



St. John Berchmans and the Jesuit Global Network of Schools

“Our true worth does not consist in what human beings think of us. What we really are consists in what God knows us to be.”

“The most important thing in life is not to do extraordinary things, but to do the ordinary things in an extraordinary way.” --- St. John Berchmans

It is fascinating to know that **St. Berchmans college, Changanachery**, a premier Higher Education institution in Kerala, India, was founded in 1922 by Venerable Mar Thomas Kurialacherry, Bishop of Changanassery diocese. The bishop was not a Jesuit. The Changanachery archdiocese belongs to the Syro-Malabar Church. Bishop Thomas started the college, with the noble aim of the Universal Catholic Church, to mould young men and women who will strive for excellence in every walk of life and human service. To actualise these goals, he found the suitable patron saint in St. John Berchmans (1599-1621). Cathedral of Saint John Berchmans, the largest Cathedral in his name, is in Shreveport, Louisiana USA. Following his footsteps, there are several educational institutions founded by Jesuits and Non-Jesuits across the globe. A cursory search on the google has shown 32 institutions named after the Saint. Is it not a surprise that a young

boy, who spent nearly 17 years in his native place in Belgium and the rest, his novitiate and one year college in Italy, touched the hearts of so many people from far and wide? How was that possible? What made this young graduate student so attract so many all over the world?

John Berchmans was born in the town of Diest in Flanders as the eldest son of a poor shoemaker. John was the eldest of five children. At a very young age he wanted to be a priest. After his mother's death, his father and two brothers followed suit and entered religious life. In 1615 he enrolled in the Jesuit College at Malines. A year later he joined the Jesuit novitiate. After the novitiate he joined the Roman College. He was an enthusiastic student, an excellent actor and orator. He has been described as a young man of exemplary life, of pure conscience and of great perfection. He was nine years of old when his mother was stricken with a long and serious illness. John would pass several hours each day by her bedside, and console her with his affectionate though serious, words. Later, when he lived with some other boys at M. Emmerick's house, he would undertake more than his share of the domestic work, selecting by preference the more difficult occupations. If he was loved by his comrades, he repaid their affection by his kindness, without, however, deviating from the dictates of his conscience. (ref. St. John Berchmans the Patron of Altar Servers and Young People, <http://www.catholicnewsworld.com/2019/11/saint-november-26-st-john-berchmans.html>).

John Berchmans could not complete his studies. He caught a contagious disease and shortly after eight o'clock on the morning of the 13th of August 1621 he died at the age of twenty-two in the infirmary of the Roman College of the Jesuits. As he was dying, he pressed to his heart his Crucifix, his Rosary and the Book of Rules, saying: “These are my three treasures, with these I shall gladly die.” He was laid out in Saint Ignatius Church next to the College on the same day.

How was it possible for a young Flemish Jesuit, who had lived in Rome studying for only three years, to have become as famous as that, and to be venerated as a saint as soon as he died?

How is John Berchmans relevant to Jesuit Education today?

Jesuit education is aimed at making their pupils, persons of Conscience, Competent, Compassionate and Committed. We can see all these qualities manifested in John. Here is an example of his extraordinary ability; Since he was an outstanding in Jesuit training, he was selected to hold a public disputation. It was a kind of public examination that was organised at the end of the school year. All clerical and other dignitaries of Rome were invited. The best student of the year was challenged on all subjects of their study by a committee of teachers and guest teachers from different disciplines. The student was to summarize each argument of the learned examiner by heart, restate each point and validate what was right in it and what was not. And all of this had to be done in compliance with the rules of Latin eloquence. In doing so, John, soft-spoken as he was, combined cordiality with firm views, and modesty with disarming humour. A perfect Jesuit student who always manifested competence in studies, commitment in any assignment he undertook.

A month later, on August the 6th, John had been allowed to represent the training college in a similar debate at the Greek College. As it happened at the last minute that the chairman of the day was unable to attend. John was asked to stand in. There too, those present were impressed by his charming performance. Immediately after that tough day in the heat of the Roman summer he called on the nurse with a headache. In the following days his health deteriorated noticeably. He was completely exhausted. A week later he died with his crucifix, rosary and the rulebook in his hand.

What can we learn from him?

His friends said that John was always kind and cheerful. They had nicknamed him brother Hilaris (from the Greek, cheerful), because he was extremely amusing. He was a diligent student. When he had spent too little time on his studies because of his daily occupations, the light in his room burning until very late at night. He was courteous, did everything he was asked to do with remarkable cheerfulness. One of his fellow brothers said: "I don't know how he does it, but whenever I am in a sombre mood, I go and sit with him; then my sombre mood will be gone in a minute."

Man of Prayer

His Rector, Father Cepari, witness John's devoutness and his attachment to his prayer life, and how he tried to serve God in everything, especially in the ordinary things of everyday life. Exactly as he had learnt it from his novice master in the novitiate: "The most important thing in life is not to do extraordinary things, but to do the ordinary things in an extraordinary way." For him, any service that was asked of him was a service to Jesus himself. Study, aversion and even physical discomfort were of no consequence. Father Cepari found that John had suffered from headaches and chronic fatigue for months before his death. John had consistently taken all this in his stride. He served God by dedicating his pain to Jesus, as his offering to Jesus' suffering.

A Saint to emulate

What makes John a saint? We might think of his ability to subordinate his pain and physical discomfort to his daily duties and services of love. Maybe we should try and seek his holiness in his desire to turn even the most ordinary things into services of love. In the spirit of St. Ignatius: to seek and find God in all things. To love and to serve in everything.

Availability, hard work, cheerfulness,
conscience, compassion, competence,

commitment, and prayerfulness are the qualities we find in him. The meaning of his religious life was to put everything that he had learned as a child at the service of God. To live for God does not imply that one must do extraordinary things. But in the service of the gospel, one should do the ordinary things that one can do with love. This is what the life of St. John Berchmans teaches us.

It is apt that on his Feast Day, the official foundation (presentation) day of the Jesuit Global Network of Schools. This helps us to affirm our shared identity. On November 26 Jesuit School Network logo is going to be released by Fr. General.

Indeed, St. John Berchmans is an inspiration to all Jesuit students in our time. May his life, as an exemplary Jesuit student, inspire Jesuit Education Globally.

The following is partial list of schools and churches named in honour of the saint:

- St. Berchmans House (Wah Yan College) (Hong Kong, Hong Kong)
- St. John Berchmans College (Brussels, Belgium)
- St. Berchmans College (Changanacherry, Kottayam)
- St. John Berchmans College (Antwerp, Belgium) [11] (page on the Dutch Wikipedia)
- St. John Berchmans College (Diest, Belgium)
- St. John Berchmans Institute (Puurs-Sint-Amands, Belgium)
- St. John Berchmans College (Westmalle, Belgium) (page on the Dutch Wikipedia)
- St. John Berchmans College (Genk, Belgium) (page on the Dutch Wikipedia)
- St. John Berchmans College (Avelgem, Belgium) (page on the Dutch Wikipedia)
- St. John Berchmans College (Mol, Belgium)
- St. John Berchmans Institute (Zonhoven, Belgium) (page on the Dutch Wikipedia)
- St John's Beaumont (Old Windsor, Berkshire, England)
- St. John's High School (Purulia Road, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India)
- St. John Berchmans High School (Tinpahar, Jharkhand, India)

- St. John Berchmans High School (Cordon, Isabela, Philippines)
- Cathedral of St. John Berchmans (Shreveport, Louisiana, USA)
- St. John Berchmans Catholic Church (Cankton, Louisiana, USA)
- St. John's Jesuit High School and Academy (Toledo, Ohio)
- St. John Berchmans School (Colegio San Juan Berchmans) (Cali, Colombia)
- St. John's College (Belize City, Belize)
- St. Berchmans College (Changanacherry, Kottayam)
- St. Berchmans Higher Secondary School (Changanacherry, Kottayam)
- St. John Berchmans Church, attached to the Collège St Michel (Brussels, Belgium)
- St. John Berchmans Parish and School (Logan Square, Chicago, Illinois)
- St. John Berchmans Church (Holland, Manitoba, Canada)
- Église Saint-Jean-Berchmans (Montreal, Quebec, Canada)
- Berchmans Illam, Jesuit Scholasticate (Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India)
- Sint Joan Berchmans mavo (Roosendaal, The Netherlands)
- Saint John Berchmans Academy of the Sacred Heart (Grand Coteau, Louisiana, USA)
- St. John Berchman Church, (Kurseong, West Bengal, India)

<i>Beatified</i>	28 May 1865
<i>Canonized</i>	15 January 1888
<i>Major shrine</i>	Chiesa di Sant' Ignazio, Rome
<i>Feast</i>	26 November

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