

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Hermann Joseph

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 7

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IN BRIEF

Saint Hermann Joseph

Premonstratensian canon of Steinfeld abbey, mystic and poet, devoted friend of the Virgin Mary.

Feast day	April 7
Born	c. 1150, Cologne, Germany
Died	April 4 or 7, 1241, Hoven, near Zülpich, Germany
Canonized	Cult confirmed on August 11, 1958, by Pope Pius XII
Era	13th century
Patron saint of	children, sacristans

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Hermann Joseph

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Hermann Joseph

Saint Hermann Joseph was a German Premonstratensian canon, mystic and poet who spent almost his whole life at the abbey of Steinfeld, in the Eifel hills, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Born in Cologne around 1150 and dead in 1241, he is remembered for his tender love of the Virgin Mary and for the story of the apple he offered to the Child Jesus. Pope Pius XII officially confirmed his cult in 1958. His feast day is April 7.

Who was Saint Hermann Joseph?

Hermann was a quiet religious. For many years he looked after the refectory of his abbey, then served as its sacristan. Yet his inner life was remarkably intense. His brothers gave him the nickname "Joseph" because of his mystical union with the Virgin Mary: he served the Mother of the Lord as Saint Joseph had served her. He left Latin prayers and poems of great delicacy, and he is seen as an important witness of Rhineland spirituality, a century before the great German mystics of the fourteenth century.

We know him through a Latin *Life* written shortly after his death by an anonymous author, probably the prior of Steinfeld, who says he relied on what Hermann and those close to him had confided. The text is mostly about mystical graces: visions, ecstasies, conversations with Christ, the Virgin and the saints. Historians regard it as a sincere account, to be read within the monastic culture of the time, when the lives of saints were told in the light of Scripture.



The Vision of Blessed Hermann Joseph, by Anthony van Dyck (1629-1630), Vienna.

Key dates in the life of Hermann Joseph

- **c. 1150**: Born in Cologne, into a family that had fallen into poverty.
- **c. 1162**: At twelve, he is received by the Premonstratensian canons of Steinfeld abbey, in the Eifel.
- **The following years**: Studies in Friesland, at the Premonstratensian abbey of Mariëngaarde, then ordination to the priesthood at Steinfeld.
- **Late twelfth and early thirteenth century**: Refectorian, then sacristan of the abbey, and spiritual director of Cistercian nuns.
- **April 4 or 7, 1241**: Dies at the Cistercian convent of Marienborn, in Hoven near Zülpich; his body is brought back to Steinfeld.
- **1728**: Pope Benedict XIII approves his inclusion in the Premonstratensian breviary.
- **August 11, 1958**: Pope Pius XII officially recognizes his cult.

The boy with the apple

The best-known episode of his life comes from his childhood in Cologne. Little Hermann loved to pray before a statue of the Virgin and Child in one of the city's churches. One day, tradition says, he offered an apple to the Child Jesus; the statue of Mary bent down and the Child took the fruit.

Historians of spirituality point out the symbolic depth of this story. The apple recalls the fruit of the Garden of Eden, and the child who offers it to Christ, the new Adam, held by Mary, the new Eve, sums up the whole theology of the Incarnation. To this day, pilgrims leave apples on his tomb at Steinfeld.

A canon of Steinfeld

At twelve, Hermann entered the abbey of Steinfeld, which belonged to the Order of Prémontré founded a few decades earlier by Saint Norbert. The Premonstratensians, also called Norbertines, are canons regular: they live in community under the Rule of Saint Augustine, sing the Divine Office and devote themselves to pastoral ministry. Hermann was sent to study in Friesland, at the abbey of Mariëngaarde, then returned to Steinfeld, where he was ordained a priest.

He was given humble jobs: first the refectory, then the sacristy, which he kept for most of his life. Caring for the church, the sacred vessels and the vestments became his way of living close to the Lord. His *Life* stresses his humility, patience, obedience and kindness toward everyone. It also speaks of physical trials and periods of spiritual dryness.

A mystic of Mary

Devotion to the Virgin stood at the center of Hermann's life. His *Life* tells of apparitions of Mary and even of a "mystical marriage" with her. These accounts make more sense in light of his reading of the Song of Songs. Like other writers

of his order, notably Philip of Harvengt, Hermann saw in the Bridegroom and Bride of the Song both Christ and his Mother. He is said to have written a commentary on the Song for the nuns he directed, now lost.

Several texts considered authentic have come down to us:

- twelve prose thanksgivings on the mysteries of Christ's life;
- poems on the joys of Mary and a hymn to the Virgin;
- a long prayer to Christ inspired by the Song of Songs;
- a song in honor of Saint Ursula and her companions, the virgin martyrs of Cologne, to whom he was deeply devoted.

The hymn *Summi Regis Cor, aveto*, one of the earliest poems addressed to the Heart of Jesus, has sometimes been attributed to him, but that attribution remains uncertain.

Death at Hoven and his cult

Late in life, Hermann served as spiritual guide to a community of Cistercian nuns at the convent of Marienborn, in Hoven, near Zülpich. He died there at a great age, on a Holy Thursday in early April 1241. According to his *Life*, his body was found incorrupt several weeks later and carried back to Steinfeld, where miracles were reported at his tomb.

Hermann was never canonized through the modern procedure, but devotion to him never died out. In 1728 Benedict XIII allowed his office in the Premonstratensian breviary, and on August 11, 1958, Pius XII recognized his public cult, which amounts to what is called an equivalent canonization. The Roman Martyrology mentions him on April 7. Baroque painters portrayed him, such as Anthony van Dyck in a canvas now in Vienna and Jean-Guillaume Carlier in Liège.

Why is Saint Hermann Joseph the patron saint of children and sacristans?

The story of the apple made him a natural friend of children: a small boy who gave Jesus what he had, with complete trust. He is invoked for children and for their first friendship with Christ. His decades of faithful work in the sacristy made him a model for sacristans, altar servers and all who care for churches, sacred vessels and vestments. More broadly, he is a saint for anyone whose service is hidden and ordinary.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Hermann Joseph in art

- **The white habit** of the Premonstratensian canons.
- **An apple**, offered to the Child Jesus in the arms of Mary.
- **The Virgin Mary** reaching out to him or joining her hand to his, the scene of his "mystical marriage".
- **Kneeling in prayer**, often surrounded by angels, as in the painting by Van Dyck.

What can we learn from Saint Hermann Joseph?

Hermann Joseph shows that a very ordinary life can be filled with a great love of God. Sacristan, refectorian, confessor of nuns, he did nothing spectacular. But he lived each task as a service to Christ and his Mother. The gesture of the child offering an apple to Jesus sums up his spirituality: give God what you have, even if it is little, with the heart of a child.

You can pray to him for children, for sacristans and those who serve at the altar, to grow in love for Mary, and to keep joy in humble tasks. To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Hermann Joseph or the novena to Saint Hermann Joseph.

Where to pray to Saint Hermann Joseph

- **Steinfeld** (Kall, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany): the basilica of the former abbey, which keeps his tomb. Pilgrims still leave apples beside it.
- **Cologne**: his native city, where tradition places the story of the apple in one of the city's churches.
- **Premonstratensian abbeys**: many houses of the order, in Belgium, France and elsewhere, keep his memory and his image.
- **Vincelottes** (Burgundy, France): the church of Saint-Martin has a depiction of Saint Hermann Joseph.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Hermann Joseph, the Boy with the Apple

Saint Hermann Joseph, a Premonstratensian canon of Steinfeld in the thirteenth century, wrote Latin prayers and poems himself, notably in honor of the joys of the Virgin Mary. These texts have no widely used English translation, so this page offers an original prayer inspired by his life and his love for Mary, followed by a few intentions to entrust to him.

A prayer shaped by his own

Among his authentic writings are twelve thanksgivings on the mysteries of Christ's life, which begin with the words *Gratias tibi, Domine Iesu Christe*, "I give you thanks, Lord Jesus Christ." You can take up this simple formula yourself, thanking the Lord for each great moment of his life: his birth, his childhood, his Passion, his Resurrection.



The Mystical Marriage of Saint Hermann Joseph, by Jean-Guillaume Carlier, Liège.

Prayer to Saint Hermann Joseph

Saint Hermann Joseph, as a child you offered an apple to the Child Jesus in his Mother's arms. Teach me to give God what I have, even if it is little, with a simple and trusting heart.

For years you served in the sacristy and the refectory. Obtain for me the joy of doing the humblest tasks with love, without seeking to be noticed.

You loved the Virgin Mary as Joseph loved her. Lead me to her. May she present me to her Son and keep me close to him in prayer.

You guided nuns on the way to God. Pray for priests, for spiritual directors and for all who are seeking their vocation. Watch over children, too, so that they may discover early the friendship of Jesus. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may I give thanks every day to the Lord Jesus for all his gifts. Amen.

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

Intentions to entrust to Saint Hermann Joseph

- For children and their first encounter with Jesus.
- For sacristans, altar servers and all who take care of churches.
- For the Norbertine canons and for religious vocations.
- To grow in love for the Virgin Mary.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Hermann Joseph's feast day is April 7. Pray to him with your children at home, before serving at Mass or preparing the church, or during May, the month of Mary. You might also place an apple before an image of the Virgin and Child while saying this prayer. For nine days of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Hermann Joseph, and read the life of Saint Hermann Joseph to know him better.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Hermann Joseph

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Hermann Joseph, Premonstratensian canon of Steinfeld and friend of the Virgin Mary. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on his feast day, April 7, begin on March 30. You can also pray it at any time of the year, for a child, for a vocation, or to grow in love for Mary.

How to pray this novena

Each day, 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. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life, which is exactly where Hermann Joseph found God.

If you pray the novena with children, read the meditation aloud in your own words and let them choose the small act of the day. Hermann Joseph is a saint they can easily understand.

Day 1: The heart of a child

As a boy in Cologne, Hermann prayed before a statue of the Virgin and Child as naturally as he would speak to his own family. Jesus said that the Kingdom belongs to those who are like little children.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me back the simplicity of a child before you, and let me speak to you with trust.

Today: Pray for a few minutes in front of an image of the Virgin and Child, in your own words.

Day 2: The apple offered

Tradition says that the child Hermann offered an apple to the Child Jesus, and the Child accepted it. God does not look at the size of our gifts but at the love with which we give them. Like the widow's two small coins in the Gospel, the apple was worth much because it was given with the whole heart.

Prayer: Lord, I offer you today what I have: my time, my work, my weaknesses. Accept them as you accepted the apple.

Today: Give something small but real: a coin to someone in need, a fruit to a neighbor, an hour to a friend.

Day 3: Poverty accepted

Hermann was born into a family that had fallen into poverty. He learned early to depend on God and not on possessions.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the worry of having more, and teach me to trust your providence.

Today: Do without one comfort and give what you save to the poor.

Day 4: Leaving home at twelve

At twelve, Hermann entered the abbey of Steinfeld. Like the boy Jesus in the Temple, he chose early to be in his Father's house.

Prayer: Lord, call young people to follow you, and give them the courage to answer generously.

Today: Pray by name for a young person you know who is discerning a vocation or a future.

Day 5: Serving at table

For years, Hermann was in charge of the refectory, serving his brothers' meals. Jesus himself said: "I am among you as one who serves."

Prayer: Lord, help me to serve the people I live with, gladly and without counting.

Today: Set the table, wash the dishes or cook a meal for others without being asked.

Day 6: Keeper of the sanctuary

As sacristan, Hermann cared for the church, the sacred vessels and the vestments. He handled them with love because they served the Eucharist.

Prayer: Lord, give me reverence for your presence in the Blessed Sacrament, and bless all who care for your churches.

Today: Make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or thank your parish sacristan or an altar server.

Day 7: In times of dryness

Hermann's *Life* speaks of physical suffering and of long periods of spiritual dryness. He kept praying even when he felt nothing. Many saints have known this night; it is often the time when love becomes most pure, because it no longer seeks a reward.

Prayer: Lord, when prayer seems empty, keep me faithful. Let me seek you and not your consolations.

Today: Keep your time of prayer today exactly as planned, even if you do not feel like it.

Day 8: With Mary

His brothers called him "Joseph" because he loved and served Mary as Joseph did. Mary always leads us to her Son. Hermann's poems on the joys of Mary show a man who never stopped wondering at the Mother of God.

Prayer: Holy Mary, Mother of God, take me by the hand as you took Hermann's, and lead me to Jesus.

Today: Pray one decade of the Rosary slowly, meditating on a joyful mystery.

Day 9: Giving thanks

Hermann wrote twelve thanksgivings, each beginning "I give you thanks, Lord Jesus Christ." His life ended as it had been lived, in gratitude.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, I give you thanks for your birth, your hidden life, your Passion and your Resurrection. Through the intercession of Saint Hermann Joseph, I place my intention in your hands. Amen.

Today: Write down three things you are thankful for and thank God for each one.

Closing prayer

Saint Hermann Joseph, humble servant of the altar and friend of the Virgin Mary, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for children, for sacristans and all who serve in the house of God, for priests and religious, and for me. Obtain for me a childlike heart, faithfulness in small things and a deep love for Mary, who leads us to Jesus. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Hermann Joseph and pray the prayer to Saint Hermann Joseph.

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