

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 27

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IN BRIEF

Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist

Apostle of Jesus, son of Zebedee, evangelist, recognized by tradition as the beloved disciple.

Feast day	December 27
Born	Galilee (Bethsaida according to tradition)
Died	c. 100, according to tradition, Ephesus, according to tradition
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial veneration)
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	theologians, writers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint John the Apostle: "Love One Another"

Novena to Saint John the Apostle

Basilica of Saint John at Ephesus, Tomb of the Apostle in Selçuk

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist

Saint John is one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. A fisherman from Galilee, son of Zebedee and brother of James, he belonged, with Peter and James, to the three disciples closest to Christ. Tradition identifies him with "the disciple whom Jesus loved," who stood at the foot of the cross and to whom Jesus entrusted his mother. Tradition also attributes to him the fourth Gospel, three letters and the Book of Revelation. According to tradition he died in Ephesus around the year 100, and his feast day is December 27, within the Octave of Christmas.

Who was Saint John the Apostle?

John was the son of Zebedee, a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee who owned a boat and employed hired men. John and his brother James were working in the family trade when Jesus called them: leaving their father in the boat, they followed him at once (Mark 1:19-20).

Jesus nicknamed the two brothers "Boanerges," meaning "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17), probably because of their fiery temperament. The Gospels tell how they wanted to call down fire from heaven on a village that refused to welcome them, and how Jesus rebuked them (Luke 9:54-55). According to an ancient interpretation, John was also one of the two disciples of John the Baptist who were the first to follow Jesus (John 1:35-39).

Key dates

- **c. 28**: Called on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, with his brother James.
- **During the public ministry of Jesus**: Witness, with Peter and James, of the Transfiguration and the agony in the Garden of Olives.

- **c. 30**: Present at the foot of the cross according to John's Gospel; he takes Mary into his home.
- **After Pentecost**: Preaches in Jerusalem and Samaria with Peter (Acts 3 and 8).
- **c. 48-49**: Saint Paul counts him among the "pillars" of the Church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9).
- **Late first century**: According to tradition, he lives in Ephesus and is exiled for a time on the island of Patmos.
- **c. 100**: Dies in Ephesus, under the Emperor Trajan according to Saint Irenaeus.
- **6th century**: The Emperor Justinian builds a great basilica over his presumed tomb.

The disciple whom Jesus loved

John belonged to the small circle of Jesus' closest friends. With Peter and James, he witnessed the raising of the daughter of Jairus, the Transfiguration on the mountain, and the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane.

In the fourth Gospel, a figure appears who is never named: "the disciple whom Jesus loved." At the Last Supper, he leans back against the chest of Jesus (John 13:23-25). At the foot of the cross, Jesus entrusts his mother to him: "Behold, your mother"; and "from that hour the disciple took her into his home" (John 19:26-27). On Easter morning, he runs to the tomb with Peter, arrives first, and "he saw and believed" (John 20:8). Since antiquity, tradition has identified this disciple with the apostle John.



Saint John supporting Mary at the foot of the cross, Isenheim Altarpiece by Grünewald (c. 1512-1516, Unterlinden Museum, Colmar).

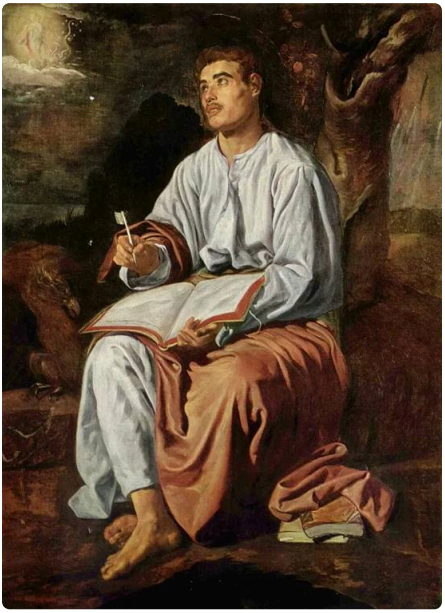
Apostle in Jerusalem, then in Ephesus

The Acts of the Apostles show John alongside Peter in the early Church: together they heal a lame man at the gate of the Temple, appear before the Sanhedrin, and go to Samaria to lay hands on the newly baptized. Around the year 48 or 49, Saint Paul met him in Jerusalem and named him among the "pillars" of the Church (Galatians 2:9).

The rest of his life is known through tradition. At the end of the second century, Saint Irenaeus of Lyon reported that John lived in Ephesus, in Asia Minor, until the reign of Trajan. Irenaeus had this memory from Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, who had known the apostle. The Book of Revelation says that its author, named John, was "on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God" (Revelation 1:9); tradition sees this as an exile under the Emperor Domitian.

The only apostle who was not martyred

According to tradition, John alone among the Twelve did not die a martyr. A legend reported by Tertullian says that in Rome he was plunged into boiling oil and came out unharmed. Another, later legend says he was offered a poisoned cup, which he blessed and drank without harm: this is why he is often shown holding a chalice.



Saint John on Patmos, by Diego Velázquez (c. 1618, National Gallery, London).

The evangelist and theologian

Tradition attributes to John the fourth Gospel, three letters and the Book of Revelation. Scholars today discuss how much comes from the apostle himself and how much from the school of disciples around him, especially for Revelation, whose style is very different. The Gospel according to John, written toward the end of the first century, is the most contemplative of the four. It opens with the famous prologue: "In the beginning was the Word"

(John 1:1). His first letter contains the sentence that sums up all his thought: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Because his gaze soars so high from the very first verse, he is represented by an eagle, and the Christian East calls him "John the Theologian."

Why is Saint John the patron saint of theologians and writers?

Because of the depth of his Gospel and letters, which have shaped Christian reflection on God for two thousand years, John is the patron saint of theologians and writers. More than anything, he is the apostle of love. The "son of thunder" became, through his life with Christ, the witness of God's tenderness. Saint Jerome reports that at the end of his life, too old to preach, John had himself carried to the assembly and repeated only: "Little children, love one another."

Catholics pray to him to grow in friendship with Christ, to welcome Mary into their lives, and for all who write and teach about God. In some regions, wine is blessed on his feast day in memory of the poisoned cup of the legend.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John in art

- **An eagle**: his symbol among the four evangelists.
- **A chalice**, sometimes with a small serpent or dragon coming out of it: the poisoned cup of the legend.
- **A young, beardless face** in scenes of the Gospel, especially the Last Supper and the Crucifixion, often in red or green.
- **An old man writing** on Patmos, with a book and a quill.



The Cave of the Apocalypse on Patmos, where tradition places Saint John's visions.

Where to pray to Saint John the Apostle

- **Ephesus** (Selçuk, Turkey): the ruins of the Basilica of Saint John, built over his presumed tomb.
- **Near Ephesus**: the House of the Virgin Mary (Meryem Ana Evi), a place of pilgrimage linked to the tradition that John welcomed Mary there.
- **Patmos** (Greece): the Cave of the Apocalypse and the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian.
- **Rome**: the oratory of San Giovanni in Oleo and the Church of San Giovanni a Porta Latina, linked to the legend of the boiling oil.
- **Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee**: the places of his calling.

To pray with him, you can say the prayer to Saint John the Apostle based on his first letter, or follow the novena to Saint John from December 19 to 27.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John the Apostle: "Love One Another"

The simplest way to pray with Saint John is to take up his own words, those that tradition attributes to him in his first letter. This page presents that passage of the New Testament, the last words of the apostle as reported by Saint Jerome, and an original prayer to Saint John, the beloved disciple.

"God is love" (1 John 4:7-8, 16)

Translated from the Greek by Saintspedia:

> *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*
>
> *Whoever does not love has not known God, for God is love.*
>
> *And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love: whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

Source: First Letter of Saint John, chapter 4, verses 7-8 and 16.

"Little children, love one another"

Saint Jerome tells how, in Ephesus at the end of his life, John was so old that he had to be carried to the assembly of the faithful. He would say only these words:

> *"Little children, love one another."*

When his disciples, growing weary, asked him why he always said the same thing, he is said to have answered that it was the Lord's commandment, and that if it was kept, it was enough. Source: Saint Jerome, *Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians*, book III, on Galatians 6:10 (Latin text in the public domain, translated by Saintspedia).

Prayer to Saint John the Apostle

Saint John, disciple whom Jesus loved, you rested against his heart at the Last Supper: teach me to stay close to him, in trust and friendship.

You remained at the foot of the cross when the others had fled: give me faithfulness in difficult hours. You took Mary into your home: help me to welcome her into my life as a mother.

You ran to the tomb, and you saw and believed: rekindle my faith in the resurrection. You wrote "God is love": teach me to love my brothers and sisters in deed and in truth.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Pray for me, for those who proclaim the Word, and for those who seek to understand the mystery 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 the Apostle and Evangelist is celebrated on December 27, two days after Christmas, between Saint Stephen (December 26) and the Holy Innocents (December 28). In some regions, wine is blessed on this day in memory of the poisoned cup of the legend. You can also pray to him before

reading the Gospel of John, for a friendship, or when you find it hard to love. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John the Apostle, and read about the life of Saint John.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John the Apostle

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia. It follows Saint John from the Sea of Galilee to Ephesus, drawing on the Gospels and on tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, begin on December 19; it ends on December 27, and so it carries you through Christmas. You can also pray it at any time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation and, if you can, the Bible passage mentioned. Then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father. The small act suggested for each day helps you carry the prayer into your daily life. During the busy days before Christmas, even a few quiet minutes are enough.

Day 1: The call by the lake

John was mending nets with his brother and his father when Jesus called him. He left everything and followed him at once (Mark 1:19-20). God's call reaches each of us in the middle of our work. John did not need to be somewhere special to be found by Jesus.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when you call me, help me to follow you without delay.

Today: Offer your day's work to God as you begin it.

Day 2: "Come and see"

The first disciples asked Jesus where he was staying. He answered, "Come and see" (John 1:39). Faith begins with an encounter and with time spent with him. John never forgot that hour: his Gospel even records that it was about

four in the afternoon.

Prayer: Lord, I want to stay with you. Show me where you dwell.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in silent prayer.

Day 3: The son of thunder

John had a fiery, sometimes violent temperament. Jesus did not stamp it out: little by little, he transformed it into love. Our faults can become strengths once we give them to Christ. The apostle who wanted to call down fire from heaven became the one who wrote most tenderly about love.

Prayer: Lord, you know my outbursts. Turn my zeal into charity.

Today: Answer gently someone who irritates you.

Day 4: The Transfiguration

On the mountain, John saw the face of Jesus shine with light (Mark 9:2-8). This memory would help him through the night of the Passion, when that same face was disfigured by suffering.

Prayer: Lord, keep alive in me the memory of the moments when you let me taste your light.

Today: Write down a moment of grace you have lived, so you can remember it in times of trial.

Day 5: Resting on the heart of Jesus

At the Last Supper, the beloved disciple leaned against the chest of Jesus (John 13:23). It is the image of a trusting friendship, free of fear. Prayer can be just that: resting near the Lord and listening to his heart.

Prayer: Jesus, let me rest close to your heart. Teach me friendship with you.

Today: Read John 15:9-17: "I have called you friends."

Day 6: At the foot of the cross

When almost everyone had fled, John stayed at Calvary with Mary and the women. Faithfulness is proven in times of trial. John could not stop the suffering of Jesus, but he did not leave him alone.

Prayer: Crucified Lord, help me to stay close to those who suffer, even when I can do nothing.

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



Praying with Saint John, apostle and evangelist.

Day 7: "Behold, your mother"

Jesus entrusted Mary to John, and John took her into his home (John 19:26-27). Through him, the whole Church receives Mary as mother. Every disciple is invited to make room for her, as John did.

Prayer: Mary, mother of Jesus, like Saint John I take you into my home. Watch over me and my family.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary.

Day 8: He saw and believed

On Easter morning, John ran to the tomb, saw the burial cloths lying there, and believed (John 20:1-8). Faith knows how to read the quiet signs of the risen Lord's presence. John did not need a great vision: an empty tomb and folded cloths were enough for him.

Prayer: Risen Lord, open my eyes so that I may see and believe.

Today: In the evening, notice one sign of God's presence in your day.

Day 9: Love one another

As an old man in Ephesus, John repeated only one thing: "Little children, love one another." His whole life with Christ is summed up in these words. At the end of a long road, what remains is love.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint John, teach me to love as you have loved us. Amen.

Today: Take a step toward reconciliation with someone close to you.

Closing prayer

Saint John, beloved disciple, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. Pray for me, for my family and for the Church. Help me to abide in the love of God and to pass it on to those around me. Amen.

To go further, read about the life of Saint John and pray the prayer to Saint John the Apostle.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint John at Ephesus, Tomb of the Apostle in Selçuk

On Ayasuluk Hill, in Selçuk in western Turkey, stand the ruins of the Basilica of Saint John, built in the 6th century by Emperor Justinian on the spot where tradition places the apostle's tomb. A few miles from ancient Ephesus, it is the main place of remembrance of Saint John, and is often visited together with the House of the Virgin Mary.

The tomb of the apostle

As early as the late 2nd century, Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, states in a letter that John, "who leaned on the Lord's breast," is buried at Ephesus. A small church, then a larger building, were built over the venerated tomb. In the 6th century, Justinian and Empress Theodora had an immense cross-shaped basilica, covered with domes, raised in its place, one of the largest churches of the Empire. It drew pilgrims throughout the Middle Ages before being abandoned and then ruined by earthquakes.



Basilica of Saint John at Ephesus, tomb of the apostle, in Selçuk.

What you can see today

Excavations and restorations in the 20th century uncovered the plan of the basilica, re-erected columns, the baptistery and, at the center, the presumed site of Saint John's tomb, marked by a slab. From the hill, the view extends over the plain where Ephesus stood, over the 14th-century Isa Bey Mosque at the foot of the site, and over the fortress that overlooks it.

Praying at Ephesus

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint John or the prologue of his Gospel. Once there, near the site of the tomb, a time of silence lets you meditate on the words he repeated at the end of his life: "Little children, love one another." The prayer to Saint John the Apostle can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.



Basilica of Saint John at Ephesus, tomb of the apostle, in Selçuk: the interior.

Other places connected with Saint John

- **House of the Virgin Mary** (Meryem Ana Evi), on Mount Bülbül, near Ephesus: a Marian shrine linked to the tradition that John took Mary in there; several popes have visited it.
- **Ancient site of Ephesus**: here are the ruins of the Church of Mary, where the Council of Ephesus was held in 431.
- **Patmos** (Greece): the Cave of the Apocalypse and the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, UNESCO World Heritage Sites.
- **Rome**: the Church of San Giovanni a Porta Latina and the Oratory of San Giovanni in Oleo, linked to the legend of the boiling oil.
- **Sea of Galilee** (Israel): the Galilee of his calling, around Capernaum.

Practical information

Selçuk is about 50 miles south of Izmir, reachable by train or bus. The Basilica of Saint John is visited as an archaeological site, with an admission fee; the House of the Virgin and the site of Ephesus can be reached by taxi or car. Mass is celebrated regularly at the House of the Virgin; check times with the shrine or a pilgrimage organizer before you leave.

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