

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Kemble

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: August 22

IN BRIEF

Saint John Kemble

English priest, secret missionary in Herefordshire for over fifty years, martyred at Hereford in 1679.

Feast day	August 22
Born	c. 1599, Herefordshire (England)
Died	August 22, 1679, Hereford (England)
Canonized	October 25, 1970, by Pope Paul VI
Era	17th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint John Kemble for Faithfulness Over the Years

Novena to Saint John Kemble

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John Kemble

Saint John Kemble was an English Catholic priest born around 1599 in Herefordshire, on the border with Wales. For more than fifty years, he secretly served the Catholics of his region. Arrested at nearly eighty during the panic set off by the so-called "Popish Plot," he was executed at Hereford on August 22, 1679. He is one of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales. His feast day is August 22.

Who was Saint John Kemble?

John Kemble was born around 1599 into a Catholic family in Herefordshire, a rural county in the west of England. At that time, Catholic practice was forbidden, and it was impossible to train for the priesthood in the kingdom. The young man therefore went to the English College at Douai, in Flanders, where he was ordained a priest on February 23, 1625. That same year, he returned to England.

So began a very long life as a missionary priest. For more than half a century, John Kemble traveled the countryside of Herefordshire and neighboring Monmouthshire, celebrating Mass in homes, baptizing, hearing confessions and visiting the sick. He lived at Pembridge Castle, near Welsh Newton, with members of his family. The Catholic people of the area knew him and protected him.

Key dates

- **Around 1599**: Born in Herefordshire, into a family that stayed Catholic.
- **1620s**: Trained at the English College in Douai.
- **February 23, 1625**: Ordained a priest at Douai.

- **1625**: Returns to England as a missionary priest in Herefordshire and Monmouthshire.
- **1625-1678**: More than fifty years of secret ministry, based at Pembridge Castle.
- **1678**: The so-called Popish Plot, denounced by Titus Oates, sets off a wave of persecution.
- **Late 1678**: Arrested at Pembridge Castle, he is imprisoned at Hereford, then taken to London for questioning.
- **August 22, 1679**: Sent back to Hereford, he is executed there at nearly eighty.
- **December 15, 1929**: Beatified by Pius XI.
- **October 25, 1970**: Canonized by Paul VI among the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales.

Half a century of hidden faithfulness

We often picture martyrs as heroes of a few days. John Kemble was first of all a priest for a whole lifetime. Fifty-three years of ministry, carried out quietly, following the rhythm of the seasons and the villages: Masses at dawn in a barn or a bedroom, confessions whispered, children baptized, the dying accompanied. The laws punished with death any priest ordained abroad, but in this rural region Catholics were still numerous, and the old priest was able to carry on his work for a long time.

The so-called Popish Plot

In 1678, an adventurer, Titus Oates, invented out of thin air a Catholic plot to assassinate King Charles II. Panic spread across England. Dozens of Catholics were arrested, tried and executed, among them many priests.

John Kemble, almost eighty, was arrested at Pembridge Castle. He could have fled, but he refused, saying that at his age he had not long to live and that it was better to die for his faith. He was taken to Hereford, then to London, where he was questioned about the plot. No evidence tied him to this invented affair. The only charge that stood was that he was a Catholic priest, which under the law was treason. He was sent back to Hereford to be executed.

The last pipe

On August 22, 1679, before being led to the place of execution, John Kemble asked to finish his prayers. According to an old account, he then shared a last pipe and a drink with the under-sheriff, calmly and good-humoredly. For a long time in the area, a last pipe smoked among friends was called a "Kemble pipe." At the place of execution, he declared that he was dying only for his Catholic faith, and not for any plot. He was hanged, then disemboweled and quartered, as traitors were treated at the time.

Veneration and iconography

His body was buried in the churchyard at Welsh Newton, near Pembridge Castle, where his grave has remained a place of pilgrimage. A relic, his hand, is venerated at Hereford. John Kemble was beatified in 1929 by Pius XI, then canonized by Paul VI on October 25, 1970, with the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales. His feast day is August 22. He is shown as an old priest with white hair, sometimes with a pipe or the rope of his execution.

What can we learn from Saint John Kemble?

John Kemble was faithful long before he was a martyr. His holiness was built over time, through humble, everyday service. Facing death, he kept his peace, and even his sense of humor. He can accompany the elderly, priests worn down by the years, and all who must persevere in a long-term commitment.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint John Kemble and the novena to Saint John Kemble.

Where to pray to Saint John Kemble

- **Welsh Newton** (Herefordshire, England): his grave, in the churchyard, a place of pilgrimage.
- **Hereford**: the city of his martyrdom, where a relic of his hand is venerated.
- **Douai** (France): the city where he was trained and ordained a priest.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Kemble for Faithfulness Over the Years

Saint John Kemble, an English priest, secretly served the Catholics of Herefordshire for more than fifty years. Arrested at nearly eighty, he was executed at Hereford in 1679, keeping his peace and good humor to the end. This prayer is an original composition inspired by his life; it is not an official liturgical text. It asks for the grace of perseverance and entrusts the elderly and priests to his intercession.

Prayer to Saint John Kemble

Saint John Kemble,
priest faithful for more than fifty years,
you traveled the roads of your region
to bring Christ into people's homes,
quietly and tirelessly.

When trial came in your old age,
you did not flee:
you met death in peace,
and bore witness that you died for your faith
and not out of hatred.

Obtain for us the grace of a faithfulness that lasts,
in marriage, in the priesthood, in consecrated life,
in our work and in our daily service.
Watch over the elderly and over weary priests,
and give us, as you had, a serene heart before death.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint John Kemble

- On his feast day, August 22.
- For a priest who is elderly or worn out by long years of ministry.
- For an elderly person nearing the end of life.
- When a long-term commitment becomes heavy to carry.
- When you are falsely accused.

A prayer for growing old well

> *Lord, keep me faithful to the evening of my life,*
> *with a peaceful and joyful heart.*
> *Saint John Kemble, pray for me. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint John Kemble from August 14 to 22, and read the life of Saint John Kemble.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Kemble

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint John Kemble, an English priest who served the Catholics of Herefordshire for more than fifty years and was martyred at Hereford on August 22, 1679. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, August 22, begin on August 14. You can also pray it at any time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with 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 Kemble, pray for us." The act for the day helps you live the novena in a concrete way.

Day 1: A faith received in the family

John Kemble was born into a family that stayed Catholic despite the laws and the fines. That is where his vocation was born, in a faith handed on at the cost of sacrifices.

Prayer: Lord, bless the families who keep the faith in a world that ignores it.

Today: Pray together as a family, even for a few moments, or call a loved one to see how they are.

Day 2: Leaving to be trained

To become a priest, John had to go to Douai, far from home. He was ordained in 1625 and went straight back to England, knowing the risk.

Prayer: Lord, give your Church generous priests, and bless those who are preparing to become priests.

Today: Pray for vocations in your diocese.

Day 3: On the roads of Herefordshire

For more than fifty years, John went from house to house to celebrate Mass and give the sacraments. His ministry was made of walks, visits and encounters.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the priests who come to us. Bless their steps and their weariness.

Today: Thank a priest for his service.

Day 4: Faithfulness in ordinary days

John's holiness was not made in a day. It grew through the repetition of the same actions, the same Masses, the same visits, over decades.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love you in the routine, and never to grow weary of doing good.

Today: Do carefully a daily task you usually rush through.

Day 5: A lie that kills

In 1678, Titus Oates invented a false Catholic plot. This lie cost the lives of many innocent people, among them John Kemble.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from lies and slander. Protect those who are falsely accused.

Today: Refuse to repeat a rumor, and say something good about a person who is being criticized.

Day 6: Not running away

Warned of the danger, the old priest refused to flee. At his age, he said, it was better to die for his faith. He stayed with those he served.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage not to run from my responsibilities when they become hard.

Today: Face a situation you have been avoiding for a long time.

Day 7: Old age offered

John Kemble was almost eighty when he was arrested, imprisoned and taken to London. He offered to God his old age, his declining strength and his trials.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the elderly, the sick and the lonely. May they feel your presence and ours.

Today: Visit an elderly person, or give them a call.

Day 8: Peace and good humor

Before dying, John finished his prayers and then, according to the account, shared a last pipe with the under-sheriff. His peace came from his trust in God.

Prayer: Lord, give me peace of heart, and even humor, in the midst of trials.

Today: Bring a little peace and good cheer to someone who is worried.

Day 9: Dying for the faith

On August 22, 1679, at Hereford, John Kemble declared that he was dying for his Catholic faith, and not for a plot. He gave his life after giving it every day for fifty years.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint John Kemble, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will, and keep me faithful until my last day.

Today: Pray for the dying of today, and for a good death for yourself.

Living the novena with Saint John Kemble

Saint John Kemble is the saint of perseverance. He did not shine through spectacular deeds, but through stubborn faithfulness, day after day, for more than fifty years. This novena can accompany those who have been committed for a long time and feel worn out: spouses, priests, religious, caregivers, family helpers. It can also be prayed for an elderly person or someone near the end of life. Entrust your intention each day, and ask with him for the grace to finish the race in peace.

Closing prayer

Saint John Kemble,
faithful priest and martyr of Hereford,
you served the people of God for more than fifty years
and welcomed death in peace.
Present to the Lord the intention I have carried through these nine days.
Obtain for me the grace of perseverance,
a serene heart in trial,
and the joy of staying faithful to the end.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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