

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint George

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: April 23

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IN BRIEF

Saint George

Roman soldier martyred around 303, dragon slayer of legend, patron saint of England, knights and Scouts.

Feast day	April 23
Born	around 280, Cappadocia (today in Turkey), according to tradition
Died	around 303, Lydda (today Lod, Israel)
Canonized	Pre-congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	England, Georgia, Catalonia, Portugal, knights, soldiers, horsemen, Scouts, armorers, farmers

In this booklet

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Basilica of San Giorgio al Velabro in Rome, Relic of Saint George

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint George

Saint George was a Christian soldier martyred at the beginning of the fourth century, most likely at Lydda in Palestine, during the persecution of Diocletian. Very little is known about his life, but his cult, attested very early, spread throughout the East and then the West. The Middle Ages made him the knight who slays the dragon, patron saint of England, Georgia, Catalonia and knights, and later of the Scouts. His feast day is April 23.

Who was Saint George?

The oldest accounts present George as an officer in the Roman army, from Cappadocia (in present-day Turkey) on his father's side and from Lydda on his mother's. When Diocletian launched the great persecution of 303, he refused to sacrifice to the gods and openly professed his faith. He was tortured and beheaded. His tomb at Lydda (today Lod, in Israel) quickly became a place of pilgrimage.

The "Acts" of his martyrdom, written later, piled up improbable tortures and wonders. As early as 494, a decree attributed to Pope Gelasius placed George among the saints "whose names are justly revered among men, but whose deeds are known only to God." The Church affirms the reality of his martyrdom and his cult, without vouching for the details of the stories.

Key dates

- **c. 280**: Born in Cappadocia, according to tradition.
- **c. 303**: Martyred under Diocletian, most likely at Lydda in Palestine.
- **4th-6th c.**: A basilica is built over his tomb at Lydda; his cult spreads throughout the East.

- **494**: The so-called Gelasian Decree names him while urging caution about his Acts.
- **8th c.**: Pope Zachary places a relic of his head in the church of San Giorgio al Velabro in Rome.
- **13th c.**: The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine popularizes the fight with the dragon.
- **1348**: Edward III places the Order of the Garter under his patronage; George becomes patron of England.
- **2002**: After being dropped from the universal calendar in 1969, he is restored as an optional memorial on April 23.

The legend of the dragon

The fight with the dragon only appears around the eleventh century, and it was the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, in the thirteenth century, that gave it its classic form. Near the city of Silene in Libya, a dragon terrorizes the people, who hand over victims drawn by lot each day. The lot falls on the king's daughter. George, riding by, makes the sign of the cross, wounds the beast with his lance and leads it into the city, held on a leash made from the princess's girdle. He kills it only after the whole city has accepted baptism.

The story is an image: the dragon stands for evil and paganism, the princess for the Church or the soul set free. This image made Saint George famous in art, from Paolo Uccello to Raphael, and turned him into the model of the Christian knight.



Saint George and the Dragon, by Raphael (around 1504, Louvre Museum).

A saint honored from East to West

In the East, George is one of the most popular saints: Greek, Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian Christians call him "great martyr" and "bearer of victory." Georgia counts hundreds of churches dedicated to him. The Crusaders brought his cult back to Europe, where he became the saint of knights.

England adopted him as patron in the fourteenth century, and his red cross on a white field still forms the English flag. In Catalonia, Sant Jordi on April 23 is a great popular feast: people give a rose and a book, a custom behind World Book Day. Portugal, Aragon, Malta, Lithuania and the city of Moscow also count him among their protectors. In the twentieth century, Baden-Powell gave him to the Scouts as their patron, and they celebrate Saint George's Day every year.



Saint George and the Dragon, by Paolo Uccello (around 1470, National Gallery, London).

Why do Catholics pray to Saint George?

Behind the legend lies a fact: a soldier preferred to die rather than deny Christ. Saint George is the saint of courage in faith and of the fight against evil, beginning within oneself. People pray to him for strength in trials, for soldiers, police officers and all who protect others, for Scouts and young people, and traditionally against skin diseases and for good harvests, since his name means "farmer" in Greek.

Where to pray to Saint George

- **Rome**: the Basilica of San Giorgio al Velabro, which has kept a relic of his head since the eighth century.
- **Lod** (Israel): the Church of Saint George, served by the Greek Orthodox Church, holds his traditional tomb in its crypt.

- **Venice**: the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, with Carpaccio's cycle of paintings on Saint George.
- **Barcelona**: the Sant Jordi chapel of the Palau de la Generalitat, open to the public on April 23.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint George or follow the novena to Saint George, from April 14 to 22.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint George

About this prayer

Saint George has been prayed to since the fourth century, in the East and the West. Medieval knights, soldiers and today's Scouts have placed themselves under his protection. The text below is an original composition by Saintspedia. It draws on what the Church remembers of him: the witness of a soldier who stayed faithful to Christ until martyrdom, and the image of the fight against evil.

Prayer to Saint George

Saint George, soldier of Christ,
you preferred death to denying your faith:
obtain for me the courage to stay faithful
when it is hard to believe and to bear witness.

Christians picture you slaying the dragon:
help me fight against evil,
first of all in my own heart,
against fear, selfishness, lies and discouragement.

Protect those who protect others:
soldiers, police officers, firefighters and rescuers.
Keep Scouts and all young people
in loyalty, service and joy.

Today I entrust to you this intention: (name your intention).
Present it to the Lord, for whom you gave your life.
Saint George, pray for us. Amen.

Original text by Saintspedia.

A short prayer before a trial

Saint George, you stood firm in your trial: give me strength and peace to face what lies ahead of me today. Let me not be afraid, for the Lord is with me. Amen.

Original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

You can pray to Saint George at any time, especially on April 23, his feast day, before a trial, a commitment or a mission, or at Scout gatherings. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint George and read the life of Saint George.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint George

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what tradition tells of Saint George, soldier and martyr. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on April 14; it ends on April 22, before the feast on April 23. It can also be prayed at any time, before a trial or for someone who needs courage.

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 and a Hail Mary. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into the day. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

Day 1: A soldier who served

George was an officer in the Roman army. Before he was a hero of legend, he was a man who served with discipline and loyalty.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust my intention to you for these nine days. Teach me to serve faithfully wherever you have placed me.

Act of the day: Carefully complete a task you keep putting off.

Day 2: Choosing faith

When the emperor ordered sacrifice to the gods, George refused. He knew what this choice would cost him.

Prayer: Saint George, help me choose Christ, even when the choice costs me.

Act of the day: Make the sign of the cross, without embarrassment, before a meal with others.

Day 3: Courage in trial

The accounts of his martyrdom stress his steadiness amid torment. Courage is not the absence of fear but trust that is stronger than fear.

Prayer: Lord, when I am afraid, give me the strength to trust.

Act of the day: Write down a fear that holds you back and entrust it to God.

Day 4: The fight against evil

The dragon Saint George defeats stands for evil. That fight begins within us, against whatever draws us away from God and others.

Prayer: Saint George, help me recognize and fight the evil in my own heart.

Act of the day: Make an examination of conscience, and if possible go to confession this week.

Day 5: Setting others free

In the legend, George saves the princess given up to the dragon. True courage always turns toward those who need protecting.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to those who need to be defended.

Act of the day: Stand up for someone who is criticized or left out.

Day 6: Strength from the cross

Before facing the dragon, George makes the sign of the cross. His victory comes not from his lance, but from Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, may my strength be in you, and not in myself alone.

Act of the day: Spend a few minutes before a crucifix.

Day 7: For those who protect

Saint George is the patron of soldiers, knights and all who risk their lives for others.

Prayer: Saint George, protect soldiers, police officers, firefighters, rescuers and their families.

Act of the day: Thank someone who watches over the safety of others.

Day 8: For young people and Scouts

The Scouts chose Saint George as their patron. They see in him a model of a loyal, generous life given to service.

Prayer: Saint George, keep young people loyal, generous and joyful in service.

Act of the day: Do someone a good turn without expecting anything back.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

George gave his life for Christ. His name, known throughout the world, reminds us that faithfulness bears fruit far beyond ourselves.

Prayer: Saint George, present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you. Obtain for me the grace to stay faithful to the end. Amen.

Act of the day: If you can, go to Mass on April 23, or pray the prayer to Saint George again.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of San Giorgio al Velabro in Rome, Relic of Saint George

The Basilica of San Giorgio al Velabro is a small seventh-century Roman church at the foot of the Palatine Hill, near the Tiber. Since the pontificate of Pope Zachary in the eighth century, it has kept a relic of the head of Saint George. It is the main shrine of Saint George in Rome and one of the oldest in the West.



The Basilica of San Giorgio al Velabro and its Romanesque bell tower, in Rome.

The Velabrum, a district full of history

In antiquity, the Velabrum was a low, marshy area between the Palatine and the Capitoline, where Roman tradition placed the finding of Romulus and Remus. The church stands against the Arch of the Moneychangers, raised in 204 in honor of Emperor Septimius Severus, next to the Arch of Janus. It was built in the seventh century, probably for the Greek community living in this district near the river port.

The relic of Saint George

Pope Zachary, himself of Greek origin, had a relic of the head of Saint George, found at the Lateran, moved to the church. The basilica was then dedicated to Saint George, together with Saint Sebastian. The relic is kept beneath the high altar and is venerated each year on April 23, the saint's feast day.

What to see

- **The portico and bell tower**, added in the twelfth century. The portico, destroyed by a bomb attack in July 1993, was rebuilt as it was.
- **The interior**, very simple, with ancient reused columns, each one different.
- **The apse fresco**, attributed to the school of Pietro Cavallini (late thirteenth century): Christ with the Virgin, Saint Peter, Saint George with his horse and Saint Sebastian.

San Giorgio al Velabro is also a cardinal's titular church. Saint John Henry Newman received it when Leo XIII made him a cardinal in 1879.

Practical tips

- **Address**: Via del Velabro, a few minutes' walk from the Mouth of Truth and the Roman Forum.

- **Visiting**: the church is open mainly in the morning and at certain afternoon hours; times vary, so check before you go.
- **Nearby**: Santa Maria in Cosmedin, the Forum Boarium and the Palatine.
- **On April 23**, a solemn Mass is celebrated in honor of Saint George.

Praying to Saint George

Before or after your visit, you can say the prayer to Saint George or follow the novena to Saint George. To get to know him better, read the life of Saint George.

Credits and sources

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