

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Damascene

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 4

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IN BRIEF

Saint John Damascene

Christian monk and theologian from Damascus, defender of the holy icons and Doctor of the Church.

Feast day	December 4
Born	c. 675, Damascus, Syria
Died	c. 749, Monastery of Saint Sabas, near Jerusalem
Canonized	Pre-Congregation; proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in 1890 by Pope Leo XIII
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	icon painters, theologians, Christians of the Middle East

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint John Damascene, Defender of Icons

Novena to Saint John Damascene

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John Damascene

Saint John Damascene, also called John of Damascus, was a Christian monk and theologian of Arab origin, born in Damascus around 675 and died around 749 at the monastery of Saint Sabas, near Jerusalem. He lived under the rule of the Umayyad caliphs and wrote in Greek. He defended the holy icons against Byzantine iconoclasm, wrote a great summary of the Christian faith and composed hymns that are still sung today, and he is often called the last of the Fathers of the Eastern Church. Pope Leo XIII proclaimed him a Doctor of the Church in 1890, and his feast day is December 4.

Who was Saint John Damascene?

John was born into a prominent Christian family of Damascus, with the Arabic name Mansur ibn Sarjun. His grandfather had been in charge of the taxes of the region under the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and negotiated the surrender of the city to the Muslims in 635. His father in turn served the first Umayyad caliphs in the financial administration.

John therefore grew up at the meeting point of two worlds. He was a Christian of Greek culture, living in a capital that had become Muslim, and he knew the Qur'an. This double belonging gives his life a particular resonance for Christians of the Middle East today.

The main biography of John was written about three centuries after his death, and it mixes solid elements with a great deal of legend. Historians generally accept that he held an administrative post, whose importance is debated, before leaving Damascus for monastic life in the early 8th century, at a time when Christians were gradually being removed from public office.



The monastery of Saint Sabas in the Judean desert, where John Damascene lived.

Key dates in the life of Saint John Damascene

- **Around 675**: Born in Damascus.
- **Early 8th century**: Leaves Damascus and becomes a monk at the monastery of Saint Sabas, in the Judean desert.
- **726**: First edict of Emperor Leo III the Isaurian against the veneration of images.
- **From 726-730**: Writes his three treatises against those who reject the holy images.
- **735**: Ordained a priest, according to tradition.
- **743**: Writes *The Fount of Knowledge*, according to the usual dating.
- **December 4, 749**: Dies at Saint Sabas, according to tradition.
- **754**: The iconoclast Council of Hieria condemns him.

- **787**: The Second Council of Nicaea restores the veneration of images and clears his memory.
- **1890**: Pope Leo XIII proclaims him a Doctor of the Church.

The defender of the holy icons

In 726, the Byzantine emperor Leo III the Isaurian issued a first edict against the veneration of images. From Saint Sabas, out of reach of imperial power, John took up his pen. In three discourses, he defended the icons with one central argument: by becoming man, the Son of God made himself visible, so it is right to depict what God himself has shown.

He also set out a distinction that would last. Adoration (*latria*) is due to God alone, while the images of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints receive veneration (*dulia*), an honor that passes through the image to the person it represents. Condemned by the iconoclast Council of Hieria in 754, John saw his thought taken up by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, which restored the veneration of images.

The legend of the severed hand

A famous legend tells that the caliph, deceived by forged letters, had John's right hand cut off, and that the Virgin Mary restored it after a night of prayer before her icon. Historians regard this episode as legendary. It nevertheless gave rise to a type of Byzantine icon, the Mother of God "of the Three Hands" (*Tricheirousa*).



Saint John Damascene, shown with a turban on an icon.

A theologian and a poet

His major work, *The Fount of Knowledge*, includes a philosophical introduction, a catalogue of heresies and, above all, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, a synthesis of the teaching of the Greek Fathers who came before him. Translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, it was read by the theologians of the West, among them Saint Thomas Aquinas. The chapter devoted to Islam is one of the first Christian writings on that religion, and it is very critical.

John is also one of the great hymn writers of Byzantium. Liturgical canons are attributed to him, especially for Easter, and they are still sung in the Orthodox Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches. He also preached homilies on the Nativity and on the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, which hold an important place in the history of Marian theology.

Why is Saint John Damascene invoked by icon painters and theologians?

Because he gave the Church its clearest defense of sacred images, John is naturally invoked by icon painters and by Christian artists in general. He showed that sacred art is not a luxury but a consequence of the Incarnation: since God became visible in Christ, beauty can lead us to him.

Because he set out the faith of the Church with rigor and clarity, he is also invoked by theologians, catechists and students of theology. Finally, as a son of Damascus, he is prayed to for the Churches of the East and for the Christians of Syria and the Holy Land.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John Damascene in art

- **A turban**: on many icons he wears a turban or a head covering in the Eastern style, a reminder of his origins in Damascus.
- **A monk's habit**: the dark garments of a monk of Saint Sabas.
- **A scroll**: often unrolled, bearing words from his hymns or writings, the sign of a teacher of the faith.
- **The icon of the Three Hands**: the Virgin Mary with a third hand, recalling the legend of his healed hand.



The Mother of God of the Three Hands, an icon linked to the legend of John Damascene.

What his holiness teaches us

Saint John Damascene united intelligence, prayer and beauty. He showed that the Christian faith can be expressed with rigor, and that contemplation and study go hand in hand. He left the honors of Damascus for the silence of the desert, and from there he served the whole Church.

He also reminds us of the long history of Arab Christians in the Middle East, who have kept their faith through many centuries and many trials.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint John Damascene, with one of his famous sayings on images, or follow the novena to Saint John Damascene.

Where to pray to Saint John Damascene

The monastery of Mar Saba (Saint Sabas), built into the cliffs of the Kidron valley in the Judean desert, between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, is the place where he lived and died. It is still inhabited by Orthodox monks. Saint John Damascene is celebrated on December 4 by both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Before 1969, his feast was kept on March 27 in the Roman calendar.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Damascene, Defender of Icons

Saint John Damascene left hymns that are still sung in the Byzantine liturgy and theological writings that nourish prayer. Below you will find one of his best-known sayings on the holy icons, with its source, followed by an original prayer to Saint John Damascene.

Words of Saint John Damascene to meditate on

> *"I do not venerate matter, but I venerate the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake, who deigned to dwell in matter and to work out my salvation through matter."*

Source: John Damascene, *First Discourse against Those Who Reject the Holy Images*, I, 16 (8th century); translation by Saintspedia. Pope Benedict XVI quoted this passage at the general audience of May 6, 2009, devoted to Saint John Damascene.



Saint John Damascene, monk and Doctor of the Church.

Prayer to Saint John Damascene

Saint John Damascene, you left the honors of Damascus for the solitude of the desert: teach me to seek God before all else.

You defended the holy images: help me to recognize that the Son of God became man and visible, and that all creation can become a path toward him.

You explained the faith of the Church with clarity: pray for theologians, for catechists and for all who seek to understand what they believe.

You sang of the Resurrection and of the Mother of God: give me a heart that praises. I also entrust to you the Christians of the East, who live in your native land, and my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for us the grace to venerate what is holy and to adore God alone. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint John Damascene is celebrated on December 4, the traditional day of his death, by both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Before 1969, his feast was kept on March 27 in the Roman calendar. His feast falls in Advent, a good time to meditate with him on the Word made flesh.

You can pray to him before an icon, when beginning theological study or catechesis, when working on a piece of sacred art, or to entrust to God the Christians of Syria and the Holy Land. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John Damascene, and read the life of Saint John Damascene.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Damascene

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and writings of Saint John Damascene, monk of Saint Sabas and Doctor of the Church. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, December 4, begin on November 26.

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. If you can, pray in front of an icon or a crucifix, as John himself would have done. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

This novena is well suited to students and teachers of the faith, to artists, and to anyone who wants to pray for the Christians of the Middle East. It can also be prayed at any time of the year.



Saint John Damascene, defender of the holy icons.

Day 1: Between two worlds

John grew up in Damascus, a Christian of Greek culture in a city ruled by Muslim caliphs. He did not hide his faith, and he did not live in fear. Many Christians today also live as a minority, among people who do not share their faith. John shows that one can be fully rooted in one's time and place while belonging wholly to Christ.

Prayer: Lord, help me to live my faith calmly and faithfully wherever you have placed me.

Today: Pray for the Christians of Syria and of the whole Middle East.

Day 2: Leaving for the desert

John left the administration of Damascus for a monastery in the Judean desert. He exchanged honors and influence for silence and prayer. Not everyone is called to the desert, but everyone needs a place of silence where God can speak.

Prayer: Jesus, draw me into silence so that I may hear your voice.

Today: Spend ten minutes in silence, without a screen, before God.

Day 3: God made visible

The heart of John's thought is simple: the invisible God became visible in Jesus Christ. Because of the Incarnation, we can see the face of God in the face of a man. This is why he defended the icons with such conviction.

Prayer: Word made flesh, let me recognize your face in the Gospel, in the sacraments and in my neighbor.

Today: Read slowly the prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18).

Day 4: Adore God alone

John taught that adoration belongs to God alone, while the saints and their images receive veneration. This distinction keeps our hearts in order. Many things compete for the place that belongs to God: success, money, the opinion of others.

Prayer: Lord, you alone are God. Free me from every idol that takes your place in my heart.

Today: Name one thing that takes too much room in your life, and offer it to God.

Day 5: Matter as a path to God

John wrote that he venerated the Creator of matter, who became matter for our salvation. Bread, wine, water, oil, wood and paint: God uses the things of this world to reach us. Creation is not an obstacle to faith but a gift that leads to the Giver.

Prayer: Creator of all things, open my eyes to the signs of your presence in the world you made.

Today: Make the sign of the cross with holy water, or take a moment to give thanks for something beautiful in creation.

Day 6: Loving the truth

In *The Fount of Knowledge*, John gathered the teaching of the Fathers who came before him. He did not seek to be original but to be faithful. Understanding the faith is a way of loving God with our minds.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, Spirit of truth, enlighten my mind so that I may know and love you better.

Today: Read a page of the Catechism of the Catholic Church or of a Father of the Church.

Day 7: Singing the Resurrection

John composed hymns for Easter that Eastern Christians still sing. For him, theology ended in praise. Faith is not only something we understand: it is something we sing.

Prayer: Risen Lord, put a song of praise in my heart, even on difficult days.

Today: Sing or listen to a hymn, and let it become your prayer.

Day 8: With the Mother of God

John preached beautiful homilies on the Nativity and the Dormition of Mary. The legend of his healed hand, which gave rise to the icon of the Three Hands, expresses a simple trust: Mary does not abandon those who turn to her.

Prayer: Holy Mother of God, take my hand and lead me to your Son.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary for someone who is suffering.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

John was condemned by an iconoclast council after his death, then honored by the Second Council of Nicaea. He did not live to see his work recognized, but he remained faithful. God sees what is done in secret and brings it to fruit in his own time.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint John Damascene, keep me faithful to you, even when I do not see the fruit of my efforts. Amen.

Today: Thank God for a person who handed on the faith to you.

Closing prayer

Saint John Damascene, monk of the desert and teacher of the faith, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for theologians and artists, for the Churches of the East and for all who seek the face of God. Obtain for us a clear faith, a praying heart and the grace to adore God alone. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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