

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: April 16

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IN BRIEF

Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

French beggar pilgrim, the vagabond of God, patron saint of the homeless and pilgrims.

Feast day	April 16
Born	March 26, 1748, Amettes, France
Died	April 16, 1783, Rome, Italy
Canonized	December 8, 1881, by Pope Leo XIII
Era	18th century
Patron saint of	the homeless, beggars, pilgrims, travelers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre for the Homeless and Pilgrims

Novena to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

Church of Santa Maria ai Monti, Tomb of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre in Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

Saint Benedict Joseph Labre was a French pilgrim and beggar, born in 1748 at Amettes, in Artois, who died in Rome in 1783 at the age of thirty-five. Turned away by several monasteries, he found his vocation on the roads: for thirteen years he walked across Europe from shrine to shrine, living on alms that he shared with other poor people. Known as the "vagabond of God" and canonized in 1881, he is the patron saint of the homeless and of pilgrims. His feast day is April 16.

Who was Saint Benedict Joseph Labre?

Benedict Joseph Labre is one of the most disconcerting saints in the history of the Church. In the age of the Enlightenment, which celebrated reason, progress and social usefulness, he chose to be nothing: a beggar in rags, covered in vermin, without a home, spending his days praying in churches. Many of his contemporaries despised him; the children of Rome, though, were already calling him "the saint."

His life was not a rejection of the world out of disgust. It was a passionate search for God, hesitant at first and then peaceful. After several failures in religious life, he understood that God was calling him to a form of life that no one had planned for him: that of a poor pilgrim, completely abandoned to Providence.

Key dates in the life of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

- **March 26, 1748**: Born at Amettes, in Artois, the eldest of fifteen children.
- **1760-1766**: Lives with his uncle, parish priest of Érin, who teaches him Latin.

- **1766-1769**: Tries to enter the Carthusians and then La Trappe, without success.
- **November 11, 1769**: Novice at the Cistercian abbey of Sept-Fons under the name Brother Urban; he is sent away a few months later.
- **1770**: Sets out on foot for Italy; receives the cord of the Franciscan Third Order at Assisi; arrives in Rome in December.
- **1770-1777**: Pilgrimages across Europe, including Loreto, Compostela and Switzerland.
- **From 1777**: Settles in Rome, while still going to Loreto every year.
- **April 16, 1783**: Dies in Rome on Wednesday of Holy Week, aged thirty-five.
- **May 20, 1860**: Beatified by Pope Pius IX.
- **December 8, 1881**: Canonized by Pope Leo XIII.

A youth searching for God

Benedict Joseph was the eldest of fifteen children. His father farmed a little land and his mother ran a small haberdashery. Because he was pious and studious, his family intended him for the priesthood, and at twelve he went to live with his uncle, the parish priest of Érin, who taught him Latin.

Around sixteen, he set his studies aside for devotional books and the sermons of a rigorist preacher. He became scrupulous, to the point of no longer daring to receive Communion. In 1766, his uncle died of typhus, which he had caught while caring for his parishioners.

Doors that closed

Benedict Joseph then longed for a life of penance. He knocked at the door of the Carthusians of Longuenesse, then of Neuville-sous-Montreuil, then of La Trappe. Each time he was found too young, too frail or too troubled.

Admitted to Sept-Fons in 1769, he was sent away a few months later because of the anxieties that tormented him.

In October 1769, he wrote a letter to his parents that has been preserved: "The good God will help me and guide me in the undertaking that he himself has inspired in me."

The vagabond of God

Refused everywhere, he took to the road. For seven years he walked across Europe, from France to Italy, from Switzerland to Spain, from shrine to shrine. It is estimated that he covered some 30,000 kilometers (about 18,600 miles) on foot. He wore an old cloak and a felt hat, and carried a breviary, a staff and a gourd. He slept outdoors or in barns, accepted alms without begging insistently, and often gave what he had received to other poor people. One day he was seen singing the Litany of the Blessed Virgin beneath the barred window of a prison and passing the coins he had been given to the prisoners.

He was often mocked, chased away, sometimes beaten. He did not defend himself and answered with a smile. His devotion drew him above all to the Virgin Mary: he kept returning to Loreto, where the Holy House of Nazareth is venerated. On the road near Lyon, the grandfather of the future Saint John Vianney welcomed him under his roof at Dardilly.

The poor man of Rome

From 1777, Benedict Joseph settled in Rome. According to tradition, he slept in a niche in the ruins of the Colosseum and, at the end of his life, in a hospice for the poor. He spent his days in churches, especially those holding the Forty Hours' Devotion before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. He remained on his knees for hours, motionless, absorbed in prayer. His confessor, Father Marconi, later bore witness to the depth of his inner life.

His repulsive appearance shocked people: he had given up all care of his body, out of a spirit of penance and self-contempt. But those who came close discovered a gentle, humble man who judged no one. He said he wished to love those who were lost, even in their very lostness.

"The saint is dead!"

On Wednesday of Holy Week, April 16, 1783, exhausted, he collapsed on the steps of the Church of Santa Maria ai Monti, near the Colosseum. A local butcher, Zaccarelli, took him into his home, where he died that evening, aged thirty-five. At once, children ran through the streets crying, "*È morto il santo!*", "The saint is dead!" Crowds came in such numbers that the guard had to step in at his funeral. He was buried at Santa Maria ai Monti, where he still rests.

His cause for beatification opened in 1783. In the nineteenth century, his beatification and canonization drew sarcasm from anticlerical circles, who mocked this "lousy saint." The Church saw in him a powerful reminder: the worth of a life is not measured by its social usefulness, but by love of God and neighbor.

Why is Saint Benedict Joseph Labre the patron saint of the homeless?

He lived for years without a roof, slept outdoors and in ruins, and depended on the charity of strangers. He knew hunger, cold, contempt and rejection from the inside. That is why the homeless, beggars, pilgrims and all who live on the road see him as one of their own. He is also invoked by people with mental illness or tormented by scruples, since he himself knew anxiety, and by all who are still looking for their path.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Benedict Joseph Labre in art

- **Ragged pilgrim's clothes**: an old cloak, a felt hat, a staff and a gourd.
- **A rosary and a breviary**: signs of his life of constant prayer.
- **Hands crossed on the chest**: as in the well-known portrait by Antonio Cavallucci.
- **The Colosseum**: the ruins where he slept among the poor of Rome.

Where to pray to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

- **Rome**: the Church of Santa Maria ai Monti, near the Colosseum, which holds his tomb.
- **Amettes** (Pas-de-Calais, France): his birthplace and the church where he was baptized, a place of pilgrimage.
- **Loreto** (Italy): the shrine of the Holy House, where he returned every year.
- **Marçay** (Vienne, France): the basilica dedicated to him.

To pray with him, use the Prayer to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre or follow the Novena to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, from April 8 to his feast on April 16.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre for the Homeless and Pilgrims

Saint Benedict Joseph Labre left very few writings: only two letters to his parents have come down to us. Tradition attributes to him a prayer known as the "prayer of the three hearts," but several versions circulate without a reliable reference text. This page offers an authentic sentence from his own hand, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

A word from Benedict Joseph Labre

In October 1769, after leaving the Carthusian monastery of Neuville and about to set out for the abbey of Sept-Fons, he wrote to his parents a letter in which he shared his trust in God:

> *"The good God will help me and guide me in the undertaking that he himself has inspired in me. [...] I will always keep the fear of God before my eyes and his love in my heart."*

Source: letter of Benedict Joseph Labre to his parents, October 20, 1769, quoted in his biographies (English translation from the French).

Prayer to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre for the Homeless

Saint Benedict Joseph, you knocked at so many doors before you found your path:
support those who feel rejected, useless or lost.

You walked the roads of Europe owning nothing:
teach me to abandon myself to Providence and not to be weighed down by what passes away.

You shared your alms with those poorer than you:
open my heart and my hands to those who sleep outside.
May I know how to look at them, greet them and help them.

You spent hours on your knees before the Blessed Sacrament:
give me a love for silent adoration.

You knew anxiety and scruples:
pray for those whose minds are troubled, and obtain for them the peace of God.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).
Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, poor man of Christ, pray for us. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Benedict Joseph Labre is celebrated on April 16, the day of his death in Rome in 1783. You can pray to him:

- before setting out on a pilgrimage or a long walk;
- when you pass a homeless person in the street, or before volunteering at a shelter or soup kitchen;

- in a time of doubt about your vocation, or after a door has closed;
- for a loved one who suffers from anxiety, scruples or mental illness.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the Novena to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, and read about his life.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, the beggar pilgrim. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on his feast day, April 16, begin on April 8. Since he died on Wednesday of Holy Week, this novena often falls during Lent or Holy Week, a fitting time to walk with him toward Easter.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then pray an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. You may pray this novena for a homeless person you know, for someone discerning a vocation, or for someone tormented by anxiety or scruples.

Benedict Joseph's story can unsettle us. He chose poverty, discomfort and contempt, and many people of his time could not understand him. This novena does not ask you to copy his way of life, but to learn from his trust, his humility and his love for the poor and for the Eucharist.

Day 1: Seeking God

From his youth, Benedict Joseph sought God with all his heart. He did not yet know how, but he knew that he wanted God alone. Every holy life begins with this desire.

Prayer: Lord, give me the desire to seek you above all things. Through the prayers of Saint Benedict Joseph, let nothing take your place in my heart. Amen.

Today: Take ten minutes of silence to stand before God.

Day 2: Closed doors

Carthusians, Trappists, Cistercians: all of them sent him away. He did not give up. A closed door is not the end of the road. God was preparing for him a path no one had imagined.

Prayer: Lord, when my plans fail, show me the path you are opening. Give me patience and hope when I feel rejected. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who has just experienced a failure or a rejection.

Day 3: Trust

"The good God will help me," he wrote to his parents as he was leaving. His whole life rested on this simple trust. He did not know where he would sleep or what he would eat, but he knew he was in the hands of his Father.

Prayer: Father, I place in your hands what worries me today. Teach me the trust of a child. Amen.

Today: Name a specific worry and hand it over to God in prayer.

Day 4: On the road

Benedict Joseph walked thousands of miles. For him, the road became a prayer. Our life, too, is a pilgrimage toward God, step by step, day after day.

Prayer: Lord, make each of my steps a step toward you. Walk beside me on the road of my life. Amen.

Today: Make one of your usual trips on foot, praying as you walk.

Day 5: Sharing with the poorer

The beggar gave what he received to other poor people and to prisoners. Poverty did not prevent generosity. Often, those who have little are the most ready to share.

Prayer: Jesus, you who became poor for us, teach me to share without calculating. Open my hands to those in need. Amen.

Today: Give to a homeless person, or to a shelter or organization that welcomes them.

Day 6: Bearing contempt

People mocked him and chased him away. He smiled without defending himself. He knew that his dignity came from God, not from the opinion of others.

Prayer: Lord, keep me at peace when I am judged, and keep me from judging others by their appearance. Amen.

Today: Greet with respect someone you usually avoid.

Day 7: Adoration

In Rome, Benedict Joseph spent hours on his knees before the Blessed Sacrament, especially during the Forty Hours' Devotion. There he found his true home.

Prayer: Jesus, present in the Eucharist, draw me close to you. Teach me to remain with you in silence and love. Amen.

Today: Spend some time in Eucharistic adoration, or make a short visit to a church.

Day 8: Mary, mother of pilgrims

Every year, Benedict Joseph returned to Loreto, to the Holy House of Nazareth. He sang the Litany of the Blessed Virgin even beneath the windows of a prison. Mary was his companion on the road.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, walk with me on the road, as you walked with Benedict Joseph. Be the mother of all who have no home. Amen.

Today: Pray the Litany of Loreto or a decade of the Rosary.

Day 9: "The saint is dead!"

When he died, the children of Rome ran through the streets crying, "The saint is dead!" They had seen what many adults had missed: the holiness hidden beneath the rags.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I entrust my intention to you. Through the intercession of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, give me a poor heart, the eyes of a child, and complete trust in you. Amen.

Today: Look for the presence of God in someone the world overlooks.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Benedict Joseph Labre, poor pilgrim of Christ, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. You knew rejection, cold and contempt, and you remained gentle and full of trust. Pray for the homeless, for pilgrims, for those whose minds are troubled, and for all who are still looking for their path. Obtain for me the grace to recognize Christ in the poor. Amen.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre and pray the Prayer to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre.

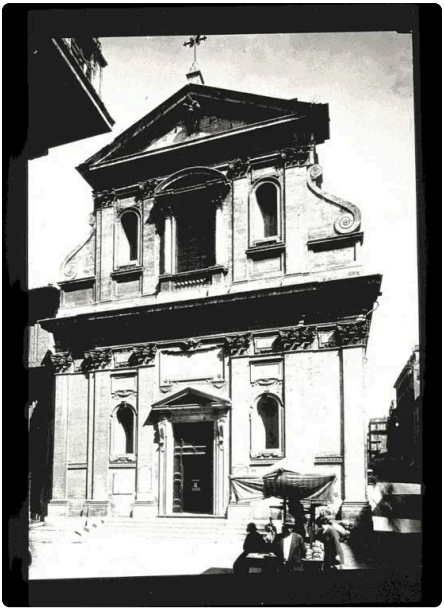
PILGRIMAGE

Church of Santa Maria ai Monti, Tomb of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre in Rome

The Church of Santa Maria ai Monti (Saint Mary of the Mountains) stands in the working-class Monti district, a few hundred yards from the Colosseum in Rome. It was on its steps that Saint Benedict Joseph Labre collapsed on April 16, 1783, and it is there that he rests. His tomb, topped by a marble effigy, has drawn pilgrims, the poor, and all who see themselves in "God's vagabond" for more than two centuries.

History of the site

The church was built at the end of the 16th century on the site of an old convent, to house an image of the Virgin found in the ruins and venerated by the people of the neighborhood. Benedict Joseph Labre attended it faithfully in the last years of his life, when he lived near the Colosseum. On Holy Wednesday in 1783, he collapsed from exhaustion before it; taken in by a neighboring butcher, he died that same evening. He was buried in the church amid a crowd so large that the guard had to be called in. The miracles reported at his tomb led to the swift opening of his cause.



The Church of Santa Maria ai Monti, in the Monti district of Rome.

What you will see

The saint's body rests beneath the altar of the left transept. The tomb is topped by a marble effigy made in 1892 by the sculptor Achille Albacini, showing Benedict Joseph stretched out, poorly dressed. A Latin inscription reads: "Here rests the body of Saint B. J. Labre." The church also preserves a painting that shows him among the poor at the Colosseum.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you may reread the life of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre. Before the effigy, take time to entrust to him the homeless people you meet, then say the prayer to Saint Benedict Joseph Labre. You can extend your visit

by walking to the Colosseum, where he spent his nights, and by offering a concrete gesture to a poor person in the city. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre

- **Amettes** (Pas-de-Calais): his birthplace and the parish church, where mementos of the saint are kept.
- **The Colosseum**, in Rome, where according to tradition he slept for several years.
- **Loreto** (Marche): the shrine of the Holy House, the goal of his yearly pilgrimages.
- **Sept-Fons Abbey** (Allier), where he was a novice under the name Brother Urban.
- **Marçay** (Vienne): the basilica dedicated to him.

Practical information

The church is on Via della Madonna dei Monti, near the Cavour metro station, a ten-minute walk from the Colosseum. It is a parish church, open at the times of services and at certain moments of the day. Crowds are larger around April 16, his feast day. Check opening hours and Mass times before you come.

Credits and sources

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