

Aloysius Gonzaga (1568– 1591)

Luigi Gonzaga was the eldest of seven children. His father, Ferrante Gonzaga, was the Marquis of the small northern Italian town of Castiglione delle Stiviere. Luigi was born in 1568 and was baptised at the very moment of birth because it was feared that both he and his mother might die. Both recovered and his mother lived long enough to build a church in Luigi's honour thirty years after his death.



Luigi is usually known in English as Aloysius and in French as Louis. As the eldest son Aloysius was heir to the title of Marquis of Castiglione.

His whole upbringing was designed to prepare him for this. Thus, from the age of nine to eleven, Aloysius was sent to live in Florence in the household of Francesco de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. Such a court was typical of the Renaissance: wealthy, cultured and learned. It was also violent, arrogant and licentious.

These great and important people were so far from 'the poor, the gentle and the peacemakers' that Aloysius believed them to be truly wretched. He had no wish to be like them. In 1581 at the age of 13 Luigi was taken by his parents to Spain to the court of King Phillip II where he was made page to the King's son Don Diego. Despite an interrupted formal education Aloysius was a sharp-witted and a keen learner.

In Madrid he quickly made progress in philosophy. At this time that he decided to enter the Society of Jesus. His father was implacably opposed to Aloysius, whom he wished to become the Marquis, wasting his life by becoming a Jesuit. In 1587 Aloysius took his three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, which made him a Jesuit. Then he continued his studies in philosophy and theology in preparation for the priesthood.

As well as being a willing student, he was also willing to help others for whom learning was more difficult. While praying in Milan Aloysius was

filled with a certainty that his death was not far away. He was keen to return to Rome for he had written: "If I have a home on earth, it is Rome - where I was born for Christ."

Both on the journey and in Rome, Aloysius found evidence of the Plague all around him. He threw himself tirelessly into caring for the sick: the former nobleman begged money to provide for victims and then nursed them himself in the hospitals, which were little more than plague pits. One day, on his way to the hospital, Aloysius found a plague victim on the street. He lifted the man on his shoulders and carried him to the hospital.

That night he felt ill. He had caught the Plague. The disease, usually so swift to kill, lasted twelve agonising weeks before Aloysius died on 21 June 1591. Aloysius wrote to his mother, "Regard my death as a joyful gift of God". He lies today in the Jesuit church of St Ignatius in Rome.