Eldest son of a shoemaker, John was born at Diest, Brabant (Belgium). He was the oldest of five children, three of whom entered into religious life. Being the oldest, He spent much of his time caring for his mother, who was in poor health.

He grew up in an atmosphere of political turmoil caused by a religious war between the Catholic and Protestant sections of the Netherlands. He studied at the Gymnasium at Diest and worked as a servant in the household of Canon John Froymont at Malines in order to continue his studies.

In 1615, the Jesuits opened a college at Malines, and St. John Berchmans was one of the first to enter. He was an energetic student and was a leader among the students. In 1616, he entered the Jesuit novitiate at Malines and came under the influence of Father Antoine Sucquet. The young Berchmans developed a strong and deep spirituality based on the loving practice of fidelity. St. Aloysius of Gonzaga was his spiritual model, and he was influenced as well by the example of the Jesuit English martyrs.

It was his realistic appreciation for the value of ordinary things, a characteristic of the Flemish mystical tradition, that constituted his holiness. He was affable, kind, and endowed with an outgoing personality that endeared him to everyone. In 1618, he was sent to Rome to study philosophy and was an exceptional student. He requested after ordination to become a chaplain in the army, hoping to be martyred on the battlefield.

In the summer of 1619, the intense heat of Rome started to affect his health and he began progressively to get weaker. The doctors could not determine what was wrong, and for two years he was continually sick, requiring medical care, and as the summer of 1621 came, it was clear that he would not last long. He died peacefully on August 13, 1621, and numerous miracles were attributed to him at the time of his funeral.

He was beatified by Pope Pius IX in 1865 and canonized by Pope Leo XIII in 1888. His body lies in the church of St. Ignatius in Rome, where Aloysius of Gonzaga is also buried.

John Berchmans was not noted for extraordinary feats of holiness or austerity, nor did he found orders or churches or work flashy miracles. He made kindness, courtesy, and constant fidelity an important part of his holiness. The path to holiness can lie in the ordinary rather than the extraordinary.

SOURCES: www.catholicsaints.info
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