

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Peter Canisius

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 21

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IN BRIEF

Saint Peter Canisius

Dutch Jesuit, Doctor of the Church, called the second apostle of Germany.

Feast day	December 21
Born	May 8, 1521, Nijmegen, Netherlands
Died	December 21, 1597, Fribourg, Switzerland
Canonized	May 21, 1925, by Pope Pius XI
Era	16th century
Patron saint of	diocese of Innsbruck

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Peter Canisius for Those Who Pass On the Faith

Novena to Saint Peter Canisius

Church of Saint Michael in Fribourg, Tomb of Saint Peter Canisius

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Peter Canisius

Saint Peter Canisius (1521-1597) was one of the first companions of the Society of Jesus. Born in the Netherlands, he spent his life as a priest in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, at the very moment when the Protestant Reformation was transforming northern Europe. A tireless preacher, founder of colleges and author of a catechism read for centuries, he is called the "second apostle of Germany," after Saint Boniface. A Doctor of the Church, he is celebrated on December 21.

Who was Saint Peter Canisius?

Peter Kanis was born on May 8, 1521, in Nijmegen, in the Habsburg Netherlands. His father, Jacob Kanis, a wealthy burgher, would serve nine times as mayor of the city; his mother, Ægidia van Houweningen, died shortly after his birth. At fifteen he left to study the liberal arts and law in Cologne. Little by little he discovered his calling to the priesthood and turned his studies toward Sacred Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. He earned his master of arts in 1540, after a stay at the University of Louvain.

In the spring of 1543, in Mainz, he met Peter Faber, the first companion of Ignatius of Loyola. Under his guidance he made the Spiritual Exercises for thirty days. He came out of them resolved: on May 8, 1543, his twenty-second birthday, he was admitted into the Society of Jesus. Soon afterward, with the support of the Carthusians of the city, he founded in Cologne the first Jesuit house in Germany.



Peter Canisius, engraving by Dominicus Custos (c. 1600).

Key dates in the life of Peter Canisius

- **May 8, 1521**: Born in Nijmegen.
- **1536**: Leaves for his studies in Cologne.
- **May 8, 1543**: Enters the Society of Jesus, after making the Spiritual Exercises with Peter Faber.
- **1546**: Ordained a priest.
- **1547**: Theologian at the Council of Trent for the cardinal-bishop of Augsburg.
- **1548**: Sent to Messina to found the first college of the Society.
- **September 7, 1549**: Solemn profession in Rome before Ignatius of Loyola; departure for Ingolstadt, in Bavaria.
- **1552**: Sent to Vienna, where he preaches at Saint Stephen's Cathedral and at the court of Ferdinand I.

- **1554**: Publication of his great catechism, the *Summa doctrinae christianae*.
- **1556-1569**: First provincial of the Jesuits of Upper Germany.
- **1580**: Settles in Fribourg, Switzerland.
- **1582**: Founds the College of Saint Michael in Fribourg.
- **December 21, 1597**: Dies in Fribourg.
- **1864**: Beatified by Pope Pius IX.
- **May 21, 1925**: Canonized and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XI.

A Jesuit formed by Ignatius

Ordained a priest in 1546, Canisius took part the following year in the Council of Trent as theologian to Cardinal Otto Truchsess von Waldburg, bishop of Augsburg. When the council was suspended, Ignatius called him to Rome to make his novitiate under his personal direction. In 1548 he was sent to Messina, in Sicily, with about ten Jesuits, to open the first college of the Society; there he taught Latin and rhetoric. This experience of education marked his whole life.

Thirty years in the service of the Church in Germany

In 1549, Pope Paul III, at the request of Duke William IV of Bavaria, sent him to teach at the University of Ingolstadt, where he became rector the following year. Then began an immense activity across the Holy Roman Empire. The Catholic Church there was weakened by the ignorance of part of the clergy and by the rapid spread of Protestant ideas, often supported by the princes.

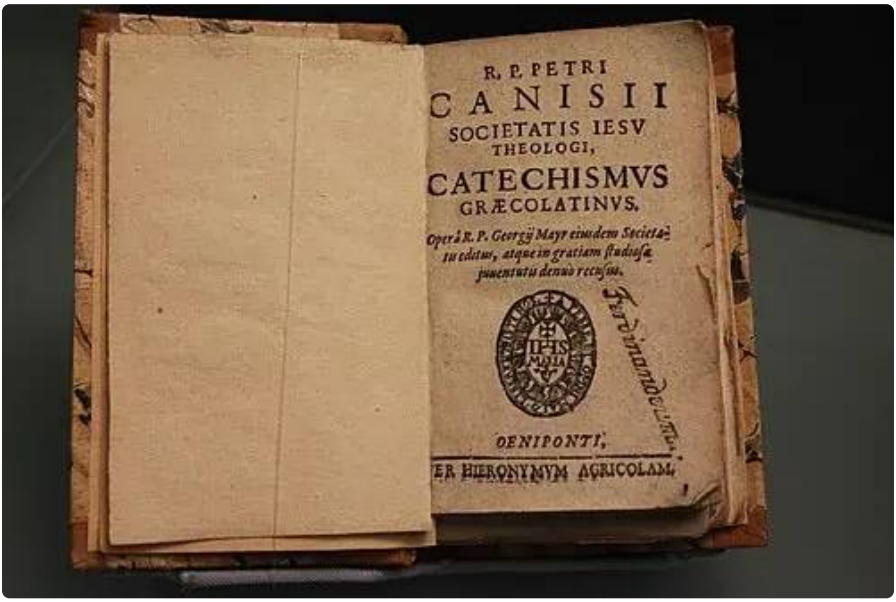
Preacher in Vienna

In Vienna, from 1552, he preached at the cathedral and advised King Ferdinand I. The king wanted to make him archbishop of the city; faithful to the Jesuit vow of refusing honors, Canisius declined several times and agreed

only to administer the diocese for a time. He took part in the diets of Augsburg and Regensburg, then, in 1557, in the Colloquy of Worms, where he defended the Catholic position against Philip Melanchthon.

Founder of colleges

Appointed in 1556 as the first provincial of the Jesuits of Upper Germany, a province stretching from Swabia to Hungary, he founded or had founded eighteen colleges in Central Europe, notably in Ingolstadt, Prague, Augsburg and Fribourg, while continuing to teach. Jesuit schools in the English-speaking world still bear his name, such as Canisius University in Buffalo, New York.


R. P. PETRI
CANISII
SOCIETATIS IESV
THEOLOGI,
CATECHISMVS
GRÆCOLATINVS.
Operâ R. P. Georgij Mayr eiusdem Societatis editus, atque in gratiam studiosæ iuventutis denuo recusus.
DILINGÆ,
TYPIS HIERONYMVM AGRICOLAM.

An early edition of the catechism of Canisius.

The catechism of Canisius

During his travels, Canisius saw the success of Luther's catechisms, published in 1529: clergy and lay people found in them a simple presentation of the faith. He understood that the Catholic Church had to offer the same service. In

1554 he published in Latin a summary of Christian doctrine, known as the *Large Catechism*. He soon drew from it a *Small Catechism* for children, then an intermediate version. Translated into German and many other languages, these works went through hundreds of editions; in some regions of Germany, "Canisius" even became a common noun for the catechism.

Canisius firmly opposed the doctrines of the Reformation, but he showed great consideration for persons. He preferred to speak of the "renewal" of the Church rather than reform, and he was convinced that this renewal had to begin with the fight against ignorance, that of the clergy as well as that of the faithful. He also translated Fathers of the Church and left an immense correspondence, published in eight volumes at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The last years in Fribourg

In 1580, Canisius settled in Fribourg, Switzerland. There, in 1582, he founded the College of Saint Michael, established a Marian congregation at the church of Notre-Dame and opened a printing press, convinced that the book was an instrument of evangelization. He spent his last years preaching, writing and guiding the faithful. He died on December 21, 1597, and was buried in the college church of Saint Michael, where his tomb is still venerated.

Why is Saint Peter Canisius a patron saint?

Saint Peter Canisius is the patron of the diocese of Innsbruck, in Austria, a land where he worked. Because of his life's work, he is also prayed to for catechists, teachers, Christian publishers and all who pass on the faith in a divided world. He did not seek to win debates, but to give believers, children included, the words of their faith. His work unites study, prayer and the patient labor of education.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Peter Canisius and the novena to Saint Peter Canisius, prayed from December 12 to 20.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Peter Canisius in art

- **The black cassock of the Jesuits**, often in the features of an old man, as in the early engravings.
- **A book**, recalling his catechism and his many writings.
- **A pen or writing desk**, for the author and the founder of a printing press.

Where to pray to Saint Peter Canisius

- **Fribourg** (Switzerland): his tomb in the church of Saint Michael, at the heart of the college he founded.
- **Fribourg**: the Basilica of Notre-Dame, where he founded a Marian congregation.
- **Nijmegen** (Netherlands): his hometown.
- **Vienna**: Saint Stephen's Cathedral, where he preached.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Peter Canisius for Those Who Pass On the Faith

Saint Peter Canisius devoted his life to teaching the faith simply, through preaching, books and the catechism. No prayer to him has become universally traditional. Saintspedia offers below an original prayer, inspired by his life and work, for all who pass on the faith: catechists, teachers, parents and priests.

A life in the service of passing on the faith

Peter Canisius saw at close range a Christendom torn apart. Instead of shutting himself up in controversy, he wanted everyone, even a child, to be able to know what the Church believes and to live by it. He spoke of "renewal" more readily than of reform, convinced that ignorance was the first poverty to be fought. His prayer can be said with catechists, teachers and parents in mind.

Prayer to Saint Peter Canisius for those who pass on the faith

Saint Peter Canisius, you who found your calling while making the Spiritual Exercises, teach me to seek God's will in silence and to follow it without delay.

You who traveled through Germany, Austria and Switzerland to proclaim the Gospel, give courage to those who teach the faith: catechists, priests, parents and teachers. May they know how to say simply what the Church believes, and live it with joy.

You who fought error without despising anyone, help us to defend the truth with gentleness and to respect those who think differently. Pray for the unity of Christians, which you saw broken.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me a love for the Word of God, a taste for learning and perseverance in service. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Peter Canisius is celebrated on December 21, the day of his death in Fribourg in 1597. Before the reform of the calendar in 1969, his feast was kept on April 27. You can also pray to him:

- at the beginning of the school year and of the catechism year;
- before teaching a class, preparing a homily or leading a faith formation group;
- for parents who want to pass on the faith to their children;

- for the unity of Christians, especially during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Peter Canisius, and read the life of Saint Peter Canisius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Peter Canisius

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and work of Saint Peter Canisius. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin it on December 12 and pray the last day on December 20, so that you reach December 21 with him, in the last days before Christmas. It can also be prayed at the start of a school or catechism year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into the rest of your day. Teachers, catechists and parents may want to pray it together, each one bringing the names of the children or adults they accompany.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: "Lord, through the intercession of Saint Peter Canisius, who taught your truth with patience and gentleness, I bring you this intention. Give me a love for your Word and the joy of making you known. Amen."

Day 1: Seeking the truth

As a student in Cologne, young Peter read the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church. He was not content with a faith of habit: he wanted to understand what he believed. Faith that seeks understanding is not a lack of trust: it is a way of loving God with the mind.

Prayer: Lord, give me the desire to know you better and the patience to learn. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: Read one chapter of a Gospel slowly.

Day 2: Letting oneself be guided

In Mainz, Peter Faber accompanied him through thirty days of Spiritual Exercises. Canisius discovered his calling thanks to a friend who knew how to listen.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who helped me find you. Make me able, in turn, to accompany others. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: Send a message of thanks to someone who mattered in your life of faith.

Day 3: Trusting obedience

Messina, Ingolstadt, Vienna, Fribourg: Canisius went wherever he was sent. He knew that the mission did not belong to him. His long journeys across Europe were not a career, but a series of answers to a call.

Prayer: Lord, make me available for what you expect of me, even when it upsets my plans. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: Accept wholeheartedly a task you did not choose.

Day 4: Teaching the little ones

After his great catechism, Canisius wrote a version for children. Nothing seemed more important to him than passing on the faith to the young.

Prayer: Lord, bless the children who are discovering your name, and those who teach it to them. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: Pray for the catechists of your parish, or offer them your help.

Day 5: Truth with gentleness

Canisius debated with the Reformers, but he refused contempt. He wanted to convince, not to humiliate. In a time of bitter quarrels, he showed that one can hold firmly to the truth while respecting the person in front of us.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, keep my words from harshness, and help me speak with truth and charity. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: In a discussion, try first to understand the other person.

Day 6: Humility

King Ferdinand wanted to make him archbishop of Vienna. Canisius refused, faithful to his vow. He preferred serving to receiving honors.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the desire to be recognized, and teach me to serve quietly. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: Do someone a discreet favor without letting it be known.

Day 7: Building schools

Eighteen colleges came into being thanks to him. Canisius believed that education is a work of charity and of evangelization.

Prayer: Lord, support teachers, students and all who find learning difficult. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: Pray for a school, or support an educational work.

Day 8: The power of the written word

In Fribourg he opened a printing press. Books carry the faith where the preacher cannot go. Today, the same mission continues through every means of communication, from the parish bulletin to the internet.

Prayer: Lord, inspire those who write, edit and publish, so that they may serve truth and goodness. Saint Peter Canisius, pray for us.

Today: Give or lend a good Christian book.

Day 9: Finishing the race

After years of immense work, Canisius spent his last days in Fribourg, in prayer. He died on December 21, 1597, as Christmas drew near. His feast falls in the last days of Advent, as if to invite us to welcome the Word made flesh, whom he served all his life.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Peter Canisius, grant that I may serve you faithfully to the end. Amen.

Today: Prepare your heart for Christmas with a time of silence.

Closing prayer

Saint Peter Canisius, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for the Church, for those who teach the faith and for the unity of Christians. Obtain for us the grace to know Christ, to love him and to make him known. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Church of Saint Michael in Fribourg, Tomb of Saint Peter Canisius

Saint Peter Canisius rests in Fribourg, Switzerland, in the Church of Saint Michael, at the heart of the college he founded in 1582. It was in this city that he spent the last seventeen years of his life and died on December 21, 1597. His tomb, still visible, is the main place where people come to pray to him.

Fribourg, the city of his last years

When Canisius settled in Fribourg in 1580, the city had remained Catholic amid cantons that had gone over to the Reformation. The aging Jesuit carried out a final burst of activity there: he founded the College of Saint Michael in 1582, established a Marian sodality at the Church of Notre-Dame, and opened a printing press. He preached, wrote, and accompanied the townspeople. The college he founded is still a school today, and a street in the old town bears his name.



The Church and College of Saint Michael in Fribourg.

The tomb of Saint Peter Canisius

At his death, Canisius was buried in the college church. Beatified in 1864, then canonized and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church in 1925, he has drawn the faithful of Fribourg and pilgrims from elsewhere for generations. To pray before his tomb is to join the place where a whole life given to teaching the faith came to an end.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you may read the life of Saint Peter Canisius. Before his tomb, you can entrust to God children, young people in formation, catechists, and teachers, then say the prayer to Saint Peter Canisius. In December, the novena to Saint Peter Canisius can accompany a pilgrimage for his feast day. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Peter Canisius

- **Fribourg**: the Basilica of Notre-Dame, where he founded a Marian sodality.
- **Nijmegen** (Netherlands): his native city, where his father was mayor.
- **Cologne**: the city of his studies and of the first Jesuit house in Germany.
- **Mainz**: the city where he made the Spiritual Exercises and entered the Society of Jesus.
- **Ingolstadt** and **Vienna**: the cities of his teaching and preaching.

Practical information

The Church of Saint Michael is on the grounds of the College of Saint Michael, an active school: access may therefore be limited at certain hours. Before you come, inquire with the Fribourg tourist office or the official website of the college for opening hours and celebrations. Modest dress and silence are requested.

Credits and sources

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