

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Francis Borgia

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: October 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Francis Borgia

Duke of Gandia and Viceroy of Catalonia who became the third Superior General of the Jesuits.

Feast day	October 3
Born	October 28, 1510, Gandia, Kingdom of Valencia, Spain
Died	September 30, 1572, Rome
Canonized	1671, by Pope Clement X
Era	16th century

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Ducal Palace of the Borgias in Gandia

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Francis Borgia

Saint Francis Borgia was a great Spanish nobleman of the 16th century, Duke of Gandia and Viceroy of Catalonia, who gave up his titles to enter the Society of Jesus and became its third Superior General. A great-grandson of Pope Alexander VI, he embodies the turning of a family with a notorious name toward holiness. He died in Rome in 1572, was canonized by Pope Clement X in 1671, and is celebrated by the Jesuits on October 3.

Who was Saint Francis Borgia?

Francisco de Borja y Aragón was born on October 28, 1510, in Gandia, in the Kingdom of Valencia. His father, Juan Borgia, was Duke of Gandia and a grandson of Pope Alexander VI; his mother, Juana of Aragon, was a granddaughter of King Ferdinand the Catholic through an illegitimate line.

At eighteen he entered the court of Emperor Charles V. In 1529 he married a lady-in-waiting of the empress, the Portuguese noblewoman Eleanor de Castro, with whom he had eight children. Nothing in this brilliant beginning suggested the path his life would take.



The ducal palace of the Borgias in Gandia, where Saint Francis was born.

Key dates in the life of Francis Borgia

- **October 28, 1510**: Born in Gandia (Kingdom of Valencia).
- **1528**: Enters the court of Charles V.
- **1529**: Marries Eleanor de Castro.
- **May 1, 1539**: Death of Empress Isabella; he escorts her body to Granada.
- **1539-1543**: Viceroy of Catalonia.
- **1543**: Becomes Duke of Gandia on his father's death.
- **March 27, 1546**: Death of his wife; on June 2 he secretly takes his first vows in the Society of Jesus.
- **May 23, 1551**: Ordained a priest at Oñate, in the Basque Country.
- **July 2, 1565**: Elected Superior General of the Jesuits.
- **September 30, 1572**: Dies in Rome.

- **1624**: Beatified by Urban VIII.
- **1671**: Canonized by Clement X.

The shock of Granada

On May 1, 1539, Empress Isabella of Portugal, wife of Charles V, died in childbirth at the age of thirty-five. Francis, then Marquis of Lombay, was charged with leading the funeral procession to the Royal Chapel of Granada. On arrival, protocol required that the coffin be opened so the body could be identified. Before the already disfigured face of a woman admired for her beauty, he is said, according to tradition, to have declared: "Never again will I serve a master who can die."

This shock did not immediately turn him away from his duties. As Viceroy of Catalonia from 1539 to 1543, he notably defended Perpignan in 1542. He supported the Franciscan reform of Saint Peter of Alcantara and welcomed the first Jesuits to come to Spain, among them Saint Peter Faber.

Having become Duke of Gandia in 1543, he withdrew to his lands, took care of his vassals, founded a university entrusted to the Jesuits and wrote short spiritual treatises.

From duke to Jesuit

Widowed in 1546, Francis asked to be admitted to the Society of Jesus. Saint Ignatius of Loyola accepted him but asked him to keep it secret until his children were settled. He made his profession in 1548. That same year he obtained from Pope Paul III the examination and official approval of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, then under criticism in Spain.

In 1550 he met Ignatius in Rome and helped fund the future Roman College. Ordained a priest in 1551, he preached, prayed at length and became a sought-after spiritual adviser: Saint Teresa of Avila consulted him twice.

Appointed commissary of the Jesuits in Spain from 1554, he founded college after college. In 1559 some of his writings were placed on the Index of the Spanish Inquisition, along with other texts published under his name. Out of prudence he withdrew to Portugal, before being called to Rome in 1561.



Saint Francis Borgia painted by Alonso Cano (Museum of Fine Arts, Seville).

Superior General of the Jesuits

Elected Superior General on July 2, 1565, on the first ballot, Francis Borgia governed the Society for seven years. He clarified its rules, opened the novitiate of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale in Rome and in 1568 launched the construction of the Church of the Gesù. Colleges multiplied across Europe.

Under his leadership the first Jesuits left for Spanish America, for Mexico and Peru, and also for Florida, the first Jesuit mission in what is now the United States. In 1571, at the request of Pope Saint Pius V, he accompanied a

diplomatic mission to Spain, Portugal and France. Exhausted, he returned to Rome on September 28, 1572, and died there two days later.

What his holiness teaches

Francis Borgia knew wealth, power and the favor of an emperor. He chose to leave them, not out of contempt for the world, but because he had understood that nothing that passes away can fill a human heart. His humility, his love of prayer and his obedience made him one of the builders of the rapid growth of the Society of Jesus.

No official patronage is attached to him in the universal Church, but he is invoked for those who hold positions of responsibility, for widowers and families in mourning, and for those who seek to give their lives to God, especially later in life.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Francis Borgia in art

- **The black Jesuit habit**, often in contrast with a ducal coronet or hat laid at his feet, sign of the honors he renounced.
- **A skull crowned with a crown**, or the open coffin of Empress Isabella, recalling the scene at Granada.
- **The Blessed Sacrament or a monstrance**, sign of his Eucharistic piety.
- **A gaunt face**, marked by penance, as in the portrait by Alonso Cano.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Francis Borgia and the novena to Saint Francis Borgia.



The Church of the Gesù in Rome, whose construction he launched.

Where to pray to Saint Francis Borgia

- **Gandia** (Valencia): the ducal palace of the Borgias, his birthplace.
- **Madrid**: the church of San Francisco de Borja, where his relics are venerated.
- **Rome**: the Church of the Gesù, whose construction he launched.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Francis Borgia to Seek God Above All

Saint Francis Borgia left no prayer that has become traditional, but a saying that tradition attributes to him sums up his conversion. You will find it below with its context, followed by an original prayer to Saint Francis Borgia by Saintspedia.

A saying of Francis Borgia to meditate on

> *"Never again will I serve a master who can die."*

Context: words that tradition attributes to Francis Borgia in Granada, in May 1539, before the body of Empress Isabella of Portugal, whose funeral procession he had escorted.

Prayer to Saint Francis Borgia

Saint Francis Borgia, you knew the honors of the court, and before the face of death you understood that nothing that passes away can fill the heart. Teach me to seek first the Lord who never dies.

You who governed a province and a duchy with justice, pray for those who hold power today, that they may serve the common good and take care of the weakest.

You who left your titles to become a simple religious, and then the servant of your brothers, give me humility and inner freedom.

I entrust to you families tried by grief, those who are seeking their vocation, and my own intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me the grace to live, like you, for the greater glory of God. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Francis Borgia is celebrated on October 3 by the Society of Jesus; the older Roman calendar kept his feast on October 10. He died in Rome on September 30, 1572. This prayer is especially fitting:

- for leaders, managers and all who hold responsibility over others;
- after the death of a spouse or a loved one;
- when discerning a vocation or a major change of life, even later in life;
- when success, money or status take too much room in your heart;
- for the Jesuits and for the schools and colleges they run.

The motto of the Jesuits, *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, "for the greater glory of God," which Francis lived so fully, can serve as a short prayer to repeat during the day.

For nine days of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Francis Borgia, and read the life of Saint Francis Borgia.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Francis Borgia

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Francis Borgia, Duke of Gandia and third Superior General of the Jesuits. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish on the eve of his feast of October 3, begin on September 24. It is also suitable for anyone facing a major decision, a bereavement or a call to a deeper life with God.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the 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 each day helps turn the prayer into a concrete choice.

You may begin each day with this prayer: *Lord, you led Saint Francis Borgia from the honors of the world to the service of your Kingdom. Through his intercession, free my heart from what passes away, and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

Day 1: A heavy family name

Francis was born into the Borgia family, whose name was associated with scandal. He did not choose his family, but he chose what he would make of his life. No inheritance, however heavy, can prevent God's grace from writing a new story.

Prayer: Lord, heal the wounds of my family history and make me a source of blessing for those who come after me.

Today: Pray for your ancestors and for the generations to come.

Day 2: At the court of the emperor

As a young man, Francis lived at the court of Charles V, among honors, intrigues and ambitions. He served his sovereign loyally, and he learned there both the value of duty and the fragility of worldly glory.

Prayer: Lord, help me to work faithfully without becoming a slave to success or approval.

Today: Do your work well today without seeking to be noticed.

Day 3: A husband and father

Francis married Eleanor de Castro and had eight children. His holiness did not begin when he became a Jesuit: it took root in his family life, in the love and duties of a husband and a father.

Prayer: Lord, bless married couples and parents, and make their homes places of holiness.

Today: Do something kind and unexpected for a member of your family.

Day 4: The face of death

In Granada, before the disfigured body of the empress, Francis understood that beauty and power pass away. Tradition says he resolved never again to serve a master who can die. Remembering death is not morbid; it helps us choose what truly lasts.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to number my days, that I may gain a wise heart.

Today: Pray for someone who has died, and ask yourself what really matters in your life.



Saint Francis Borgia, by Alonso Cano.

Day 5: Governing with justice

As Viceroy of Catalonia and then Duke of Gandia, Francis exercised power with care for his people. He took care of his vassals and supported the reform of the Church. Authority, for a Christian, is a form of service.

Prayer: Lord, give those who govern a sense of justice and a heart for the poor.

Today: Pray for a leader you find difficult, and use your own authority gently.

Day 6: Grief and a new call

When his wife died in 1546, Francis did not close in on himself. In his grief he heard a new call and asked to join the Society of Jesus. God can open a path even in the darkest moments of loss.

Prayer: Lord, comfort widows, widowers and all who mourn, and show them the way forward.

Today: Visit, call or write to someone who has recently lost a loved one.

Day 7: Leaving everything

The duke gave up his titles and his property to become a simple religious. True freedom is found in giving ourselves completely to God. What we hand over to him is never lost; it becomes a seed for others.

Prayer: Lord, free me from my attachments, and let me find my treasure in you alone.

Today: Give away something you are attached to but do not need.

Day 8: A man of prayer

As a priest, Francis spent long hours in prayer and became a spiritual adviser even to Saint Teresa of Avila. He helped obtain the approval of Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. Everything he did flowed from his intimacy with God.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to pray, and make my action flow from my prayer.

Today: Take fifteen minutes of silent prayer, perhaps with an examen of your day.

Day 9: For the greater glory of God

As Superior General, Francis sent Jesuits to the Americas, founded colleges and began the Church of the Gesù. Until his last journey, he spent himself for the Church. He died exhausted, but at peace, having served the Master who never dies. The small beginnings he blessed, colleges, missions and a church in Rome, still bear fruit today.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Francis Borgia, may my whole life be for your greater glory. Amen.

Today: Offer your whole day to God when you wake up, and thank him for it in the evening.

Closing prayer

Saint Francis Borgia, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have carried. Pray for leaders and for families, for those who mourn and for those who seek their vocation. Obtain for me the grace to serve only the Lord who does not die, and to live everything for the greater glory of God. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Ducal Palace of the Borgias in Gandia

The Ducal Palace of the Borgias, in Gandia, south of Valencia, is the residence where Saint Francis Borgia was born in 1510 and where he lived as duke before entering the Society of Jesus. Now owned by the Jesuits, the palace is today the saint's main place of remembrance in Spain, along with the Madrid church that keeps his relics.

The home of the Dukes of Gandia

The Duchy of Gandia entered the Borgia family at the end of the 15th century. The palace, in the heart of the city, was the dukes' residence. Francis was born there on October 28, 1510. After his father's death in 1543, he returned as duke, looked after his lands and his vassals, and led a life of ever more intense prayer. It was also in Gandia that he founded a university, entrusted to the Jesuits, and began his theology studies after his first vows.

The Jesuits became owners of the palace at the end of the 19th century. They made it a place of remembrance for Francis Borgia, one that combines the history of the powerful family with that of his conversion.



The Ducal Palace of the Borgias in Gandia.

Visiting the palace

The visit lets you discover the palace's state rooms, its courtyard and the spaces devoted to the memory of the saint. It helps you understand the contrast between the lavish life of a grandee of Spain and the choice of poverty that Francis made in joining the Jesuits.



The interior of the Ducal Palace of Gandia.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Francis Borgia. In this place marked by wealth and power, one can meditate on his resolution at Granada: never again to serve a mortal lord. Extend this time with the prayer to Saint Francis Borgia. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places associated with Saint Francis Borgia

- **Madrid**: the church of San Francisco de Borja, run by the Jesuits, where his relics are venerated.
- **Granada**: the Royal Chapel, where in 1539 he escorted the remains of Empress Isabella.
- **Oñate** (Basque Country): where he was ordained a priest in 1551; he celebrated his first Mass at the Sanctuary of Loyola.

- **Rome**: the church of the Gesù, whose construction he launched in 1568, and the city where he died in 1572.

Practical information

Gandia is on the Mediterranean coast, about 70 kilometers south of Valencia. The palace is generally visited with a guide or on an organized route. Days, hours and visiting conditions vary: check the palace's official website before you come.

CREDITS

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