

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Cassian

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 23

IN BRIEF

Saint John Cassian

Monk from the East, disciple of the Desert Fathers, founder of the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Marseille and master of monastic life.

Feast day	July 23
Born	c. 360, Scythia Minor (present-day Dobruja)
Died	c. 435, Marseille, France
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint John Cassian, Teacher of Unceasing Prayer

Novena to Saint John Cassian

Abbey of Saint-Victor in Marseille

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John Cassian

Saint John Cassian was a 5th-century monk from the shores of the Black Sea who spent many years among the Desert Fathers of Egypt before settling in Marseille, where around 415 he founded the Abbey of Saint-Victor. His two great books, the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, passed on the experience of Eastern monasticism to the West and shaped the Rule of Saint Benedict. He died around 435 and is celebrated on July 23, especially in the Archdiocese of Marseille.

Who was Saint John Cassian?

John Cassian was born around 360 in Scythia Minor, the region now called Dobruja, between the Danube and the Black Sea, in present-day Romania. His origins have been much debated: some scholars placed his birth in Syria, in Egypt, or even at La Ciotat in Provence. Historians today agree that he probably came from a well-off family of Greek culture, and that he also had an excellent command of Latin. In his writings he mentions the good education he received.

While still young, he set out for the Holy Land with his friend Germanus. The two were so close that Cassian described them as "one mind and one soul in two bodies."

Key dates in the life of Saint John Cassian

- **Around 360**: Born in Scythia Minor.
- **Around 385**: Enters a monastery in Bethlehem with his friend Germanus.
- **Around 390-400**: Lives among the monks and hermits of Egypt, especially at Scetis.

- **Around 400-404**: In Constantinople, becomes a disciple of Saint John Chrysostom, who ordains him a deacon.
- **Around 405**: In Rome, pleads the cause of the exiled Chrysostom before the pope.
- **Around 415**: Settles in Marseille and founds two monasteries, Saint-Victor for men and Saint-Sauveur for women.
- **Around 420-426**: Writes the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*.
- **430**: Writes his treatise *On the Incarnation*, against Nestorius.
- **Around 435**: Dies in Marseille.

In the school of the Desert Fathers

After two years in a monastery in Bethlehem, Cassian and Germanus received permission to go to Egypt, then the heart of Christian monasticism. They spent about ten years there, visiting the hermits of Scetis and the neighboring deserts and questioning the elders about prayer, the struggle against the passions and purity of heart.

There Cassian also discovered the thought of Evagrius Ponticus, whose list of eight evil thoughts he would take up: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia (spiritual sloth), vainglory and pride. Through Cassian, this list reached the West, and it lies behind the later teaching on the seven deadly sins.

Between East and West

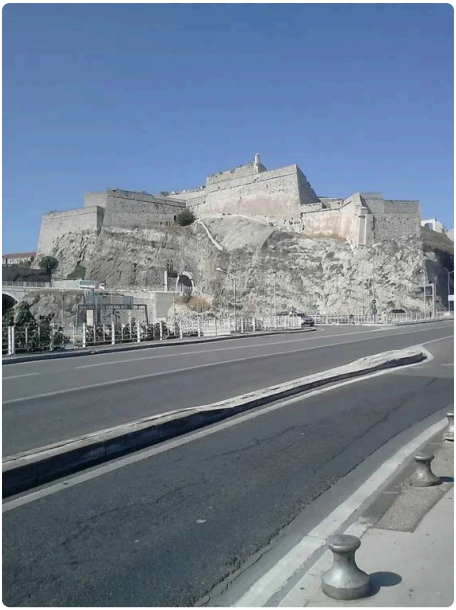
Around 400, the monks who read Origen were driven out of Egypt. Cassian went to Constantinople, where he entered the service of the bishop, Saint John Chrysostom. When Chrysostom was sent into exile, Cassian traveled to Rome to defend his cause. These journeys made him one of the few men of his time who knew both the Church of the East and the Church of the West from the inside.

Marseille and the monk's books

Around 415, Cassian settled in Marseille. He founded a monastery for men near the tomb of the martyr Saint Victor, and a monastery for women. At the request of Castor, Bishop of Apt, and later of other monks and bishops of Provence, he put in writing what he had learned.

- The *Institutes* describe the common life of monks and the remedies for the eight principal vices.
- The *Conferences* record, in the form of dialogues, twenty-four conversations with the elders of the desert. Part of the work is dedicated to Saint Honoratus, founder of Lérins, and to Saint Eucherius, the future Bishop of Lyon.

These books had an immense success. Saint Benedict borrowed passages from them almost word for word and expressly recommended them to his monks. In the Middle Ages they were read in the evening in monasteries, so much so that the light meal that followed the reading took the name "collation," from the Latin title of the *Conferences*, *Collationes*.



The Abbey of Saint-Victor in Marseille, founded by John Cassian.

A debated teacher

In his thirteenth Conference, Cassian deals with the question of grace and human freedom. He insists on the part played by the human will, to the point of departing from the positions of Saint Augustine. His ideas were later called "Semi-Pelagian" and were rejected by the Council of Orange in 529, presided over by Saint Caesarius of Arles.

This explains why he is not counted among the Doctors of the Church and why his cult remained local in the West. Yet his holiness was recognized very early: as early as 470, Gennadius of Marseille called him "Saint Cassian." The Orthodox Churches venerate him as a saint and a Father of the Church.

What does his holiness teach us?

Cassian was above all a bridge. He gathered the wisdom of the monks of Egypt and made it accessible to Western Christians. His teaching is very concrete: know your own thoughts, fight your passions patiently, keep a pure heart, pray without ceasing.

He recommended repeating the verse of the psalm "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me," which the Church still sings at the beginning of each hour of the Liturgy of the Hours. Millions of Catholics who pray the Divine Office repeat his advice every day, often without knowing it.

Is Saint John Cassian a patron saint?

Saint John Cassian has no widely established patronage. He is honored above all as a master of monastic life and of prayer, and is especially dear to the Church of Marseille, where he founded his monasteries. Monks, nuns and all who seek to pray without ceasing naturally turn to him as a guide.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John Cassian in art

Saint John Cassian appears above all in icons, especially in the Eastern tradition. He is shown as a monk in a dark habit, often with a long beard, holding a scroll or a book, the sign of his writings, and sometimes raising his hand in blessing. Western images of him are rare.

Where to pray to Saint John Cassian

- **Marseille**: the Abbey of Saint-Victor, the monastery he founded, with its early Christian crypts beneath the fortified church.
- **Provence**: several places bear his name, such as Lake Saint-Cassien in the Var.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint John Cassian or the novena to Saint John Cassian.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Cassian, Teacher of Unceasing Prayer

Saint John Cassian left the Church a very short prayer. In his *Conferences*, he presents it as the secret of unceasing prayer that he learned from the monks of Egypt. This verse of the psalm still opens every hour of the Liturgy of the Hours today. You will find it below with its source, followed by an original prayer to Saint John Cassian.

The prayer Cassian recommended

> *"O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me."*

Source: Psalm 70 (69), verse 2. John Cassian, *Conferences*, X, 10, where Abba Isaac teaches Cassian and Germanus to repeat this verse without ceasing, in joy as well as in temptation. In Latin: *Deus, in adiutorium meum intende; Domine, ad adiuvandum me festina.*

Abba Isaac explains that this single verse contains every feeling of the soul: the humility of one who knows he needs God, and the confidence of one who knows he will be heard. It can be said while working, walking, waking or falling asleep.

Prayer to Saint John Cassian

Saint John Cassian, you crossed seas and deserts to learn how to pray: pray for those who seek God and do not know where to begin.

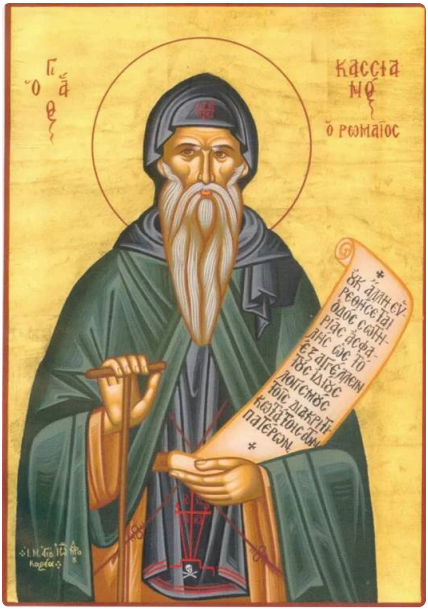
You listened humbly to the elders of the desert: teach us to let ourselves be taught, and to recognize in our hearts the thoughts that lead us away from God, anger, sadness, pride and acedia.

You lived a long spiritual friendship with your brother Germanus: bless our friendships, so that they help us grow in faith.

I entrust to you monks and nuns, the Church of Marseille, and my own intention: (name it in silence).

Each day, may I learn to repeat with confidence: "O God, come to my assistance." Amen.

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



Saint John Cassian, monk and teacher of prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint John Cassian is celebrated on July 23, especially in the Archdiocese of Marseille. The short verse from the psalm can be prayed at any moment of the day, and it is particularly helpful:

- when you are tempted or discouraged;
- when distractions crowd your prayer;
- when you begin a task, a journey or a difficult conversation;
- when you want to learn to pray more simply and more often.

To learn more, read the life of Saint John Cassian, or pray the novena to Saint John Cassian.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Cassian

This novena to Saint John Cassian is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the monk who learned to pray in the deserts of Egypt and passed on that wisdom to the West. Each day draws on a theme from his life and teaching. To end on his feast day, July 23, begin it on July 15. It can also be prayed at any time, especially when you want to deepen your life of prayer, when you feel spiritually dry, or before a retreat. You do not need to be a monk or a nun to follow this path: Cassian wrote for anyone who wants to give God a pure heart.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and the verse Cassian loved: "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me." Read the meditation slowly, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed. Repeat the verse of the psalm as often as you can during the day.

Day 1: Setting out

As a young man, Cassian left his homeland near the Black Sea and went to the Holy Land. Every spiritual life begins with a departure: leaving our habits to go and seek God.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, give me the courage to set out on the road toward God, wherever He calls me. Amen.

Today: Choose one habit that keeps you from prayer and set it aside for this novena.

Day 2: A friend in God

Cassian and Germanus were "one mind and one soul in two bodies." Together they traveled, questioned the elders and grew in faith. Spiritual friendship is a gift from God.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, bless my friendships and help me to be a true friend, one who leads others toward God. Amen.

Today: Thank God for a friend who has helped you in your faith, and tell that friend.

Day 3: Listening to the elders

In Egypt, Cassian spent years listening humbly to the hermits of Scetis. He did not come to teach but to learn. Humility opens the door to wisdom.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, give me a humble and teachable heart, ready to listen to those whom God places on my path. Amen.

Today: Ask advice from someone older or wiser than you, and really listen.

Day 4: Knowing your thoughts

Cassian taught that we must recognize the thoughts that pull us away from God: gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory and pride. Naming them is already beginning to be free of them.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, help me to see clearly in my heart and to fight patiently against what keeps me from God. Amen.

Today: In the evening, take five minutes to look back over your day and notice which thought troubled you most.

Day 5: Against acedia

Acedia is the weariness of the soul that makes prayer seem pointless and duty heavy. Cassian knew it well among the monks. His remedy was simple: stay, work, persevere.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, when I am discouraged and tired of good, give me the strength to persevere. Amen.

Today: Finish a task you have been putting off.

Day 6: Faithful in trials

Cassian served Saint John Chrysostom in Constantinople and defended him in Rome when he was exiled. He stayed faithful to his bishop when it was costly. Fidelity is proven in hard times.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, make me faithful to those who count on me, and to the Church, even in difficult times. Amen.

Today: Pray for your bishop and for priests who are being tried.

Day 7: Building community

In Marseille, Cassian founded two monasteries, one for men and one for women. He wanted to give others the chance to live what he had received. Faith grows when it is shared.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, help me to build up my family, my parish and my community in charity. Amen.

Today: Do something concrete for your parish or a community you belong to.

Day 8: Purity of heart

For Cassian, the goal of all monastic effort was purity of heart, because "blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Everything else is a means to that end.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, obtain for me a pure heart, simple and turned toward God. Amen.

Today: Go to confession, or prepare for it with a careful examination of conscience.

Day 9: Praying without ceasing

Cassian's great legacy is the verse "O God, come to my assistance." Repeated throughout the day, it turns every moment into prayer. The Church still opens each hour of the Divine Office with it.

Prayer: Saint John Cassian, teach me to pray without ceasing, and to call on God in every moment of my life. Amen.

Today: Pray one hour of the Liturgy of the Hours, such as Morning or Evening Prayer.

Closing prayer

> *Lord our God, you led Saint John Cassian through the deserts of Egypt to learn the ways of prayer, and you made him a teacher for monks and for the whole Church. Through his intercession, purify our hearts, strengthen us against temptation and teach us to call on you at all times. I entrust to you my intention for this novena: (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Read also the life of Saint John Cassian and the prayer to Saint John Cassian.

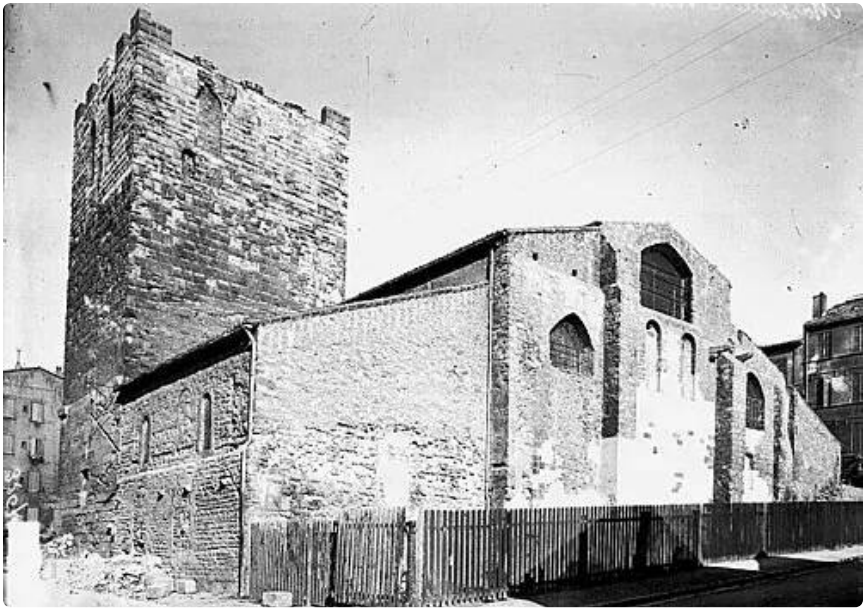
PILGRIMAGE

Abbey of Saint-Victor in Marseille

The Abbey of Saint-Victor in Marseille is the monastery founded by Saint John Cassian around 415, near the tombs of martyrs of the first centuries. What remains of the medieval abbey is a fortified church overlooking the Old Port and, above all, some of the oldest crypts in France, where one can still pray in the very places where the first community of monks lived.

An abbey born from a martyr's tomb

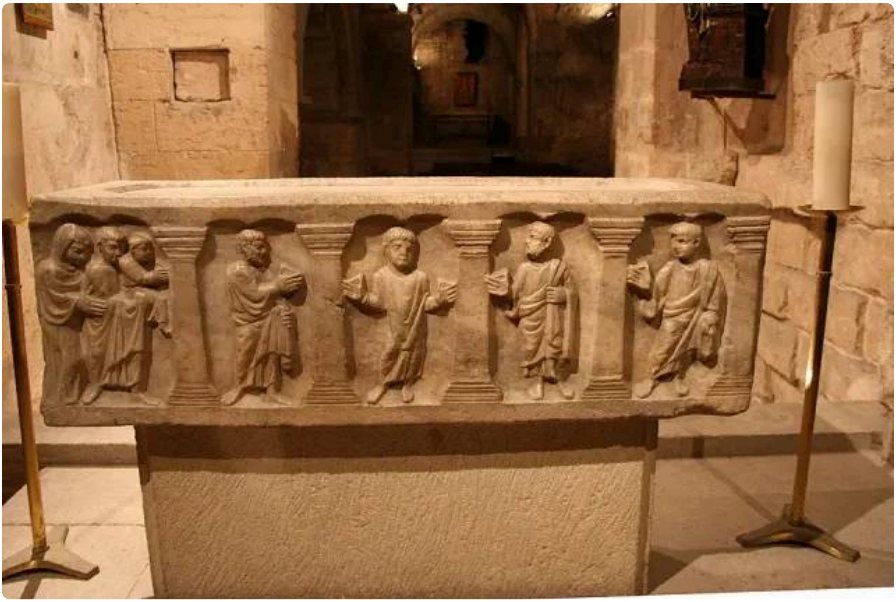
When Cassian arrived in Marseille, he found, outside the walls of the ancient city, a necropolis where the martyr Saint Victor was venerated. He established his monastery for men there, while founding a monastery for women in the city. In the Middle Ages, the Abbey of Saint-Victor became one of the most powerful in Provence. The present church, fortress-like with its crenellated towers, dates mostly from the 11th-14th centuries.



The Abbey of Saint-Victor in Marseille, exterior view.

The crypts

Beneath the church stretch the crypts, remains of the sanctuaries of the first centuries. They contain a remarkable collection of early Christian sarcophagi and chapels cut into the rock. The statue of Notre-Dame de Confession, a Black Madonna, is venerated here; it is at the heart of the Candlemas procession on February 2, one of Marseille's great religious traditions. The memory of Cassian and his first monks is rooted in these places.



The crypts of the Abbey of Saint-Victor.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint John Cassian. In the silence of the crypts, it is natural to take up the verse he recommended, "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me," and then pray the prayer to Saint John Cassian. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint John Cassian

- **Bethlehem**: the town where he took his first steps in monastic life.
- **Desert of Scetis** (Wadi Natrun, Egypt): the region of the hermits he questioned, where Coptic monasteries still thrive.
- **Lérins**: the islands off Cannes, whose founder, Saint Honoratus, received the dedication of part of the *Conferences*.

Practical information

The abbey is on the south bank of the Old Port, not far from Fort Saint-Nicolas. The church is a working place of worship; access to the crypts may require an admission fee and have its own hours. Check the official website of the Abbey of Saint-Victor before you come, and avoid service times for your visit.

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