

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Climacus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: March 30

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint John Climacus

Monk and abbot of Mount Sinai in the 7th century, author of The Ladder of Divine Ascent.

Feast day	March 30
Born	c. 579
Died	c. 649, Mount Sinai
Era	7th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint John Climacus for Humility and Prayer

Novena to Saint John Climacus

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint John Climacus

Saint John Climacus, also called John of Sinai or John the Sinaite, was a monk of the monastery of Mount Sinai who died around 649. He owes his nickname to his great work, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (in Greek *klimax* means "ladder"), which describes the spiritual life as a climb toward God in thirty steps. The book became one of the most widely read texts of Eastern monasticism and was translated early in the West. The Catholic Church celebrates him on March 30, and the Orthodox Churches also honor him on the fourth Sunday of Lent.

Who was Saint John Climacus?

His life is known through a short account by the monk Daniel of Raithu and a few anecdotes told by Anastasius of Sinai. According to this tradition, John was well educated and became a monk at Mount Sinai at the age of sixteen, under the guidance of an elder named Martyrius. When his master died, he withdrew as a hermit to Tholas, at the foot of the mountain, and lived there for many years, receiving those who came to ask his advice.

Slandered by envious monks who accused him of talking too much, he kept complete silence for a whole year, then resumed his teaching at the request of his disciples. The monks later chose him as their hegumen, that is, their abbot. Shortly before his death, he left this office to return to solitude.

Recent scholars nuance this portrait. The rhetorical and philosophical quality of his writings suggests a learned education, which would have been hard to acquire in the desert. Some clues suggest that he first lived by the sea, perhaps in Gaza, as a lawyer, and entered Sinai later, after the death of his wife. The story of the young monk who flees the world at sixteen would then follow a classic model of the lives of saints.

Key dates

- **c. 579**: Born, probably in Syria or Palestine.
- **Late 6th century**: Enters the monastery of Sinai, according to tradition under the guidance of Martyrius.
- **Early 7th century**: Long life as a hermit at Tholas, at the foot of Mount Sinai.
- **c. 640**: As abbot of the monastery, he writes *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* at the request of Abbot John of Raithu.
- **c. 649**: Dies at Sinai.
- **c. 1300**: Latin translation by Angelo Clareno, which spreads the work in the West.
- **1688**: French translation by Arnauld d'Andilly, published by Port-Royal.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent: thirty steps toward God

The abbot of Raithu, a neighboring monastery on the Red Sea, asked John for a guide to train monks. John composed a treatise in thirty chapters, or "steps," echoing the thirty years of Christ's hidden life. The image comes from the dream of Jacob, who saw a ladder set up between earth and heaven.

The journey follows a clear logic:

- renouncing the world and obeying a spiritual father;
- entering into repentance and the "mourning" of the heart, presented as a path to true joy;
- fighting the vices one by one;
- avoiding the traps of asceticism itself, such as pride and vainglory;
- reaching at last inner peace, *hesychia*, and charity, which crowns the whole ladder.

The style is made of short sayings, images drawn from daily life and little stories. John compares the fickle soul to crabs that move forward and then back, and the fear of God to a ray of sunlight that reveals the dust in a house. He also wrote a short *Letter to the Shepherd*, addressed to the superiors of communities.

Against judging others, for humility

Two themes return with force. The first is the refusal to judge one's neighbor. Judas was among the apostles and the good thief among the robbers, John reminds us, and no one knows what happens between a sinner and God.

The second is humility, which he places above fasting and vigils: repentance lifts us up, mourning knocks at the gate of heaven, but it is humility that opens it. On prayer, he recommends simplicity: few words, and a patient return to God each time the mind wanders. This advice has made him a beloved teacher for all who practice short, repeated prayer, such as the Jesus Prayer.



Saint Catherine's Monastery at Sinai, where John Climacus lived.

A teacher for East and West

In the East, *The Ladder* was copied in countless manuscripts, often illustrated, and is read every Lent in monasteries. In the West, the work circulated in Latin and then in Italian from the 14th century; it was printed in Venice in 1492 under the title *Scala paradisi*, and Port-Royal published a French translation in the 17th century. English readers today can find it in several modern translations, often under the title *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

On February 11, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI devoted a general audience catechesis to him, stressing that his path remains relevant for every Christian, not only for monks.

Why pray to Saint John Climacus?

Saint John Climacus has no traditional patronage. He founded no order and performed no great public deeds. His holiness is that of a man who prayed for a long time and knew how to pass on his experience. His ladder reminds us that the Christian life is a patient growth: no one climbs all the steps at once, we sometimes fall, and what matters is to start climbing again, with humility and without judging others.

Christians turn to him to grow in prayer, to give up judging their neighbor, to keep going during Lent and to find courage after a fall.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John Climacus in art

In icons, John appears as an elderly monk with a long white beard, often holding a scroll or his book. The most famous image linked to him is the icon of the Ladder itself, kept at Saint Catherine's Monastery: monks climb a ladder toward Christ, who welcomes them at the top, while demons try to drag some of them down. The ladder is therefore his main symbol.

Where to pray to Saint John Climacus

- **Mount Sinai, Egypt**: Saint Catherine's Monastery, where he was a monk and abbot, and which keeps the famous icon of the Ladder.
- **Anywhere during Lent**: reading one step of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is a traditional way to enter his school.

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

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Climacus for Humility and Prayer

Saint John Climacus left no prayer that became traditional, but his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* is full of short sayings that lend themselves to meditation. Here are two of them, with their source, followed by an original prayer to Saint John Climacus for humility and simple prayer.

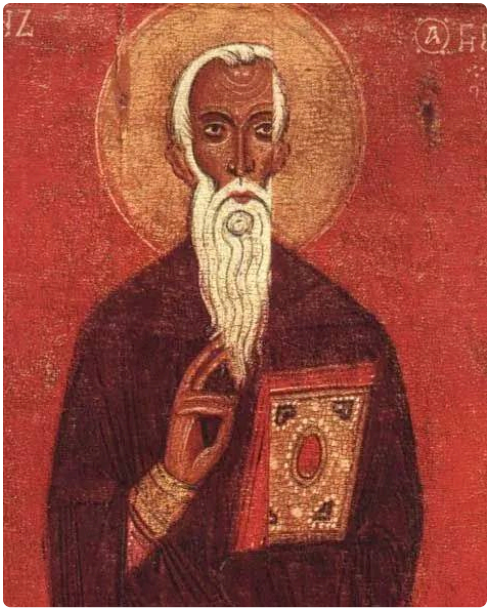
Two sayings of John Climacus to meditate on

> *"Repentance lifts up, mourning knocks at the gate of heaven, and holy humility opens it."*

Source: John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 25 (on humility). English rendering by Saintspedia.

> *"Do not try to say many words when you pray, lest your mind be distracted in searching for words."*

Source: John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 28 (on prayer). English rendering by Saintspedia.



Saint John Climacus, Byzantine icon.

Prayer to Saint John Climacus for humility and prayer

Saint John Climacus, you spent your life seeking God in the silence of Sinai: teach me to pray simply, with few words and great trust. When my mind wanders, help me return to the Lord without losing heart, as many times as it takes.

You described the Christian life as a ladder: give me the patience to climb it step by step. If I fall, lift me up through repentance; if I grow proud, bring me back to humility, which alone opens the gate of heaven.

Keep me from judging my brothers and sisters, for I do not know their hearts. Teach me instead to see in each one someone whom God loves and can still raise up.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Pray for me, so that I may reach, with all who walk toward God, the top of the ladder, where charity dwells. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint John Climacus is celebrated on March 30, in the heart of Lent, a season especially suited to reading his work. In the Byzantine tradition, the fourth Sunday of Lent is also dedicated to him. You can pray to him:

- to make progress in prayer and to pray with fewer, truer words;
- to stop judging others;
- to take courage again after a fall or a relapse;
- at the start of Lent, to choose one "step" to work on during the season.

To go further, pray the novena to Saint John Climacus, or read the life of Saint John Climacus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Climacus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and teaching of Saint John Climacus, monk and abbot of Mount Sinai in the 7th century and author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, begin on March 22; it ends on March 30. Since this period falls during Lent, the novena can also become a small Lenten retreat, and you may pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before 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 proposed for each day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off: John Climacus would remind you that the important thing is to start climbing again.

You may begin each day with the sign of the cross and this short invocation:

> *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Saint John Climacus, teacher of prayer and humility, pray for me. Amen.*

Day 1: The ladder of Jacob

John took the image of his book from the dream of Jacob, who saw a ladder joining earth and heaven. God does not wait for us at a distance: he opens a way and invites us to climb it, one step at a time.

Prayer: Lord, you have set a ladder between heaven and my life. Give me the desire to climb toward you, and the patience to do it step by step.

Today: Name one concrete step you want to take toward God during these nine days.

Day 2: Leaving what weighs us down

The first steps of the Ladder speak of renouncing the world. This does not mean despising creation, but letting go of what keeps the heart from being free for God.

Prayer: Saint John, help me to see what holds me back, and give me the courage to put it down.

Today: Give up one small comfort or one useless habit for the day.

Day 3: Obedience and a spiritual guide

John learned the monastic life under the guidance of an elder, Martyrius. He teaches that no one climbs alone: we need someone wiser to walk beside us and to tell us the truth.

Prayer: Lord, give me humble and wise guides, and teach me to listen to them.

Today: Thank someone who has helped you grow in faith, or consider asking a priest for spiritual advice.

Day 4: Tears that bring joy

John speaks of "mourning," the sorrow of the heart for sin. For him, this sorrow is not sadness without hope: it is a path toward true joy, because it opens us to God's mercy.

Prayer: Jesus, give me a heart that regrets its sins without despair, and that trusts entirely in your mercy.

Today: Make an examination of conscience, and if you can, plan to go to confession.

Day 5: Do not judge

Judas was among the apostles and the good thief among the robbers, John reminds us. We do not know what happens between another person and God. Judging others is one of the most common traps of those who try to live a good life.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from condemning my neighbor. Give me eyes that see others as you see them.

Today: Each time you catch yourself judging someone, say a short prayer for that person.

Day 6: The year of silence

When he was accused of talking too much, John answered with a year of silence, not with arguments. Silence can be a school of humility and a space where God speaks.

Prayer: Saint John, teach me to keep silent when words would only defend my pride, and to listen to God in the quiet.

Today: Set aside ten minutes of complete silence, without screens or music.

Day 7: Praying with few words

John advises not to look for many words when we pray, so that the mind does not scatter. A short prayer, repeated with love, can carry the whole heart to God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Today: Repeat this short prayer slowly several times during the day, especially when your mind wanders.

Day 8: Humility opens the gate

For John, humility is above fasts and vigils. Repentance lifts us up, mourning knocks at heaven's gate, but humility opens it. The humble person no longer needs to prove anything, and so becomes free to love.

Prayer: Lord, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like yours.

Today: Do a hidden act of service that no one will notice or thank you for.

Day 9: At the top, charity

The last step of the Ladder is love. All the efforts of the spiritual life have one goal: to love God and neighbor. Inner peace and charity are the fruit of the whole climb.

Prayer: Saint John Climacus, pray that I may reach the top of the ladder, where God is love, and that I may never stop climbing.

Today: Reach out with kindness to someone who is lonely or difficult to love.

Closing prayer

> *Saint John Climacus, monk of Sinai and guide of souls, you showed that the Christian life is a patient climb toward God. Obtain for me the grace to rise again after each fall, to pray with a simple heart, to stop judging others and to grow in humility. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Lead me, with all who seek the Lord, to the charity that crowns every step. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To continue, pray the prayer to Saint John Climacus or read his life.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Unknown, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Catherine's Monastery at Sinai, where John Climacus lived.: Image: Dr. Ondřej Havelka (cestovatel), CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint John Climacus, Byzantine icon.: Image: Anonymous, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com