

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John Sarkander

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: March 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint John Sarkander

Catholic priest of Moravia, martyred in Olomouc in 1620 for keeping the seal of confession.

Feast day	March 17
Born	December 20, 1576, Skoczów, Silesia (now Poland)
Died	March 17, 1620, Olomouc (now Czech Republic)
Canonized	May 21, 1995, by Pope John Paul II
Era	17th century

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint John Sarkander

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John Sarkander

Saint John Sarkander, in Czech Jan Sarkander, was a Catholic priest of Moravia who died a martyr in Olomouc on March 17, 1620. Accused of treason at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, he was tortured for refusing to reveal what he had heard in confession. Beatified in 1860, he was canonized by Saint John Paul II in Olomouc in 1995. His feast is celebrated on March 17, the same day as Saint Patrick.

Who was Saint John Sarkander?

John Sarkander lived in the Czech lands at a time when Catholics and Protestants were in violent conflict. Bohemia and Moravia were deeply divided between the Catholic Church, the heirs of Jan Hus, the Bohemian Brethren and the Lutherans. In 1618 the revolt of the Protestant Estates of Bohemia against the emperor opened the Thirty Years' War. It was in this setting of religious and political tension that Sarkander carried out his ministry and met his death.

He is honored above all as a martyr of the seal of confession: he chose torture and death rather than betray what a penitent had entrusted to him in the sacrament of reconciliation. For Catholics today, when the seal of confession is sometimes questioned in public debate, his witness has lost nothing of its force.

Key dates

- **December 20, 1576**: Born at Skoczów, in Cieszyn Silesia, in present-day Poland.
- **1609**: Ordained a priest.
- **Following years**: Ministry in several parishes of Moravia, then at Holešov.

- **1618**: Beginning of the Bohemian revolt and of the Thirty Years' War.
- **1620**: Arrest, accusation of treason and torture in Olomouc.
- **March 17, 1620**: Dies in prison from his torture.
- **May 6, 1860**: Beatified by Pope Pius IX.
- **May 21, 1995**: Canonized by Pope John Paul II in Olomouc.

A priest amid division

Born in 1576 at Skoczów, in Silesia, John Sarkander completed his studies and was ordained a priest in 1609. He served in Moravia, in several parishes, and then at Holešov. He worked especially to bring back to the Catholic Church the followers of Jan Hus and the Bohemian Brethren, who were numerous in the region. In a torn country, this zeal earned him the hostility of part of the population and of the Protestant authorities.

The procession of Holešov

In early 1620, Polish troops sent to support the emperor crossed Moravia and ravaged the countryside. According to the traditional account, as they approached Holešov, John Sarkander went out to meet them in procession, carrying the Blessed Sacrament, and the town was spared.

His opponents saw this as proof that he was in league with the Poles and accused him of having called in these foreign soldiers. They also suspected that he had received the confidences of his Catholic lord, whose confessor he was, and that he had taken part in a plot.

Martyr of the seal of confession

Arrested, John Sarkander was taken to the prison of Olomouc. His judges wanted him to reveal what he knew of his penitent's plans. He refused, invoking the absolute secrecy of confession that the Church imposes on every

priest. He was then subjected to long and cruel tortures, in particular on the rack. He did not give in. Gravely injured, he died in his prison on March 17, 1620, after several weeks of suffering.

His courage makes him, together with Saint John of Nepomuk in the fourteenth century, one of the great figures of priests who died for keeping the seal of confession.

Beatification and canonization

The beatification process, opened in the eighteenth century under Pope Benedict XIV, was interrupted. Pope Pius IX beatified John Sarkander on May 6, 1860. Saint John Paul II canonized him on May 21, 1995, in Olomouc, together with Zdislava of Lemberk.

The canonization drew reactions from some Czech Protestants, and it became an occasion to recall the need for forgiveness and reconciliation between Christians after the violence of the past. His relics are kept in Saint Wenceslas Cathedral in Olomouc, where an altar is dedicated to him. A chapel bearing his name, decorated with frescoes telling his life and martyrdom, also stands in Olomouc.

Why is Saint John Sarkander invoked by confessors?

Saint John Sarkander is not the official patron of a country or a trade, but his death speaks directly to every priest who hears confessions. He kept the seal of confession under torture, so priests ask his help to be faithful guardians of God's mercy, and penitents can turn to him to approach the sacrament without fear. Because he was falsely accused of treason, he is also invoked by people who suffer unjust accusations. And because he died in a time of hatred between Christians, he is a fitting intercessor for Christian unity.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John Sarkander in art

- **Cassock and surplice**: he is shown as a priest of his time.
- **The martyr's palm**: the sign of his martyrdom.
- **The monstrance**: in scenes of the procession of Holešov, he carries the Blessed Sacrament.
- **The rack**: some frescoes show him stretched on the instrument of his torture.

What can we learn from Saint John Sarkander?

John Sarkander reminds us of the greatness of the sacrament of reconciliation: the penitent can confide in complete safety, because the priest is bound to secrecy, even at the cost of his life. He also bears witness to the fidelity of a pastor in a time of hatred and war between Christians. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint John Sarkander and the novena to Saint John Sarkander.

Where to pray to Saint John Sarkander

- **Olomouc** (Czech Republic): Saint Wenceslas Cathedral, which keeps his relics and an altar dedicated to him.
- **Olomouc**: the Saint John Sarkander chapel, with its frescoes.
- **Holešov** and **Skoczów**: the parish of his ministry and his hometown.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John Sarkander for Priests and Confessors

As far as we know, there is no traditional English prayer to Saint John Sarkander whose text we can vouch for. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by his life: the priest of Moravia, faithful in a time of division, who died rather than break the seal of confession.

A priest faithful to the end

In 1620, at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, John Sarkander was accused of treason. His judges wanted him to reveal what he had heard in confession. He refused, endured torture and died in Olomouc on March 17, 1620. Saint John Paul II canonized him in 1995.

Prayer to Saint John Sarkander for priests and confessors

Saint John Sarkander, you chose torture rather than betray the trust of a penitent: pray for all priests who hear confessions, that they may be faithful guardians of God's mercy.

Give me the confidence to approach the sacrament of reconciliation without fear, knowing that what I entrust to God remains between him and me.

You were unjustly accused and judged by those who hated you: support all who are slandered, imprisoned or tortured, and give them the strength to remain faithful to their conscience.

You lived in a land torn apart among Christians: obtain for us the grace of forgiveness and unity. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may I keep my word and stay faithful to Christ to the end. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

- On his feast day, March 17.
- Before going to confession, especially after a long time away from the sacrament.
- For priests, and for a confessor who has helped you.
- For someone who is falsely accused, and for Christian unity.

A short prayer before confession

> *Saint John Sarkander, faithful keeper of the secrets of mercy, help me to open my heart to God with trust and humility. Amen.*

To know him better, read the life of Saint John Sarkander, or pray the novena to Saint John Sarkander from March 9 to March 17.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John Sarkander

This novena to Saint John Sarkander is an original composition by Saintspedia. In nine days it follows the life of this Moravian priest who died in 1620 rather than break the seal of confession. To end on his feast day, March 17, begin it on March 9. Since it falls during Lent, it is a fine way to prepare for confession before Easter. It can also be prayed at any time for priests, for those who are falsely accused and for Christian unity.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a few minutes in silence. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the invocation: "Saint John Sarkander, martyr of the seal of confession, pray for us." Each day also proposes a small concrete act. Ideally, plan to go to confession during these nine days.

Day 1: Born in Silesia

John Sarkander was born on December 20, 1576, at Skoczów, in Silesia. He grew up in a land where Christians were divided and where faith could become a cause of conflict. God calls his witnesses in every time and place, even the most troubled.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint John Sarkander, help me to live my faith with courage and peace in the world where you have placed me. Amen.

Today: Pray for your town and for the Christians who live in it.

Day 2: Called to the priesthood

After his studies, John was ordained a priest in 1609. He gave his life to serving the people of God in the parishes of Moravia. Every priest is a gift for the Church.

Prayer: Saint John Sarkander, pray for priests, that they may be faithful to their calling, and for young men who hear the Lord's call. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for the priests of your parish, and thank one of them.

Day 3: A pastor in a divided land

Bohemia and Moravia were torn between Catholics, the heirs of Jan Hus, the Bohemian Brethren and the Lutherans. John Sarkander worked to bring people back to the Catholic Church, which earned him enemies. Division among Christians is a wound in the Body of Christ.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you prayed that all may be one. Through the prayers of Saint John Sarkander, heal the wounds between Christians and lead us toward unity. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christian unity, and speak with respect of other Christians.

Day 4: Carrying the Blessed Sacrament

According to tradition, when Polish troops approached Holešov in 1620, John went out to meet them in procession, carrying the Blessed Sacrament, and the town was spared. He placed his trust in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, present in the Eucharist, through the intercession of Saint John Sarkander, increase my faith in your real presence and my trust in you. Amen.

Today: Spend some time before the Blessed Sacrament in a church.

Day 5: Falsely accused

His opponents accused him of having called in the foreign soldiers and of taking part in a plot. He was arrested and imprisoned in Olomouc. Many people today are also falsely accused and cannot defend themselves.

Prayer: Saint John Sarkander, support all who are falsely accused, slandered or unjustly imprisoned. Let the truth come to light and keep them from despair. Amen.

Today: Refuse to judge or condemn someone on the basis of rumors.

Day 6: The seal of confession

His judges wanted him to reveal what his penitent had told him in confession. He refused. The seal of confession is absolute: what is confided to God through the priest remains between the penitent and God.

Prayer: Saint John Sarkander, give me the confidence to approach the sacrament of reconciliation without fear, knowing that God receives me with mercy. Amen.

Today: Make a careful examination of conscience and plan your next confession.

Day 7: Strength under torture

John was tortured cruelly, especially on the rack. He did not give in. His strength came from God and from his love for the penitent whose trust he would not betray. Fidelity sometimes demands everything.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint John Sarkander, strengthen all who are persecuted or tortured, and give me the grace to keep my word even when it costs me. Amen.

Today: Keep a promise you have been putting off, or pray for prisoners of conscience.

Day 8: Death in prison

Gravely injured, John died in his prison in Olomouc on March 17, 1620, after weeks of suffering. His death was not a defeat but a witness. He gave his life for the mercy of God.

Prayer: Saint John Sarkander, pray for the sick and the dying, and for all who suffer alone. Obtain for them the peace of Christ. Amen.

Today: Visit or call someone who is sick or isolated.

Day 9: Forgiveness and reconciliation

When Saint John Paul II canonized him in Olomouc in 1995, the event was an occasion to recall the need for forgiveness between Christians after the violence of the past. On this last day, let us entrust our intention to him.

Prayer: Saint John Sarkander, present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days, and obtain for me the grace to forgive and to be reconciled. Amen.

Today: Take a step toward reconciliation with someone, or go to confession.

Closing prayer

Saint John Sarkander,
priest of Moravia and martyr of the seal of confession,
you preferred torture to betraying the trust of a penitent.
Pray for all confessors, that they may be faithful guardians of mercy.
Give us confidence in the sacrament of reconciliation,
support those who are falsely accused,
and obtain for divided Christians the grace of unity.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Continue with the prayer to Saint John Sarkander or read his life and story.

Credits and sources

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