BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John the Almsgiver

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: November 11

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IN BRIEF

Saint John the Almsgiver

Patriarch of Alexandria from 610 to about 619, famous for his charity toward the poor.

Feast day	November 11
Born	between 550 and 556, Amathus (Cyprus)
Died	c. 619 (between 616 and 621), Amathus (Cyprus)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Casarano (Italy), works of charity

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint John the Almsgiver

Church of San Giovanni in Bragora, Venice

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John the Almsgiver

Saint John the Almsgiver, also called John the Merciful, was Patriarch of Alexandria in the early 7th century. Born in Cyprus in the mid-6th century, a widower and former official, he led the Church of Alexandria from 610 until his death around 619, placing the poor at the center of his ministry. He died at Amathus, his home town. His body is venerated in Venice. His feast day is November 11 in the Catholic Church, and November 12 in the Orthodox Churches.

Who was Saint John the Almsgiver?

John is one of the great figures of charity in Christian antiquity. We know him mainly through two early accounts: a short Life written by two people close to him, John Moschus and Sophronius, the future Patriarch of Jerusalem, now lost; and a fuller Life written around 640 by Leontius, Bishop of Neapolis in Cyprus. Leontius had not known him personally, and his account follows the conventions of the hagiography of his day. But it draws on memories that were still fresh and gives the portrait of a bishop who truly left his mark on Alexandria through his generosity, at a time of war and great poverty.

Key dates in the life of John the Almsgiver

- **Between 550 and 556**: Born at Amathus, near present-day Limassol in Cyprus, where his father Epiphanius held high office.
- **Second half of the 6th century**: He marries, has two children and serves as an imperial official.
- **Before 610**: Widowed and bereaved of his children, he leads a life of prayer and charity.

- **610**: At the request of Emperor Heraclius, he becomes Patriarch of Alexandria.
- **Beginning of his patriarchate**: He has the poor of the city counted; there are seven thousand five hundred.
- **From 614**: He welcomes refugees fleeing Palestine, conquered by the Persians, and sends aid to Jerusalem.
- **c. 619**: As the Persians threaten Egypt, he sets out for Constantinople and dies on the way at Amathus.
- **c. 640**: Leontius of Neapolis writes his Life.
- **1249**: His body is brought to Venice, where it is venerated in the church of San Giovanni in Bragora.

From official to patriarch

John was born into a prominent family in Cyprus. He married and had two children, while serving in the imperial administration. He lost his wife and children quite early. This trial turned him toward a life of prayer and service, and his reputation for kindness spread. He was close to Emperor Heraclius and linked by friendship or spiritual kinship to the patrician Nicetas, the emperor's cousin. In 610, when the patriarchal see of Alexandria fell vacant, Heraclius asked him to take it. John thus became, as a layman, the pastor of the second city of the Empire, a city divided between Christians faithful to the Council of Chalcedon and supporters of Monophysitism.

The poor, "my lords"

As soon as he arrived, according to Leontius, John asked his stewards to draw up a list of "his lords." When they were surprised, he explained that he meant the poor, because they were the ones who could help him enter heaven. Seven

thousand five hundred were counted, who from then on received regular help. He also had hospices and hospitals built, visited the sick himself and is said to have founded houses where poor women could give birth in decent conditions.

The most famous story is that of the blanket. A rich man, seeing that the patriarch slept under a shabby blanket, gave him a very costly one. John could not sleep all night, thinking of all those it could have covered; the next day he sold it and gave the money to the poor. The rich man bought it back and returned it to him, and John sold it again. "We shall see," the donor finally said, "who tires first: you of selling, or I of buying back." The account also says that he received each week, sitting in front of the church, all who wished to speak to him, so that no one would be prevented from approaching him.

A pastor in the storm

From 614, the Persians invaded Palestine and took Jerusalem. Crowds of refugees reached Alexandria. John welcomed them, had the wounded cared for and food distributed. He sent to Jerusalem money, wheat, oil, wine and clothing to help the Christians and religious communities, and envoys to ransom captives. A Chalcedonian patriarch, he also defended the faith defined at the Council of Chalcedon and opposed Monophysite teachings.

Around 619, the Persians in turn threatened Egypt. John left with Nicetas for Constantinople, probably to seek help. Stopping in Cyprus, he fell ill and died at Amathus, the town where he had been born.

Devotion and art

Honored very early as a saint in both East and West, John received the name of Almsgiver, in Greek *Eleemon*, the Merciful. His relics were later brought to Venice, in 1249. His body, with some of his garments, is still venerated in a chapel of the church of San Giovanni in Bragora, to the right of the choir. A head reliquary attributed to him is kept in Split Cathedral, in Croatia. Another

Venetian church, near the Rialto, bears his name and holds a painting of him by Titian. He is also the patron of Casarano, in Apulia. A tradition links him to the hospital founded in Jerusalem in the 11th century by merchants from Amalfi, from which the Order of the Hospitallers was born.

He is shown as a bishop or patriarch, giving alms to a poor man or holding a purse. The Roman Martyrology commemorates him on November 11; in the West he was formerly celebrated on January 23.

What can we learn from Saint John the Almsgiver?

John took the words of the Gospel seriously: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." He did not only give money: he organized mutual aid, received the poor in person and opened his city to refugees. His life reminds us that charity is not an extra added to faith, but its concrete expression. You can pray to him for the poor and those who serve them, for refugees, for the bereaved, and to learn to give without counting the cost.

Where to pray to Saint John the Almsgiver

- **Venice** (Italy): the church of San Giovanni in Bragora, where his body is venerated in a chapel near the choir.
- **Venice** (Italy): the church of San Giovanni Elemosinario, near the Rialto, dedicated to him.
- **Split** (Croatia): the Cathedral of Saint Domnius, which keeps a head reliquary in his name.
- **Casarano** (Apulia, Italy): the town of which he is the patron saint.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John the Almsgiver for the Poor and Refugees

Saint John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria in the early 7th century, called the poor "my lords" and opened his city to the refugees of war. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him the poor, refugees, those who serve them, and our own conversion to generosity.

Prayer to Saint John the Almsgiver

Saint John the Almsgiver,
you recognized in the poor
the face of Christ and your lords;
open my eyes to those I no longer see
and my heart to those I avoid.

You could not sleep warm
while thinking of those who were cold;
free me from attachment to possessions,
and teach me to give
with joy and without counting.

You welcomed refugees
and ransomed captives;
watch over those who flee war,
over the sick and mothers in distress,
and over all who serve the poorest.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint John the Almsgiver

- On his feast day, November 11.
- Before making a donation or committing yourself to a work of charity.
- For refugees, migrants and victims of war.
- For the bereaved, especially those who have lost a spouse and children.
- For those who run charities, hospitals and maternity homes.

A short invocation

> *Saint John the Almsgiver, friend of the poor,*
> *teach me to give as Christ gave himself. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint John the Almsgiver from November 3 to 11, and read the life of Saint John the Almsgiver.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John the Almsgiver

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria, as told by his biographer Leontius of Neapolis. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, November 11, begin on November 3. You can also pray it at any other 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 the Almsgiver, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: Passing through grief

John lost his wife and children. Instead of closing in on himself, he let this wound open him to the suffering of others.

Prayer: Lord, comfort those who mourn a spouse or a child. Make our wounds places of compassion.

Act of the day: Pray for someone who is grieving and get in touch with them.

Day 2: Accepting an unexpected call

A layman and a widower, John is called to become Patriarch of Alexandria. He accepts a charge he had not sought.

Prayer: Lord, when you call me where I did not expect, help me to accept with humility.

Act of the day: Say yes to a request for help you would tend to refuse.

Day 3: Counting the poor

His first act is to draw up the list of "his lords," the poor of the city. Seven thousand five hundred are counted. To love is first to see and to know.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the poor of my neighborhood, whom I pass without seeing.

Act of the day: Learn the name of someone living on the street or in hardship near you.

Day 4: The blanket sold

John cannot sleep under a costly blanket while thinking of those who are cold. He sells it, again and again, for the poor.

Prayer: Lord, free me from attachment to my comfort, and give me a heart that thinks first of others.

Act of the day: Give a warm garment or a blanket to a charity.

Day 5: A door always open

According to Leontius, on certain days he sat in front of the church to receive all who wanted to speak to him, with no one in between.

Prayer: Lord, make me available and approachable. Let no one be afraid to come and ask me for help.

Act of the day: Take time to really listen to someone, without looking at the clock.

Day 6: Welcoming refugees

When Palestine falls to the Persians, crowds flee to Alexandria. John welcomes them, feeds them and has them cared for.

Prayer: Lord, protect those who flee war, and give our countries welcoming hearts.

Act of the day: Support a work that helps refugees, with a gift or a little time.

Day 7: Ransoming captives

John sends men to ransom prisoners and has aid brought to the Christians of Jerusalem. His charity reaches beyond the walls of his city.

Prayer: Lord, remember prisoners, hostages and all who are deprived of freedom.

Act of the day: Pray for persecuted Christians and for people in detention.

Day 8: Caring for new life

Tradition says that he founded houses where poor women could give birth with dignity. He cared for life at its beginning.

Prayer: Lord, bless expectant mothers, especially those who are alone or in need, and those who accompany them.

Act of the day: Give practical help to a young mother or a family expecting a child.

Day 9: Dying with empty hands

John dies at Amathus, his home town, around 619, having given everything away. He comes before God with empty hands, but with a heart full of those he loved.

Prayer: Lord, help me to live for others and to die in your peace. Through the intercession of Saint John the Almsgiver, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Make a gift, however small, in secret, and attend Mass if possible.

Closing prayer

> *Saint John the Almsgiver,*
> *Patriarch of Alexandria and father of the poor,*
> *you served Christ in the least of your lords.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you,*
> *and make me merciful like you.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

PILGRIMAGE

Church of San Giovanni in Bragora, Venice

The church of San Giovanni in Bragora stands in Venice, in the Castello district, on a small square near the Riva degli Schiavoni. It is one of the oldest parishes in the city. In a chapel to the right of the choir it keeps the body of Saint John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria, who died around 619 and whose relics arrived in Venice in 1249.

An old Venetian parish

The church is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. Its name, Bragora, whose origin is still debated, distinguishes this parish from the other Venetian churches dedicated to a Saint John. The present building, plain in appearance with its brick façade, dates mostly from the late 15th century. It was at its font that the composer and priest Antonio Vivaldi, born in the neighborhood, was baptized in 1678.

Venice, a merchant city turned toward the East, received many relics from the eastern Mediterranean in the Middle Ages. Those of John the Almsgiver, which arrived in 1249, were entrusted to this parish, where they are still venerated.

What you can see

The interior is a simple nave with a wooden ceiling, housing several works of the Venetian Renaissance, including a large *Baptism of Christ* by Cima da Conegliano at the high altar. In the chapel to the right of the choir, a

monument holds the body of Saint John the Almsgiver, kept with some of his garments, beneath an altarpiece devoted to him. It is a quiet place, far from the crowds of Saint Mark's Square, well suited to recollection.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint John the Almsgiver. Before his relics, entrust to him the poor you know, refugees and those who serve them, then say the prayer to Saint John the Almsgiver. A fine way to extend the visit is to make, on your way out, a gesture of charity. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint John the Almsgiver

- **San Giovanni Elemosinario** (Venice): the church dedicated to him near the Rialto, with a painting by Titian.
- **Split Cathedral** (Croatia): a head reliquary attributed to him.
- **Amathus** (Cyprus): the ancient site of his home town, where he died.

Practical information

The church is in the sestiere of Castello, a few minutes' walk from the Riva degli Schiavoni and the nearby vaporetto stops. It is a parish church: modest dress and silence are requested, especially during Mass. Opening hours and times of services may vary: check with the parish before you come.

Credits and sources

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