

SAINTS ALIVE! JUNE 21: ST. ALOYSIUS GONZAGA



Aloysius Gonzaga was an Italian aristocrat who became a member of the Society of Jesus.

His father wanted Gonzaga to become a soldier. His military training started at an early age. At age four, he was given a set of miniature guns and accompanied his father on training expeditions.

Gonzaga wanted to join a religious order but his father was furious and prevented him from doing so until, as a 17-year-old, Gonzaga gave up all rights of inheritance and was accepted into the novitiate of the Society of Jesus in Rome.

Four years later, a plague broke out in Rome. The Jesuits opened a hospital for the stricken, and Gonzaga volunteered to work there. A few days before his 23rd birthday, Gonzaga showed the first symptoms of being infected. He died three months later.

For his compassion and courage in the face of an incurable disease, St. Aloysius Gonzaga has become the patron of both AIDS sufferers and their caregivers.

History is marked by diseases and epidemics where citizens are advised to stay away from specific areas and certain people for fear of becoming contaminated, falling ill, and spreading the disease. Taking precaution is certainly prudent. But when prudence isolates the victim who is in need of care? Is it the isolated victim or have we also become infected with the disease of self-focus?

When is taking precaution not prudence but fear of that which is different? I had relatives visiting my home once and were concerned that diabetes was contagious. People suffering from a mental illness were considered to be sinners or suffering from the sins of their parents.

A girl in my grade school class suffered from polio and wore braces. None of us gave it a second thought (except that we'd slow down in Duck, Duck, Goose). A decade later, I gave someone physically disabled a second thought and a third thought.

People who were left-handed were thought to be mentally ill; writing with one's left hand was a grade school violation. My mother chastised me for making the sign the cross with my left hand because it was the sign of the devil.

When we are afraid to be in contact with someone who is different or simply ailing, let us pray to St. Aloysius Gonzaga for inner strength.



ARCHDIOCESE
OF PORTLAND
IN OREGON

Office of Life, Justice, and Peace