

In the beginning, “God said: Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” Evening came, and morning followed—the first day” (Gn 1:3-5).

Today we honor John Leonardi, a priest who died nearly 400 years ago. He believed that people who lived without God lived in darkness. His taught “Christ first of all.” Christ shines light on the human heart. Christ shines light on history. Christ shines light on the entire universe. “There is no area that cannot be touched by his power; there is no evil that cannot find a remedy in him, no problem that is not resolved in him. ‘Either Christ or nothing!’”ⁱ

Born in Italy in 1541, little Giovanni was the youngest of seven children. At the age of 17, he began a decade long study of pharmacology. Once he passed the certification necessary to practice as a pharmacist, he went onto become a doctor of souls through his study of theology. He was ordained a priest at the age of 31 and practiced what he preached. “The medicine of God” is necessary for every human soul.

He celebrated his first Mass on Epiphany, 1572. On Epiphany, we celebrate the Magi following a star to adore the Christ child. “All nations are invited to sing the Lord's praises for they have been called to hear the good news and worship the long-awaited Messiah and King with the gift of their lives.”ⁱⁱ Indeed, this holy day summarizes the priestly life of John Leonardi. He had a great missionary zeal to bring the light of Christ to everyone. Together with two others, he helped to organize and found the Congregation at the Vatican that helps missionary priests evangelize people around the world.

In 1579 to help clearly and effectively teach the faith, he formed the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine which published materials for the teaching of the faith in a most instructive way. Leonardi's practical methods were used up and until the 19th century. Perhaps you recall taking CCD classes yourself.

John Leonardi served during the period of church history known as the Catholic Counter-Reformation, a time when the church was in great need of saints to help reform it. With Jesus and the Blessed Mother as role models for how we live our lives, we can't go wrong. To help strengthen and renew the church, John Leonardi petitioned the newly elected Pope Paul V to improve the training for priests and the young. “As regards the remedies required by the Church as a whole, its reformation must be undertaken among high and low alike, among its leaders as well as its children.”ⁱⁱⁱ The good formation of priests is necessary to help communicate the faith to all. And the Christian formation of children educating them “from their earliest years... in the purity of Christian faith and holy morals”^{iv} is also necessary.

The moral life does not constrain us. Rather, it truly liberates to follow the example of the sacrificial love of Jesus and lay down our lives for the good of others. John Leonardi died in 1609 from the flu. He caught it while he was ministering to the sick suffering from an epidemic that broke out in Rome.

In 2009, during the Year of the Priest, Pope Benedict XVI cited John Leonardi as a role model for all priests and all Christians. “Only Saints, men and women who let themselves be guided by the divine Spirit, ready to make radical and courageous decisions in the light of the Gospel, renew the Church and make a crucial contribution to building a better world.”^v

ⁱ vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20091007.html

ⁱⁱ Ordo, Feast of the Epiphany

ⁱⁱⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-john-leonardi-712

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.