

In later years the Pope named John the Patriarch of See of Jerusalem to show the high esteem with which he regarded him. Due to his deep spirit of humility he refused the office and the Pope absolved him from the care of the See.

During this time petty jealousies had caused opposition to arise against the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas. To end this, at the General Chapter of Paris in 1279, John, who had always revered the Angelic Doctor, and was convinced of the soundness of his doctrine, reviewed the opposition's objections. He then had the Chapter pass an act to suppress and punish writings or preaching detrimental to St. Thomas' personal character and teachings. Thus did John do his part in keeping peace in the Order and at the same time preserve Thomism for the Church and the Order.

The next Chapter brought the octogenarian to England, then back through Flanders, Holland, and Switzerland to Vienna. Having missed only one of the annual Chapters during his generalate because of a mission for the Pope, John was determined not to miss another one as long as he was Master General. His spirit pushed him but his body could now scarcely answer its demands. Nevertheless, through Germany to Montpellier, France, he walked to preside at the next General Chapter in June 1283. After the Chapter he spent the summer at Montpellier trying to regain his strength. In the fall before the cold set in, John left Montpellier, but only a few days away he fell sick again. He returned to Montpellier and there he died in the Dominican Convent.

These are only a few lines in the wonderful picture of the saintly little man. Looking quickly at the sketch of his life, one can see how he was an obedient preacher—indeed a diligently obedient preacher. He exhorted the members of the Order to preach the Word of God throughout the world by just and persuasive methods. He did great things for the Church through his peace-making missions, and he restored harmony to the Order when it was needed. He preached and lived the words of his patron, St. John, "My little children, love one another."

By the time of his death, 1283, nine years after Gregory had urged him to promote devotion to the Holy Name, John Garbella had

personally shown his brothers how to carry out the papal wish. He had ordered and he saw to it himself, that an altar of the Holy Name was erected, and that societies and confraternities under the title and invocation of the Holy Name were established in every Dominican church. Certainly the words with which he urged the Provincials of the Order, had a true foundation in his own life. This was the same man whom St. Pius X in 1903 raised to the altars of the Church. His feast day is celebrated on December 2 throughout the Dominican Order and in the diocese of Vercelli. He is known as Blessed John of Vercelli, Confessor of the Order of Preachers. We may also add the title, "Missioner of the Holy Name."

#### THE GIFT OF PIETY

. . . from the pen of St. Thomas . . .

"The gift of piety does not merely give cult and due honor to God, but to all men inasmuch as they pertain to God. . . . From this it follows that piety comes to the aid of those who find themselves in need of mercy" *Summa*, II, IIae, 121, 1, ad 3.

. . . from the life of St. Dominic . . .

"In the daytime no one was more gracious and joyous than St. Dominic in the midst of the brethren and his associates. But at night no one was more instant in any way in vigils and prayerful supplications. . . . The day he gave to his neighbor, the night to God, knowing that the Lord commanded the day to be spent in dealing out mercy, while the night's canticle belongs to Him alone."

*Legenda Petri Ferrandi* on the life of St. Dominic