

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Peter Betancur

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: April 25

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IN BRIEF

Saint Peter Betancur

Franciscan tertiary born in Tenerife, founder of the Bethlehem work in Antigua Guatemala and the first saint of Guatemala.

Feast day	April 25
Born	March 21, 1626, Vilaflor, Tenerife (Canary Islands, Spain)
Died	April 25, 1667, Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala
Canonized	July 30, 2002, by Pope John Paul II
Era	17th century
Patron saint of	Canary Islands, Guatemala, homeless people

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Peter Betancur for the Sick and the Poor

Novena to Saint Peter Betancur

Church of San Francisco in Antigua Guatemala, Grave of Brother Peter

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Peter Betancur

Saint Peter Betancur, known in Spanish as *el Santo Hermano Pedro*, "the holy Brother Peter," was a shepherd from the Canary Islands who became the apostle of the poor and the sick in Guatemala. A Franciscan tertiary, he founded in Antigua a hospital and a community that gave rise to the Order of the Bethlehemite Brothers. He died in 1667 at the age of forty-one, and he is the first saint of the Canary Islands and of Guatemala, canonized by Pope John Paul II in 2002. His feast day is April 25.

Who was Saint Peter Betancur?

Pedro de Betancur was born on March 21, 1626, in Vilaflor, a small mountain village in the south of the island of Tenerife, in the Canary Islands. His family were poor farmers descended both from the Guanches, the ancient inhabitants of the island, and from Castilian settlers. As a boy and a young man he tended flocks. In winter he took them to graze near the coast, where a cave, now a place of pilgrimage, keeps his memory alive.

He loved to visit the shrine of Our Lady of Candelaria, patroness of the Canary Islands, and remained deeply attached to her all his life.

At twenty-three he left his island from the port of Santa Cruz de Tenerife for the Americas. He first stopped in Havana, Cuba, where a religious from Tenerife gave him lodging for more than a year, and then continued on to Guatemala.



Vilaflor, Tenerife, the birthplace of Peter Betancur.

Key dates in the life of Saint Peter Betancur

- **March 21, 1626**: Born in Vilaflor, on the island of Tenerife.
- **c. 1649**: At twenty-three, he sails for the Americas and stays more than a year in Havana.
- **c. 1651**: Arrives in Guatemala, in the city of Santiago de los Caballeros, present-day Antigua.
- **1650s**: Joins the Third Order of Saint Francis and takes the name Peter of Saint Joseph.
- **1658**: Founds the work of Bethlehem in Antigua, serving the poor and the sick.
- **April 25, 1667**: Dies in Antigua at forty-one.
- **June 22, 1980**: Beatified in Rome by Pope John Paul II.
- **July 30, 2002**: Canonized in Guatemala City by Pope John Paul II.

A poor man among the poor

When he reached Santiago de los Caballeros, then the capital of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, Peter had nothing. He wanted to become a priest and began studying, but he could not succeed. He then understood that his vocation lay elsewhere: to serve Christ in the poorest.

He joined the Franciscan Third Order, the branch of the family of Saint Francis open to lay people, and took the name Peter of Saint Joseph. He wore the habit of penance and lived a life of prayer and great austerity.

His days were spent in hospitals, prisons and the streets of the city. He visited the sick, begged for them, stayed with the dying, and taught poor children to read and to know their catechism. Tradition says that at night he walked the streets of Antigua ringing a small bell, inviting people to pray for the souls in purgatory, to whom he was deeply devoted.

Bethlehem, a house for the convalescent

Peter noticed that poor patients, sent home from the hospital as soon as they were barely cured, fell ill again for lack of care and shelter. In 1658 he opened a modest house in Antigua to take them in, and called it Bethlehem, in memory of the poverty of Christ's birth.

The work grew into a hospital, a school and a shelter for the homeless. Companions joined him. After his death they formed the Order of the Bethlehemite Brothers, the first religious order founded on the American continent, which spread through Latin America.

Peter was also known for his devotion to the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which he defended two centuries before the dogma was proclaimed in 1854. He has been called the "Saint Francis of Assisi of the Americas."



The Holy Brother Peter in a colonial painting.

Death and legacy

Worn out by penance and work, Peter died on April 25, 1667, at forty-one. He was buried in the church of San Francisco in Antigua Guatemala, which remains the heart of his cult: thousands of pilgrims come each year to pray at his tomb. In the Canary Islands his memory is kept alive in his village of Vilaflor, where a shrine is dedicated to him, and in the cave at Granadilla de Abona, near the coast where he tended his flocks.

Beatified by John Paul II in Rome in 1980, he was canonized by the same pope on July 30, 2002, in Guatemala, during an apostolic journey. He is thus the first saint born in the Canary Islands and the first saint of Guatemala.

Why is Saint Peter Betancur the patron saint of the Canary Islands, Guatemala and the homeless?

He is invoked as patron of the Canary Islands, where he was born and grew up, and of Guatemala, where he gave his whole life and where he is buried. He is also a patron of homeless people because his house of Bethlehem was first of all a roof for those who had none: convalescents sent away from the hospital, street children and the destitute.

His life shows that failure does not prevent us from answering God's call. Unable to become a priest, he became a brother to everyone, especially the sick who were sent away too soon and the children no one was teaching. His charity was concrete, inventive and attentive to needs others overlooked. He is prayed to for the sick, the homeless, migrants, catechists and all who serve the poor.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Peter Betancur and the novena to Saint Peter Betancur, prayed from April 17 to 25.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Peter Betancur in art

Brother Peter is usually shown in the brown habit of a Franciscan tertiary, a figure of simplicity and humility. He is often depicted with a small hand bell, recalling his nightly walks through Antigua to call people to pray for the dead, or with a walking staff. Some images show him among the sick, the people of his house of Bethlehem.

Where to pray to Saint Peter Betancur

- **Antigua Guatemala**: his tomb in the church of San Francisco.
- **Vilaflor, Tenerife**: the shrine of the Holy Brother Peter in his home village.
- **Granadilla de Abona, Tenerife**: the cave of the Holy Brother Peter, near the coast where he tended his flocks.

- **Candelaria, Tenerife**: the shrine of Our Lady of Candelaria, which he often visited as a young man.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Peter Betancur for the Sick and the Poor

Saint Peter Betancur, the Holy Brother Peter, is widely prayed to in Guatemala and the Canary Islands, but no older prayer to him has become universal with a reliable source. Here is an original prayer by Saintspedia, drawn from his life of service to the poor of Antigua.

A moment from his life to reflect on

According to tradition, Brother Peter walked the streets of Antigua at night ringing a small bell, to remind people of their souls and invite them to pray for the dead in purgatory. By day he searched for the sick who had been sent home from the hospital too soon, and welcomed them into his house of Bethlehem.

Prayer to Saint Peter Betancur for the sick and the poor

Holy Brother Peter, shepherd of Tenerife who became a servant of the poor in Guatemala, you left everything to follow Christ in a distant land: pray for migrants and for all who are looking for their place far from home.

You could not become a priest, and in that failure you found the path God had prepared for you: help me to accept my limits and to serve where I am called.

You opened your house of Bethlehem to the sick without shelter, to children without school and to the homeless: open my heart to those who are forgotten. Give me eyes to see needs that others overlook, and hands to meet them.

You prayed for the dead and reminded everyone of the worth of their soul: teach me to live in truth before God. I entrust to you the sick, the poor, my loved ones who have died, and my intention: (name it in silence).

Through the intercession of Our Lady of Candelaria, whom you loved so much, obtain for me a humble and charitable heart. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Peter Betancur's feast day is April 25, the day of his death in Antigua in 1667. This prayer is especially fitting:

- for a sick person, especially someone recovering after a hospital stay;
- for the homeless and for those who serve in shelters and soup kitchens;
- for migrants and families far from home, including the many Guatemalan and Canarian communities abroad;

- for catechists and teachers of poor children;
- for the souls of the dead, especially those no one remembers.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Peter Betancur from April 17 to 25, and read the life of Saint Peter Betancur. His tomb is in the church of San Francisco in Antigua Guatemala.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Peter Betancur

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Peter Betancur, the Holy Brother Peter of Antigua Guatemala. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, April 25, begin it on April 17. It can also be prayed at any time of year, for a sick person, for someone without a home, or for a migrant far from family.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into daily life, in the concrete charity that marked Brother Peter. You can pray it alone, as a family, or with a parish group or a ministry that serves the poor.

Day 1: The shepherd of Vilaflor

Before he became the brother of the poor, Peter was a shepherd on the slopes of Tenerife. In the silence of the mountains, and in the cave where he sheltered his flock near the coast, he learned to pray. God often prepares great works in hidden years.

Prayer: Lord, Good Shepherd, teach me to listen to you in silence and in the simple tasks of each day.

Today: Take ten minutes of silence, away from screens.

Day 2: Loving the Virgin Mary

As a young man, Peter often visited the shrine of Our Lady of Candelaria, patroness of the Canary Islands. Later in Guatemala he would ardently defend the Immaculate Conception, long before it was proclaimed a dogma. His love for Mary stayed with him from his island to the end of his life.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, whom Peter loved as a mother, keep me close to your Son.

Today: Pray one decade of the Rosary.

Day 3: Leaving everything

At twenty-three, Peter left his island, his family and his flock for the Americas, without knowing what awaited him. After more than a year in Havana, he reached Guatemala with nothing. He trusted in Providence.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you migrants and all who live far from their loved ones. Be their road and their shelter.

Today: Support an organization that welcomes migrants, or pray for a migrant family you know.

Day 4: Accepting failure

Peter wanted to be a priest, but his studies did not succeed. Instead of giving up, he understood that God was calling him in another way. What looked like a closed door became the beginning of his true vocation.

Prayer: Lord, help me to receive my failures as doors you open onto another path.

Today: Entrust to God a failure that still weighs on you.

Day 5: A son of Saint Francis

As a Franciscan tertiary, Peter took the habit of penance and the poverty of Saint Francis. He lived simply so as to be free to serve. Poverty was not an end in itself for him, but a way to have his hands and heart available for others.

Prayer: Lord, free me from what weighs me down, so that I may be more free to love you and my neighbor.

Today: Give away an object or a piece of clothing you do not need.

Day 6: Bethlehem, the open house

Peter saw convalescents sent away from the hospital with no place to go. He opened a house for them and called it Bethlehem, like the stable where Christ was received in poverty. The house grew into a hospital, a school and a shelter.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to those who have nowhere to rest, and give me a welcoming heart.

Today: Check in on someone who has just left the hospital or who is sick.

Day 7: Teaching the children

In his house of Bethlehem, Peter also taught poor children to read and to know God. He saw that ignorance, too, is a form of poverty, and that a child who learns receives a future.

Prayer: Lord, bless catechists, teachers, and the children who have no access to school.

Today: Help a child with homework, or support an educational ministry.

Day 8: Praying for the dead

Tradition says that Peter walked the streets of Antigua at night with a small bell, inviting people to pray for the souls in purgatory. He forgot no one, not even the dead. His bell still reminds us that charity reaches beyond death.

Prayer: Lord, welcome into your light all who have died, especially those whom no one commends to your mercy.

Today: Pray for a deceased member of your family, or visit a grave.

Day 9: A life given away

Worn out by work and penance, Peter died at forty-one, on April 25, 1667. His life was short, but it was entirely given, and it still bears fruit centuries later in Guatemala, in the Canary Islands and wherever the poor are served in his name.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Peter Betancur, make my life a gift.

Today: Do a quiet service for someone, without expecting thanks.

Closing prayer

Holy Brother Peter, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for the sick, the poor, migrants and children. Obtain for us a heart as humble as yours, and the joy of serving Christ in our brothers and sisters. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Peter Betancur and the prayer to Saint Peter Betancur.

PILGRIMAGE

Church of San Francisco in Antigua Guatemala, Grave of Brother Peter

Saint Peter Betancur rests in Antigua Guatemala, in the Church of San Francisco, a few blocks from where he founded his house of Bethlehem. Thousands of pilgrims come each year to pray at the grave of the "Santo Hermano Pedro," the first saint of Guatemala, in a colonial city that is a World Heritage Site.

A Franciscan church in the heart of Antigua

In the 17th century, Antigua, then called Santiago de los Caballeros, was the capital of the Captaincy General of Guatemala. The Franciscans owned one of the city's main churches there. Peter Betancur, who had entered the Third Order of Saint Francis, was attached to them. When he died on April 25, 1667, he was buried in their church, where his tomb immediately became a place of prayer.

Like much of Antigua, the church suffered from the earthquakes that struck the city over the centuries, and ruins of the old convent remain beside it. Devotion to Brother Peter, however, has never faltered and took on new scale after his beatification in 1980 and his canonization in 2002.



The Church of San Francisco in Antigua Guatemala.

Visiting the church and the grave

Pilgrims come to pray at the saint's grave, often to entrust a sick person or to give thanks for a grace received. Many testimonies of gratitude left by the faithful can be seen there. The ruins of the old Franciscan convent next door let you see what this great religious complex was like in colonial times.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Peter Betancur. At his grave, you can entrust the sick, the homeless, migrants, and your own departed, then say the prayer to Saint Peter Betancur. Pilgrims who come around April 25 can join in the novena to Saint Peter Betancur. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Peter Betancur

- **Vilaflor** (Tenerife, Canary Islands): the shrine of Saint Brother Peter, in his native village.
- **Granadilla de Abona** (Tenerife): the cave of Saint Brother Peter, near the coast where he took his flocks in winter.
- **Candelaria** (Tenerife): the shrine of the Virgin of Candelaria, patroness of the Canary Islands, which he often visited.
- **Guatemala City**: the capital where John Paul II canonized him on July 30, 2002.

Practical information

Antigua Guatemala is about forty kilometers (25 miles) from Guatemala City. The Church of San Francisco is in the historic center, accessible on foot. Crowds are very heavy around April 25 and during Holy Week. Mass times and visiting hours should be checked with the parish or the local tourist office before you come.

Credits and sources

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