

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Peter Nolasco

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 6

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IN BRIEF

Saint Peter Nolasco

Merchant from Languedoc, founder in Barcelona of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy for the ransom of captives.

Feast day	May 6
Born	c. 1180-1182, Mas-Saintes-Puelles, France
Died	May 6, 1245, Barcelona, Spain
Canonized	cult confirmed September 30, 1628, by Pope Urban VIII
Era	13th century
Patron saint of	captives, prisoners

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Peter Nolasco for Prisoners and Captives

Novena to Saint Peter Nolasco

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Peter Nolasco

Saint Peter Nolasco was a merchant born in the Lauragais, in Languedoc in the south of France, around 1180. In Barcelona, in 1218, he founded the Order of Our Lady of Mercy, devoted to ransoming Christians held captive in Muslim lands. His religious, the Mercedarians, even vowed to give themselves up as hostages to free prisoners in danger of losing their faith. He died in Barcelona in 1245 and is celebrated on May 6.

Who was Saint Peter Nolasco?

Peter was born around 1180-1182 at Mas-Saintes-Puelles, near Castelnaudary, in what is now the department of Aude in southern France. At a date we do not know, his family settled in Barcelona, where his father, Bernard, trained him in the merchant's trade.

The western Mediterranean was then divided between Christian kingdoms and the Muslim states of Spain and North Africa. Wars, piracy and raids produced large numbers of captives on both sides, who were reduced to slavery. A merchant who traded across these frontiers saw this suffering at close range.

Early sources on his life are scarce, and many stories were embellished later, especially by the painters and chroniclers of his order. The main outlines of his work, however, are well established by documents of the time, including the papal bulls that approved his foundation.

Key dates

- **c. 1180-1182**: Birth at Mas-Saintes-Puelles, in the Lauragais.
- **Youth**: He becomes a merchant in Barcelona.

- **c. 1203**: He gathers lay companions to ransom captives.
- **August 10, 1218**: Founding of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy in the cathedral of Barcelona.
- **1227**: First constitutions of the order.
- **January 17, 1235**: Approval by Pope Gregory IX.
- **May 6, 1245**: Death in Barcelona.
- **September 30, 1628**: Pope Urban VIII confirms his cult, the equivalent of a canonization.

The merchant and the captives

Merchants could travel between Christian and Muslim territories, and they often acted as go-betweens for the ransom of prisoners. This is how Peter discovered the distress of Christian captives, separated from their families, living in poverty and exposed to the risk of abandoning their faith. Deeply moved, he decided to devote his wealth and his life to setting them free.

Around 1203 he gathered a few young men who shared this desire. Together they collected alms in Catalonia and Aragon, then negotiated ransoms. For some fifteen years this small group of laymen, united in prayer, bought back prisoners. But the number of captives kept growing, and Peter understood that the work needed a more lasting form.

The founding of the Order of Mercy

According to the tradition of the order, on the night of August 1 to 2, 1218, the Virgin Mary appeared to him and asked him to found a religious order for the redemption of captives. On August 10, 1218, before the high altar of the cathedral of Barcelona, in the presence of Bishop Berenguer de Palou and King James I of Aragon, Peter and his companions received the habit. The Dominican Saint Raymond of Peñafort, the king's adviser, supported the project. The order adopted the Rule of Saint Augustine.

To the three usual vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Mercedarians added a fourth: to give themselves up as hostages, if necessary, to free a captive in danger of losing the faith. The first constitutions, in 1227, asked the brothers to be "always joyfully ready to give their lives," in the image of Christ, who handed himself over to the mercy of his enemies. The Spanish word *merced*, meaning "mercy" or "grace," gave the order its name.

An order at the service of freedom

In 1235, Pope Gregory IX officially approved the order with the bull *Religionis vestrae*. When the founder died on May 6, 1245, the Order of Mercy numbered about a hundred brothers in eighteen houses in Aragon, Catalonia and the south of France. According to the order's chronicles, nearly four thousand captives were ransomed during its first twenty-seven years. The order already had a martyr, Saint Serapion, who died in Algiers.

Peter was buried in the Mercedarian convent in Barcelona. His cult, which remained alive among the Mercedarians and among the people, was confirmed by Urban VIII in 1628 and extended to the whole Church in 1664. In the seventeenth century, the painter Francisco de Zurbarán devoted a famous series of paintings to his life.

Why is Saint Peter Nolasco the patron saint of captives and prisoners?

Peter Nolasco looked at captives not as merchandise but as brothers whose freedom and faith were under threat. He put his merchant's skills at the service of mercy, and he founded an order ready to go as far as the gift of self. That is why he is invoked for prisoners, hostages and all people deprived of their freedom. Today the Mercedarians still work with prisoners and with victims of new forms of slavery, such as human trafficking.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Peter Nolasco in art

Saint Peter Nolasco is shown in the white habit of the Mercedarians, with the order's shield on his chest: the arms of Aragon beneath a white cross on a red field. Painters, Zurbarán above all, illustrated the visions told by the order's tradition: the Virgin Mary giving him the habit, the Apostle Peter appearing to him crucified upside down, or an angel showing him the heavenly Jerusalem. Chains or freed captives sometimes appear at his feet.

Where to pray to Saint Peter Nolasco

- **Barcelona**: the Basilica of La Mercè, mother house of the order, dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy, patroness of the city.
- **Barcelona**: the Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia, where the order was founded in 1218.
- **Mas-Saintes-Puelles** (Aude, France): his native village, which keeps his memory.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Peter Nolasco or the novena to Saint Peter Nolasco.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Peter Nolasco for Prisoners and Captives

The Mercedarians pray to their founder with texts proper to their order, which are little known outside it. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by the life of Saint Peter Nolasco: the merchant moved by the fate of captives, the founder of the Order of Our Lady of Mercy, the man ready to give himself up for the freedom of others.

A saint of mercy and freedom

Peter Nolasco gave his fortune and then his life to ransoming Christian captives. His brothers took a special vow to take the place of a prisoner in danger of losing the faith. The first constitutions of the order asked them to be "always joyfully ready to give their lives."

Prayer to Saint Peter Nolasco for prisoners and captives

Saint Peter Nolasco, you saw in captives brothers to be set free: open my eyes to those around me who are not free.

I entrust to you prisoners, hostages, victims of human trafficking and modern slavery, and all who are locked in fear, addiction or despair. May the mercy of God reach them and lift them up.

You placed your skills as a merchant at the service of the poorest: help me to make my work and my possessions serve the good of others.

You were ready to give your life for a stranger: teach me to give myself with joy, in small things as in great ones. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

With Our Lady of Mercy, pray that we in turn may become builders of freedom and peace. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Peter Nolasco is celebrated on May 6, the day of his death in 1245. This prayer also fits:

- on September 24, the feast of Our Lady of Mercy, patroness of Barcelona;
- before visiting someone in prison;
- for a person taken hostage or unjustly detained;
- for victims of human trafficking and those who work to free them.

A short invocation

> *Saint Peter Nolasco, friend of captives, pray for all who are deprived of freedom. Our Lady of Mercy, pray for us. Amen.*

To get to know him better, read the life of Saint Peter Nolasco, or pray the novena to Saint Peter Nolasco.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Peter Nolasco

This novena to Saint Peter Nolasco is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the merchant from Languedoc who, moved by the fate of Christian captives, founded the Order of Our Lady of Mercy in Barcelona in 1218. To end on his feast day, May 6, begin it on April 28. You can also pray it at any time, especially for a prisoner, a hostage, a victim of trafficking or anyone who has lost their freedom.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a quiet moment. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed. Some episodes come from the tradition of the Mercedarian order, which has enriched the few documents we have about his life.

Day 1: A merchant's son

Peter was born in the Lauragais and learned the merchant's trade from his father in Barcelona. God called him through his everyday work, not in spite of it. The skills he learned in the marketplace would one day serve the ransom of thousands.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, help me to see my daily work as a place where God can call me. Amen.

Today: Offer your work today for someone who has none.

Day 2: Seeing the captives

Traveling between Christian and Muslim lands, Peter discovered the distress of prisoners cut off from their families. Many people passed them by. He stopped and looked. Like the Good Samaritan, he let himself be moved, and that compassion changed the course of his life.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, give me eyes that see the suffering others prefer to ignore. Amen.

Today: Learn about a situation of injustice you know little about.

Day 3: Giving his wealth

Moved by what he saw, Peter decided to use his own fortune to ransom captives. Money became, in his hands, an instrument of freedom. What we own is truly ours only when we know how to give it.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, free me from attachment to possessions, and teach me to share generously. Amen.

Today: Make a gift to an organization that helps prisoners or victims of trafficking.

Day 4: Friends in a common cause

Around 1203, Peter gathered young laymen who shared his desire. For fifteen years they collected alms and negotiated ransoms, united in prayer. Good works grow when they are shared. Peter did not try to do everything alone; he knew how to gather others around a common cause.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, bless all volunteers and associations who work for the freedom and dignity of others. Amen.

Today: Thank someone who gives their time to serve others.

Day 5: Under the mantle of Mary

According to the tradition of the order, the Virgin Mary appeared to Peter in 1218 and asked him to found a religious order for the redemption of captives. Our Lady of Mercy became the mother of the work. Under her protection, a group of friends became a religious family.

Prayer: Our Lady of Mercy, with Saint Peter Nolasco, I place under your protection all who are held captive. Amen.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary for prisoners.

Day 6: A fourth vow

The Mercedarians added a fourth vow to the usual three: to give themselves as hostages, if necessary, to free a captive in danger of losing the faith. Love goes as far as taking another's place. This is exactly what Christ did for us on the Cross.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, teach me to love as Christ loved, even to the point of giving myself. Amen.

Today: Take on a task that someone else finds hard.

Day 7: Joyfully ready

The first constitutions asked the brothers to be "always joyfully ready to give their lives." Sacrifice in the Gospel is not gloomy; it is the joy of loving. A gift made grudgingly loses much of its beauty.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, give me a joyful heart in service and in sacrifice. Amen.

Today: Do a service with a smile, without complaining.

Day 8: Thousands set free

According to the order's chronicles, nearly four thousand captives were ransomed in the first twenty-seven years. Each one was a person with a name, a family and a story. Behind every number, God sees a beloved child.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, I entrust to you prisoners, hostages and victims of modern slavery, especially those no one remembers. Amen.

Today: Write to, visit or pray by name for someone in prison.

Day 9: A faithful end

Peter died in Barcelona on May 6, 1245, leaving an order of a hundred brothers in eighteen houses. His work continues today among prisoners and the victims of new forms of slavery.

Prayer: Saint Peter Nolasco, present to God the intention I have carried through this novena, and make me an instrument of mercy. Amen.

Today: Forgive someone who has hurt you, and set them free in your heart.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you inspired Saint Peter Nolasco, under the guidance of the Virgin Mary, to found an order for the ransom of captives. Through his intercession, free us from the chains of sin, comfort all who are deprived of liberty and make us generous servants of your mercy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Read more in the life of Saint Peter Nolasco, or say the prayer to Saint Peter Nolasco.

CREDITS

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