BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint John the Dwarf

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: October 17

IN BRIEF

Saint John the Dwarf

4th-century Egyptian Desert Father, monk of Scetis, famous for his obedience and humility.

Feast day	October 17
Born	c. 339, Bubastis (Egypt)
Died	c. 405, Mount Colzim, near the Red Sea (Egypt)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint John the Dwarf for Humility and Perseverance

Novena to Saint John the Dwarf

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint John the Dwarf

Saint John the Dwarf, also called John Colobos (*Kolobos* means "the short one" in Greek), is one of the great Desert Fathers of Egypt. Born around 339, he lived as a monk at Scetis, today's Wadi El Natrun, where he became famous for his obedience and humility, and died around 405 near the Red Sea. About forty sayings are attributed to him. The Catholic Church celebrates him on October 17, the Orthodox Churches on November 9.

Who was Saint John the Dwarf?

John belongs to the second generation of the monks of Scetis, the desert northwest of Cairo where Saint Macarius of Egypt had gathered the first hermits. What we know of him comes mainly from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, a collection of words and short stories handed down by the monks, and from a later Coptic Life. These texts do not give a continuous biography: they show a man short in stature, sometimes quick-tempered, but whose obedience and humility became proverbial. The dates of his life are only approximate.

Key dates in the life of John the Dwarf

- **c. 339**: Born at Bubastis, in the Nile Delta, into a poor Christian family.
- **c. 357**: At about eighteen, he leaves for the desert of Scetis and places himself under the guidance of an elder.
- **Following years**: The episode of the "tree of obedience", a dry stick he waters for three years.
- **Late 4th century**: He is ordained a priest and becomes the spiritual father of many monks.

- **Late 4th or early 5th century**: Driven out of Scetis by raids of Berber tribes, he takes refuge on Mount Colzim, near the Red Sea.
- **c. 405**: Dies on Mount Colzim, where Saint Anthony had lived.
- **Early 6th century**: His relics are brought back to Scetis; they are venerated today at the monastery of Saint Macarius.

The tree of obedience

The most famous story of his life is that of the tree of obedience. His elder, whom tradition names in different ways, one day planted a piece of dry wood and told him to water it every day. The water was very far away. John obeyed without arguing, every day, for three years. At the end of that time, the wood came back to life, put out leaves and bore fruit. The elder picked some and took it to the brothers in church, saying: "Take and eat the fruit of obedience." The story, which reads like a parable, expresses a conviction of the Fathers: humble obedience bears fruit where people see only dead wood. Coptic tradition long pointed out this tree near the monastery that bore his name.

Sayings of a Desert Father

John's sayings are full of wisdom and sometimes humor. One day, it is told, he told his elder brother that he wanted to live like the angels, without working, praising God unceasingly, and he went off into the desert. A week later he came back and knocked on the door. His brother, without opening, asked who he was. "I am John." "John has become an angel; he is no longer among men." Leaving him outside until morning, his brother finally said: "You are a man: you must work in order to eat." John bowed down and asked forgiveness. He also taught that humility and the fear of God surpass all the virtues, and that a house is not built by starting with the roof, but with the foundations, that is, with one's neighbor.

Another story, that of Paesia, has deeply touched tradition. This young woman had first opened her house to the monks, then lost her way in a disordered life. The elders sent John to her. She was converted and followed him into the desert; that very night she died, and John, it is said, saw her soul carried away by angels. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux quotes this story to show the power of a single act of love.

Exile and death

Ordained a priest, John became the father of a large community; tradition counts among his disciples Saint Arsenius, a former tutor at the imperial court. When desert tribes laid waste to Scetis, John left for Mount Colzim, near the Red Sea, where Saint Anthony had lived before him, and died there around 405. In the early 6th century, his relics were brought back to Scetis. They are venerated today at the monastery of Saint Macarius, in Wadi El Natrun, which belongs to the Coptic Orthodox Church. He is shown as an elderly monk, short in stature, watering a shrub or leaning on a staff.

What can we learn from Saint John the Dwarf?

John the Dwarf reminds us that we do not become saints all at once, but through daily faithfulness, like watering a stick that seems dead. He also shows that we do not escape our human condition: we sanctify it through work, patience and humility. He can be invoked to learn obedience and perseverance, for those who do not yet see the fruit of their efforts, and for those who are returning to God.

Where to pray to Saint John the Dwarf

- **Wadi El Natrun** (Egypt): the monastery of Saint Macarius, where his relics are venerated.

- **Hosios Loukas** (Greece): the Byzantine monastery where a mosaic depicts him.
- **At home**: by reading his sayings, on October 17.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint John the Dwarf for Humility and Perseverance

Saint John the Dwarf, also called John Colobos, a Desert Father of Scetis in the 4th century, is remembered for his obedience, patience and humility. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him those who persevere without seeing fruit, and those who want to learn humility.

Prayer to Saint John the Dwarf

Saint John the Dwarf,
small in stature and great in humility,
for three years you watered a dry stick,
out of obedience and love.
Teach me faithfulness in small things,
even when I see no fruit.

You wanted to live like an angel,
and you discovered that you were a man.
Help me to accept my limits,
to work humbly
and to seek God at the heart of my ordinary life.

You who led a repentant sinner to God,
pray for those who have drifted away,
and obtain for them the grace of one true return.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint John the Dwarf

- On his feast day, October 17 (November 9 for the Orthodox).
- When a long and patient effort seems to produce nothing.
- To learn obedience and humility.
- For monks and nuns, especially those of Egypt.
- For the conversion of a loved one.

A short invocation

> *Saint John the Dwarf, friend of humility,*
> *make the fruit of obedience blossom in me. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint John the Dwarf from October 9 to 17, and read the life of Saint John the Dwarf.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint John the Dwarf

This novena offers nine days with Saint John the Dwarf, also called John Colobos, a Desert Father of Scetis in the 4th century. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on his feast day, October 17, begin on October 9. You can also pray it at any time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, make 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 Dwarf, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recalled come from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and from Coptic tradition.

Day 1: A son of the poor

John was born into a poor Christian family of Bubastis. God often chooses the lowly to show his greatness.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for my family and for the faith I received. Teach me to love simplicity.

Act of the day: Pray for a poor family you know.

Day 2: Going into the desert

At eighteen, John left everything for Scetis. The desert is not first a place, but a space of silence where we listen to God.

Prayer: Lord, give me each day a moment of desert to listen to you.

Act of the day: Keep a quarter of an hour of silence, without screens.

Day 3: Trusting an elder

John placed himself under the guidance of an elder and obeyed him. No one grows alone in the spiritual life.

Prayer: Lord, give me a good guide, and the humility to listen to him.

Act of the day: Ask advice from a wise person, or plan to go to confession.

Day 4: Watering the dry wood

For three years John watered a dry stick, and the stick finally blossomed. Faithful obedience bears unexpected fruit.

Prayer: Lord, when my efforts seem useless, help me to persevere in trust.

Act of the day: Faithfully take up again a good habit you had dropped.

Day 5: A man, not an angel

John wanted to live like an angel, without working. He had to come back and knock at his brother's door, and learn that he was a man.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from proud dreams, and teach me to serve you in my human condition.

Act of the day: Do an ordinary task with care, offering it to God.

Day 6: Starting with the foundations

John taught that a house is not built from the roof, but from the foundations: one's neighbor. Holiness begins with love for those who are close.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love you through those you place near me.

Act of the day: Do a service for someone close to you before they ask.

Day 7: The conversion of Paesia

Sent to a young woman who had lost her way, John brought her back to God. She died that very night, forgiven. A single true return to God is enough for his love.

Prayer: Lord, touch the hearts of those who have drifted away from you, and bring them back to your mercy.

Act of the day: Pray by name for someone who has left the faith.

Day 8: Father of many monks

As a priest, John guided many disciples. The one who had learned to obey could now lead others with gentleness.

Prayer: Lord, bless priests and spiritual guides. Give them gentleness and wisdom.

Act of the day: Pray for the priest who accompanies you or for your parish.

Day 9: Dying in exile

Driven out of Scetis, John ended his days on Mount Colzim, far from his brothers. He stayed faithful to the end, wherever God led him.

Prayer: Lord, keep me faithful wherever you lead me. Through the intercession of Saint John the Dwarf, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Pray for the Christians of Egypt and, if you can, attend Mass.

Closing prayer

Saint John the Dwarf,
humble monk of Scetis,
present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Obtain for me patience in small things,
the joy of obedience
and the peace of a humble heart.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Credits and sources

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