

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John I, Pope and Martyr

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 18

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IN BRIEF

Saint John I, Pope and Martyr

Pope from 523 to 526, the first bishop of Rome received in Constantinople, who died a martyr in a Ravenna prison.

Feast day	May 18
Born	c. 470, Tuscany, Italy
Died	May 18, 526, Ravenna, Italy
Era	6th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Pope Saint John I, Martyr, for Prisoners

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John I, Pope and Martyr

Saint John I was pope from 523 to 526, at a time when Italy was ruled by the Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great. The first bishop of Rome to travel to Constantinople, he was received there with exceptional honors. On his return, Theodoric, who suspected him of conspiracy, had him thrown into prison in Ravenna, where he died of hunger and ill-treatment. The Church honors him as a martyr on May 18.

Who was Pope Saint John I?

John was born around 470 in Tuscany; according to local traditions, in Siena or in a castle, now vanished, near Chiusdino. He studied in Florence and then in Rome, entered the clergy and served the Roman Church for many years.

As a deacon in Rome at the turn of the sixth century, he at first supported the antipope Lawrence against Pope Symmachus; he recognized his error in 506 and asked for forgiveness. He is very probably the deacon John to whom the philosopher Boethius dedicated several of his theological treatises.

Having become archdeacon to Pope Hormisdas, he succeeded him on August 13, 523, seven days after his death.

Key dates in the life of John I

- **c. 470**: Born in Tuscany.
- **506**: As a deacon, he is reconciled with Pope Symmachus.
- **August 13, 523**: Elected bishop of Rome, succeeding Hormisdas.
- **525-526**: Embassy to Constantinople, to Emperor Justin I, on Theodoric's orders.
- **526**: Arrested on his return to Ravenna and imprisoned.

- **May 18, 526**: Dies in prison in Ravenna; his body is brought back to Rome and buried in Saint Peter's.

A pope under an Arian king

Since 493, Italy had been governed from Ravenna by Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths. Like his people, he was an Arian: he did not recognize the full divinity of Christ. For a long time he left the Catholic Church in peace.

In the last years of his reign, however, suspicion grew. In the East, Emperor Justin I took harsh measures against the Arians of his empire, and Theodoric suspected the Roman aristocracy of plotting with Constantinople. The philosopher Boethius, John's friend, was executed during this period.

A mission imposed by the king

Theodoric then decided to send the pope himself to Constantinople, against his will, to obtain from the emperor a softening of his edict, the return of the Arian churches, and even the return to Arianism of those who had converted to Catholicism. According to tradition, John agreed to plead for tolerance, but refused to ask that converts be sent back to heresy.

The first pope in Constantinople

John set out with a large escort: bishops, among them Ecclesius of Ravenna, and several Roman senators. In Constantinople his welcome was triumphant: it was the first time a bishop of Rome had come to the imperial capital. Emperor Justin granted almost all the requests, except the last: he would not allow converts to return to Arianism.

Death in a Ravenna prison

On his return, Theodoric, who saw in these honors proof of an understanding with the emperor, had the pope arrested in Ravenna. John, elderly and exhausted by the journey, died in prison a few days later, on May 18, 526, deprived of food and mistreated. His body was carried back to Rome and buried in Saint Peter's Basilica. The Church sees in him a martyr, who died for refusing to betray the faith of those who had embraced it.



Pope John I in the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493).

A pastor and builder

Despite the brevity of his pontificate, the *Liber Pontificalis* credits him with restoring several cemeteries of the martyrs in Rome, notably that of Saints Nereus and Achilleus on the Via Ardeatina, that of Saints Felix and Adauctus, and that of Saint Prisca. He also had the confession of the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls embellished.

A tradition credits him with work on Roman liturgical chant and with fixing the date of Easter according to a new calculation, which counts the years from the birth of Christ. The two letters that bear his name are probably apocryphal.

Why is Saint John I honored as a martyr?

John I was not killed by the sword, but he died in prison as a result of the hunger and ill-treatment inflicted on him by a king who saw his mission as a betrayal. He had refused to ask that converts be forced back into Arianism: in other words, he defended the freedom of conscience of those who had chosen the Catholic faith. This is why the Church honors him as a martyr. He has no traditional patronage, but he can be prayed to for prisoners, for Christians under political pressure and for those entrusted with diplomatic missions.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John I in art

- **The bars of a prison**: he is often shown behind the bars of his cell in Ravenna.
- **The papal tiara and vestments**, as in the woodcut of the Nuremberg Chronicle.
- **A portrait medallion** among the popes in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls in Rome.

What his holiness teaches us

John I was caught in a political crisis that was beyond him. He accepted an imposed mission and pleaded for peace, but he refused to sacrifice the freedom of conscience of converts. His death in prison makes him a witness of faithfulness in the face of power. He is venerated particularly in Ravenna and in Tuscany.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint John I and the novena to Saint John I, prayed from May 9 to 17.



The mausoleum of Theodoric in Ravenna, the city where John I died.

Where to pray to Saint John I

- **Rome**: Saint Peter's Basilica, where he was buried; his remains are associated with the Vatican Grottoes.
- **Ravenna**: the city of his captivity and death.
- **Tuscany**: his native region, where his cult has remained alive.

PRAYER

Prayer to Pope Saint John I, Martyr, for Prisoners

Pope Saint John I, martyr, left no authentic writings: the two letters that bear his name are probably apocryphal. No traditional prayer to him has spread widely. Saintspedia offers below an original prayer inspired by his mission to Constantinople and his death in prison in Ravenna, for prisoners, for those under pressure from those in power and for those who must negotiate in difficult situations.

The prisoner pope

Sent by force to Constantinople by King Theodoric, John I pleaded for peace among Christians, but refused to ask that converts be sent back to heresy. On his return, he was imprisoned and died of hunger. Art shows him behind the bars of his cell.

Prayer to Saint John I for prisoners

Saint John I, shepherd of the Church of Rome, you who accepted a mission you had not chosen, help me to welcome in faith the burdens entrusted to me, even when they are beyond my strength.

You who pleaded for peace without betraying the truth, inspire those who negotiate, govern or serve as mediators: may they seek justice without denying their conscience.

You who died in prison, deprived of bread, be close to prisoners, to those jailed for their convictions and to all who suffer unjustly. Obtain for them inner strength and visitors who treat them as brothers and sisters.

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

Keep me faithful to Christ and to his Church, in the freedom of the children of God. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint John I is celebrated on May 18, the anniversary of his death in Ravenna in 526; he was formerly commemorated on May 27. You can also pray to him:

- for prisoners, prison chaplains and those who visit people in prison;
- for Christians who live under political pressure or persecution;
- for diplomats and negotiators working for peace;
- when you are given a mission or a responsibility you did not choose.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John I, and read the life of Pope Saint John I.

NOVENA

Novena to Pope Saint John I

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint John I. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin it on May 9 and pray the last day on May 17, so that you reach May 18 with him. It can also be prayed at any time for a prisoner, or for Christians who suffer under an unjust power.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into the rest of your day. Prison ministry groups and families of prisoners may want to pray it together, naming the people they carry in their hearts.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: "Lord, through the intercession of Saint John I, pope and martyr, who remained faithful to you in prison, I bring you this intention. Give me courage, peace and faithfulness. Amen."

Day 1: A long service

Before becoming pope, John served the Roman Church for many years as a deacon and then as archdeacon. His holiness grew in faithful, daily service.

Prayer: Lord, help me to serve you faithfully in the small duties of every day. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Do one ordinary task with special care, offering it to God.

Day 2: Recognizing one's mistakes

As a young deacon, John took the wrong side in a division of the Church, supporting an antipope. In 506 he recognized his error and asked forgiveness.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to recognize my mistakes and the courage to ask forgiveness. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Ask forgiveness from someone you have wronged, or go to confession.

Day 3: The friendship of a thinker

The philosopher Boethius very probably dedicated several of his theological treatises to the deacon John. Faith and reason met in their friendship.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who seek you with their minds, and help me to love you with all my intelligence. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Read a few pages of a good book about the faith.

Day 4: A burden not chosen

Theodoric forced the elderly pope to travel to Constantinople on his behalf. John accepted a mission he had not wanted.

Prayer: Lord, when I am given a burden I did not choose, help me carry it with faith and trust. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Accept without complaint a duty or request that you find difficult.

Day 5: Pleading for peace

In Constantinople, John pleaded for tolerance toward the Arians, so that violence would not spread. He sought peace, even for those who did not share his faith.

Prayer: Lord, make me a peacemaker, even toward those who do not think as I do. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Pray for a person or a group with whom you are in conflict.

Day 6: Not betraying conscience

John refused to ask that converts be forced back into Arianism. He would not sacrifice the freedom of those who had chosen the Catholic faith.

Prayer: Lord, protect the freedom of conscience of believers throughout the world, and keep me faithful to the truth. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Learn about a person or a country where religious freedom is denied, and pray for them.

Day 7: Honors that pass

In Constantinople, John was welcomed in triumph. A few weeks later, he was in prison. Human honors do not last; only God remains. John's peace did not depend on the welcome of the powerful, but on his communion with Christ, who was himself acclaimed and then condemned.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the desire for praise and from the fear of disgrace. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Do a good deed in secret, without seeking any recognition.

Day 8: In prison

Arrested in Ravenna, deprived of food and mistreated, the elderly pope ended his life in a cell. Christ said: "I was in prison and you came to me."

Prayer: Lord, be close to all prisoners, the guilty and the innocent alike, and to their families. Saint John I, pray for us.

Today: Pray for prisoners and prison chaplains, or support a prison ministry.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

John died on May 18, 526. His body was brought back to Rome and buried in Saint Peter's, near the tomb of the apostle who had also died for Christ.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint John I, keep me faithful to you and to your Church until the end. Amen.

Today: Pray for the pope and for all who serve the Church in difficult conditions.

Closing prayer

Saint John I, pope and martyr, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for prisoners and for all who suffer injustice, for Christians under pressure from those in power, and for those who work for peace. Obtain for us the grace to remain faithful to Christ, to respect the conscience of others, and to keep hope even in the darkest hours. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Pope Saint John I and pray the prayer to Saint John I.

Credits and sources

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