

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Nicodemus

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 31

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IN BRIEF

Saint Nicodemus

Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, disciple of Jesus who came to him by night and helped bury him.

Feast day	August 31
Died	1st century
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since the early Church)
Era	1st century

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Nicodemus

Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Site of the Burial of Christ

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Nicodemus

Saint Nicodemus was a Pharisee of Jerusalem and a member of the Sanhedrin who appears three times in the Gospel of John. He came to Jesus by night to question him, later spoke up cautiously for him before the other religious leaders, and after the crucifixion brought a large quantity of spices to bury his body with Joseph of Arimathea. A figure of the seeker who moves step by step from darkness into light, he is commemorated on August 31 in the Roman Martyrology, together with Joseph of Arimathea.

Who was Saint Nicodemus?

Everything we know for certain about Nicodemus comes from the Gospel of John. He is introduced as "a man of the Pharisees" and "a ruler of the Jews" (John 3:1), which most likely means a member of the Sanhedrin, the great council of Jerusalem. Jesus himself calls him "the teacher of Israel" (John 3:10), which suggests he was a respected teacher of the Law. His name, of Greek origin, means "victory of the people," and was borne by Jews of the time.

The Gospels say nothing about his birth, his family or his death. Some writers have proposed identifying him with a wealthy notable of Jerusalem mentioned in rabbinic writings, Nicodemus ben Gorion, but the connection remains uncertain.

Key dates

- **Early in the ministry of Jesus**: In Jerusalem, at a Passover feast, he comes to Jesus by night and speaks with him about being born again (John 3:1-21).
- **At the Feast of Tabernacles**: When the chief priests and Pharisees want Jesus arrested, he reminds them that the Law condemns no one without a

hearing (John 7:50-52).

- **On the evening of Good Friday**: He brings about a hundred pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes and buries the body of Jesus with Joseph of Arimathea, in a new tomb in a garden (John 19:38-42).
- **c. 415**: According to an ancient account, his relics are discovered near Jerusalem together with those of Saint Stephen.

The conversation by night

Nicodemus came by night: perhaps out of caution, so as not to be seen with a controversial teacher, perhaps simply to talk in peace. Saint John, who loves symbols, also suggests that he was coming out of darkness toward the one who is the light. He began with a word of respect: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." Jesus immediately disconcerted him by speaking of being born "from above," or "again," since the Greek word has both meanings.

Nicodemus took the phrase literally: how could a grown man be born a second time? Jesus then spoke to him of being born "of water and the Spirit," which Christian tradition has always understood as pointing to baptism, and of the Spirit who blows where he wills, like the wind.

The conversation opens onto one of the best-known sentences in the whole Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16). Millions of English-speaking Christians know it by heart as "John 3:16." The evangelist does not tell us how Nicodemus answered: he lets him leave with his questions.

The courage of a just man

A few months later, at the Feast of Tabernacles, the guards sent to arrest Jesus came back empty-handed. The Pharisees mocked them: none of the leaders believed in this man. Nicodemus then spoke up, cautiously but courageously: "Does our law condemn a person before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" He was answered with contempt: "Are you from Galilee too?" He was not yet an open disciple, but he refused to keep silent in the face of injustice.



Michelangelo's Bandini Pietà (Florence): the hooded old man, identified as Nicodemus, is said to bear the features of the artist.

The burial of Jesus

It was at the foot of the cross that Nicodemus fully revealed himself. While most of the disciples had fled, he joined Joseph of Arimathea, who had obtained the body of Jesus from Pilate. He brought about a hundred pounds

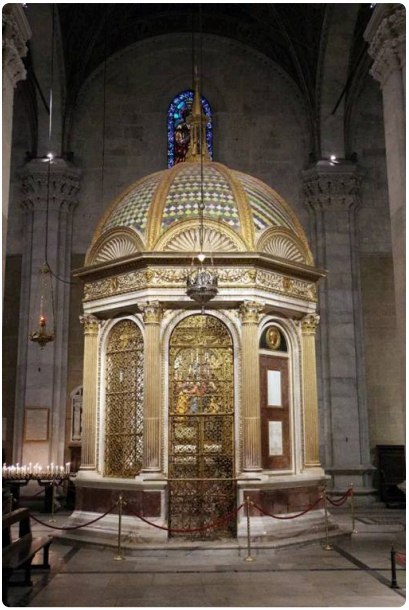
of myrrh and aloes, a considerable amount, worthy of a king's burial.

The two men wrapped the body in linen cloths with the spices, according to Jewish custom, and laid it in a new tomb cut in the rock, close to Golgotha. The man who had come by night now acted in broad daylight, at the very hour when it was most dangerous to show oneself a friend of the crucified.

Nicodemus in tradition

An apocryphal text of the fourth or fifth century, the *Acts of Pilate*, circulated in the Middle Ages under the name *Gospel of Nicodemus*; it is not part of the Bible and was not written by him. According to an account by the priest Lucian, in 415 his remains were found at Caphargamala, near Jerusalem, along with those of Saint Stephen and Gamaliel.

A medieval legend also credits him with carving the Volto Santo, the great wooden crucifix venerated in Lucca, in Tuscany, which historians date to a much later period.



The Volto Santo of Lucca, a crucifix that legend attributes to Nicodemus.

Why do Catholics pray to Saint Nicodemus?

Nicodemus has no official patronage, but he is the saint of those who search, who hesitate, who move forward slowly. He was not converted in an instant: he asked questions, took measured risks, then gave everything at the decisive moment. His path reassures all for whom faith is a gradual journey, and encourages those who still hesitate to bear witness in public. He is also a natural companion for those who bury the dead and comfort the grieving.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Nicodemus in art

- **An older bearded man**, often richly dressed or wearing a hood or turban, as befits a member of the council.
- **A jar of ointment or spices**, for the burial of Jesus.

- **Pincers or a ladder**, in scenes of the Descent from the Cross, where he helps take down the body.
- **Scenes of the Entombment**, where he stands at the head or the feet of Christ with Joseph of Arimathea.
- **A night scene with Jesus**, as in Henry Ossawa Tanner's painting.

Where to pray to Saint Nicodemus

- **Jerusalem**: the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, where tradition places Golgotha and the tomb in which he buried Jesus.
- **Lucca, Italy**: the Cathedral of San Martino and the Volto Santo, whose carving legend attributes to him.
- **Anywhere**: before a sculpted Entombment, of the kind found in many churches, where he often appears at the feet or the head of Christ.

To pray with him, read the prayer with Saint Nicodemus, which uses his conversation with Jesus, or follow the novena to Saint Nicodemus from August 22 to 30, ending on the eve of his commemoration.

PRAYER

Prayer with Saint Nicodemus: "For God So Loved the World"

Saint Nicodemus left no prayer, and his only recorded words are in the Gospel of John. The simplest way to pray with him is to take up the conversation he had with Jesus one night in Jerusalem. This page presents that text, followed by an original prayer to Saint Nicodemus for all who are searching for God.

The conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus (John 3:1-17)

Translation from the Greek by Saintspedia. The Greek word *anōthen*, which Jesus uses, means both "from above" and "again": Nicodemus's misunderstanding turns on this double meaning.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do the signs that you do unless God is with him."

Jesus answered him: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to him: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?"

Jesus answered: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. The wind blows where it wills; you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

Source: Gospel of John, chapter 3, verses 1 to 17 (verses 6-7 and 9-13 omitted). The bronze serpent lifted up by Moses is recounted in the Book of Numbers (21:4-9).

Prayer to Saint Nicodemus for those who seek God

Saint Nicodemus, you came to Jesus in the night, with your questions and your hesitations: pray for me.

You were learned and respected, and you let yourself be unsettled by the word of Christ: teach me the humility of one who seeks. When I do not understand, keep me from walking away; help me come back, as you did, to the One who alone has the words of eternal life.

You dared to defend Jesus before the powerful: give me the courage to speak for justice, even at the risk of contempt. On the evening of the cross you brought spices to bury him with love: teach me to honor the bodies of the dead and to comfort those who mourn.

I entrust to you all who seek God in secret, those who do not yet dare to speak of their faith, and those who doubt. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). May the Spirit, who blows where he wills, make me born from above and lead me from the night into the light. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Nicodemus is commemorated on August 31 in the Roman Martyrology, together with Saint Joseph of Arimathea; the older martyrology mentioned him on August 3, with the finding of the relics of Saint Stephen. You can also pray to him on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, when the Church meditates on the burial of Christ, in grief, or for a friend searching for faith.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Nicodemus, and discover the life of Saint Nicodemus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Nicodemus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the three passages of the Gospel of John that speak of Nicodemus. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his commemoration, begin on August 22: it ends on August 30, the day before his commemoration on August 31. It can also be prayed at any time, especially by those who are searching for God or who hesitate to speak of their faith.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation and, if possible, the Gospel passage indicated, then say the prayer of the day and an Our Father. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow Nicodemus from his first visit by night to his last act of love at the tomb. They make a good companion for anyone returning to the faith, preparing for baptism or confirmation, or walking with a friend who is asking questions about God.

Day 1: Coming by night

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (John 3:2). He did not come perfectly: he came as he could, with his fears. God welcomes those who draw near, even timidly. Jesus did not ask him why he came so late or so secretly.

Prayer: Lord, I come to you as I am, with my fears and my questions. Welcome me.

Today: Take a quiet moment of prayer in the evening, before going to sleep.

Day 2: Daring to ask

The teacher of Israel did not hide that he did not understand: "How can this happen?" (John 3:9). Sincere questions are not a lack of faith, but a path toward it.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the courage to ask my questions, and the patience to wait for your answers.

Today: Write down a question of faith that stays with you and talk about it with someone you trust.

Day 3: Born from above

Jesus invited Nicodemus to be born from above, of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Baptism is not a distant memory: it is a new life to receive each day.

Prayer: Lord, renew in me the grace of my baptism. Make me a new creation.

Today: Make the sign of the cross with holy water as you enter a church, thinking of your baptism.

Day 4: The wind blows where it wills

We cannot see the wind, but we hear its sound (John 3:8). The Spirit often works quietly, in unexpected places and people.

Prayer: Spirit of God, teach me to recognize your passing in my life and in the lives of others.

Today: In the evening, look back over your day and give thanks for one sign of God's presence.

Day 5: God so loved the world

At the heart of the conversation, Jesus revealed to Nicodemus the love of the Father: he gave his Son, not to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:16-17).

Prayer: Father, thank you for loving me so much. May I believe in your love more than in my fears.

Today: Learn John 3:16 by heart.

Day 6: Coming into the light

"Whoever lives the truth comes to the light" (John 3:21). Nicodemus came by night; little by little, he would turn toward the day. Truth is lived out in actions.

Prayer: Jesus, light of the world, shine on the dark places in me and help me walk in the truth.

Today: Prepare for confession, or bring into the open a situation you have been hiding.



Praying with Saint Nicodemus.

Day 7: Speaking up

Before the Pharisees who condemned Jesus without hearing him, Nicodemus recalled the justice of the Law (John 7:50-51). He was met with contempt, but he had spoken.

Prayer: Lord, when someone is unjustly accused in front of me, give me the courage not to stay silent.

Today: Stand up for someone who is being criticized in their absence.

Day 8: At the foot of the cross

When the disciples had fled, Nicodemus came with Joseph of Arimathea to take the body of Jesus (John 19:38-39). Faithfulness often shows itself when everything seems lost. The secret disciple became the one who stayed.

Prayer: Crucified Lord, let me stay close to you in dark hours, and close to those who suffer.

Today: Visit someone who is grieving, or pray for someone who has died.

Day 9: The spices of love

Nicodemus brought a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes: a lavish gesture, a royal tribute (John 19:39-40). He gave much, without yet knowing that the tomb would be empty on the third day.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Nicodemus, teach me to love you generously, and lead me to the joy of Easter. Amen.

Today: Give your time or a gift generously, without calculating.

Closing prayer

Saint Nicodemus, you passed from the night into broad daylight: I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for those who seek God in secret, for those who doubt, and for those who do not yet dare to bear witness. Obtain for us the grace to be born from above and to follow Christ to the end. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Nicodemus and the prayer with Saint Nicodemus.

PILGRIMAGE

Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Site of the Burial of Christ

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the Old City of Jerusalem, covers the places that Christian tradition has identified since the 4th century with Golgotha and the tomb of Christ. It was here, according to the Gospel of John, that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus on the evening of Good Friday, in a new tomb cut in a garden very near the place of the crucifixion. It is therefore the place most directly linked to Saint Nicodemus.

A place venerated since antiquity

In the early 4th century, Emperor Constantine had a Roman temple, believed to have been built over the tomb of Jesus, cleared away, and raised in its place a vast complex of shrines, consecrated in 335. The building was burned, destroyed in 1009 on the order of Caliph al-Hakim, rebuilt in the 11th century, then largely reworked by the Crusaders in the 12th century. Archaeologists have confirmed that in Jesus's time the site lay outside the city walls, in a former quarry where tombs had been cut, which matches the account in the Gospels.



Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, site of the burial of Christ.

From Golgotha to the tomb

On entering, one climbs to the right toward Golgotha, the rock of the crucifixion. Facing the entrance is the Stone of Anointing, a reddish slab where pilgrims pause in remembrance of the body of Jesus prepared for burial; this is where Nicodemus's gesture and his spices are especially remembered. In the center of the rotunda, the aedicule houses the tomb of Christ, restored in 2016-2017. Behind it, in a small chapel of the Syriac rite, one can see Jewish tombs cut into the rock, dated to the time of Jesus, which tradition associates with Joseph of Arimathea.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Nicodemus and the account of the burial in John 19:38-42. On site, a time of silence before the Stone of Anointing, then at the entrance of the tomb, is a good moment to entrust an

intention, especially for a deceased loved one or for a person who is seeking God. The prayer with Saint Nicodemus can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, site of the burial of Christ, the interior.

Other places associated with Saint Nicodemus

- **Lucca** (Tuscany): the Cathedral of San Martino, which houses the Volto Santo, a wooden crucifix that legend attributes to Nicodemus.
- **Jerusalem**: the Temple and its courts, now the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount), where he met Jesus during the Jewish feasts.
- **In France**: many churches preserve sculpted Entombments from the late Middle Ages, in which Nicodemus is shown with Joseph of Arimathea, as at Tonnerre, Chaource or Solesmes.

Practical information

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is shared among several Churches, chiefly the Greek Orthodox, the Latin Catholics, represented by the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land, and the Armenians, according to ancient rules known as the "Status Quo." Entry is free, but opening hours and service times vary, and crowds are heavy around Easter. Proper dress is required. Ask the Custody of the Holy Land, and check the situation on the ground, before planning your pilgrimage.

Credits and sources

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