

BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Saint Benedict Menni

*Life, prayer and novena*

Feast day: April 24

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IN BRIEF

## Saint Benedict Menni

*Italian Brother of Saint John of God, restorer of his order in Spain and founder of the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.*

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| **Feast day** | April 24 |
| **Born** | March 11, 1841, Milan, Italy |
| **Died** | April 24, 1914, Dinan, Brittany, France |
| **Canonized** | November 21, 1999, by Pope John Paul II |
| **Era** | 20th century |
| **Patron saint of** | people with mental illness, Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus |

## In this booklet


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Novena to Saint Benedict Menni

Credits and sources



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LIFE

# Saint Benedict Menni

Saint Benedict Menni was an Italian religious of the Hospitaller Brothers of Saint John of God, born in Milan in 1841 and died in Dinan, in Brittany, in 1914. Sent at the age of twenty-six to restore his order in Spain, he opened hospitals there, transformed the care of people with mental illness and founded the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1999, he is celebrated on April 24.

## Who was Saint Benedict Menni?

Benedict Menni, baptized Angelo Ercole Menni, belongs to the generation of nineteenth-century founders who answered the miseries of their time with very concrete works of charity. He gave his whole life to the sick, and first of all to those nobody wanted: people with mental illness, who were locked away more often than cared for, and disabled children. A saying attributed to him sums up his approach: "Care for them like children, but treat them as persons."

His life was also marked by trials: years in hiding in a Spain torn apart by the Carlist Wars, fierce opposition within his own order, and finally exile in France, where he died far from his foundations. Today he is venerated as one of the great witnesses of hospitality, in the line of Saint John of God.




*Saint Benedict Menni, Brother of Saint John of God.*

## Key dates

- **March 11, 1841**: Born in Milan, the fifth of fifteen children.
- **1859**: Volunteers as a stretcher-bearer for the wounded of the Battle of Magenta brought back to Milan.
- **1860**: Enters the Hospitaller Brothers of Saint John of God and receives the name Brother Benedict.
- **1866**: Ordained a priest after theological studies in Rome.
- **1867**: Sent to Spain with the blessing of Pope Pius IX to restore the order; opens a small hospital in Barcelona.
- **1877**: Opens the psychiatric hospital of Ciempozuelos, near Madrid.
- **1881**: Founds the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Ciempozuelos.
- **1911**: Appointed prior general of his order by the Holy See.

- **1912**: Facing opposition, he resigns and goes into exile in France.
- **April 24, 1914**: Dies in Dinan, Brittany; his body is later brought back to Ciempozuelos.
- **June 23, 1985**: Beatified by John Paul II.
- **November 21, 1999**: Canonized by John Paul II in Rome.

## A childhood in Milan and the call of the wounded

Angelo Ercole was born on March 11, 1841, in Milan, then capital of the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia under Austrian rule. His father was a merchant, and the large family was deeply devout: they prayed the rosary together and visited the poor and the sick. The boy, nicknamed *Ercolino*, would pray for long periods before an image of the Madonna, and his devotion to Mary never left him.

In June 1859, during the war between Austria on one side and France and Piedmont on the other, Milan received the wounded from the Battle of Magenta. Angelo Ercole, then eighteen, volunteered as a stretcher-bearer. Among the maimed soldiers he discovered his vocation: to devote his life to those who suffer. The following year he knocked at the door of the Hospitaller Brothers of Saint John of God, the order founded in Granada in the sixteenth century to serve the sick.

## Restoring the order in its cradle

Now Brother Benedict, he studied in Rome, where he developed a deep attachment to the pope. Ordained a priest in 1866, he became secretary to the prior general. In 1867 the prior general, in agreement with Pius IX, entrusted him with a daunting mission: to restore the order in Spain, where anticlerical laws had almost wiped it out. Benedict was only twenty-six and did not speak Spanish. According to the traditional account, the pope encouraged him with these words: "Go to Spain, my son, and restore the order in its very cradle."

Arriving in Barcelona in October 1867, he opened a small hospital for about a dozen patients. The following years were hard: revolution, the Carlist Wars, threats of expulsion. At times he had to live in hiding. During the Third Carlist War he even organized relief for the wounded of both sides. Little by little vocations came, and the Spanish province was reborn.

## Ciempozuelos and the mentally ill

In 1877 Benedict Menni opened a psychiatric hospital at Ciempozuelos, south of Madrid, with equipment that was modern for the time. He surrounded himself with competent staff and worked to change the way people looked at mental illness, often seen then as an incurable curse. For him, a patient remained a person worthy of respect, to be cared for with patience, skill and tenderness.

There, in 1881, together with two young women from Granada, he founded the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, dedicated to caring for women with mental illness. The beginnings were very hard: the work was immense, resources were scarce, and one of the first sisters was killed by a patient. But the congregation grew. During the founder's lifetime, the brothers and sisters opened dozens of houses in Spain, Portugal, France and as far as Mexico. Reelected several times as provincial of Spain, Benedict watched over everything, traveled constantly and supported his communities.




*Ciempozuelos, birthplace of the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.*

## Trial and exile

In 1911 the Holy See appointed Benedict Menni prior general of the whole order. The office brought him sharp opposition, both inside and outside the institute. Rather than divide his brothers, he resigned in 1912 and went to Rome to inform the pope. He then left for France, first Paris and then Dinan, where the Brothers of Saint John of God had a house. There he died on April 24, 1914, in great poverty. His body was brought back to Spain and rests in Ciempozuelos, near the motherhouse of the Hospitaller Sisters.

## Why is Saint Benedict Menni a patron of the mentally ill?

Benedict Menni took Christ's words seriously: "I was sick and you visited me." He united charity and competence, convinced that caring well for someone is a way of loving them. He reminds us that people living with mental illness have a

full place in the Church and in society. That is why he is invoked for people with mental health struggles and their families, for doctors, nurses, caregivers and hospital chaplains, and why the Hospitaller Sisters he founded honor him as their father. His humility in trial, when he chose to step aside rather than impose himself, is also a lesson for anyone who holds responsibility.

## Symbols and how to recognize Saint Benedict Menni in art

Because he lived in the age of photography, Benedict Menni is usually shown from his portraits: a priest with a gentle, serious face, wearing the black habit of the Hospitaller Brothers of Saint John of God. Devotional images sometimes show him beside a sick person, a reminder of his life given to patients.

## Where to pray to Saint Benedict Menni

- **Ciempozuelos** (Spain): his tomb, near the motherhouse of the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.
- **Dinan** (Brittany, France): the town where he died, where the Brothers of Saint John of God keep his memory alive.
- **Milan** (Italy): his hometown.
- The houses of the Hospitaller Sisters and of the Brothers of Saint John of God around the world.

To entrust these intentions to him, see the prayer to Saint Benedict Menni and the novena to Saint Benedict Menni, from April 15 to 23.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Benedict Menni for the Sick

Saint Benedict Menni devoted his life to the sick, especially to people living with mental illness. As far as we know, there is no widely used traditional prayer to him in English, so Saintspedia offers here an original prayer inspired by his life and his spirit of hospitality.

## Prayer to Saint Benedict Menni for the sick

*Saint Benedict Menni, you discovered your vocation among the wounded of Magenta: teach me not to look away from those who suffer.*

*You cared for the mentally ill like children while respecting them as persons: watch over all whom mental illness locks in anxiety, confusion or loneliness. Obtain for them peace of heart, good care and patient loved ones.*

*Support families under strain, who carry each day the weight of the illness of a child, a parent or a spouse. Give them strength to persevere and the comfort of knowing they are loved by God.*

*Bless doctors, nurses, care workers, chaplains and all who work in hospitals. May their skill be filled with charity, and their weariness sustained by hope.*

*You accepted humiliation and exile without losing your peace: help me to go through my own trials with trust. Today I entrust to you this intention: (name it in silence).*

*Through your intercession, may the Heart of Jesus, source of all mercy, heal what can be healed and console what must be carried. Amen.*

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




*Saint Benedict Menni, apostle of the sick.*

## Short invocation

> *Saint Benedict Menni, friend of the sick and of caregivers, pray for us.*
> *Heart of Jesus, source of mercy, have pity on those who suffer.*

Original invocation by Saintspedia.

## When to pray this prayer

Saint Benedict Menni is celebrated on April 24, the anniversary of his death in Dinan in 1914. You can pray to him when someone is admitted to the hospital, during a mental health crisis in your family, before beginning a career in health care, or on the World Day of the Sick, February 11. It is also a fitting prayer for nurses, psychiatric staff and hospital chaplains at the start of a shift.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Benedict Menni, and read the life of Saint Benedict Menni.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Benedict Menni

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Benedict Menni, Brother of Saint John of God and founder of the Hospitaller Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast day, April 24, begin it on April 15. It can also be prayed at any time for a person living with mental illness, for a family under strain or for those who care for the sick.

## How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you live in Benedict Menni's spirit of hospitality. You can pray it alone, as a family, or with colleagues in a hospital or care home.

## Day 1: A faith learned at home

Angelo Ercole grew up in a large family in Milan where the rosary was prayed together and the poor and sick were visited. His love for Mary, born before an image of the Madonna, stayed with him all his life. The faith of a home prepares hearts for great callings.

**Prayer:** Lord, bless our families, and make them schools of prayer and charity.

**Today:** Pray a decade of the rosary for your family.

## Day 2: The call of the wounded

At eighteen, he carried the wounded of the Battle of Magenta on stretchers. Among the maimed soldiers he heard God's call. Sometimes our vocation appears where we least expect it: in front of someone who suffers.

**Prayer:** Lord, give me eyes that see those who are wounded around me, and a heart ready to answer.

**Today:** Offer concrete help to someone who is going through a hard time.

## Day 3: Saying yes

The following year he entered the Hospitaller Brothers of Saint John of God and became Brother Benedict. He gave his whole life to the service of the sick. A real yes engages the whole of our existence.

**Prayer:** Lord, help me say yes to you without holding back, in the life you have given me.

**Today:** Pray for vocations to religious life and to the caring professions.

## Day 4: Sent without knowing the language

At twenty-six, without speaking Spanish, he was sent to restore his order in Spain. He trusted the word of the pope and the grace of God more than his own strength. God often sends us before we feel ready.

**Prayer:** Lord, when a task seems too big for me, teach me to rely on you.

**Today:** Take one first step in a task you have been putting off out of fear.

## Day 5: Charity in times of war

Through revolution and the Carlist Wars, sometimes forced into hiding, Benedict kept going. He organized relief for the wounded of both sides. Charity does not choose its camp; it sees only the person in need.

**Prayer:** Lord, free my heart from divisions, and teach me to serve everyone without distinction.

**Today:** Pray for the victims of a war going on today.




*Ciempozuelos, where Saint Benedict Menni opened his psychiatric hospital in 1877.*

## Day 6: A person, not a burden

At Ciempozuelos, Benedict wanted the mentally ill to be cared for like children and respected as persons. In a time when mental illness was seen as a curse, he saw a brother or a sister. Every person keeps a dignity that no illness can take away.

**Prayer:** Lord, I entrust to you all who live with mental illness: give them peace, good care and faithful friends.

**Today:** Reach out with kindness to someone who is isolated or struggling.

## Day 7: Skill and tenderness

Benedict surrounded himself with competent staff and modern equipment. For him, caring well was a way of loving. Good intentions are not enough; love also needs knowledge and work well done.

**Prayer:** Lord, bless doctors, nurses, caregivers and chaplains, and let their skill be full of love.

**Today:** Thank a health worker you know, or pray for one by name.

## Day 8: Founding in poverty

The Hospitaller Sisters began in great poverty, and one of the first sisters was killed by a patient. Yet the congregation grew and spread to many countries. Works of God often begin small and in suffering.

**Prayer:** Lord, give perseverance to all who begin a good work in difficult conditions.

**Today:** Support a charity that cares for the sick or disabled.

## Day 9: Humility in trial

Appointed prior general, then contested, Benedict chose to resign rather than divide his brothers. He died in exile in Dinan, poor and far from his foundations. His humility was his last gift to the Church.

**Prayer:** Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Benedict Menni, give me peace in trials, and heal what can be healed. Amen.

**Today:** Let go of a quarrel or a grievance for the sake of peace.

## Closing prayer

*Saint Benedict Menni, servant of the sick and father of the Hospitaller Sisters, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Watch over those who suffer in body and mind, over their families and over all who care for them. Obtain for us a heart full of compassion, hands ready to serve and peace in every trial. Amen.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Benedict Menni and the prayer to Saint Benedict Menni.

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