BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Gualbert

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 12

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IN BRIEF

Saint John Gualbert

11th-century Florentine monk, founder of the abbey of Vallombrosa and of the Vallombrosan congregation.

Feast day	July 12
Born	late 10th century, Florence region (Val di Pesa, Italy)
Died	July 12, 1073, abbey of Passignano (Tuscany, Italy)
Canonized	1193 by Celestine III
Era	11th century
Patron saint of	foresters of Italy, foresters of Brazil

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Vallombrosa Abbey

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John Gualbert

Saint John Gualbert (Giovanni Gualberto in Italian) was an 11th-century Florentine monk, founder of the abbey of Vallombrosa, in Tuscany, and of the Benedictine congregation of the Vallombrosans. As a young nobleman, he gave up avenging the murder of a relative and forgave the killer, before becoming a monk. A fierce opponent of simony, he died at Passignano on July 12, 1073. Canonized in 1193, patron of Italian foresters, his feast day is July 12.

Who was Saint John Gualbert?

John Gualbert lived in the age of the great reform of the Church, in the 11th century, when monks, bishops and popes fought two evils that disfigured the clergy: simony, that is, the buying of Church offices, and Nicolaism, the failure of clerics to keep celibacy. Like Saint Romuald and Saint Peter Damian, he belongs to the reformers who sought to renew monastic life through poverty, prayer and common life. His life, written by disciples shortly after his death, is fairly well known, although several dates remain debated.

Key dates in the life of John Gualbert

- **Late 10th century**: Born into a noble family of the Florence region, whose father is lord of Petroio, in the Val di Pesa.
- **Youth**: On a Good Friday, he spares the murderer of a relative he was meant to avenge, and forgives him in the name of Christ.
- **Shortly after**: He enters the Benedictine monastery of San Miniato al Monte, in Florence.
- **Following years**: Refusing to live under an abbot he considers simoniacal, he leaves San Miniato and looks for a more austere way of life.

- **c. 1036**: He settles at Vallombrosa, on the wooded slopes of the Pratomagno, with a few companions; the dates proposed vary according to the sources.
- **1038**: Consecration of the church of Vallombrosa.
- **1068**: At the abbey of Settimo, one of his monks walks through fire to prove the simony of the bishop of Florence, who is then deposed.
- **July 12, 1073**: Dies at the abbey of Passignano.
- **1193**: Canonized by Pope Celestine III.
- **1951**: Pius XII proclaims him patron of Italian foresters.

The Good Friday pardon

John Gualbert grew up in a family of the lesser Florentine nobility, in a world where blood vengeance was a duty of honor. According to the account of his life, one of his relatives, his brother or a kinsman, was murdered. On a Good Friday, John, armed and accompanied, met the murderer in a narrow lane. The man, unarmed, fell to his knees and, with his arms outstretched in the form of a cross, begged him in the name of Christ crucified to spare him. John gave up striking him and forgave him. He then went into the church of San Miniato, on the hill overlooking Florence, to pray before the crucifix. Tradition reports that Christ bowed his head toward him, as if to approve his act. This crucifix is venerated today in Florence, in the church of Santa Trinita.

From San Miniato to Vallombrosa

Deeply shaken, John asked for the monastic habit at San Miniato, despite his father's opposition. He led a fervent life there. But when the office of abbot was obtained, according to his biographers, for money, he refused to remain under that authority. He left the monastery, visited the hermits of Camaldoli,

founded by Saint Romuald, and then settled in a lonely, wooded place in the Tuscan Apennines, Vallombrosa, the “shady valley”. Disciples joined him, lay people and monks who came from San Miniato.

John adopted the Rule of Saint Benedict, which he wished to live very strictly: poverty, silence, common life and charity. He insisted on welcoming the poor and pilgrims, and he created a class of lay brothers, consecrated lay people responsible for manual work, which allowed the choir monks to devote themselves to prayer. The church of Vallombrosa was consecrated in 1038. Out of humility, John refused to receive the priesthood. Other monasteries adopted his customs and formed the congregation of Vallombrosa, confirmed by the Holy See after his death.

The fight against simony

John Gualbert was one of the great supporters of the reform of the Church. He publicly denounced the simony of the bishop of Florence, Pietro Mezzabarba, at the risk of his life: the bishop’s men even violently attacked a Vallombrosan monastery in Florence. In 1068, at the abbey of Settimo, one of his monks, Peter, agreed to walk through a blazing pyre to prove that the bishop had bought his office. He came out unharmed, and the bishop was deposed. This monk, who later became a bishop and cardinal, is known as Peter Igneus. John also met Pope Leo IX and supported the reforming popes with his preaching.

Death, devotion and art

In old age, John Gualbert withdrew to the abbey of Passignano, in the Chianti, where he died on July 12, 1073. He was buried there; his tomb, carved in the 16th century by Benedetto da Rovezzano, is now kept, in fragments, in the San Salvi museum in Florence. He was canonized in 1193 by Celestine III. In 1951, Pius XII declared him patron of Italian foresters, in memory of the monks of

Vallombrosa who had cared for the great forest around the abbey for centuries. He is shown as a monk in the Vallombrosan habit, holding a tau-shaped staff or a cross, sometimes trampling a demon, symbol of simony, and often with the crucifix of San Miniato.

What can we learn from Saint John Gualbert?

Everything begins with a pardon. On a Good Friday, John Gualbert chose not to kill, and that act opened his life to a deep conversion. He then served the purity of the Church with courage, without seeking honors, and founded a religious family united by poverty and charity. He can be invoked for the strength to forgive, for the purification of the Church, for monks and for those who care for forests and creation.

Where to pray to Saint John Gualbert

- **Vallombrosa** (Reggello, Tuscany): Vallombrosa Abbey, mother house of the Vallombrosans, in the heart of the forest.
- **Badia a Passignano** (Tavarnelle Val di Pesa): the abbey where he died and was buried.
- **Florence**: the church of Santa Trinita, which keeps the crucifix of San Miniato, and the church of San Miniato al Monte, where he became a monk.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Gualbert for the Grace of Forgiveness

Saint John Gualbert, an 11th-century Florentine monk, forgave on a Good Friday the murderer of one of his relatives, then founded the abbey of Vallombrosa and fought simony. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It asks him for the grace of forgiveness and entrusts to him the Church, monks and foresters.

Prayer to Saint John Gualbert

Saint John Gualbert,
on a Good Friday you met your enemy
and gave up revenge
for love of Christ crucified.
Teach me to forgive,
even when the wound is deep.

You sought God in the silence of the forest,
in poverty and brotherly life.
Give me a taste for prayer
and respect for the creation
that God has entrusted to our hands.

You who fought with courage
what disfigured the Church,
pray that she may be pure, poor and faithful,
and that her shepherds may serve Christ alone.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint John Gualbert

- On his feast day, July 12.
- On Good Friday, meditating on the forgiveness of Christ on the cross.
- When it is hard to forgive a serious offense.
- For the reform and purification of the Church.
- For foresters, forest rangers and those who protect nature.

A short invocation

> *Saint John Gualbert, who forgave at the foot of the cross,*
> *obtain for me a heart able to forgive. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint John Gualbert from July 4 to 12, and read the life of Saint John Gualbert.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Gualbert

This novena offers nine days with Saint John Gualbert, an 11th-century Florentine monk and founder of the abbey of Vallombrosa. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on his feast day, July 12, begin on July 4. It also suits any journey toward forgiveness.

How to pray this novena

Each day, make the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint John Gualbert, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A young Florentine nobleman

John grew up in a noble family, where honor demanded that spilled blood be avenged. He shared the values of his world.

Prayer: Lord, show me what in my life comes from the world rather than from the Gospel.

Act of the day: Reread a Gospel page on forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35).

Day 2: The Good Friday encounter

On a Good Friday, John met the murderer of one of his relatives. The man begged him, arms outstretched like a cross, to spare him in the name of Christ.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when I meet the one who has hurt me, help me to see in him a brother for whom you died.

Act of the day: Pray for someone who has hurt you.

Day 3: Forgiveness

John gave up revenge and forgave. That choice, made at the cost of an inner struggle, changed his whole life.

Prayer: Lord, give me the strength to forgive as you have forgiven me.

Act of the day: Take a first step toward reconciliation, even a small one.

Day 4: The crucifix that bowed

According to tradition, before the crucifix of San Miniato, Christ bowed his head toward John. The forgiveness he gave joined the forgiveness of the cross.

Prayer: Christ crucified, I entrust my wounds to you. Heal them with your love.

Act of the day: Pray for a few minutes before a crucifix.

Day 5: Becoming a monk

Despite his father's opposition, John asked for the monastic habit. Conversion sometimes calls for choices that unsettle those who love us.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to follow your call, with respect for those who do not understand it.

Act of the day: Pray for young people discerning a vocation.

Day 6: Refusing corruption

John left San Miniato rather than obey an abbot who had bought his office. He preferred truth to a quiet life.

Prayer: Lord, give me honesty in my work and the courage to refuse what is unjust.

Act of the day: Examine your conscience about money and integrity.

Day 7: The silence of the forest

At Vallombrosa, in the middle of the woods, John founded a community of prayer, poverty and charity. Creation became there a place of encounter with God.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the beauty of creation. Teach me to respect it and to praise you through it.

Act of the day: Take a time of prayer in nature, or plant a tree.

Day 8: For a pure Church

John fought simony tirelessly, and one of his monks walked through fire to expose it. He wanted a Church at the service of Christ alone.

Prayer: Lord, purify your Church and give her poor and faithful shepherds.

Act of the day: Pray for the Pope, the bishops and priests.

Day 9: A peaceful death

John died at Passignano on July 12, 1073, surrounded by his brothers. His life, which had begun with a pardon, ended in peace.

Prayer: Lord, grant me to die reconciled with all. Through the intercession of Saint John Gualbert, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass if you can and receive the sacrament of reconciliation.

Closing prayer

Saint John Gualbert,
man of forgiveness and founder of Vallombrosa,
present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Obtain for me a forgiving heart,
an upright life
and the love of prayer.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can also pray the prayer to Saint John Gualbert at any time, and read the life of Saint John Gualbert.

PILGRIMAGE

Vallombrosa Abbey

The abbey of Vallombrosa lies in Tuscany, about thirty kilometers east of Florence, on the slopes of the Pratomagno massif. It was here that Saint John Gualbert settled in the 11th century with his first companions, and here that the Benedictine congregation of the Vallombrosans was born. Surrounded by a great forest of fir and beech, the abbey is still inhabited by monks.

History of the abbey

After leaving the monastery of San Miniato al Monte, John Gualbert sought a place of silence. He found it in this "shady valley" of the Apennines, where a few hermits were already living. Disciples joined him, and a community formed around the Rule of Saint Benedict, lived in poverty and charity. The church was consecrated in 1038. From Vallombrosa, the reform spread to other monasteries in Tuscany and Italy, which formed the Vallombrosan congregation.

The present buildings, enlarged and transformed between the late Middle Ages and the Baroque period, keep the plan of a great monastery, with its church, cloister and tower. For centuries the monks cared for the forest around the abbey, so much so that Saint John Gualbert was proclaimed patron of Italian foresters. The forest is now a protected nature reserve.

What you can see

The abbey church, with its Baroque decoration, keeps the memory of the founder, especially in a chapel dedicated to him. Around the abbey, paths run through the forest and lead to small places of memory linked to the early days

of the community and to the hermit life. The setting, cool even in summer, invites silence and the contemplation of creation, which were at the heart of the life of the first Vallombrosans.

Praying on site

Before coming, you can read the life of Saint John Gualbert. At the abbey, entrust to him those you find it hard to forgive, the purification of the Church and those who care for creation. You can say the prayer to Saint John Gualbert, or join the prayer of the monks. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint John Gualbert

- **Badia a Passignano** (Tavarnelle Val di Pesa): the Vallombrosan abbey where he died in 1073.
- **San Miniato al Monte** (Florence): the abbey where he became a monk.
- **Santa Trinita** (Florence): the Vallombrosan church that keeps the crucifix which, according to tradition, bowed toward him.

Practical information

Vallombrosa belongs to the municipality of Reggello, in the province of Florence. It is reached by road, through the forest; in winter, snow can make access more difficult. The abbey is a place of prayer: modest dress and silence are requested, especially during the offices. Opening times of the church and of the offices may vary with the seasons: check with the monastic community or the tourist office before your visit.

Credits and sources

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