

'Stand firm then, my dear brothers, immovable in your resolve, doing your full share in the task the Lord has given you, since you know that your labour in the Lord's service cannot be spent in vain.'



BLESSED GILES OF SANTAREM, CONFESSOR
(Died 1765. Feast 14 May)

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THERE is a legend that Giles in his early manhood bartered his soul for a knowledge of the dark secrets of nature with a view to obtaining a position of wealth and rank in the medical world. Setting out for Paris where he hoped to study medicine, he was accosted on the way by a charming stranger who persuaded him to abandon his journey to France and to turn aside to Toledo, where he spent seven years as an apprentice in the art of magic and agreed to trade his soul for the fulfilment of his ambition. He then resumed his journey to Paris where he obtained both riches and fame, performing miracles of healing; but being converted by a frightful vision he returned to Spain and sought the habit of the order at Valencia, where after seven years of the severest penance and the greatest agony of mind on account of his infamous bargain, he was rewarded for his perseverance by the miraculous return of the sacrilegious document that he had signed with his blood.

The story has no great antiquity and does not appear until the middle of the sixteenth century, three hundred years after the saint's death. Rejected by all the serious historians of the order, it re-appeared in the middle years of the nineteenth century in certain popular lives of Dominican saints, and that is the sole reason for relating it here. A study of the contemporary evidence concerning Giles is quite sufficient to rebut any claims the legend has to sober historical truth.

Giles was born in the castle of Vaozela near Coimbra, then the capital of Portugal, towards the end of the twelfth or the begin-

ning of the thirteenth century, being the third son of Don Rodrigo Paez, or Pelagius, governor of that city. As a young man he entered the clerical state and through the influence of his parents received several rich benefices, including a canonry in the cathedral and the office of treasurer of the diocese of Coimbra. We do not know if he was ordained priest at this time or after he became a Dominican, but we do know he set out sometime about 1220 to make a special study of medicine at Paris, where the principal professor in that art was an English priest, John of St Giles, who later followed Giles into the order. John was also first physician to the French king Philip Augustus, and continued to practise as a Dominican, being called to attend Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln and even the Empress of Germany. Another interesting medical man in Paris about this same time, or maybe a little later, was another Portuguese priest who became physician to Pope Gregory X and himself became pope as John XXI; whilst an Evesham Benedictine named Hugh was made a cardinal and medical adviser to Martin IV in the same century. Giles therefore could not have been considered as acting in a way incompatible with his clerical state when he set himself to the study of medicine.

It seems certain that he had a successful career as a doctor, but in 1225 he surrendered all his worldly prospects to enter the order, not at Valencia as the legend states, but at Paris in the convent of St Jacques where he had as a fellow-novice the future master-general, Humbert de Romans. Humbert is the principal authority for our knowledge of Blessed Giles and his holy life, which is to be found in the *Lives of the Brethren*, a work drawn up between 1251 and 1256 by Gerard de Frachet at the direct command of Humbert when head of the order. Humbert tells us that Giles was sorely tried by having to sleep on a hard bed and wear clothes irritating to his tender skin; but when he complained of this to his confessor the latter replied: 'My dear brother, recollect the life of luxury you enjoyed in the world, and bear this trial patiently for the forgiveness of your sins and our Lord will be with you.' Quite obviously, as Fr Echard says in his works on the writers of the Order, *Scriptores Ordinis Ord. Praed.*, the confessor was referring to the softness, not the immorality, of the life he had led, as some authors have stated. Had Giles' former life been one of sinful dissipation, his mind would have

been too heavily burdened with the thought of his past excesses (not to mention the alleged sacrilegious compact with Satan), for him to be likely to worry about such trifles as an uncomfortable couch and a rough woollen habit.

That these trifles formed his principal scruple assuredly puts out of court the graver accusations; and moreover we must remember that Humbert found him at first a light-hearted companion, ever ready with a passing jest when he met anyone, even inclined to boisterousness, and unable to manage the monastic silence. Here certainly we have no picture of the almost despairing penitent of the legend or the sinner converted from a life of sin. For his light-heartedness Humbert tells us that Giles took himself so severely to task, that he eventually gained complete mastery over his tongue. 'The master of the order', says Frachet, 'learned these things from Giles himself when they were together in the infirmary at Paris, nor could he recall his ever uttering an idle word, speaking only to console or help those in trouble.' The master further related that in his humility Giles, skilled medical man though he was, nevertheless always accepted unquestioned such remedies as the infirmarian offered him, a thing Humbert seems to have considered worthy of special remark. He concludes by telling us that Giles on his return home became a great worker for souls, being a 'gracious preacher' and an untiring provincial.

Giles succeeded to the office of provincial of Spain in 1235 and seems to have held it until 1261. He died in the convent of Santarem (from which place he has received his posthumous surname) on the feast of our Lord's Ascension, 14 May 1265; and the age-long cult to his memory was sealed by the approval of Benedict XIV in 1748, when he extended his office and mass to the kingdom of Portugal and the entire Dominican order.