

Aloysius Gonzaga's childhood was not unlike that of the founder of the Society of Jesus, St. Ignatius Loyola. Both came from noble families whose ambitions were decidedly worldly and both were cultured early in their childhoods to the excesses of Renaissance courtly life.

Born in March of 1568, Gonzaga was the firstborn to the Marquis and Marchioness of Castiglione, heirs to a powerful family in the Lombardy region of northern Italy. His father was a successful military commander and Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, and a cousin of his was a prominent Cardinal of the Church. He was four years old when his father started to train him as a soldier. At the age of eight, he began to serve in the court of Grand Duke Francesco I de' Medici in Florence.

But young Gonzaga was equally influenced by the religious witness of his mother, who helped stir within him an appreciation for a life of the faith. Appalled by the courtly temptations that surrounded him, he adopted an austere manner and performed penitential practices. Some say he even professed a private vow of chastity at the age of nine. While traveling with his family through the royal courts of Spain, Gonzaga made the choice to enter the Jesuits. His father was not amused. A few years of family conflict ensued before the Marquis relented to his son's religious vocation. In November of 1585, Gonzaga renounced his inheritance to a younger brother and headed to Rome to enter the Jesuit novitiate there.

While in Rome, his spiritual director was the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine (who was later named a Cardinal and subsequently declared a Saint and Doctor of the Church). Bellarmine encouraged Gonzaga to relax some of his private ascetical devotions and to engage more with his companions and those in need. In 1591, a plague swept through Rome. He volunteered to serve the needs of those suffering from this pandemic. One day, he found an unconscious plague-stricken individual on the street and carried him to a nearby hospital. Not surprisingly, Gonzaga soon contracted the illness due to his ministry and died at the age of twenty-three on this date: 21 June 1591.

Before his own death in 1621, Robert Cardinal Bellarmine asked his religious superiors to be buried at the feet of his spiritual son, Aloysius Gonzaga. Their remains are interred adjacent to each other near a side altar in the Church of St. Ignatius in Rome.

Gonzaga was canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1726 and was soon afterwards named as the patron saint of youth. When the Jesuits of New England acquired our current property on Eastern Point in the late 1950's, the house was frequently used to host retreats for high school students. Thus, Gonzaga was a fitting patron for the Jesuits to adopt. Given his piety and devotion to service (especially in these current days of our global pandemic), St. Aloysius Gonzaga remains a fitting patron for us all.



