

Saint of the Week

We continue our Pastor Column series “Saint of the Week,” and our Saint of the Week this week is Saint Cajetan. He was born in Vicenza, in modern-day northern Italy, in the year 1480. He was living and ministering, therefore, during the Reformation era, one of the most contentious and troublesome times in the history of Christendom.

In 1523, the Church was in sad shape. People could not get the spiritual nourishment they needed from the large numbers of uneducated and even immoral priests who took their money but returned nothing. When good priests and laity turned to the hierarchy for help, they found leaders who were, at best, apathetic and indifferent to their concerns.

The response to such widespread corruption and worldliness on the part of the people was variable; for example, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others rebelled against the Church, splitting away from the Church when their pleas for correction and reform went unheard. Eventually, they would form their own churches – hence, the Protestant Reformation.

Saint Cajetan responded differently; though he was just as concerned as Martin Luther about the state of the Church, the difference of his response to the situation was that he went to Rome in 1523 – not to talk to the pope or the hierarchy but to consult with members of a confraternity called the Oratory of the Divine Love. When he had first come to Rome many years before, he felt called to some unknown great work there. He studied for the priesthood and was ordained, and as priest, he helped to reestablish a faded confraternity whose fundamental aims were promoting the glory of God for the salvation of souls.

Returning from Rome as a priest, he founded another Oratory in his home town and also in Verona, where he had promoted the spiritual life and care for the poor and sick not only with words but with his heroic example. He told his brothers, “In this oratory, we try to serve God by worship; in our hospital, we may say that we actually find Him.” But none of the horrors that he saw in the hospitals of the incurables saddened him as much as the wickedness that he encountered wherever he looked.

In his confraternity, he found other clergy who felt the same way that he did about the evil situation of Christendom society. But they did not want to split off from the Church; they wanted to restore it. Thus, they decided to form an order based on the lives of the Apostles themselves in the hope that the apostolic life would inspire them and others to live holy lives devoted to Jesus.

In order to accomplish this, they would focus on the moral life, sacred studies, preaching and pastoral care, helping the sick, and other foundations of the pastoral life. The new order was known as the Theatines Clerks Regular, an order of the regular clergy whose first superior general was a bishop named Theatensis (although Saint Cajetan is considered the founder).

While they did not experience thousands of formerly greedy and licentious priests flocking to their door, Saint Cajetan and the others in the order nonetheless persevered even in the face of open opposition from laity and clergy who did not want to reform. It was his holy example that converted many, as well as his preaching.

Worn out by the troubles he saw in his Church and his home, Saint Cajetan grew weak and soon became sick. When doctors tried to get him to rest on a bed that was softer than the boards on which he was accustomed to sleep, he answered, “My Savior died on a cross. Let me die on wood at least.” He died in 1547, on August 7, and his Memorial is August 7.

Saint Cajetan...pray for us.