

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Berchmans

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: August 13

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IN BRIEF

Saint John Berchmans

Young Flemish Jesuit who died in Rome at twenty-two, model of faithfulness in ordinary life and patron saint of altar servers.

Feast day	August 13, November 26
Born	March 13, 1599, Diest, Belgium
Died	August 13, 1621, Rome, Italy
Canonized	January 15, 1888, by Pope Leo XIII
Era	17th century
Patron saint of	altar servers, young people, students

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint John Berchmans

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John Berchmans

Saint John Berchmans was a young Flemish Jesuit who died in Rome in 1621, at the age of twenty-two, as he was completing his studies in philosophy. He founded nothing, was never ordained a priest and did nothing extraordinary in the eyes of the world. His holiness lies entirely in the way he lived the daily routine of religious life: prayer, study and community life, with a cheerfulness his companions never forgot. Canonized in 1888 and honored as the patron saint of altar servers, he is celebrated on August 13, and on November 26 in the Society of Jesus.

Who was Saint John Berchmans?

Jan Berchmans was born on March 13, 1599, in Diest, in the duchy of Brabant, then part of the Spanish Netherlands and today in Belgium. His father, who bore the same first name, was a master shoemaker and leather merchant, a respected man in the town, a member of the guilds and an alderman. His mother was Elisabeth Vanden Hove. A joyful boy, John wanted to become a priest from his early teens.

He studied at the Jesuit college of Mechelen (Malines), where he proved an excellent student. His parents hoped he would have a fine career in the Church. John chose religious life instead: on September 24, 1616, he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus. His mother died that same year, on December 1. His father would later become a priest himself.



The house where John Berchmans was born, in Diest, Belgium.

Key dates in the life of John Berchmans

- **March 13, 1599**: Born in Diest, in Brabant.
- **Teenage years**: Student at the Jesuit college of Mechelen.
- **September 24, 1616**: Enters the novitiate of the Society of Jesus.
- **December 1, 1616**: Death of his mother.
- **1619**: Sent to Rome to study philosophy at the Roman College.
- **July 8, 1621**: Brilliantly passes his final examination in philosophy.
- **August 13, 1621**: Dies in Rome of dysentery.
- **1865**: Beatified by Pope Pius IX.
- **January 15, 1888**: Canonized by Pope Leo XIII.

A student at the Roman College

In 1619, his superiors sent him to Rome to continue his formation at the Roman College, the great Jesuit university. There, the memory of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, who had died in the same house in 1591, was still fresh. His teachers and classmates were struck by the way he combined a brilliant mind with real human maturity. He was friendly, attentive to others and good-humored, and he took every detail of the rule seriously without ever becoming rigid.

A famous saying is attributed to him: his greatest penance was common life. It sums up his spirituality well. There were no spectacular austerities, but a patient faithfulness to schedules, to study, to small services and to the brothers he lived with every day. His personal journal, which has been preserved, shows that this ordinary life was carried by deep prayer, which his biographers do not hesitate to call mystical union with God.

Death at twenty-two

At the beginning of 1621, his health declined, though no one was really worried. On July 8, he successfully defended his final examination in philosophy. Shortly afterward, a violent attack of dysentery sent him to the infirmary. He died on August 13, 1621, aged twenty-two. According to his biographers, he asked to hold his crucifix, his rosary and the book of the rules of the Society, saying these were the three things dearest to him. They became his attributes in art.

A growing devotion, from Flanders to Louisiana

John Berchmans's reputation for holiness spread quickly, in Flanders as in Rome. His letters in Dutch to his family and friends were kept and published. The cause for his beatification succeeded in 1865, under Pius IX.

The miracle that led to his canonization took place in the United States. In 1866, at Grand Coteau, Louisiana, a young novice of the Society of the Sacred Heart, Mary Wilson, lay dying. Her sisters prayed to John Berchmans, and she was healed; she said that he had appeared to her. This healing was accepted for his canonization, proclaimed by Leo XIII on January 15, 1888, on the same day as those of Saint Peter Claver and Saint Alphonsus Rodriguez.

The saint's body rests in a baroque sarcophagus beneath the altar of the left transept of the church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome. In 1921, for the third centenary of his death, a great procession welcomed his relics in Leuven. Churches are dedicated to him in Rome, in Etterbeek (Brussels) and in Montreal, and the cathedral of Shreveport, Louisiana, bears his name. Many Jesuit schools have chosen him as their patron.

In 1960, Saint John XXIII told the seminarians of Rome that, as a young seminarian himself, he often came to pray in the church of Sant'Ignazio before the altars of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga and Saint John Berchmans, asking for the grace of a pure life.

Why is Saint John Berchmans the patron saint of altar servers?

John Berchmans is the saint of small faithfulness. He reminds us that we do not become saints in spite of ordinary life, but through it: a class well prepared, a service rendered, a prayer said from the heart, a smile for a tiring companion. That is why he became the patron saint of altar servers, who serve at the altar with simplicity, and a friend of students, seminarians and young religious. In Belgium, he is also honored as a patron of young people.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint John Berchmans and the novena to Saint John Berchmans, prayed from August 4 to 12.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John Berchmans in art

He is shown as a young man with a gentle face, wearing the black cassock of the Jesuits. His three attributes come from the account of his death:

- **The crucifix**: his love for Christ.
- **The rosary**: his trust in the Virgin Mary.
- **The book of rules**: his faithfulness to his vocation in the Society of Jesus.

Where to pray to Saint John Berchmans

- **Rome**: his tomb in the church of Sant'Ignazio, which also holds the tomb of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga.
- **Diest** (Belgium): his birthplace.
- **Brussels**: the church of Saint John Berchmans in Etterbeek, linked to the Collège Saint-Michel.
- **Grand Coteau** (Louisiana): the Academy and convent of the Sacred Heart, where Mary Wilson was healed.
- **Shreveport** (Louisiana): the Cathedral of Saint John Berchmans.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Berchmans for Young People and Students

Saint John Berchmans is prayed to above all by young people, students, seminarians and altar servers. He left no prayer that became traditional. Below you will find a saying that tradition attributes to him, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

A saying of John Berchmans to meditate on

> *"My greatest penance is common life."*

Source: a saying attributed to John Berchmans by the tradition of the Society of Jesus and repeated by his biographers. It does not appear in this exact form in his surviving letters.

His biographers also report that as he was dying, on August 13, 1621, he wished to hold his crucifix, his rosary and the book of the rules of the Society. These three objects summed up his life: love for Christ, trust in Mary and faithfulness to his vocation.

Prayer to Saint John Berchmans for young people and students

Saint John Berchmans, you found God in the simplest tasks of each day: teach me to do with love what I have to do today.

You studied with zeal and never stopped praying: help pupils and students to work with courage, to stay confident before their exams and to put their intelligence at the service of others.

You lived community life with patience and good humor: help me to bear gently with those around me, and to be a joyful presence for them.

Watch over altar servers and all who serve at the altar. Guard the young people who are asking what their vocation is. I also entrust to you my own intention: (name it in silence).

Teach me to love, as you did, Christ crucified, the Virgin Mary and the road on which God is calling me. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint John Berchmans is celebrated on August 13, the day of his death, and on November 26 in the Society of Jesus. You can also pray to him before an exam, at the start of the school year, before serving at Mass or when you are discerning your vocation. Parents can pray it for a child who is studying far from home, and parish groups of altar servers can say it together before a celebration.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John Berchmans, and discover the life of Saint John Berchmans.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Berchmans

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint John Berchmans. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast day, August 13, begin it on August 4. You can also pray it at any time of year: before exams, at the start of a school year, or when a young person is discerning a vocation.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act proposed for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life. This novena is well suited to young people, to a group of altar servers or to students. If you miss a day, simply pick it up again: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

John Berchmans did not leave a body of writings or a great work behind him. What he leaves is an example within reach of everyone: ordinary days lived with love. Over these nine days, let him show you that your own daily routine, at school, at work or at home, can become a place of encounter with God.

Day 1: A childhood in Diest

John grew up in a family of craftsmen in Diest, in Brabant. Very young, he wanted to become a priest. Great calls often begin in an ordinary home, around a family table.

Prayer: Lord, bless families, and make them attentive to the calls you address to their children. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray for your family, naming each of its members.

Day 2: Choosing freely

His parents dreamed of a fine career for him. John chose the Society of Jesus. Following Christ sometimes means disappointing those we love, while still loving them. That same year his mother died, and he carried this grief into his first months of religious life.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the inner freedom to answer what God asks of me. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Take a moment of silence to ask where God is calling you today.

Day 3: Study as a service

At the Roman College, John studied seriously. For him, learning was not a way to shine, but a way to prepare to serve. His final examination, a few weeks before his death, was a success, offered like everything else to God.

Prayer: Lord, bless my work and my thinking, and let them serve others. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Do carefully a piece of work you were tempted to rush.

Day 4: Common life

A saying is attributed to him: his greatest penance was common life. Living with others, day after day, with their habits and our own, is a true path to holiness.

Prayer: Lord, give me patience and gentleness with those who share my life. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Do a discreet favor for someone around you.

Day 5: Joy

His companions remembered a friendly and cheerful young man. Holiness does not put out good humor: it purifies it and makes it a gift for others.

Prayer: Lord, make me a joyful witness of your love. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Welcome someone with a real smile, especially someone you find difficult.

Day 6: Faithful in small things

John did nothing spectacular. He was faithful every day, in schedules, in prayer and in small services. God looks at the love we put into little things.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be faithful in small things. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Keep a modest commitment you had made and let slip.

Day 7: Serving at the altar

As patron saint of altar servers, John Berchmans reminds us of the beauty of liturgical service: being close to the altar, attentive, at the service of everyone's prayer.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, present in the Eucharist, keep in joy all who serve at your altar. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Attend a weekday Mass, or pray for the altar servers of your parish.

Day 8: The crucifix, the rosary and the rule

According to his biographers, he held these three objects as he died. They express the heart of his life: Christ, Mary, and faithfulness to his vocation.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, lead me to your Son and help me stay faithful to my path. Saint John Berchmans, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray one decade of the rosary.

Day 9: A short and full life

John died at twenty-two. His life was short, but it was entirely given. The value of a life is not measured by its length, but by the love that fills it. Buried today in the church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome, he continues to accompany young people through their prayers, as he did for Mary Wilson at Grand Coteau, in Louisiana, whose healing led to his canonization.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint John Berchmans, grant me to live each day fully for you. Amen.

Today: Pray for young people who are sick and for families mourning a child.

Closing prayer

Saint John Berchmans, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have brought before you. Pray for young people, for students and for all who are seeking their vocation. Obtain for me the grace to love God in everyday life, with faithfulness and with joy. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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