

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Bonaventure

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 15

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IN BRIEF

Saint Bonaventure

Franciscan theologian, minister general of his order and Doctor of the Church, known as the Seraphic Doctor.

Feast day	July 15
Born	c. 1217-1221, Bagnoregio, Italy
Died	July 15, 1274, Lyon, France
Canonized	April 14, 1482, by Pope Sixtus IV
Era	13th century

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Bonaventure

Church of Saint Bonaventure in Lyon

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Bonaventure

Saint Bonaventure, born Giovanni di Fidanza in Bagnoregio in central Italy, was one of the greatest theologians of the thirteenth century. A master at the University of Paris, minister general of the Franciscans for seventeen years, official biographer of Saint Francis of Assisi and then a cardinal, he died in Lyon in 1274 during the second ecumenical council held in that city. Known as the "Seraphic Doctor," canonized in 1482 and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church, he is celebrated on July 15.

Who was Saint Bonaventure?

Giovanni was born in Bagnoregio, near Orvieto, around 1217 or in 1221 depending on the sources. His father, Giovanni di Fidanza, was a physician; his mother was named Maria di Ritello. Almost nothing is known of his childhood or of the exact reason for his religious name. A fifteenth-century tradition says that as a gravely ill child he was presented to Francis of Assisi, who blessed him; the story is late and cannot be verified.

Around 1236 he went to study the arts in Paris, then the intellectual capital of Christendom. In 1243 he joined the Friars Minor and studied under Alexander of Hales, a great theologian who had become a Franciscan. Licensed in 1248, he commented on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the standard theology textbook of the day, and began teaching in his turn.

Key dates in the life of Saint Bonaventure

- **c. 1217 or 1221**: Born in Bagnoregio, Italy.
- **c. 1236**: Studies in Paris.
- **1243**: Enters the Order of Friars Minor.

- **1257**: Elected minister general of the Franciscans; receives his doctorate the same year as Thomas Aquinas.
- **1259**: Retreat on Mount La Verna, where he writes *The Journey of the Mind into God*.
- **1263**: Presents his Life of Saint Francis, the *Legenda maior*, to the general chapter of Pisa.
- **1265**: Declines the archbishopric of York, offered by Pope Clement IV.
- **1273**: Made cardinal bishop of Albano by Gregory X.
- **May 7, 1274**: Opening of the Second Council of Lyon, which he helped prepare.
- **Night of July 14-15, 1274**: Dies in Lyon during the council.
- **April 14, 1482**: Canonized by the Franciscan pope Sixtus IV.
- **Late 16th century**: Proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Sixtus V.

The second founder of the Franciscans

In 1257, not yet forty years old, Bonaventure was elected head of the order Francis of Assisi had founded some thirty years earlier. The order was in crisis. The "Spirituals" wanted absolute poverty and drew on the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore, while other friars accepted a development toward study, teaching and life in friaries. Bonaventure sought a path of realistic faithfulness. He condemned extreme positions, revised the order's constitutions at the chapter of Narbonne and reorganized its provinces.

Above all, he wrote a new life of Saint Francis, which the chapter of 1266 declared the only official one, ordering earlier biographies destroyed. This decision was criticized even in his own time, but it gave the order a shared portrait of its founder. Bonaventure also asked the friars to ring the bells in the evening in honor of the Annunciation, a practice that foreshadows the Angelus. He is sometimes called the "second founder" of the Franciscans.



Bagnoregio, the hometown of Saint Bonaventure.

The Seraphic Doctor

Deeply shaped by Saint Augustine, Bonaventure saw theology as a path toward union with God in love. In *The Journey of the Mind into God* (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*), written in 1259 on La Verna, where Francis had received the stigmata, he describes the soul's ascent: starting from creatures, which are traces of the Creator, then entering into oneself, the image of God, and finally rising to contemplation, where the intellect gives way to love. All creation appears as a book that speaks of God, in the spirit of the Canticle of the Creatures.

His work is immense: biblical commentaries, the *Breviloquium* (a short summary of theology), spiritual treatises such as *The Triple Way* and *The Tree of Life*, many sermons and the *Collations on the Hexaemeron*, left unfinished. Less confident than Thomas Aquinas in the power of reason alone, he stressed

the humility of the intellect, which needs grace to reach the truth. His thought is drawing renewed interest today; the future Pope Benedict XVI devoted part of his academic work to him.

Lyon, the council and his death

Pope Gregory X, whose election in 1271 Bonaventure had helped bring about, made him a cardinal and entrusted him with preparing the Second Council of Lyon, which opened on May 7, 1274. One of its aims was to restore union with the Greek Christians, and Bonaventure spoke to welcome the Byzantine delegation. But, exhausted and struck by high fevers in a very hot summer, he withdrew on July 13 and died during the night of July 14-15. His secretary suggested he had been poisoned, a theory historians reject.

His friend the Dominican Peter of Tarentaise, the future Pope Innocent V, preached his funeral sermon. A few months earlier, Thomas Aquinas had died on his way to the same council, and people mourned the fall of the "pillars of the Church." Bonaventure was buried in the Franciscan church of Lyon, which now bears his name.



Saint Bonaventure, shown as a Franciscan and a cardinal.

Why do students and teachers pray to Saint Bonaventure?

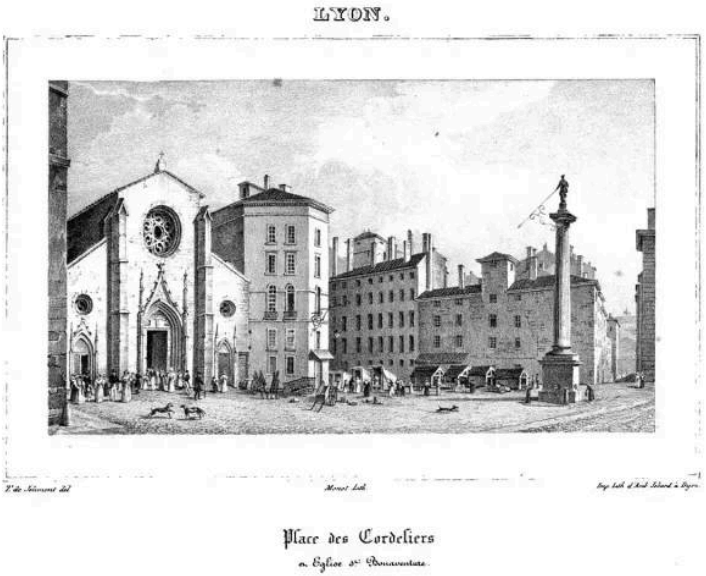
Bonaventure united two vocations that are often set against each other: that of the scholar and that of the contemplative. For him, study only makes sense if it makes love grow. As head of a divided order, he also showed that one can govern firmly without giving up gentleness or the inner life. His motto took up the words of Saint Paul: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me."

That is why Catholics pray to him for students, teachers, theologians and all who seek God with both mind and heart. In the United States, his name is carried by St. Bonaventure University in western New York, a Franciscan university.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Bonaventure in art

Saint Bonaventure wears the brown or gray habit of the Franciscans, tied with a knotted cord. As a cardinal, he is often shown with a red cardinal's hat, worn, held or hanging nearby. As a Doctor of the Church, he holds a book and sometimes a pen. Some painters, like Zurbarán, depicted scenes from his life and death, including the exposition of his body. He may also appear with a crucifix, recalling his contemplation of Christ crucified.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Bonaventure and follow the novena to Saint Bonaventure, from July 6 to 14.



The church of Saint-Bonaventure in Lyon, where he was buried.

Where to pray to Saint Bonaventure

- **Lyon** (France): the church of Saint-Bonaventure, the former Franciscan church, where he was buried.

- **Bagnoregio** (Lazio, Italy): his hometown, which keeps his memory alive.
- **La Verna** (Tuscany): the sanctuary where he wrote *The Journey of the Mind into God*.
- **Rome**: the church of San Bonaventura al Palatino.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Bonaventure to Unite Study and the Love of God

Saint Bonaventure is one of the few saints whose prayer has remained in the Church's liturgical tradition: the Roman Missal included it among the prayers of thanksgiving after Mass. You will find it below, with a famous passage from his *Journey of the Mind into God*, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

Prayer of Saint Bonaventure after Communion

> *"Pierce, most sweet Lord Jesus, the inmost depths of my soul with the most sweet and saving wound of your love, with true, serene and most holy charity, so that my soul may ever languish and melt with love and longing for you alone; that it may yearn for you and faint for your courts, and long to be dissolved and to be with you."*

Source: opening of the prayer *Transfige, dulcissime Domine Iesu*, attributed to Saint Bonaventure and given in the Roman Missal among the prayers of thanksgiving after Mass. Saintspedia translation from the Latin, which is in the public domain.

A word of Saint Bonaventure to meditate on

> *"If you ask how this comes about, question grace, not learning; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligent reading; the Bridegroom, not the teacher; God, not man."*

Source: Saint Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, chapter 7, 6, written in 1259 on Mount La Verna. Saintspedia translation from the Latin.



Saint Bonaventure in prayer.

Prayer to Saint Bonaventure

Saint Bonaventure, you sought God with all your mind and all your heart: teach me never to separate study from prayer.

You saw in every creature a trace of the Creator: open my eyes to the beauty of the world, and through it lead me back to the One who made it.

Son of Saint Francis, you served your brothers in a time of division: give wisdom and patience to those who must lead a community, a family or a work.

I entrust to you students, teachers, researchers, and my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me the grace to live your motto: that it may no longer be I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Bonaventure is celebrated on July 15, the day of his death in Lyon in 1274. The prayer after Communion is meant for the moments of thanksgiving after Mass. The original prayer suits the start of a school year, a time of exams or research, or any moment when study feels dry and you want it to lead you back to God. It can also be prayed for those who lead a community through times of tension.

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Bonaventure

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and writings of Saint Bonaventure. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on July 15, begin on July 6; it ends on July 14. You can also pray it at the start of a school year, before exams, or whenever you want to unite study and prayer.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into the day. Bonaventure taught that the soul rises to God step by step: these nine days follow the steps of his own life, from Paris to Lyon.

Day 1: The thirst for truth

As a young man, Giovanni left Italy to study in Paris. He wanted to understand. This desire for truth was already, though he did not yet know it, a desire for God. Every honest search for truth is a road on which God can be met.

Prayer: Lord, do not let the desire to know you better grow cold in me.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes slowly reading a passage of the Gospel.

Day 2: Choosing poverty

In 1243 the brilliant student joined the Friars Minor. He chose the simplicity of Francis rather than a career. Detachment freed his heart for what mattered most. He would remain a friar all his life, even as a famous teacher and later as a cardinal.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you became poor for our sake: teach me the freedom of those who are not attached to possessions.

Today: Skip an unnecessary purchase and give the money away.

Day 3: Studying in order to love

For Bonaventure, knowledge that does not lead to love remains barren. The intellect is a path, not a goal. He wrote that we should ask grace rather than learning, desire rather than understanding.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, may everything I learn make me more humble and more loving.

Today: Pray for a student or a teacher you know.

Day 4: The book of creation

In *The Journey of the Mind into God*, every creature is a trace of God. The world is a book in which we can read the goodness of the Creator, as Francis sang in his Canticle of the Creatures. Learning to read that book takes time, silence and a grateful heart.

Prayer: God our Creator, teach me to see your beauty in the simplest things.

Today: Spend a few minutes looking at a tree, the sky or a landscape, and give thanks.

Day 5: Serving amid division

Elected minister general, Bonaventure had to hold together friars who opposed one another. He sought a realistic faithfulness to the spirit of Francis, rejecting extremes on both sides. Leading people who disagree requires patience, firmness and a great deal of prayer, and Bonaventure never let governing smother his inner life.

Prayer: Lord, make me a peacemaker in the conflicts of my family, my community or my workplace.

Today: Take a step toward reconciliation with someone you disagree with.

Day 6: Telling the lives of the saints

Bonaventure wrote the life of Saint Francis so that his brothers would keep alive the memory of their father. The saints show us that the Gospel can really be lived. Their stories are not museum pieces: they are invitations addressed to us today.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the saints who have gone before me. Help me to follow their example.

Today: Read the life of a saint you know little about.

Day 7: Refusing honors

In 1265, Bonaventure declined the archbishopric of York to remain at the service of his order. He did not seek the first places. When he finally became a cardinal, it was to serve the Church at a council, not to gain prestige.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from pride and from the desire to be seen.

Today: Do a quiet service without trying to be noticed.

Day 8: Working for unity

At the Council of Lyon, Bonaventure welcomed the envoys of the Greek Church. He gave his last strength to the unity of Christians, and died before the council ended. Unity among Christians is a work that outlasts any single life; each of us can add a stone to it through prayer and charity.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you prayed that all may be one: heal the divisions among Christians.

Today: Pray for Orthodox Christians and for their Churches.

Day 9: Christ in me

Bonaventure died in Lyon in 1274, in the service of the Church. His motto sums up his life: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." All his learning and all his responsibilities were meant to make room for Christ.

Prayer: Lord, I place the intention of this novena in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Bonaventure, come and dwell in my whole life. Amen.

Today: Spend some time in adoration or silent prayer before the Lord.

Closing prayer

Saint Bonaventure, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented to you. You united learning and holiness: pray for those who study and teach, and obtain for us the grace to seek God with all our heart. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Bonaventure and the prayer to Saint Bonaventure.

PILGRIMAGE

Church of Saint Bonaventure in Lyon

In the heart of Lyon's Presqu'île, on Place des Cordeliers, the Church of Saint Bonaventure is the former church of the city's Franciscans. Saint Bonaventure, who died in Lyon in July 1274 during the Second Council of Lyon, was buried here. In France it remains the main place of remembrance for the Seraphic Doctor.

The church of the Cordeliers

In France, the Friars Minor were called "Cordeliers" because of the knotted cord they wear as a belt. Settled in Lyon from the 13th century, they received Bonaventure's body in their church. In the 15th century his remains were transferred to a new church dedicated to Saint Francis; when the tomb was opened in 1434, his head was reportedly found perfectly preserved, which helped bring about his canonization in 1482.

Later, the saint's relics were desecrated and scattered during the unrest that shook Lyon, and the silver reliquary of his head has never been found. The church, which took the name of Saint Bonaventure, has come through the centuries and remains today a busy parish church in the midst of a shopping district.



The Church of Saint Bonaventure, Place des Cordeliers in Lyon.

Visiting the church

The building is a Gothic church with a wide nave, typical of mendicant-order churches, designed to hold large crowds who came to hear preaching. Its side chapels and stained-glass windows evoke the history of the Franciscans and the saint who gave the church its name. Its location in the middle of downtown makes it a place of passage where many step in for a few minutes of prayer.



The nave of the Church of Saint Bonaventure.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Bonaventure. In the church, take a moment of silence to entrust to God your studies, your work, or your search for truth, then pray the prayer to Saint Bonaventure. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Bonaventure

- **Bagnoregio** (Lazio, Italy): his birthplace, near Orvieto.
- **La Verna** (Tuscany): the sanctuary of La Verna, where Saint Francis received the stigmata and where Bonaventure wrote *The Soul's Journey into God* in 1259.
- **Paris**: the Latin Quarter, where he studied and taught, even though the Cordeliers convent of his day has almost entirely disappeared.

- **Rome**: the Church of Saint Bonaventure on the Palatine.

Practical information

The Church of Saint Bonaventure is on Place des Cordeliers, in Lyon's 2nd arrondissement, an easy walk from Place Bellecour or Les Terreaux. It is generally open during the day, but visiting hours and Mass times may change: check the website of the parish or the Diocese of Lyon before you come. The feast of Saint Bonaventure, July 15, is a good time to visit.

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