

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Benedict the Moor

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 4

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Benedict the Moor

Sicilian Franciscan friar born to enslaved African parents, cook and superior of the friary of Santa Maria di Gesù in Palermo.

Feast day	April 4
Born	1526, San Fratello, Sicily, Italy
Died	April 4, 1589, Palermo, Sicily, Italy
Canonized	May 24, 1807, by Pope Pius VII
Era	16th century
Patron saint of	Palermo, San Fratello, people of African descent in the Americas, cooks

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Benedict the Moor Against Racism and for the Humble

Novena to Saint Benedict the Moor

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Benedict the Moor

Saint Benedict the Moor, also called Benedict the Black or Benedict the African, was a sixteenth-century Sicilian Franciscan friar born to African parents who had been enslaved. First a hermit, then a cook at the friary of Santa Maria di Gesù near Palermo, he served for a time as superior of his community even though he could neither read nor write. Patron of Palermo and deeply loved by Black Catholics throughout the Americas, he was canonized in 1807. His feast day is April 4.

Who was Saint Benedict the Moor?

Benedict was born in 1526 in San Fratello, a small town in the province of Messina, in northeastern Sicily. His parents, Christopher and Diana, were Africans brought to Sicily as slaves who had become Christians. According to tradition, they agreed to have a child only on the condition that he would be born free; the sources differ on exactly when he gained his freedom. His nickname, "the Moor" (*il Moro* in Italian), was used at the time for anyone with dark skin.

He grew up as a farmhand and later worked as a day laborer. He shared his small wages with the poor, visited the sick and spent his free time in prayer, so that people called him "the holy Moor" long before his death. He also endured constant mockery because of his skin color and his origins, and he answered it with a gentleness that struck everyone around him.

Key dates in the life of Saint Benedict the Moor

- **1526**: Born in San Fratello, Sicily, to African parents who had been enslaved and had become Christians.

- **As a young man**: He joins the community of hermits founded by Jerome Lanza.
- **c. 1550**: The community is approved by Pope Julius III.
- **After the death of Lanza**: Benedict becomes superior of the hermits.
- **1562**: The independent hermits are dissolved; he enters the Observant Franciscans at Santa Maria di Gesù, near Palermo.
- **1578**: He is elected guardian, that is, superior, of the friary.
- **April 4, 1589**: He dies at the friary of Santa Maria di Gesù.
- **1611**: His remains are placed in a new reliquary shrine given by King Philip III of Spain.
- **May 15, 1743**: Beatified by Pope Benedict XIV.
- **May 24, 1807**: Canonized by Pope Pius VII.

A hermit with Jerome Lanza

One day, while Benedict was being mocked, a local nobleman named Jerome Lanza noticed his patience. Lanza was living a hermit's life with a few companions under the patronage of Saint Francis. He is said to have told the mockers: "You laugh at him now, but soon you will hear great things of him." Benedict sold his few possessions and joined these hermits, who lived in the hills around Messina and later near Palermo. When Lanza died, his brothers chose Benedict as their superior.

In 1562, Pope Pius IV decided that independent groups of hermits should be attached to the great religious orders. Benedict then entered the Friars Minor of the Observance, at the friary of Santa Maria di Gesù, on the slopes overlooking Palermo.

The cook who became superior

At the friary, Benedict was first assigned to the kitchen. The humblest tasks suited him, because they allowed him to serve without being noticed. Tradition says that food multiplied in his hands in times of scarcity. In 1578, to his great surprise, the friars elected him guardian of the friary, even though he was a lay brother who could neither read nor write. He later served as vicar and as novice master.

His contemporaries were amazed at how accurately he explained Scripture and answered difficult theological questions. People came from all over Sicily to ask for his advice, his prayers and healing: the poor, the sick, nobles and priests. He tried to stay hidden, traveling at night or covering his face with his hood. Toward the end of his life, he was allowed to go back to the kitchen. He died on April 4, 1589, at the age of sixty-three.

Why is Saint Benedict the Moor the patron saint of Palermo and of Black Catholics?

As early as 1602, the senate of Palermo chose him as patron of the city, which he still protects alongside Saint Rosalia. In 1611, King Philip III of Spain gave a shrine for his remains, which were displayed for the veneration of the faithful. His cult spread quickly in Spain and Portugal, then in their colonies in the Americas, where confraternities of Africans and their descendants, enslaved or free, adopted him as their protector. In Brazil, where he is known as São Benedito, he is one of the great "Black saints," together with Saint Iphigenia and Saint Elesbaan, and many churches and towns bear his name.

In the English-speaking world, several parishes are dedicated to him, and he is often remembered alongside Saint Martin de Porres as a model for Black Catholics. Because he spent so many years in the friary kitchen, he is also invoked as a patron of cooks.

He was beatified in 1743 and canonized in 1807 by Pius VII. In July 2023, the wildfires that swept the hills around Palermo severely damaged the church of Santa Maria di Gesù and the shrine where his body rested; firefighters were able to save part of his remains.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Benedict the Moor in art

Saint Benedict the Moor is easy to recognize: he is shown as a Black man wearing the brown Franciscan habit with the knotted cord. Statues in Brazil and Latin America often show him holding the Child Jesus in his arms. These images, carried in processions and kept in countless homes, spread his face far beyond Sicily.

What can we learn from Saint Benedict the Moor?

Benedict knew humiliation because of his color and his origins, and he answered it with gentleness, never letting the contempt of others define him. This son of enslaved Africans, who could not read, became the counselor of learned men and the superior of his brothers. He reminds us that God lifts up the lowly and that the dignity of every person depends neither on birth nor on education. Catholics pray to him against racism, for cooks and for people who suffer discrimination.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Benedict the Moor or begin the novena to Saint Benedict the Moor.

Where to pray to Saint Benedict the Moor

- **Palermo**: the Franciscan friary of Santa Maria di Gesù, where he lived and where his remains were venerated until the 2023 fire.
- **San Fratello** (Sicily): his hometown, where a shrine is dedicated to him.

- **Brazil and Latin America**: the many churches of São Benedito and San Benito, for example in Salvador da Bahia.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Benedict the Moor Against Racism and for the Humble

Saint Benedict the Moor could neither read nor write and left no texts of his own. In Italy, in Spain and above all in Latin America, many popular prayers are addressed to him under the names San Benedetto il Moro, San Benito de Palermo or São Benedito. Here is an original prayer by Saintspedia, inspired by his life as the son of enslaved Africans, a friar in the kitchen and a counselor of the humble and the learned alike.

A saint of humility and dignity

Mocked for the color of his skin, Benedict answered with gentleness. As a Franciscan, he preferred the kitchen to honors, and yet his brothers elected him superior. Today he is invoked by those who suffer racism, by cooks and by all who serve without being seen.

Prayer to Saint Benedict the Moor

Saint Benedict, son of enslaved parents who became a brother to all, you answered mockery with gentleness: teach me to keep peace in my heart when I am hurt.

I entrust to you all who are despised because of their color, their origin or their poverty. Let them know that they are loved by God, and change the hearts of those who reject them, beginning with my own.

You served your brothers in the kitchen with joy: bless those who prepare meals, those who feed the poor and all whose work goes unnoticed.

Without knowing how to read, you understood the Word of God so well: open my mind to the Gospel and give me the wisdom of the humble. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Protect Palermo and Sicily, Africa and her scattered children, and all the peoples who call upon you. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Benedict the Moor is celebrated on April 4, the day of his death in 1589. In Brazil and other countries, popular feasts in his honor take place on other dates, according to local traditions. You can pray to him when you face injustice or humiliation, before cooking for a family or a community, or for brotherhood between peoples. To pray over several days, follow the novena to Saint Benedict the Moor, and to know him better, read the life of Saint Benedict the Moor.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Benedict the Moor

This novena to Saint Benedict the Moor is an original composition by Saintspedia; it is not an official liturgical text. Over nine days, it follows the son of enslaved Africans who became a Franciscan friar, a cook and a superior in Palermo. To end on his feast day, April 4, begin it on March 27. You can also pray it at any time: when you suffer contempt or injustice, for a person facing racism, or for those who work in kitchens and in hidden service.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a few quiet minutes. Begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. Finish with the small act proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off: a novena is a path of trust, not a performance.

Day 1: Born free

Benedict was born in 1526 in San Fratello, Sicily, to Christopher and Diana, Africans who had been enslaved. Tradition says they wished their son to be born free. Every human life is a gift from God, and no one belongs to another as property.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, pray for all who live in slavery or exploitation today, that they may be set free and recognized in their dignity. Amen.

Today: Learn about one organization that fights human trafficking, and pray for its work.

Day 2: Sharing a small wage

As a young farmhand and day laborer, Benedict earned little, yet he shared it with the poor and visited the sick. Generosity does not wait until we have plenty.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, open my hands to those in need, even when I have little to give. Amen.

Today: Give something, however small, to someone in need.

Day 3: Gentleness under mockery

Benedict was often mocked for his skin color and his origins. He answered with a gentleness that disarmed those around him. Gentleness is not weakness: it is strength that refuses to return evil for evil.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, when I am hurt by words, keep me from bitterness and give me a peaceful heart. Amen.

Today: Hold back a harsh word, and pray for someone who has hurt you.

Day 4: Someone who saw his worth

Jerome Lanza, a nobleman living as a hermit, noticed Benedict's patience and said that great things would be heard of him. One person's respectful look can change the course of a life.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, give me eyes that see the worth of every person, especially those whom others overlook. Amen.

Today: Encourage someone who is often ignored or underestimated.

Day 5: Leaving everything to follow Christ

Benedict sold his few possessions to join the hermits and live in prayer and poverty, under the patronage of Saint Francis. Following Christ always involves letting go of something.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, help me to let go of what keeps me from God and to trust him with my life. Amen.

Today: Give away one thing you do not need.

Day 6: Joy in the kitchen

At the friary of Santa Maria di Gesù, Benedict worked as a cook. He loved this humble task because it let him serve without being seen. Tradition says food multiplied in his hands in times of scarcity.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, bless all who cook and serve meals, at home, in restaurants, in shelters and soup kitchens. Amen.

Today: Prepare or serve a meal with special care, offering it as a prayer.

Day 7: A superior who could not read

In 1578, the friars elected Benedict, a lay brother who could neither read nor write, as guardian of the friary. He accepted this charge as a service and later served as novice master. Authority in the Church is meant to be service.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, pray for all who lead others, in families, parishes and communities, that they may serve with humility. Amen.

Today: Pray for your parish priest, your bishop or someone who has responsibility for you.

Day 8: The wisdom of the humble

Learned men and priests were amazed at how well Benedict explained Scripture. People came from all over Sicily for his advice and prayers, yet he tried to remain hidden. God gives his light to those who are humble of heart.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, open my heart to the Word of God and give me the wisdom that comes from prayer. Amen.

Today: Read a page of the Gospel slowly, and keep one sentence with you all day.

Day 9: Protector of a scattered people

After his death on April 4, 1589, Benedict became the patron of Palermo, and his cult crossed the ocean. Africans and their descendants in the Americas, enslaved or free, took him as their protector. In him, they saw that God had not forgotten them.

Prayer: Saint Benedict, pray for Africa and her children throughout the world, and for an end to racism in our Church and in our societies. Amen.

Today: Examine your own heart for prejudice, and take one concrete step toward someone different from you.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. You made Saint Benedict the Moor, son of enslaved parents, a humble servant in the kitchen and a wise guide for his brothers. Through his intercession, heal the wounds of racism and contempt, bless all who serve unseen, and grant the intention I have carried during these nine days: (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Saint Benedict the Moor, pray for us.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Mateus Hidalgo, CC BY-SA 2.5 br, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com