BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Jovan Vladimir

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 22

IN BRIEF

Saint Jovan Vladimir

Prince of Duklja (present-day Montenegro) c. 990-1016, martyr, considered the first Serbian saint.

Feast day	May 22
Born	Duklja (present-day Montenegro), probably
Died	May 22, 1016, Prespa (Macedonia)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	11th century
Patron saint of	Bar (Montenegro)

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Jovan Vladimir for Peace Between Peoples

Novena to Saint Jovan Vladimir

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Jovan Vladimir

Saint Jovan Vladimir (John Vladimir) was a Slavic prince who ruled Duklja, present-day Montenegro, from about 990 until his death on May 22, 1016. Known for his piety, justice and gentleness, he was beheaded at Prespa, in Macedonia, by a rival who had sworn him peace. Honored as a martyr soon after his death, he is considered the first Serbian saint and the patron of the town of Bar. His feast day is May 22.

Who was Saint Jovan Vladimir?

Vladimir lived at the time of the long war between the Byzantine Empire and the First Bulgarian Empire of Tsar Samuel. Prince of a small state caught between two powers, he sought to protect his people rather than to conquer. What we know of him comes partly from Byzantine chroniclers, such as John Skylitzes, and above all from the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja*, written in the 12th century from oral traditions. This account, which mixes history, legend and wonders, must be read with caution. Yet it draws a consistent portrait of a just and peaceful Christian ruler who died the victim of treachery.

Key dates in the life of Jovan Vladimir

- **c. 990**: Still young, he succeeds his father Petrislav as prince of Duklja; his court lies near present-day Bar, in southern Montenegro.
- **992**: A Serbian embassy, probably sent by him, travels to Constantinople to seek an alliance with Emperor Basil II.
- **997**: Tsar Samuel invades Duklja; Vladimir entrenches himself on a hill, then surrenders to spare his people and is imprisoned at Prespa.
- **Shortly after**: According to tradition, he marries Kosara, of Samuel's family, who gives Duklja back to him and entrusts him with the region of

Dyrrachium.

- **1014-1015**: Samuel dies after his defeat by Byzantium; his nephew Ivan Vladislav seizes power by murder.
- **May 22, 1016**: Lured to Prespa by false promises, he is beheaded as he leaves a church, a wooden cross in his hand.
- **c. 1018-1019**: His remains are brought back to Duklja.
- **1215**: His relics are moved to Dyrrachium (Durrës).
- **1381**: They are taken to the church dedicated to him near Elbasan, in Albania.
- **1995**: They are placed in the Orthodox cathedral of Tirana.

The captive prince

Around 990, the young Vladimir inherited a principality covering roughly present-day Montenegro and some neighboring lands. Pressed by the expansion of Tsar Samuel, he sought the support of Byzantium. But in 997 Samuel invaded Duklja. According to the *Chronicle*, Vladimir withdrew with his army and his people to a hill infested with venomous snakes, whose bites his prayer made harmless. To deliver his people from hunger and the sword, he finally surrendered. He was taken captive to Prespa, where he prayed day and night; an angel, the account says, told him that he would soon be freed but would die a martyr.

Vladimir and Kosara

The *Chronicle* then tells one of the most beautiful stories of early Serbian literature. Kosara, Samuel's daughter according to Skylitzes, obtained her father's permission to wash the heads and feet of the prisoners. Among them she noticed Vladimir, struck by his nobility, humility and wisdom. She asked to marry him. Samuel agreed, gave Duklja back to his new son-in-law and entrusted him with the region of Dyrrachium. According to the account,

Vladimir and Kosara then lived "in all holiness," and the prince governed his people "in the fear of God and justice." He avoided war, and the influence of the Church of Ohrid and of the Slavonic liturgy spread in his principality.

The wooden cross and martyrdom

After Samuel's defeat in 1014 and his death, his son Gabriel Radomir was murdered in 1015 by his cousin Ivan Vladislav, who wanted to eliminate the whole of the tsar's family. Vladislav invited Vladimir to Prespa and sent him, as a pledge of his word, a golden cross. Vladimir replied that Christ was crucified not on a cross of gold but of wood, and asked for a wooden cross brought by religious. Two bishops and a hermit came to give it to him. Trusting, he kissed the cross and set out for Prespa with a few followers. On arrival, he went into a church to pray. As he came out, on May 22, 1016, Vladislav's soldiers struck him down and beheaded him; he was still holding the cross in his hands.

Devotion, relics and art

Buried at Prespa, Vladimir was very soon honored as a saint and martyr. His relics were later moved many times: to Duklja, then to Dyrrachium in 1215, to the church of Saint Jovan Vladimir near Elbasan in 1381, and since 1995 to the Orthodox cathedral of Tirana. The cross he was holding at the moment of his death has been entrusted for centuries to a family in the village of Velji Mikulići, in southern Montenegro, and is shown to the faithful only once a year, at Pentecost. His feast is celebrated on May 22, a date that Churches following the Julian calendar keep on June 4 of the Gregorian calendar. Icons show him as a crowned ruler, with the cross in his right hand and his own head in his left.

What can we learn from Saint Jovan Vladimir?

Vladimir preferred peace to military glory and gave himself up to save his people. He placed his trust not in gold but in the cross of Christ, and he died unarmed, the victim of treachery. Honored by Catholics and Orthodox in the Balkans, he can be invoked for peace between peoples, for political leaders and for the reconciliation of divided Christians.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Jovan Vladimir and the novena to Saint Jovan Vladimir.

Where to pray to Saint Jovan Vladimir

- **Bar** (Montenegro): the town of which he is patron, near the former court of Duklja.
- **Velji Mikulići** (Montenegro): the village where his cross is kept and shown at Pentecost.
- **Tirana** (Albania): the Orthodox cathedral that has kept his relics since 1995.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Jovan Vladimir for Peace Between Peoples

Saint Jovan Vladimir, prince of Duklja, present-day Montenegro, governed his people in justice and peace. Betrayed by a rival, he was beheaded in 1016 as he left a church, a wooden cross in his hand. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him peace between peoples, political leaders and the unity of Christians.

Prayer to Saint Jovan Vladimir

Saint Jovan Vladimir,
just and peaceful prince,
you gave yourself up
to spare your people from hunger and the sword.
Teach the leaders of our countries
to serve the good of all rather than their own glory.

You who refused the cross of gold
to trust only in the wooden cross of Christ,
help me to place my trust in him alone,
and not in riches or in human promises.

You whom Catholics and Orthodox venerate,
obtain peace for the peoples of the Balkans
and unity for divided Christians.
Present to the Lord the grace I ask of him [intention].
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Jovan Vladimir

- On his feast day, May 22.
- For peace in the Balkans and in countries at war.
- For political leaders and all who exercise authority.
- When you have been betrayed by someone you trusted.
- For unity between Catholics and Orthodox.

A short invocation

> *Lord, by your cross, give us peace.*
> *Saint Jovan Vladimir, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Jovan Vladimir from May 14 to May 22, and read the life of Saint Jovan Vladimir.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Jovan Vladimir

This novena offers nine days of prayer with Saint Jovan Vladimir, prince of Duklja, martyred in 1016. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition; it is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, May 22, begin on May 14. You can also pray it at any other time, especially for peace. Several episodes come from the *Chronicle of the Priest of Duklja*, in which history mingles with legend.

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 Jovan Vladimir, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A young prince

Still young, Vladimir received responsibility for his people. He knew he was answerable to God for those entrusted to him.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who hold responsibility, and help me to serve well those entrusted to me.

Act of the day: Pray for the leaders of your country and your town.

Day 2: Between two powers

His small principality was caught between Byzantium and the Bulgarian Empire. Vladimir sought above all to protect his people.

Prayer: Lord, protect the small nations crushed by the conflicts of the great.

Act of the day: Pray for a country at war today.

Day 3: Giving himself up for his people

Under siege, Vladimir finally surrendered to deliver his people from hunger and the sword. He preferred his captivity to their death.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you who gave your life for us, teach me to give myself for others.

Act of the day: Give something up for the good of someone close to you.

Day 4: Prayer in prison

Captive at Prespa, he prayed day and night. Prison became for him a place of encounter with God.

Prayer: Lord, console prisoners and make my own confinements places of prayer.

Act of the day: Pray for prisoners, especially prisoners of war.

Day 5: Kosara's charity

Kosara went down to wash the feet of the captives. Her act of charity opened a path of peace between enemies.

Prayer: Lord, may our acts of kindness become bridges between those who oppose each other.

Act of the day: Do an act of service for someone you hardly know.

Day 6: Governing with justice

Back in his principality, Vladimir governed "in the fear of God and justice" and avoided war.

Prayer: Lord, give those who govern a concern for justice and peace.

Act of the day: Learn about an injustice in the world and pray for those who suffer from it.

Day 7: The wooden cross

To the golden cross sent by his rival, Vladimir preferred a wooden one: Christ died on wood, not on gold.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the lure of gold and teach me to love your cross.

Act of the day: Pray for a while before a crucifix.

Day 8: Trust betrayed

Vladimir trusted the promises of peace. He was betrayed and killed as he left a church.

Prayer: Lord, heal those who have been betrayed, and grant me to forgive those who have deceived me.

Act of the day: Entrust to God a betrayal you have suffered, and pray for the one responsible.

Day 9: Martyr of peace

He died on May 22, 1016, cross in hand. Catholics and Orthodox honor him as a saint.

Prayer: Lord, give peace to the nations and unity to your Church. Through the intercession of Saint Jovan Vladimir, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass and pray for unity between Catholics and Orthodox.

Closing prayer

Saint Jovan Vladimir,
prince of peace and martyr of the cross,
present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Keep me faithful to Christ crucified,
teach me to forgive,
and obtain peace for divided peoples.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Credits and sources

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