

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Nicholas Owen

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: March 22

IN BRIEF

Saint Nicholas Owen

English Jesuit brother, carpenter who built hiding places for priests, martyred in the Tower of London in 1606.

Feast day	March 22
Born	c. 1550, Oxford, England
Died	March 1606, Tower of London, England
Canonized	October 25, 1970, by Pope Paul VI
Era	17th century
Patron saint of	carpenters, illusionists and escape artists (popular devotion)

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Nicholas Owen

Saint Nicholas Owen was an English Jesuit brother and a carpenter of genius who, for nearly twenty years, built hiding places for Catholic priests persecuted under Queen Elizabeth I. Arrested in 1606 after the Gunpowder Plot, he died under torture in the Tower of London without giving up a single name. Canonized in 1970 among the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, he is honored on March 22.

Who was Saint Nicholas Owen?

In late sixteenth-century England, celebrating the Catholic Mass was a crime, and being a Catholic priest could cost you your life. Even so, priests trained on the Continent came back secretly to support the faithful. They moved from manor to manor, sheltered by Catholic families. When the priest hunters searched a house, a priest's life often depended on one thing: a hiding place clever enough to escape discovery. Nicholas Owen was the great master of these hiding places, the famous *priest holes*.

A man of small stature, nicknamed "Little John," he worked alone, often at night, passing himself off as a traveling carpenter. He was also the faithful companion of Father Henry Garnet, superior of the Jesuits in England, so much so that he was known as "Garnet's man."



Nicholas Owen and Edward Oldcorne, engraving by Gaspar Bouttats.

Key dates

- **c. 1550**: Born in Oxford into a Catholic family; his father is a carpenter.
- **1581-1583**: After the execution of Saint Edmund Campion, he is imprisoned for proclaiming the martyr's innocence.
- **From 1586-1588**: He enters the service of Father Henry Garnet and is later admitted as a brother in the Society of Jesus.
- **1594**: Arrested in London with Father John Gerard, he is tortured but reveals nothing; he is released on payment of a fine.
- **October 4, 1597**: He helps organize John Gerard's dramatic escape from the Tower of London.
- **January 1606**: After the Gunpowder Plot, he is arrested at Hindlip Hall, Worcestershire.

- **March 1606**: He dies in the Tower of London from torture, without having spoken.
- **1929**: Beatified by Pope Pius XI.
- **October 25, 1970**: Canonized by Pope Paul VI with the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales.

God's carpenter

The son of an Oxford carpenter, Nicholas learned his father's trade. His family remained Catholic, and two of his brothers became priests. After the execution of Edmund Campion in 1581, he dared to defend the Jesuit martyr's innocence in public and was jailed for the first time.

Around 1586-1588 he entered the service of Father Henry Garnet, who had come to England to lead the underground Jesuit mission. For nearly twenty years he traveled the country, building astonishingly clever hiding places in Catholic manor houses: under a staircase with a step that lifted, behind a chimney, inside the thickness of a wall, beneath a floor. Sometimes he made one hiding place easy to find, to satisfy the searchers, with a second, better concealed one behind it.

Before each job, it is said, he received Communion, and he prayed as he worked. He never spoke of what he had built elsewhere, so as not to put anyone in danger. No one knows how many of his hiding places survive; several, such as those at Harvington Hall in Worcestershire, can be visited today.

Arrested, tortured, released

In 1594 Owen was arrested in London with Father John Gerard. He was tortured to make him reveal the houses where priests were hiding. He said nothing. The authorities, unaware of his importance, released him on payment of a fine by a Catholic gentleman.

Three years later, in 1597, he helped organize the escape of John Gerard, who was imprisoned in the Tower of London: the priest got away by sliding down a rope over the moat. Around this time a riding accident left Owen lame for the rest of his life.



A hiding place under a stair at Harvington Hall, attributed to Nicholas Owen.

Hindlip Hall and the Tower of London

In November 1605 the Gunpowder Plot, a scheme by a group of Catholics to blow up Parliament, failed. It set off a violent crackdown. Father Garnet, wrongly accused of organizing the plot, hid at Hindlip Hall, near Worcester, with Father Edward Oldcorne and two lay brothers, one of whom was Owen. The house was searched for days. Starving, Owen and his companion Ralph Ashley finally came out of their hiding place, perhaps to draw attention away from the priests. The others were found soon after.

Secretary of State Robert Cecil was delighted: he knew this man knew every hiding place in England. Owen was taken to London, then to the Tower, where he was tortured horribly, hung by his wrists for hours despite a hernia. He kept silent to the end and died in early March 1606; the authorities claimed he had taken his own life. Father John Gerard wrote of him that no one could be said to have done more good in the Lord's vineyard in England, and that he had saved the lives of many hundreds of people.

Why is Saint Nicholas Owen the patron saint of carpenters and escape artists?

Nicholas Owen was neither a priest nor a preacher. He served Christ with his hands, his ingenuity and his silence. Thanks to him, priests could go on celebrating Mass and families could go on receiving the sacraments. He is naturally invoked by carpenters, joiners and craftsmen.

A more recent popular devotion has made him the patron of illusionists and escape artists, in memory of his hiding places and of John Gerard's escape from the Tower. He is also prayed to for persecuted Christians and those who shelter them, and for faithfulness under trial. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Nicholas Owen and the novena to Saint Nicholas Owen.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Nicholas Owen in art

- **Carpenter's tools**, such as a hammer, chisel or saw, recalling his trade.
- **The Jesuit habit** of a lay brother.
- **A hidden door, staircase or priest hole**, the work for which he is remembered.
- **Instruments of torture or a martyr's palm**, as in the old engraving by Gaspar Bouttats showing him with Edward Oldcorne.

Where to pray to Saint Nicholas Owen

- **Harvington Hall, Worcestershire**: an Elizabethan manor house with hiding places attributed to Nicholas Owen, and a chapel.
- **London**: the Tower of London, place of his martyrdom, and Westminster Cathedral, where the English Martyrs are honored.
- **Oxford**: his hometown, where local parishes keep alive the memory of the Catholic martyrs.
- **Jesuit churches**: in England and elsewhere, the Society of Jesus honors him among its martyrs.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Nicholas Owen, Carpenter and Martyr

Saint Nicholas Owen, Jesuit brother and carpenter, saved the lives of many priests by building hiding places in the Catholic manor houses of England, before dying under torture in 1606. We know of no traditional prayer in his honor, so this page offers an original prayer for craftsmen, persecuted Christians and all who protect others at the risk of their lives.

Prayer to Saint Nicholas Owen

Saint Nicholas Owen, humble carpenter, you put your skill at the service of the lives of priests and the faith of a whole people: teach me to serve God with my hands and with the gifts he has entrusted to me.

You worked alone, at night, in prayer, seeking neither thanks nor glory: give me a love for hidden work, done well and offered for others.

You kept silent under torture so as to betray no one: obtain for me faithfulness in trial, the discretion that protects, and the courage never to abandon my brothers and sisters.

Watch over Christians persecuted today, over those who must pray in secret, and over all who risk their lives to shelter people in danger. Bless carpenters, joiners, craftsmen and builders. I entrust to you my intention (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may the Lord make me a refuge for those who need help. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

Intentions to entrust to Saint Nicholas Owen

- Persecuted Christians and priests in danger.
- Carpenters, joiners and craftsmen.
- Those who protect refugees and people under threat.
- Prisoners who are tortured, and their families.
- Religious brothers who serve in the background.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Nicholas Owen is honored on March 22, and in England he is also remembered with the Martyrs of England and Wales. Pray to him before a delicate piece of manual work, for a loved one in danger, or for Christians who suffer for their faith. You can also pray the novena to Saint Nicholas Owen or read the life of Saint Nicholas Owen.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Nicholas Owen

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Nicholas Owen, Jesuit brother, carpenter and martyr. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on March 22, his feast day, begin on March 14. You can also pray it at any time of year: for persecuted Christians, for a craftsman or builder, for someone who shelters people in danger, or for the grace to stay faithful under pressure.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off. This novena suits carpenters and craftsmen, religious brothers, and anyone who wants to serve others quietly and faithfully.

Day 1: A carpenter's son

Nicholas learned his trade from his father in Oxford, as Jesus learned his in Nazareth from Joseph. Work done with skill and care is already a way of praising God. Nicholas never imagined that a carpenter's tools would one day become instruments of the Church's survival in his country.

Prayer: Lord, bless the work of my hands and make it an offering pleasing to you. Amen.

Today: Do one ordinary task with extra care, offering it to God.

Day 2: Speaking up for the innocent

After Edmund Campion was executed, young Nicholas publicly defended his innocence and was thrown into prison for it. He did not stay silent when truth was trampled.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to speak up for those who are falsely accused or forgotten. Amen.

Today: Defend someone who is being criticized unfairly, or refuse to join in gossip.

Day 3: Faithful companion

For nearly twenty years, Nicholas stayed at the side of Father Henry Garnet, so closely that people called him "Garnet's man." Loyalty is a quiet virtue, made of countless days of service, long journeys and shared dangers.

Prayer: Lord, make me a faithful friend and a reliable helper to those you have entrusted to me. Amen.

Today: Thank someone who has stood by you, or offer your help to a priest or a parish volunteer.

Day 4: Working in prayer

It is said that Nicholas received Communion before beginning each hiding place, and prayed as he worked through the night. His craft and his prayer were one.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, be the beginning and the end of all my work. Amen.

Today: Begin your work with a short prayer and end it with a word of thanks.

Day 5: The gift of silence

Nicholas never spoke of what he had built in other houses. His discretion protected lives. There is a silence that is cowardice, and a silence that is love.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to guard what has been entrusted to me, and to keep the secrets that protect others. Amen.

Today: Spend ten minutes in silence before God, and guard your tongue all day.

Day 6: Making room for others

Each priest hole was a refuge, a small space that meant life for a hunted man and the sacraments for a whole household. Nicholas spent his talent making room for others. Thanks to these hidden spaces, Mass could still be celebrated, children baptized and the dying given the sacraments.

Prayer: Lord, make my home and my heart a refuge for those who are in danger or alone. Amen.

Today: Support a charity that shelters refugees, the homeless or victims of violence.

Day 7: Strength in weakness

Small of stature and left lame by an accident, Nicholas did not seem made for heroism. Yet God did great things through him. Our limitations do not stop the Lord, who often chooses the small to accomplish his work.

Prayer: Lord, your power is made perfect in weakness: use me as I am. Amen.

Today: Offer to God a weakness or a limitation that weighs on you.

Day 8: Hiding to save others

At Hindlip Hall, starving after days in hiding, Nicholas came out with Ralph Ashley, perhaps to draw the searchers away from the priests. He was ready to be caught so that others might be spared. His fear was real, but his love was stronger.

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart that thinks first of others, even when I am afraid. Amen.

Today: Put someone else's need before your own in a concrete way.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

In the Tower of London, Nicholas was tortured for hours and did not betray a single name. He died in March 1606, having given everything. Father John Gerard said he had saved the lives of many hundreds of people.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas Owen, pray for persecuted Christians today, and obtain for us the grace of faithfulness to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray for a country where Christians suffer for their faith, and learn something about their situation.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Nicholas Owen, carpenter of God and faithful martyr, you built refuges with your hands and protected the Church with your silence. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during this novena (name your intention). Bless all who work with their hands, protect those who are persecuted for their faith, and obtain for me a humble, loyal and courageous heart. With all the Martyrs of England and Wales, pray for us. Amen.*

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