The Servant of God **BONIFACE BONILLO**

Brother to all, for the love of God

Brother José Ramón Pérez Acosta, O.H.

1899 - 1978

The Servant of God BONIFACE BONILLO Brother to all, for the love of God

1899 - 1978

Introduction

Cañaveruelas, a small town in the province of Cuenca, 165 kilometres from Madrid, is where the earthly adventure of Brother Boniface began.

The town takes its name from the abundance of reeds (cañas) along the Garibay River, a name of Arabic derivation meaning 'rocks', where the people have always farmed cereals and, today, sunflowers, and are very attached their religious customs and traditions, as well as the cult of the dead.

It was here, at number 4 El Mesón street, that Boniface was born to Manuel Bonillo and Higinia Fernández, at 1 a.m. on 14 May 1899. He was baptised three days later, according to the baptism register of the Parish Church of Our Lady of Peace.



Cañavaruelas village.



Baptistery.

The little boy brought great joy to this humble family, who only had one daughter, seven-year-old Juana, having lost another daughter, Fernanda, in infancy. Boniface also fell sick as a child and, according to his own

account, his mother offered him to Our Lady to be cured.

Boniface recovered from his illness and grew up healthy, restless and cheerful, always ready to help others, despite the fact that his family was destitute and only owned a small vegetable garden, from



Bonifacio's House.

which the family could barely scrape a living, as their sole source of income.

He made his First Communion on the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1908. His childhood was peaceful, until the death of his father on 7 January 1909. Being the only male member of the family, he had to combine study with work, to provide for his mother and sister. At the same time, he enjoyed healthy friendships with the youngsters in the village and, according to Juliana Alcañíz, who had been 'a neighbour all her life', he was always ready to lend a hand to anyone in need. He was also a great help to his brother-in-law, working in his forge as a blacksmith.

At the age of 22, he fell in love with a beautiful girl from the village, Lorenza, to whom he became engaged for two years, but knowing the financial



The Parish Church of Our Lady of Peace.

hardship they would have to endure in the future, he realised that their relationship was hopeless.

He stayed in his town until 1923 and, being the only son of a widowed mother, he was exempted from military service.

He would go with some friends from his town to the nearby town of Arganda del Rey to work in the vineyards for the grape harvest, but even these seasonal jobs soon came to an end. And so one day, with one of his friends, Félix, he left for Madrid in search of work, but without success, and then to Zaragoza, where once again there was nothing for him. It was at this point, with greater determination than ever, that he told his friend: "I'm off to Barcelona to find work, trusting my luck". Young Boniface set out for Barcelona alone, while his friend Félix preferred to stay with his family at home.



Church interior of Our Lady of Peace.

THE KINDERGARTEN OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

In Barcelona, the Brothers of St John of God Centre of the Immaculate Conception, which had been founded on 26 February 1882 and inaugurated in 1908, was working full out. At first there had only been three Brothers, six sick children and a very small number of Co-workers. The children taken in were aged between 5 and 16, and gradually numbered 250, suffering from a variety of diseases and disabilities, such as ringworm, blindness, and scrofula and it was in 1924 that marine balneotherapy was introduced for them in the Calafell Sanatorium, another Centre run by the Brothers of the Hospitaller Order of St John of God.

While he was in Barcelona, with no hope of finding work, reading the local newspaper he discovered that the Brothers of St John of God at the Centre of the Immaculate Conception were in need of an errand boy, Boniface went to the address and was taken on. He immediately embraced the spirit that animated the Brothers, who were famous for their love of the poor and needy people, and were always attentive to catering for the spiritual life of sick children.

Enthused by what he was experiencing, he wrote to his mother and sister and his friend Félix telling them about the Brothers' wonderful witness of faith. After a few months, he told them that he felt called to the Religious life in the manner of St John of God, and asked to enter the Hospitaller Order. The

Brothers asked for information about Boniface by contacting the Cañaveruelas town council. Despite the opposition of Jorge Baquero, the father of his former girlfriend and mayor of Cañaveruelas, the council sent them a certificate of good conduct as they considered Boniface to be the best person in Cañaveruelas and did not want to be ungrateful to him. On the strength of this reply, the Brothers accepted him to join their mission.

THE SITUATION IN SPAIN

In 1899, when Boniface was born, Maria Cristina, the second wife of King Alfonso XII, ruled over Spain which had by now lost part of its huge empire: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Two major political forces dominated Spain: the conservative parties and the liberals. Government crises followed one after another, with constant changes of ministers and disputes between the parties. Yet despite the difficulties, the economy was growing and electric lighting replaced gas lighting in the large towns, there was a revolution in transport, the development of the car, chemicals and armaments industries, as well as in textiles and agriculture. The population of Spain then stood at about nineteen million.

Such was the social and civilised climate in which Boniface lived, that despite having had a deprived, simple childhood without have been able to go to school, he was nevertheless a happy young man. He had developed by making up for his lack of an education with his keen intelligence and his innate ability to understand and convince others.

It was in this context that the great work of the Brothers of St John of God entered his life.

But who was this Saint John of God who had so impressed the young Boniface during his stay in Barcelona?

THE INFLUENCE OF ST JOHN OF GOD

John of God was born at Montemor o Novo (Portugal) in 1495. The son of Christian parents, at the age of eight he had left home for Oropesa (Toledo) and had stayed there with the family of Francisco Gil (Mayoral) for about twenty years, managing the flock and the lands of Francisco Álvarez of Toledo. After some time, acknowledging his good nature, they wanted to give him the mayor's daughter in marriage, but instead he enlisted as a soldier to fight the French, and went to Fuenterrabía.

Entering the service of Emperor Charles V he went on to Pavia, and then played a part in the defence of Vienna against the Turks with the armies of Don John of Austria. Satisfied with his service, but also tired, he returned to La Coruña and from there went to his father's home in Portugal, only to be given the sad news that his mother had died already, and that his father had entered a Franciscan convent where he had died a holy death. Returning to Spain via Seville, he continued to work

as a shepherd, before going to Ceuta to work as a bricklayer.

His wanderings were not yet over, and he returned to Spain, via Gibraltar, where he sold religious and secular books and novels. This was in 1538. He also travelled to other towns laden with his books, and ended up in Gaucín (Málaga).

At this point in his troubled life, the Saint had an encounter that was to prove decisive for his vocation. Tradition has it that one day he caught sight of barefoot child dressed in rags, and carried him on his shoulders. When he arrived by a fountain, he took some water for the thirsty child and as he turned round he found the child beaming at him holding a pomegranate (in Spanish called 'granada') in his hand, saying: 'John of God, Granada will be your cross'. It was the Child Jesus, and at that instant he disappeared from his sight.

And it was at that very instant, that the final destination of his journey became clear to him: Granada.

When he arrived in the city, he started selling books on Elvira Street, near the Gate of the same name.

On 20 January 1539, John of Ávila was due to preach at the Hermitage of the Martyrs, and John of God went to listen to him. On hearing him, he was overwhelmed at his words and when the sermon was over he ran out of the church like a man possessed, shouting out for God's mercy and pity and begging for forgiveness for his sins. He returned to the shop, gave away the religious books, destroyed the secular ones and then distributed the money he had earned to the passers-by.

Deemed to have lost his reason, he was interned at the Royal Hospital, where he was ill-treated, as was the custom at the time, and where he took care of the other inpatients. It was here that the adventure of his life was forged and which inspired him to write: 'If only I could have a hospital one day where I could treat these sick people as they deserve!" After some time he was discharged from the hospital, and went to Baeza, where John of Ávila gave him advice, before setting out on pilgrimage to the Monastery of Guadalupe. From then onwards, the Virgin Mary would be his protector and in that holy place he was to find help and training in "nursing" to be able to undertake his future mission.

He returned to Granada, ready to help the poor and the sick he met on the streets, assisting them during the day and even going out at night to beg for alms calling out: 'Brothers, do good to yourselves by giving alms to the poor'.

The Saint began his service in his hospital on his own. Father Francisco de Castro, his first and most reliable biographer, writes: "After eating and praying for his benefactors, he set about the washing-up, cleaning the pots and pans, sweeping and dusting the house, and fetching water with two pitchers from the fountain which wore him out, because, knowing that he had been declared insane, and realising how badly he had been ill-treated, he did not want anyone to join him to help him; and so he did everything single-handedly, until people came to know who he really was."

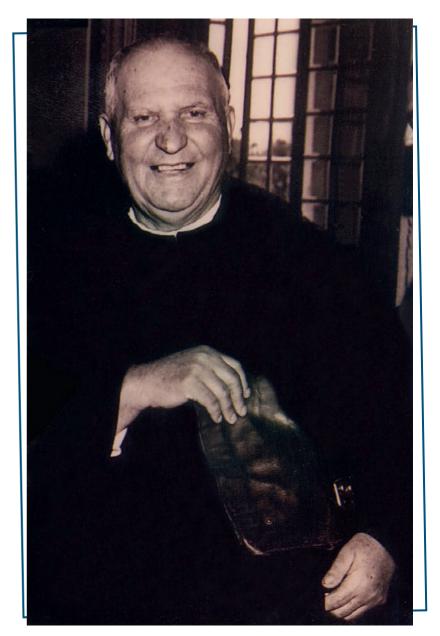
Later, some of the convalescents would give him a hand, until his first followers joined him. He went out begging for alms in the silence of the night. He took two jugs, tied with string and hanging on one arm, car-

rying a large basket on his shoulders, and walked the streets of Granada, often picking up poor sick people he found in the street, and carrying them on his back.

Following Master Ávila, John of God walked around Córdoba, as he himself tells us: when I was in Córdoba, walking through the city, I found some poor people who were so badly cared for that it broke my heart and I helped them as best I could'.

He lived by giving his all, bringing relief to the sick, assisting the poor and caring for the needy. In Granada, in July 1549, a fire broke out in the Royal Hospital. Hearing the cries of the poor sick people inside, he threw himself into the flames to save them all. The people who saw him forgot the story about the madman, and hailed him as a saint. One day while trying to save a boy who was drowning in the Genil river, he contracted pneumonia and was confined to bed. John of God reluctantly agreed to be taken to the home of the Los Pisa noble family, who were very fond of him, and stayed there for ten days. On the day of his death he was found kneeling in his room, embracing the crucifix and looking up to heaven. The people who found him there thought he was kneeling in prayer, but by then, his God-loving soul was already on its way to the Father.

8 March 1550 will forever be remembered as the day mercy entered heaven dressed as John of God. There was nothing strange about that. This was how he had lived: prostrate, and holding in his arms the 'living Christs' he had encountered during his life. His reputation as a saint still attracts many people even today to follow his path of Hospitality all over the world.



Brother Bonifacio.

ENTRY INTO THE HOSPITALLER ORDER

Boniface alighted from the train at Ciempozue-los station on 12 August 1924 and set off for the San José Psychiatric Hospital run by the Brothers of St John of God, where his life's adventure was about to begin. And it was here that his formation phase began. In prayer he found the strength not to give up, and not to look back at what he had left behind: his mother, sister, girlfriend, friends, city, And comforted by attending the daily Eucharist, reciting the rosary, meditating on the Word of God, his devotion to Mary and an appropriate sacramental life, he gradually took the steps he needed, helped by the climate of closeness and trust he found among his companions and the Brothers.

Caring for the sick, to whom he dedicated his services, became his charism from the very beginning. Part of his time was also dedicated to education, delivering special lectures on general culture and studies of the fundamentals of the Hospitaller Order.

Charity is the concrete form of Hospitality to alleviate the sufferings of the many sick, poor and needy people. And this is where the young Brother could look to the saintly Founder of the Hospitaller Order as in a mirror, following him ever more closely, making their lives identify with Christ's.

At the end of his postulancy, he moved to the novitiate at the San José de Carabanchel Alto Cen-

tre near Madrid on 8 December 1924. Now clothed with the hospitaller habit, the community joyfully welcomed the new Brothers, embracing them fraternally. Brother Boniface began his novitiate with great enthusiasm and the best intentions to live up to his vocation, essential requirements to be able to consecrate oneself to God. Any trials he would have to face from now on would not matter.

Familiarity with the Rule and the Constitutions, the progressive maturing of his ideals, the purification of his motivations, the careful practice of Hospitality and formation to freely and responsibly make his choice greatly helped him to discern his vocation and to prepare to offer himself to the Lord and the Church through Religious profession.



San José Centre.

During his novitiate he lived the spirit of sacrifice and penance with zeal and spiritual conviction. The novices were reminded of what St. John of God used to say in this regard: "There is no higher contemplation than that of contemplating the passion of Christ" and that "I find no better remedy and encouragement than to look at Jesus crucified". From this school he drew the lessons he needed to nourish and consolidate his Hospitaller spirituality, refining his merciful sensitivity towards the sick, the poor and the children for whom he had a fatherly love.

He was accompanied by his devotion to Mary, seeking to imitate Our Lady's virtues as his mother had taught him from his infancy, and was comforted by the daily recitation of the rosary, always imitating St John of God, as we know from one of his letters: "I can tell you that I have got on very well with reciting the rosary, I hope to God that I will recite it as long as I can and as God wills". Brother Boniface learned to practise the virtues proper to the Religious vows he was about to profess. To this end, the motto of his life was always: "learn to live simply, poorly and laboriously".

"I am properly dressed, because I am a poor beggar", he would later say to the people of Córdoba who asked him why he did not change his old habit and worn-out shoes. Particular stress was placed on the vow of Hospitality, a specific feature of the Brothers of St John of God, in the novitiate to train candidates for the future mission that awaited them. Brother Boniface learned what St John of God had said: "Charity is the mother of all virtues", and how he exhorted those who practised it, saying that "where there is no charity there is no God, even though God

is everywhere". The Servant of God experienced the self-denial and sacrifice that Hospitality demanded, learning what John of God demanded of a young man who wanted to imitate and follow him:

"If I knew with certainty that you would draw benefit for your soul and everyone else's, I would order you to come at once, but I am afraid that the opposite might be the case; So I feel it would be better better for you to spend a few days coping with your difficulties so that you can get used to fatigue and to putting up with living through alternating very bad and very good days; and on the other hand, it seems to me that if you were to end up losing yourself, it would be much better for you to return, but God knows what is best for you."

"...it seems to me that you are like a rolling stone and drifting like a rudderless boatr; it will be therefore be good for you to go and punish your flesh and endure a hard life for the love of God, giving thanks to Him for the good and the bad."

"Remember our Lord Jesus Christ and his blessed Passion, who returned good for the evil that had been done to him. You must do the same when you come into the house of God."

"If you do come here, you will have to suffer a great deal, all for the love of God, and you will have to obey much more and work much harder than you have ever worked before, and give up your sleep to care for the poor and the sick, and all for the love of God."

"Tell yourself that the time has come to choose a path. If you must come, do what seems best to you. But

remember that if you must come, you must come to offer some fruit to God, to really work hard and not to idle, because the most beloved son is given the hardest work."

"Now, do what seems best to you, for I do not know whether the Lord will be pleased for you to come to this house as soon as you would like to, or whether he wants you to stay and suffer where you are. Do what God inspires you to do, and see what will be the best service you can render."

"That is why I have nothing more to say to you, except to say that I pray that God will save you and keep you and direct you to his service as he does with all people. I pray unceasingly for you and for everyone."

"Let me just add one last word: live with God, always hear Mass, confess often if possible, and never go to sleep at night in mortal sin."

"Love our Lord Jesus Christ above all things in the world, for the more you love Him, the more He loves you. Stay with God and go with him."

Encouraged by these desires, Brother Boniface felt reassured, comforted, and set his eyes and heart fixed on God alone: 'I only want to find and follow God's will.

HIS PROFESSION OF VOWS

At the end of his novitiate, on 3 June 1926, the Servant of God made his profession of temporary vows in the chapel of the San José de Carabanchel Alto psychiatric hospital. His relatives attended the ceremony, as did a representation of the more than one hundred children and young people with epilepsy who were being cared for at the Centre. During Mass he made his temporary vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and hospitality, promising to observe the Rule and the Constitutions of the Hospitaller Order. During his three years of simple profession, he placed himself at the disposal of his superiors, carrying out the tasks entrusted to him with diligence and passion. He returned to Ciempozuelos, where he worked with the Brothers directly with the mentally ill for the next six months.



Community of Ciempozuelos 1925.

By virtue of his character and his talent of being able to relate to others, and faced with the urgent need for material goods for the Order's Centres, he was dispensed from the later stages of his formation and was assigned to work as a beggar for alms at the St John of God Centre in Santurce (Bilbao) from 20 December 1926 until 15 October 1927, when he returned to Madrid. In the Spanish capital he continued his work as a questor for alms at the San Rafael Centre for children suffering from poliomyelitis and bone tuberculosis until 1931.

THE SAN RAFAEL HOSPITAL IN MADRID

The hospitaller work of the Brothers of the San Rafael Hospital began in 1892 in Pinto (Madrid), before moving in 1900 to Paseo de las Acacias, 6, and finally in 1912, to the magnificent San Rafael Hospital in the upper part of the Hipódromo (Chamartín), where it stands today. To fulfil the desire of the Brothers to see their charitable and social work expand, the Centre was enlarged in 1929 with another new pavilion, with a capacity to receive more than three hundred children, which they maintained by "counting on the invaluable collaboration of the tireless Brother beggars". The Centre was inaugurated by King Alfonso XIII, accompanied by Queen Victoria.

On 3 June of that same year he made his solemn profession in the chapel of the San José de Carabanchel Alto Centre, which was already well known to him, definitively consecrating himself to God at the service of the poor and sick.

Brother Boniface had already been begging on the streets of Madrid for two years: "We would arrive at noon at Los Tres Peces street (in the Lavapiés district), take the tram from the Hipódromo, for a coin, and go to La Bombilla". Later, when asked about his health in 1973, he said: "I had bad hearing, bad eyesight and bad feet, but I soon recovered all three. The worst time for my feet was when I was begging in Madrid. I had to climb a lot of stairs because there were no lifts in those days."

When he was still in Madrid in 1931, a number of fires had broken out in churches and religious houses, and columns of smoke could be seen from the roofs of the San José Centre. On that occasion, thirty soldiers of the cavalry regiment, under the command of a lieutenant, arrived at night to defend the facilities from any attempts at assault or arson. The Brother beggars, including Brother Boniface, went out every day to collect alms, although dressed as laymen, showing great courage and a spirit of sacri-



Solemn profession 1929.

fice that exalted them, which earned them true admiration and respect from all the benefactors who witnessed their selfless and heroic charity, despite grave difficulties and threats.

The later history is described as follows by Dr Alvarez Sierra: 'Then came the years of the Republic, the war of liberation. During the Spanish Civil War, the Brothers at the Centre were persecuted and their activities were curtailed. One of the Brothers to be martyred was Brother Eutimio Aramendía, who was the chief nurse of this House. The building was taken over as a women's prison and later on as a military hospital'.

IN GRANADA AT ST JOHN OF GOD

He left fond memories of his time in Barcelona, Ciempozuelos, Santurce and Madrid from 1931 to 1934. Later on, Brother Boniface was transferred to Granada, where he also worked as bursar of the San Rafael Centre. It was an intense period of hard work, because the hospital and the street mission kept him very busy.

From this experience he matured the conviction that his whole life would be consecrated in Hospitality, fully mindful that when doing God's work noone ever fails, and he concentrated all his efforts on working hard, seeking the kingdom of God among the sick and poor children, and continuing to identify with Jesus through prayer, fraternal life and his apostolate as an alms-raiser, as a true poor man of God.

CÓRDOBA A WELCOMING CLINIC

In November 1934, after having found an ideal piece of land for the future of children's hospitality, the Brothers of St John of God succeeded with some difficulty in buying it, and on 2 January 1935, in the presence of Adrián Touceda, the first Superior of the House, and Brothers Crescencio Olivares, Juan Grande, Federico Argüello and Juan B. Velázquez, they signed the deeds of sale of the property known as the "Huerta de San Pablo" (St Paul's Orchard), and embarked on the plan for the new building.

They created the Asociación Unión de Damas Pro-Hogar y Clínica San Rafael for the foundation and



San Rafael Clinic.

charitable support for the care of poor and disabled children. Despite the initial difficulties in paying workers for the work, they eventually succeeded and work proceeded well and the children found a welcoming and suitable place for their needs. The nascent community arrived in Córdoba on 12 August 1935, and Brother Boniface Bonillo immediately began his work as a beggar to raise alms for the children.



Brother Boniface in 1935.

QUESTOR IN CÓRDOBA

The San Rafael Clinic, an important centre for the Order and also for the city of Córdoba, was officially inaugurated on 20 October 1935, in the presence of the Vicar Provincial, Brother Guillermo Llop, the future Blessed Martyr, who greatly appreciated the efforts made to build the hospital.

Brother Boniface went from door to door begging for alms, obtaining subscriptions, and knocking on the doors of businesses and shops asking without hesitation, because the need was so great. And since everything was insufficient, he began to go to the villages and farms in the province, always calling out the same thing: "Is there something for my poor children?".

His task seemed easy, but when he returned home each evening, he was always downhearted by hs failure to meet the needs of so many children. That is why he decided to visit other villages in different provinces as a beggar, holding out his his hand to benefactors by travelling through Jaén,



Clinic San Rafael Córdoba 1948.

Granada, Ciudad Real, Cáceres and Badajoz. He was not always satisfied, because after the Spanish Civil War there were so many difficulties: poor harvests and poverty, food rationing and low wages.

Gradually, however, the Servant of God won over the sympathy of many people who recognised his dedication to others. At harvest time, he would visit all the farms harvesting wheat, chickpeas, oil, olives, grapes, wine, almonds, turkeys, chicken -- everything came in handy. Seeing the Brother's generous heart, they would tell him: "if you can catch that animal, you can take it with you." And he would chase it, in his habit, sparing no effort until he caught it.



Community of Córdoba.

HE BECAME KNOWN AS "BROTHER GARBANZO" (BROTHER CHICKPEA)

The Brothers stepped up their efforts and treated ever more children for congenital deformities, Pott's disease, bone tuberculosis and all kinds of orthopaedic and general surgery.

Once, while raising alms on a farm, the owner gave him a large sheep and a sack of chickpeas. There was also a nun who had received the same act of charity from the farmer. As they were about to leave, some armed men approached him:

- How nice, we have a monk and a nun here.
- This deserves to be celebrated with a good meal!
- While another added: "What a great idea!"

So they seized him, the nun the farm owner, slaughtered the animal and ate their fill. After teasing and enjoying themselves, they said, "Why don't we have some fun with these two saints?"

They took two donkeys and put Brother Boniface on one and the nun on the other. Tying their feet and hands, they put them on the donkeys' backs. And so, in this ridiculous position, they turned them round and round, taunting them and uttering vulgarities. During this unsavoury game, Brother Boniface recognised one of the three characters: he was the father of a child who had been operated on at

the Clinic some time earlier. So turning to him, he said: "If this had been done to me when your son was there, he would have died of hunger: the sheep you just ate and the chickpeas you took were not a loss to me, but to the poor sick children in the Clinic."

On hearing this, the man came to his senses, put an end to the mocking and said to the others: 'Give the sack of chickpeas to "Brother Garbanzo".

And from then on, they began to call him by that name without it causing him any embarrassment. If he had to write to thank someone for alms he would sign his name Brother Garbanzo. Even when he was later decorated by the Spanish government with the title of The Most Excellent he said: 'I will always be Brother Garbanzo until I die'.



Brother Boniface after questing.

THE QUESTOR'S ART

Simplicity, humility, prudence, love of work and dedication to his neighbour were always his hall-marks. His good-natured appearance, his friendliness, his ability to convince others, his astuteness and his faith in God made him an alms-raiser who never returned empty-handed to the Clinic.

To collect alms, he would go to the clubs in the city centre and meet the people entering the elegant and majestic Savarín, the Ivory or the Mercantil. Brother Bonifacio would sit at midday, with his eyes wide open and eating nothing, waiting for an opportunity to meet anyone of high status or low, who could help his children. Sometimes, these



Brother Boniface with two benefactors.

would elude him, but he knew where to go to find them. And when they found him, they would give him generous gifts and he would join them at their farms or stores to collect what would be useful for his many sick children.

He knew all about collecting donations and alms. He knew everything about the benefactors. If someone had sold a farm or bought something important, he knew how to get through to them, saying 'What a good sale you've made, why don't you give me something for my children?' He used the same tactic when they had a good harvest. He would visit the bullfighters after the bullfights. If there was any lucky winner of the lottery or other games, he never



Brother Boniface waiting for benefactors.

missed the chance to talk to them and congratulate them and then ask for a share for his children. Such was his familiarity with his environment.

He went out with the hunting parties knowing that he would be able to reap a double harvest: getting some deer or rabbit meat, and manage to get the hunters to part with some of the money that they had taken with them. He accepted every possible donation, even the most unlikely, which he could them sell or exchange for his children.

He never gave any sign of fatigue or listlessness. He armed himself with holy patience, learning the art of waiting for 'the fruit to ripen'.

When they urged him not to overdo things, he would reply, "I am just a poor beggar, I do what I have to do, and others are worse off than me". The Brothers of his community admired him; Brother Federico Argüello said: "I am sure he spent all night thinking how to raise more alms because no one could resist him." He would drive an old Land Rover to the Córdoba countryside and load up everything they gave him, because he would not leave empty-handed. For many reasons, it was obvious that Brother Boniface was a good beggar serving the needy.

He was a great 20th century Samaritan because his conscience was formed in such a way as to make his whole person sympathetic towards the needy people he met along the way. And consistently with the Gospel of mercy, he was able to awaken hardened aloof hearts, making them great by serving others through his total dedication to God.

HE KNEW NO BARRIERS WHEN 'BEGGING FOR THE LOVE OF GOD'

He was known everywhere in the province of Córdoba thanks to his very frequent visits around the villages, especially when they were bringing in the harvests of the regional produce. Needless to say, Brother Boniface also came across indifferent and ill-disposed people. But his wit and goodness enabled him to break down their reluctance.

Once day of Córdoba town centre he stopped a man in a brand new car and asked him for a donation and was told, in no uncertain terms, that he had nothing to give. Brother Boniface, after some thought, said: 'Don't you think that your car resembles an olive?'

The astonished man replied: 'I don't know what you mean – olives are a different colour.'

Boniface replied, 'But there is a tough nut inside an olive, like the driver of that car.' The man burst out laughing and made a generous donation.

To shelter the building against the stifling heat of the Córdoba summer, they had to procure a metal structure on the children's terrace-solarium and buy sun curtains. Brother Boniface asked the Brothers in the community: "When will we be able to buy an awning for the terrace?". They needed to pay 80,000 pesetas for one, and the Brothers could nev-

er afford that. But, as we know, for God everything is possible. Divine Providence would not not let them down.

And this is where a bullfight came in handy. For the proprietor of the local bullring had made a handsome profit that day, and had made a very generous donation to the Civil Governor to be given to charitable organisations; they agreed to donate part of the money to the clinic, which used it to put towards the sun curtains, while Brother Boniface went begging to find the rest of the money needed. So they were able to complete the installation to the great joy and of all the children.



Clinic Terrace.

Bolstered by Brother Boniface's perseverance and sacrifice, the Brothers tried to improve their services every day, and the children's hospital continued to perform its noble mission of caring for and nursing sick children.

The entire city attended the Silver Jubilee of the Centre and recognised the good work done by the Brothers of St John of God in their work with children. The charity shown by the people of Córdoba, promoted by the Brothers of St John of God, combined with their fervent prayer, their service to children with physical limitations, and the testimony of their spirit of Hospitality was recognised by the public as a whole and by the media. At the Jubilee, everyone praised Boniface and his tireless and wonderful alms-raising work. Among the orange and olive groves, charity grew in the El Brillante mountains. With the most vulnerable children, Brother Boniface smiled and showed his love.

All the sick were treated with the utmost affection, but more than once, when the sick person was a child – once the hospital had started admitting adult patients – Brother Boniface invited his fellow Brothers saying, 'Treat child X very well, because he is poor'. He was so happy to see them smiling, relaxed and amused.

THE CHARITY AUCTION

Every Christmas, the 'charity auction' was broadcast to every house in Córdoba, because Brother Boniface was seen as a member of every family, and everyone felt closer to the children in his clinic.

The local radio station, 'Radio Córdoba', offered to collaborate with the staff, announcing that Brother Bonifacio would be visiting shops and businesses in the city. Even during the Christmas holidays, Brother Bonifacio stayed in the radio studio because the children wanted to talk to him on the phone. The auction became popular because Brother Boniface had a fondness for certain animals (sheep, pigs, turkeys, dogs, pigeons, partridges and even some donkeys), and year after year it was the people themselves who brought the Servant of God whatever they needed without him asking. During his radio broadcasts, Brother Boniface would be invited to sing a song, recite a poem he had composed himself, improvise funny and witty rhymes, which were then offered and rewarded with donations

The programmes went on well into the night, and when the listeners were told that Brother Boniface would sing, the calls increased, people were moved with emotion, everyone contributed according to their possibilities. It was all very simple. Brother Boniface knew everything about the people of Córdoba, with his prodigious memory and his constant contacts with them. The Servant of God considered this to be his field of the apostolate and his mission.

He organised three bullfighting festivals to raise funds and several public entertainment evenings, always for the benefit of children in his hospital, because whatever he raised seemed too little for his purposes.

THE POPULARITY OF BROTHER BONIFACE

Few people in Córdoba were as popular as he was. He was of normal height, stocky, with a strong build. He would go out wearing his famous soupplate round clerical hat, his old 'worn' shoes, his briefcase wallet in hand, his enormous friendliness and a broad smile that lit up his good-natured face. But he was also recognisable by his great faith in God, his 'evangelical' way of speaking, his constant prayer, and his close great resemblance to the 'reigning' pope, for which he was called a 'different John XXIII'. He was already better known and recognised among the merchants and in the social clubs and the bars because it was in all these places that he used to ask for alms and donations.

It is true that he was often refused, but there were many others, led by the goodness of their hearts, who put their wallets into his hands so that he could take as much money as he saw fit, knowing that he only kept what was necessary and that every penny went to alms. And since he asked for money from those who could afford it and gave the money to those who needed, he was admired by all. If Brother Boniface used sympathy as a stratagem to

obtain something, it was always because he wanted the benefactor to give joyfully and was happy to know that his donations were for a good cause.

He asked gracefully and gently. If he went to meet the hunters at the place where the shot game was gathered, he would wait by the door; if at night he was told that many people would be attending a theatre or musical performance, he would show up without an invitation and be there without disturbing them. And 'something was always given'. Indeed, there were many who gave him tips on where he could go, because there was 'somewhere to scrape' a



Brother Boniface with Fl Cordobés.

little something there. He knew how to ask, because he was convinced that asking meant giving. 'Do good to yourselves by giving to the poor for the love of God'.

When Brother Bonifacio heard that the famous bullfighter from Palma del Río, Manuel Benítez Pérez, known as 'El Cordobés', was holding a party to celebrate his good times, he went there and, happy to see him appear, took his wallet bag, which he carried under his arm, raised it in a toast and, greeting them loudly, said: 'Peasants of El Cordobés, Manolete and Guerra, let's see if you are generous and leave me with a generous offering'. The applause was thunderous and at the end of the 'paseillo' he collected enough money to feel happy enough to return to the clinic.

Juan Muñoz Cascos, author of the biography "El hermano Bonifacio, Excelentísimo Sr. Limosnero", written with great affection for our Servant of God, says in Chapter XXIV that he had investigated Brother Boniface by putting a specific question to sever-



St John of God Hospital, Córdoba.

al people from different social levels: "What is your opinion of Brother Boniface? The answer was unanimous: 'He was a saint; he never asked anything for himself, but everything for his children; he never complained about anything; it would be difficult for the Hospitaller Order to have another questing friar like him again; he knew who he had to ask and how to ask'.

And the response of Juan Jurado Ruiz, a virtuous priest who had known the servant of God since his arrival in Córdoba, was clear and decisive: "In Brother Boniface stand out his boundless love and dedication for the needy, even to the point of forgetting himself in order to give himself to others; a touching humility, which never gave importance to the enormous merit of his work as an alms-giver; and his deeply religious spirit, proclaimed on many occasions during his long life as a Brother of St John of God".

THE CROSS OF MERIT

With scant interest in celebrations and decorations, in his daily life the Servant of God found true joy in being close to benefactors and co-workers. He was also happy and at ease with the simple people of the countryside. Knowing every nook and cranny of all the villages and farms in Córdoba, he could better carry out his work as a questor.

He did not limit himself to begging; when he knew that a child was ill, he would visit him, show him affection and do what he could for the family, so that he could be admitted to the San Rafael Clin-

ic, which is why he was admired and respected by all. In this way he realised his motto: to be simple, poor and hardworking, to be the least and the servant of all; certain that whoever worked for the poor, worked for God.

After having walked the streets of the cities, fields and villages of Córdoba for almost forty years, with tired feet and hands open from so much begging, someone remembered to pay homage to the famous 'beggar of Córdoba', because his work, although humble and demanding great sacrifice, did not go unnoticed. Brother Boniface was the talk of the town, and so it was decided to reward such self-less love and charity for the poorest.

So the Córdoba authorities, echoing popular sentiment, asked the Spanish government to confer the Cross of Charity on him, an award that was

Decorated with the Grand Cross.

only given to people who had done a great deal of good to their neighbour and were a living example to others. In this way, the government publicly acknowledged his merits and thanked him on behalf of all the Spanish people.

He was awarded the prize in April 1972, but the award ceremony was set for 10 December of the same year. On that day, the ceremony began with a Mass concelebrated by twelve priests, presided over by the Bishop of Córdoba, Bishop Cirarda, who delivered a homily full of affection for Brother Boniface. By the end of the Eucharist, more than two thousand people had gathered outside the church.

- The former mayor of Córdoba emphasised the figure of the Brother, saying, 'In his blushed face when asking there was the gratitude and joy of the giver'.



Brother Boniface with Bishop Cirarda.

- Dr Calzadilla, medical director of the clinic since its inception in 1935, briefly explained the history of the centre since its foundation.
- Fr Jacinto del Cerro, of the Hospitaller Order of St John of God recited a beautiful poem, followed by a few words from the Superior of Córdoba, Brother Antonio Barreno, who emphasised the dedication of Brother Boniface.

After the reading of the order granting the "Gran Cruz de Beneficencia", the Civil Governor, D. Manuel Hernández, spoke moving words "To the affection of Córdoba for Brother Boniface, the Government supports him with merit and gratitude". The Provincial Superior Sebastián Fernández expressed his gratitude for the honour conferred on a worthy member of the Hospitaller Order.

Brother Boniface concluded in moving words, thanking the Government and all those present for their affectionate participation in the ceremony and for the plaque placed "as a fitting tribute and sign of fraternal affection for his tireless charity and dedication to the needy".

It must be said that, in turn, donations had arrived from benefactors, both large and small, in the weeks before, so that the humble alms-giver could hear the 'sound' of alms-giving for the needs of the children in the Centre. We know that later, when the Provincial was informed by a member of his community that Brother Boniface was ready to "sacrifice the medal" for the poor, he indicated that in virtue of holy obedience it should be properly guarded.

HE WAS DEEPLY CONSCIOUS OF HIS RELIGIOUS VOCATION AS A HOSPITALLER

By now elderly, Brother Boniface was assisted by a young Brother who was a nurse in the Córdoba community. While the Servant of God was of robust constitution, he often had problems with his feet, and sometimes this Brother used to help him to wash and put on his shoes. The Brother, however, had decided to abandon his Religious vocation because of a woman who had proposed to marry him. And when he took his leave of good Brother Boniface, the latter, with sadness and tears in his eyes, told him: "It is most regrettable that you do this to your Religious vocation. I, too, when I was in Madrid as a Brother, was approached with proposals of the same kind, yet it never crossed my mind to do so. But God willing, God be praised'. It took him a long time to forget the loss of this Brother.

Brother Boniface not only proved his unwavering vocation, but his testimony was decisive to attracting new vocations and the formation of new priests and religious.

Brother Félix Quintas, who spent two years in community with him in Córdoba, has testified that when the Servant of God returned after midday from door-to-door questing, he would eat with the community or at a second table, and rest for a while. In the afternoon he used to clean the chamber pots

of the hospitalised children. He did this daily as a compulsory hospital service that he had imposed on himself; he was always close to the children, with whom he shared anecdotes and jokes. He did this to comfort them and relieve their homesickness.

On his way home after questing, he liked to stop in the children's room and, if he saw a sad child, he would ask him: "Why are you sad? "I am never sad, because before that moment comes, I tell myself a joke and laugh". And the smile would bloom again on the bedridden child. A kiss on the forehead and he would say: "Pray to the Child Jesus, that he may always be with you". He always took the opportunity to make a reference to heaven.

CELEBRATION OF HIS 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF RELIGIOUS PROFESSION

A capable and sociable, self-sacrificing and simple Brother, at the age of 77, on 24 October 1976, celebrated the 50th anniversary of his Religious profession, which the Brothers of the community and the Religious Province celebrated on great numbers. In fact, for all the Brothers, in the words of Superior Antonio Barreno, Brother Boniface had something more abot him than an ordinary Brother. For the Brothers he was the living memory of what St John of God had been.

Bishop Cirarda celebrated the Eucharist and addressed heartfelt and touching words to the celebrant and to Brother Antonio Manso from Córdoba, who was celebrating his 25th anniversary of profession. Ten priests also concelebrated and the choir of the Apostolic School of Córdoba animated the Holy Mass. The Provincial Vicar, Brother Sebastián Fernández, received the renewal of vows, in the presence of a large representation of Brothers from the other Provinces of Spain.

The church was packed as never before, and at the end Brother Boniface received gifts from benefactors, the communities represented, the Centre staff and the applause of countless friends, as well as that of 'his children', happy to see that 'Brother Boni' was still alive and active and that everyone loved him.



50th anniversary of religious profession.

ACCIDENTAL FALL AND ARRIVAL AT THE FINISHING LINE

It was 1978. On 20 May, a day like any other, as he was preparing to go out questing. Brother Angel Fonseca, who had been assigned by the Superior to help the Servant of God, now in his 80s and worn out by hard work, heard a loud bang from the bathroom while Brother Boniface was in the shower. He hurried back, having gone to get a towel that was not in place, and had to call for help from two other Brothers. They helped him up and realised that he was in severe pain in his right shoulder. He was bandaged in the infirmary and the suspicion of a fracture was confirmed by X-rays: fracture of the neck of the humerus, and subsequent cast.

Brother Boniface insisted on going to work as a beggar. To the driver Pedro, who did not see him in good condition and advised him against it, he replied: "I must beg every day, as a poor man does". That is why he told those who were plastering his arm: 'Leave my hand free to beg', and continued: 'My loquacity is enough for me'.

The Brothers recount that he never complained and patiently told them: 'I am wasting my time, what I have to do is work', and 'what I eat I do not deserve'. A month later he was on the street again, but this time he realised that it was no longer as it had been before. Back home, as he was not feeling well, he was taken to the ward and put to bed. The doctors who examined him were clear in their diagnosis: it

was cerebral thrombosis. But this time he recovered through his own strength.

A few days later he resumed his questing activities for "his children" via telephone. Many benefactors took an interest in him and left him their donation, which he in turn handed over to the Superior.

He was slowly fading away. In moments of lucidity, he said. "Last night I thought I was dying, but I felt such sweetness and peace that I have no doubt that the Lord is preparing a happy passage to Him". He slipped into a coma, but regained consciousness and was still able to tell Brother Angel: "If we are not men of prayer, our lives go down the drain," as he had said many times during his life. "I have already fulfilled my mission, may God call me whenever he wants".

DESTINED FOR HEAVEN

At about 3.10 p.m. on 11 September 1978, Brother Boniface Bonillo died peacefully in the St John of God Hospital in Córdoba. The news spread throughout the city. The community and the children wept and prayed a lot for him. He would never ask for alms again. The radio, the newspapers, the benefactors, all the people of Córdoba paraded before the body of Brother Boniface. Brothers came from all the houses of Andalusia and from Madrid, Bishop Infantes Florido, presiding at the Eucharist, said in his homily: "He was a simple man who offered his life, his good humour and his smile as a testimony of his dedication to others. He did not exclude anyone and did not distinguish between people according to their social class. For him, everyone was equal and he addressed everyone asking for his children".

After the funeral, his mortal remains were transferred to the cemetery of San Rafael, in the city of Córdoba, and placed in the chapel of the Brothers of St. John of God, in the main courtyard of the cemetery.



Cemetery Burial Ground.

BACK TO HOSPITAL

After his death, his reputation for holiness continued to grow, as did the Social Centre dedicated to him, which continued to carry out its mission of service to the most needy in Córdoba and intensified its activities every year due to the difficult conditions of many families deprived of basic needs.

As long as there are people in need, the Brothers of St John of God, as faithful followers of the Saint of Charity and committed continuers of the service that Brother Boniface always wished to provide beyond the impossible, will keep the social service active in the spirit of solidarity and generosity of all the people of Córdoba who even today continue to donate what is necessary.



Translation of mortal remains.

In 1999, on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of the beloved Brother Boniface, after obtaining the necessary authorisations, it was decided to exhume the remains that had been laid to rest in the San Rafael cemetery after his death. In March 1999, they underwent a thorough anatomopathological study and were duly preserved and moved to the chapel of St John of God Hospital, where they await resurrection and the desired glorification. Since then, many people have continued their pilgrimage to ask for favours and graces from the Lord through the intercession of the Servant of God.

Our Brother Boniface continues to hope that when we visit him and pray to him, we remember the poor and suffering, especially children, for whom he always did everything out of love for God.



Tomb of the Servant of God.

LETTER FROM BISHOP CIRARDA

When Bishop Cirarda was Bishop in Córdoba, he participated in the ceremony of conferring the 'Gran Cruz de Beneficencia' in 1972, experiencing moments of true cordial and fraternal closeness with Brother Boniface. On the centenary of the Servant of God's birth in 1999, the bishop apologised for not being able to attend due to other commitments, but wrote a beautiful letter to the Superior of the Community of Córdoba.

"I am grateful for your kind invitation to honour dear Brother Boniface in Córdoba on 20 May next.

I have a very beautiful memory of the goodness of this Brother. I had many contacts with him in the days, now long gone, of my episcopal service in that Church in Córdoba, which was unforgettable for me. And I remember with emotion the many virtues of this Brother, the love with which he cared for the sick, especially children, and the courage with which he dared everything to serve them, beyond what human prudence might advise. His spirit always seemed to me as 'a stand-in', as they say in the cinematic lexicon, for the spirit of St John of God, whose life and example had seduced him into imitating Christ, following in the footsteps of that 'madman of love' who amazed Granada.

By honouring Brother Boniface, Córdoba honours itself, fulfilling a duty of gratitude to such a good servant of God and the poor, who was considered a 'fool of love' and a 'Brother' to everyone in Córdoba.

I would have liked to be with you on the 20th, to return the honour you did me by inviting me. But I cannot. I am retired and very old. But I am in good health and I move around a lot because of my continuous apostolic commitments. As I told you on the phone, for the entire month of May I am engaged in pastoral work in Catalonia, Navarre and Vitoria.

I join you spiritually in remembering Brother Boniface. And I would be grateful, if you would be so kind, at the appropriate time, to mention me when you address all the people of Córdoba when you pay homage to him.

Greetings and a blessing on all the Brothers."

¥ José M. Cirarda

Because of its content we will also quote another letter from Bishop Cirarda, to whom Juan Muñoz Cascos, author of the book 'Excelentísimo Señor Limosnero', had sent a copy. Below is his reply from Pamplona 4 March 1985:

"My dear friend: You have done yourself honour by paying homage to the Most Excellent Mr Questor, Brother Boniface, by dedicating to him an extensive and well-documented book, which seems to me to capture the spirit of that man of God, a distinguished benefactor of Córdoba, born in Castilla la Nueva, but a Cordovan at heart since his arrival in that Caliphate city.

I got to know him closely during the years when I was Bishop of Córdoba. I had many dealings with him.

I admired his great human and religious virtues. I witnessed how he always did his utmost to ensure that the St John of God Clinic achieved excellence in its services. For this reason, I was very happy to be able to participate on two different occasions in two tributes paid to him during my days in Córdoba.

I have read with interest the work you have dedicated to it. I hope it serves two purposes:

- so that we do not forget the figure of that good man, with the temperament of a saint, engraved in him, who in ancient Córdoba bore exemplary fruits of charity and social justice; and
- so that the memory of his man will be an incentive for his work to remain, so that there will be no shortage of generous Cordovese who will continue along the path he traced with his admirable charitable dedication.

I am very grateful to you for sending me the book and for your affectionate dedication.

I pray to God that there are many Cordovan people who like to remember worthy people, who often fall into oblivion due to our fragility and selfishness.

May you always have me as your loving friend. May you be blessed."

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

Lord Jesus Christ, comforter of the weak and oppressed,

who proclaimed your Gospel of Mercy,

through the testimony and works of charity of Brother Boniface,

faithful imitator of St John of God,

may we obtain through his intercession

the graces we ask of you

and in particular the grace of..,

so that by following his example

we can love You above all things in the world

and we can always serve You

in our neediest and sickest brothers and sisters.

Lord our God, obtain for us the graces we have asked of You

for Your greater glory and honour.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Our Father, Hail Mary and Gloria)

ITINERARY OF THE LIFE OF BROTHER BONIFACE

1. Cañaveruelas.

Bonifacio Bonillo was born on 14 May 1899. Orphaned at the age of ten, he devoted himself to working in his small vegetable garden to support his family. He was a kind and cheerful young man with everyone.

2. Barcelona.

In 1923, having been exempted from military service as the son of a widowed mother, he went in search of work and after wandering unsuccessfully around Madrid and Zaragoza, he arrived in Barcelona where he found a job as an errand boy at the 'Centro de la Inmaculada', run by the Brothers of St John of God, which cared for poor children.

3. Ciempozuelos.

He entered as a postulant in Ciempozuelos (Madrid), in the psychiatric sanatorium of "San José", where the Brothers welcomed and cared for more than 1,300 mentally ill people. It was the decisive vocational test that confirmed him in his call to Hospitality.

4. Carabanchel Alto.

There, near Madrid, he made his novitiate (1924-1926) and simple profession of the vows of poverty,

chastity, obedience and hospitality (1926). He spent his time in hospital with about a hundred epileptic boys admitted to the 'San José' institute.

5. Santurce.

In 1926 in Santurce (Bilbao), in the St John of God Hospital, he received his first assignment as hospital orderly for ten intense months.

6. Madrid.

In the 'San Rafael' Centre for children suffering from poliomyelitis, he did his most strenuous work as bursar for four years (1927-31), and demonstrated his great vocation for hospital service, testing his fortitude and virtues.

7. Granada.

From 1931 to 1935 he spent time in Granada, devoting himself to questing in the city and caring for poor and paralysed children.

8. Córdoba.

With his arrival in Córdoba in 1935, the new 'San Rafael' Centre grew up, where he devoted himself with humble willingness to beg, travelling through towns and villages for 43 years, developing his Christian virtues, becoming a brother to all, especially the poorest and sickest, consuming his life for 'his poor children'. In 1972, the Spanish government awarded him the Grand Cross of Merit for his com-

mitment to charity towards his neighbour. He died in the reputation of sanctity on 11 September 1978 in the San Juan de Dios hospital in Córdoba. On 18 December 2022 the Cause for the Servant of God's beatification and canonisation began in the Diocese of Córdoba.



Index

Introduction \mathfrak{p}	Э.
The Kindergarten of the Immaculate Conception \dots	
The situation in Spain	. :
The influence of St John of God	. '
Entry into the Hospitaller Order	1
His Profession of vows	1
The San Rafael Hospital in Madrid	2
In Granada at St John of God	2
Córdoba a welcoming clinic	2
Questor in Córdoba	2
He becam known as 'Brother Garbanzo' (Brother chickpea)	2
The questor's art	
He knew no barriers when 'begging for the love of God'	3
The Charity Auction	
The popularity of Brother Boniface	
The Cross of Merit	
He was deeply conscious of his Religious vocation as a Hospitaller	4
Celebration of his 50 th Anniversary of Religious Profession	4
Accidental fall and arrival at the finishing line	4
Destined for heaven	4
Back to hospital	4
Letter from Bishop Cirarda	
Prayer of intercession	
Itinerary of the life of Brother Boniface	5