

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John the Baptist

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: June 24

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IN BRIEF

Saint John the Baptist

Prophet and forerunner of Christ, who baptized Jesus in the Jordan and died a martyr.

Feast day	June 24, August 29
Born	late 1st century BC, Judea (Ein Karem, according to tradition)
Died	c. AD 29-32, Machaerus (present-day Jordan), according to Flavius Josephus
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since the early Church)
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	French Canadians, Quebec, Florence, the Order of Malta

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint John the Baptist: the Hymn "Ut Queant Laxis"

Novena to Saint John the Baptist

Amiens Cathedral and the Relic of the Head of Saint John the Baptist

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John the Baptist

Saint John the Baptist is the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. The son of the priest Zechariah and of Elizabeth, a relative of the Virgin Mary, he preached repentance in the Judean desert and baptized the crowds in the Jordan River, and then Jesus himself, before being imprisoned and beheaded on the orders of Herod Antipas. The Church celebrates him twice: on June 24 for his birth, and on August 29 for his martyrdom. Apart from Christ and the Virgin Mary, he is the only one whose birth the liturgy celebrates.

Who was Saint John the Baptist?

John is known both from the four Gospels and from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. At the end of the first century, Josephus wrote of a good man named John, called the Baptist, who urged the Jews to practice justice and to be baptized, and whom Herod had put to death. The Gospels present him as the "forerunner," the one who goes ahead of the Messiah to prepare his way, in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one crying out in the desert: prepare the way of the Lord."

According to the Gospel of Luke, his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, were elderly and childless. One day, while Zechariah was serving in the Temple in Jerusalem, the angel Gabriel announced to him the birth of a son. Six months later, the same angel visited Mary in Nazareth. When Mary came to greet Elizabeth, the child leaped for joy in his mother's womb: Christian tradition sees this as his first encounter with Jesus.



Saint John the Baptist by Leonardo da Vinci (c. 1513-1516, Louvre Museum).

Key dates in the life of John the Baptist

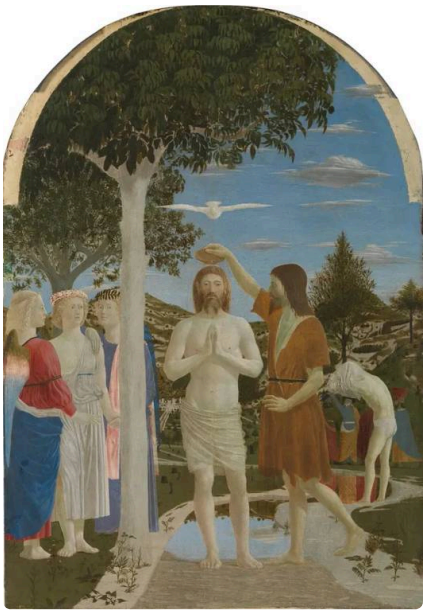
- **c. 7-5 BC**: His birth is announced to Zechariah in the Temple in Jerusalem.
- **A few months later**: Born in Judea, six months before Jesus; Zechariah recovers his speech and sings the *Benedictus*.
- **Youth**: He lives in the desert until the day he appears publicly to Israel (Luke 1:80).
- **c. 28-29**: "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius," he begins to preach and baptize near the Jordan.
- **c. 28-29**: He baptizes Jesus and points him out as "the Lamb of God"; two of his disciples, including Andrew, follow Jesus.
- **Shortly after**: Arrested by Herod Antipas, whom he had rebuked for marrying Herodias, his brother's wife.
- **c. 29-32**: Beheaded in the fortress of Machaerus, according to Josephus.

- **1206**: A relic of his head is brought from Constantinople to Amiens, in France.
- **1908**: Saint Pius X confirms him as patron saint of French Canadians.

The voice crying in the desert

John led an austere life: he wore a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt, and ate locusts and wild honey. His preaching was direct. He called everyone to change their lives and gave practical advice: whoever has two tunics should give one to the person who has none; tax collectors should take no more than what is fixed; soldiers should not use violence against anyone. As a sign of repentance, he immersed in the waters of the Jordan those who came to him.

Crowds came from Jerusalem and all of Judea. Some wondered whether he might be the Messiah. John refused that title: he announced the one coming after him, whose sandal strap he was "not worthy to untie," and who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.



The Baptism of Christ by Piero della Francesca (c. 1450, National Gallery, London).

The baptism of Jesus

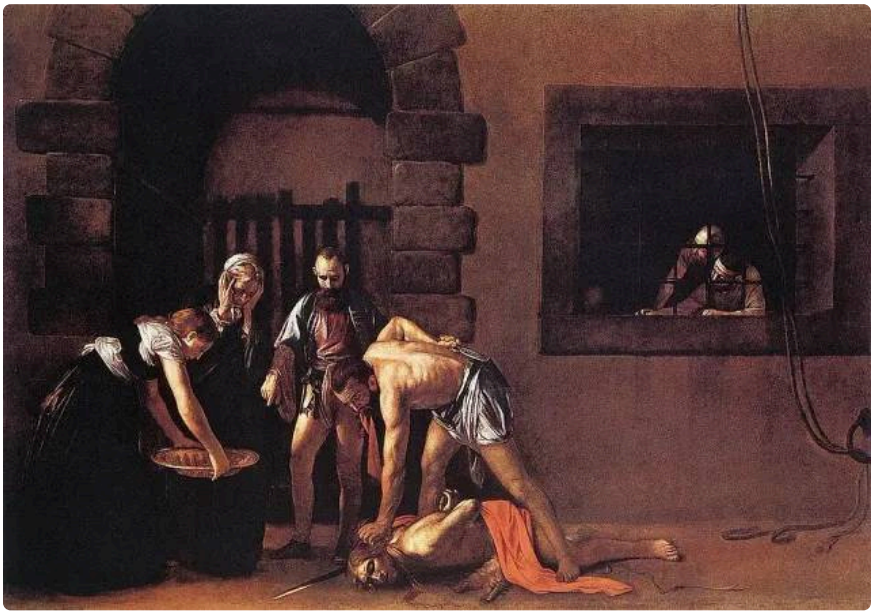
One day, Jesus of Nazareth came to ask for baptism too. John at first tried to stop him: "I need to be baptized by you." In the end he agreed. The Gospels relate that as Jesus came up out of the water, the Spirit descended on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven declared him the beloved Son.

The next day, seeing Jesus pass by, John said to two of his disciples: "Behold, the Lamb of God." One of them was Andrew, who went to find his brother Simon Peter. John did not try to hold on to his disciples. When he was told that everyone was going to Jesus, he answered with a sentence that sums up his life: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Martyrdom at Machaerus

John publicly rebuked Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, for marrying Herodias, his brother's wife. Herod had him arrested. From prison, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come?" Jesus answered by listing the healings he was performing, then praised John as no one else: among those born of women, there is none greater.

According to the Gospel of Mark, at a banquet, the daughter of Herodias danced before Herod, who promised her whatever she wished; prompted by her mother, she asked for John's head. The prophet was beheaded in his prison. His disciples took his body and buried it.



The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist by Caravaggio (1608, Saint John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta).

Why is Saint John the Baptist the patron saint of French Canadians?

The feast of his birth, on June 24, became the great popular feast of French Canada, and Saint Pius X confirmed him as patron of French Canadians in 1908. In Quebec, June 24 is still celebrated as the Fête nationale, often called Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day. He is also the patron saint of Florence, whose baptistery is dedicated to him, and of the Order of Malta, officially the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta.

John the Baptist is the saint of self-effacement: he could have kept the success of his preaching for himself, but chose to point to someone else. He is also the saint of courage, who spoke the truth to the powerful at the cost of his life. Catholics pray to him to prepare their hearts for Christ, for the baptized and those preparing for baptism, and for the courage to speak the truth.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint John the Baptist in art

- **The camel-hair garment** or animal skin, recalling his life in the desert.
- **The lamb**, often at his feet or in his arms, for "Behold the Lamb of God."
- **A slender reed cross**, sometimes with a banner reading *Ecce Agnus Dei*.
- **The raised index finger**, pointing toward Christ or toward heaven.
- **His head on a platter**, in scenes of his martyrdom.

Where to pray to Saint John the Baptist

- **Amiens** (France): Notre-Dame Cathedral, which has kept the relic of his head since 1206.
- **Ein Karem**, near Jerusalem: the Church of Saint John the Baptist, built according to tradition on the place of his birth, and the Church of the Visitation.

- **Bethany beyond the Jordan**: the baptism site on the Jordanian side, and Qasr al-Yahud on the opposite bank.
- **Rome**: the Archbasilica of Saint John Lateran, the pope's cathedral, dedicated to Christ the Savior and to the two Saints John.
- **Florence**: the Baptistery of Saint John, dedicated to the city's patron saint.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John the Baptist: the Hymn "Ut Queant Laxis"

The hymn "Ut queant laxis" is one of the oldest chants in honor of Saint John the Baptist. Composed in the eighth century, it is still sung in the Liturgy of the Hours for his Nativity on June 24, and it is famous for having given their names to the notes of the musical scale. Below you will find its first verse, a saying of the Baptist from the Gospel, and an original prayer to Saint John the Baptist.

"Ut queant laxis" (first verse)

> *Ut queant laxis resonare fibris*
> *mira gestorum famuli tuorum,*
> *solve polluti labii reatum,*
> *sancte Iohannes.*
>
> *So that your servants may sing with full voices the wonders of your deeds, free our lips from the guilt that stains them, O Saint John.*

Source: hymn attributed to Paul the Deacon, a monk of Monte Cassino (eighth century), sung at Vespers of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist. Latin text in the public domain, translated by Saintspedia.

In the eleventh century, the monk Guido of Arezzo used the first syllables of its lines, *ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la*, to name the notes of the scale; *si* (now often called *ti*) came later from the initials of *Sancte Iohannes*. The prayer asks that John, whose father Zechariah recovered his speech at his birth, may also open our lips to praise.



Saint John the Baptist in prayer.

A word to meditate on

> *"He must increase, but I must decrease."*

Source: Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 30. This is John the Baptist's answer to his disciples, worried to see the crowds following Jesus.

Prayer to Saint John the Baptist for courage

Saint John the Baptist, you leaped for joy before you were even born, as the Savior drew near: teach me to recognize the presence of Christ in my life.

You left comfort behind for the truth of the desert: help me make room for God within me. You called everyone to share their tunic and to live justly: convert my heart and my habits.

You pointed to Jesus, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God": make me a witness who leads others to him, not to myself. You spoke the truth to the powerful until you gave your life: obtain for me the courage to stand upright. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

May he increase, and may I decrease. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

Saint John the Baptist is celebrated on June 24, the Solemnity of his Nativity, near the summer solstice, and on August 29, the memorial of his Passion. The Saint John's Eve bonfires lit in many regions on the night before June 24 recall that he was, in Jesus' words, "a burning and shining lamp." You can also pray to him during Advent, when the liturgy lets us hear his voice every year. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint John the Baptist and read the life of Saint John the Baptist.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John the Baptist

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, following the life of Saint John the Baptist as the Gospels tell it. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, start on June 15; it ends on June 23, and his feast falls on June 24. You can also pray it from August 20 to 28, before the memorial of his martyrdom on August 29.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, and say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for each day helps you live out concretely the Baptist's call to conversion.

You can pray it alone, as a family or with a parish group. It is especially fitting for those preparing for baptism or confirmation, for godparents, or for anyone who wants to make a fresh start. Keep a Bible close by: several days point to a passage from the Gospel of Luke. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow John from his unexpected birth to his death in prison: the joy of the Visitation, the silence of his father, the desert, his preaching by the Jordan, the baptism of Jesus, his witness to the Lamb of God, his humility before Christ and his courage before Herod. Each stage invites us to prepare a way for the Lord in our own lives.

Day 1: An unexpected birth

Zechariah and Elizabeth no longer expected a child. God brings life where people had stopped hoping. The name John means "God is gracious," and the neighbors wondered: "What then will this child be?"

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you what seems barren or without a future in my life. Let your grace be born there.

Today: Read Luke 1:5-25.

Day 2: Leaping for joy

When Mary greets Elizabeth, the child leaps in her womb. Even before he can speak, John recognizes the presence of the Savior.

Prayer: Saint John the Baptist, teach me to recognize the presence of Jesus and to rejoice in it.

Today: Pray for a pregnant woman or for a child not yet born.

Day 3: The silence of Zechariah

Zechariah remains mute until the birth of his son. When he recovers his speech, it is to bless God. Silence prepares the way for praise.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be silent so as to hear you better, and to speak only to bless you and serve others.

Today: Pray the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79).

Day 4: The desert

John grew up in the desert. There he learned simplicity and inner freedom. The desert is the place where we discover what really matters, far from noise and from what others think of us.

Prayer: Lord, lead me into the desert of my heart, and free me from what weighs me down.

Today: Give up an unnecessary comfort for the day.

Day 5: The call to conversion

"Prepare the way of the Lord." John asks for concrete changes: share, be honest, do violence to no one.

Prayer: Lord, show me what I need to change in my life to make room for you.

Today: Give a piece of clothing or an item in good condition to someone who needs it.

Day 6: The baptism in the Jordan

Jesus stands in line with sinners to receive John's baptism. The Son of God draws near to those who are seeking forgiveness.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for my baptism. Renew in me the grace I received that day.

Today: Find out the date of your baptism and thank God for this gift.



Praying with Saint John the Baptist.

Day 7: Behold the Lamb of God

John points Jesus out to his disciples and lets them go and follow him. A true witness keeps no one for himself.

Prayer: Saint John the Baptist, make me a witness who leads others to Jesus, not to myself.

Today: Speak simply about your faith with someone who is asking questions.

Day 8: He must increase, I must decrease

When the crowds leave him for Jesus, John rejoices like the friend of the bridegroom. He accepts being in the background, and his joy is complete precisely because another is now at the center.

Prayer: Lord, free me from jealousy and from the need to be at the center. May he increase, and may I decrease.

Today: Highlight the work or talent of someone else.

Day 9: The courage of truth

John tells Herod the truth and pays for it with his life. In prison he also knows doubt, and he questions Jesus. His faithfulness is that of a man who keeps searching to the end.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint John the Baptist, I entrust my intention to you. Give me the courage of truth, and keep me faithful even in doubt. Amen.

Today: Pray for persecuted Christians and for prisoners.

Closing prayer

Saint John the Baptist, forerunner of the Lord, at the end of these nine days, I place in your hands the intention I have entrusted to you. Prepare in me the way of Christ. Obtain for me a converted heart, a simple life and the courage to bear witness. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint John the Baptist and pray the hymn "Ut queant laxis."

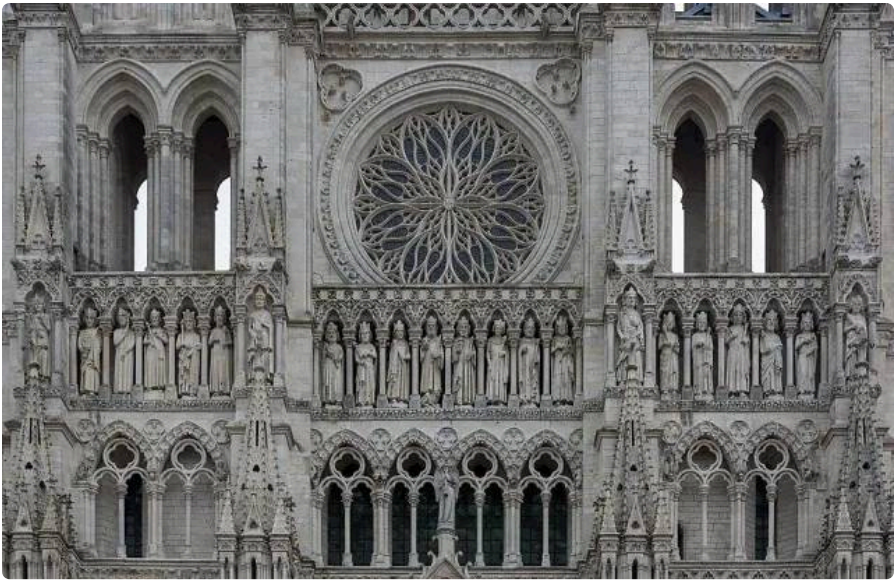
PILGRIMAGE

Amiens Cathedral and the Relic of the Head of Saint John the Baptist

Notre-Dame Cathedral in Amiens, the largest Gothic cathedral in France, has kept since 1206 a relic venerated as the head, that is, the front part of the skull, of Saint John the Baptist. It is the great pilgrimage site dedicated to the Forerunner in France, and the story of its construction is closely tied to this relic.

A relic from Constantinople

In 1204, the Fourth Crusade ended with the capture and sack of Constantinople, and many relics from the Byzantine capital were carried off to the West. Walon de Sarton, a canon of Picquigny in Picardy, brought to Amiens in 1206 a reliquary containing the face of the skull attributed to Saint John the Baptist. The bishop welcomed it solemnly, and pilgrims flocked in. A few years later, after the old cathedral burned, construction began in 1220 on a much larger building, worthy of housing the relic and welcoming the crowds.



Amiens Cathedral and the relic of the head of Saint John the Baptist.

Notre-Dame Cathedral of Amiens

Built mostly in the 13th century, the cathedral is striking for the height of its nave, which exceeds 130 feet, and for the richness of its sculpted facade. It has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1981. For the pilgrim of Saint John the Baptist, the most eloquent feature is the choir screen: on its north side, sculpted and painted groups from the early 16th century tell the life of the Baptist, from his preaching in the desert to his beheading and the arrival of his head in Amiens. The south side is devoted to Saint Firmin, the city's first bishop.

The head of Saint John the Baptist today

The medieval reliquary disappeared during the Revolution, but the relic itself was preserved. It is now displayed in a more recent reliquary that evokes the platter of the Gospel account. It is exposed for the veneration of the faithful on

certain feasts and special celebrations. Other relics of the saint's head are venerated elsewhere, notably in Rome and Damascus: the Church has never settled these questions of authenticity, and it is the prayer of pilgrims that gives the place its meaning.

Praying in Amiens

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint John the Baptist. On site, a walk along the north side of the choir screen lets you meditate on his life scene by scene. You can then take a time of silence to entrust an intention to him, and say the hymn "Ut queant laxis" or the simple words: "He must increase, but I must decrease." These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.

Other places of Saint John the Baptist

- **Ein Karem** (Jerusalem): the Church of Saint John the Baptist, on the traditional site of his birth, and the Church of the Visitation.
- **Bethany Beyond the Jordan** (Jordan): the archaeological site of the baptism, a World Heritage site; across the river, Qasr al-Yahud.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, and the Church of San Silvestro in Capite, which also displays a relic of his head.
- **Florence**: the Baptistery of Saint John and its bronze doors.
- **Valletta** (Malta): Saint John's Co-Cathedral, church of the Order of Malta, home to Caravaggio's *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*.

Practical information

Amiens is easy to reach by train from Paris, and the cathedral is in the city center, a few minutes' walk from the train station. The dates when the relic is displayed, and Mass and visiting times, are published by the cathedral parish

and the Diocese of Amiens; check them before you come. In summer and winter, a light show sometimes restores the facade's original colors.

Credits and sources

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