

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Thomas the Apostle

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Thomas the Apostle

One of the twelve apostles, called Didymus, witness of the Resurrection and apostle of India according to tradition.

Feast day	July 3
Born	1st century, Galilee (probably)
Died	1st century (c. 72 according to Indian tradition), Mylapore (today Chennai, India), according to tradition
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since the early Church)
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	architects, builders, India

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Thomas the Apostle

Basilica-Cathedral of Saint Thomas the Apostle in Ortona

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Thomas the Apostle

Saint Thomas is one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. The Gospel of John presents him as a brave and outspoken disciple who refused to believe in the Resurrection without seeing, then cried out before the risen Christ: "My Lord and my God!" According to an ancient tradition, he carried the Gospel as far as India, where the Christians of Kerala still call themselves "Saint Thomas Christians." His relics are venerated in Ortona, Italy, and at his traditional tomb in Chennai. His feast day is July 3.

Who was Saint Thomas the Apostle?

Thomas appears in all four lists of the Twelve handed down by the New Testament. His name comes from an Aramaic word meaning "twin"; the Gospel of John translates it into Greek: Thomas, "called Didymus." Nothing is known of his twin, his family or his trade. Like most of the apostles, he probably came from Galilee.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke mention only his name. It is the Gospel of John that gives him a face, recording four of his interventions. Together they paint the portrait of a loyal man who asks the questions others dare not ask, and who wants to understand before he commits himself. The expression "doubting Thomas" has made him famous, but it tells only part of his story.

Key dates

- **c. 28-30**: Called by Jesus to be one of the Twelve.
- **c. 30**: When Lazarus dies, he urges the disciples to follow Jesus into Judea, "that we may die with him" (John 11:16).

- **Eight days after Easter**: The risen Christ appears to him; Thomas professes his faith (John 20:24-29).
- **After the Ascension**: Present with the apostles gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 1:13).
- **52**: Arrives on the Malabar Coast, in southern India, according to the tradition of the Christians of Kerala.
- **c. 72**: Martyred at Mylapore, near today's Chennai, according to the same tradition.
- **384**: The pilgrim Egeria prays at his tomb in Edessa, in Mesopotamia.
- **1258**: His relics are brought from the island of Chios to Ortona, in the Abruzzo region of Italy.
- **1969**: His feast is set on July 3 in the Roman calendar; it was previously celebrated on December 21.

Thomas in the Gospel of John

Thomas's first intervention is an act of courage. Jesus wants to return to Judea, where people had tried to stone him, to go to his friend Lazarus, who has just died. The disciples hesitate. Thomas settles it: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16).

The second comes at the Last Supper. Jesus announces that he is going to prepare a place for his disciples and adds: "Where I am going, you know the way." Thomas objects frankly: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" His question draws one of the most famous sayings of the Gospel: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:5-6).



Christ and Saint Thomas, bronze group by Andrea del Verrocchio at Orsanmichele, Florence (15th century).

From doubt to the greatest profession of faith

On the evening of Easter, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples gathered together. Thomas is not there. When the others tell him, "We have seen the Lord," he answers: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later, Jesus comes again while Thomas is present, and invites him to touch his wounds. Thomas does not do so, or at least the text does not say so: he simply cries out, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus answers him: "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:24-29).

The Fathers of the Church drew a deeper lesson from this scene: the doubt of Thomas, once overcome, served to strengthen the faith of later generations. His confession is in fact the most explicit in the Gospels: he is the first to call

Jesus, face to face, "my God." Thomas appears one last time by the Sea of Tiberias, among the seven disciples to whom the risen Lord shows himself after a night of fishing (John 21:2).

The apostle of India

In the 3rd century, Origen, quoted by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, reported that Thomas received as his mission field the land of the Parthians, in today's Iran. At about the same time, the *Acts of Thomas*, an apocryphal account written in Syriac at Edessa, show him leaving for India as a carpenter and builder in the service of King Gondophares, a ruler whose existence is confirmed by coins. The account is largely legendary, but it is what made Thomas the patron saint of architects, often shown holding a carpenter's square.

The Christians of Kerala, in southern India, keep a very ancient tradition that the apostle landed on the Malabar Coast in 52, founded communities there, and then died a martyr, pierced by a lance, at Mylapore on the east coast. These "Saint Thomas Christians," of Syriac tradition, were established long before the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century. Historians debate whether the apostle really came to India, but the Christian presence there is ancient, and devotion to Thomas has never wavered. Today the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholic Churches, among others, honor him as their father in faith.



San Thome Basilica in Mylapore, Chennai, built over the traditional site of his burial in India.

Why is Saint Thomas the patron saint of India and of architects?

He is the patron of India because of the tradition of his mission and martyrdom there, kept alive for centuries by the Saint Thomas Christians. He is the patron of architects and builders because of the *Acts of Thomas*, which describe him as a builder sent to construct a palace for an Indian king.

Above all, Thomas reassures everyone who doubts. He does not pretend to believe; he says what he thinks, and it is within the community of disciples, which he had not left, that Christ comes to meet him. His path shows that faith is not the absence of questions, but an encounter with a person. You can pray to him for a loved one who does not believe, for yourself in times of uncertainty, or for the Christians of Asia.

To pray with him, read the "My Lord and my God" prayer or follow the novena to Saint Thomas the Apostle, from June 24 to July 2, the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Thomas in art

- **The finger in the wound**: the most famous scene, Thomas reaching toward the side of the risen Christ, as in Caravaggio's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* or Verrocchio's bronze.
- **The carpenter's square**: recalling the builder of the *Acts of Thomas* and his patronage of architects.
- **The lance or spear**: the instrument of his martyrdom according to Indian tradition.
- **The book**: like the other apostles, he often holds the Gospel.

Where to pray to Saint Thomas

- **Ortona** (Abruzzo, Italy): the Basilica-Cathedral of Saint Thomas the Apostle, which has kept his relics since 1258.
- **Chennai** (India): San Thome Basilica in Mylapore, built over his traditional tomb, and Saint Thomas Mount, the traditional site of his martyrdom.
- **Kodungallur** (Kerala, India): the shrine that commemorates his arrival in India according to tradition.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, which displays a relic said to be the finger of Saint Thomas.



The Basilica-Cathedral of Saint Thomas the Apostle in Ortona, where his relics rest.

PRAYER

Prayer of Saint Thomas: "My Lord and My God"

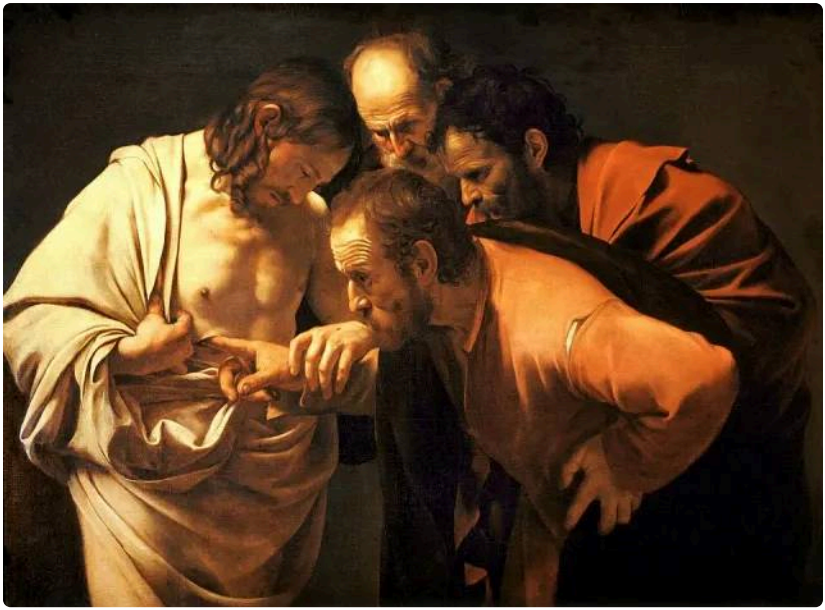
"My Lord and my God": these four words are the only prayer of Saint Thomas that we know. They are recorded in the Gospel of John (20:28), at the moment when the apostle, who had refused to believe, finds himself before the risen Christ. Below you will find that passage, followed by an original prayer to Saint Thomas.

"My Lord and my God" (John 20:26-29)

Eight days after Easter, the disciples are gathered again, and Thomas is with them. Translation by Saintspedia from the Greek text of the Gospel.

> *Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said: "Peace be with you."*
>
> *Then he said to Thomas: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; reach out your hand, and put it into my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believe."*
>
> *Thomas answered him: "My Lord and my God!"*
>
> *Jesus said to him: "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."*

Source: Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 26-29. An old custom, still alive in many Catholic families, is to say "My Lord and my God" silently when the priest elevates the Host at Mass.



Saint Thomas the Apostle at prayer.

Another word of Thomas to meditate on

> *"Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"*

Source: Gospel of John, 14:5. Jesus answers this question of Thomas: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

Prayer to Saint Thomas the Apostle for those who doubt

Saint Thomas, apostle of Jesus, you who wanted to see and touch before believing, pray for me.

You know what doubt is, and you were not ashamed to say so. When my faith wavers, when I no longer understand where God is leading me, teach me to ask my questions honestly, without leaving the community of believers.

You who recognized the Lord by his wounds, help me to recognize him in those who suffer, and to touch, through my help, the wounds of my brothers and sisters.

I entrust to you those I love who do not believe, those who seek without finding, and the Christians of India and Asia who honor you as their father in faith. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me the grace one day to say with you, with all my heart: "My Lord and my God!" Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Thomas is celebrated on July 3, a day of great celebration among the Saint Thomas Christians of India. His Gospel is read every year on the Second Sunday of Easter, Divine Mercy Sunday, which is a privileged moment to pray to him. You can also turn to him in a season of doubt, or for someone who has drifted away from the faith.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Thomas the Apostle, from June 24 to July 2, and read the life of Saint Thomas.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Thomas the Apostle

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the passages of the Gospel of John in which the apostle Thomas appears. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on June 24; it ends on July 2, the day before his feast on July 3. You can also pray it during the Easter season, or at any time when faith feels difficult.

How to pray this novena

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

Day 1: A twin

Thomas is called "Didymus," the twin. The Fathers of the Church liked to say that each of us can recognize ourselves in him, as in a twin brother who doubts and searches. His story is not only about him; it is about us.

Prayer: Lord, you know me as I am, with my faith and my doubts. Call me as you called Thomas.

Today: Write down a question you have not dared to ask God.

Day 2: "Let us go and die with him"

When Jesus wants to return to Judea despite the danger, Thomas leads the others: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). Before he is a doubter, he is a faithful friend, ready to share his Master's risks.

Prayer: Jesus, give me the courage to follow you even when the path looks dangerous.

Today: Take a step you have been putting off out of fear.

Day 3: The way

"Lord, we do not know where you are going" (John 14:5). Thomas's honest question receives the answer: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." Our questions, brought to Jesus, can become the occasion of a deeper revelation.

Prayer: Lord, when I cannot see where I am going, be my way yourself.

Today: Read John 14:1-7 slowly.

Day 4: The one who was absent

On the evening of Easter, Thomas is not with the others. He misses the encounter. Everyone, at some point, drifts away, out of sadness or disappointment. The Gospel does not condemn him for it, and the other disciples do not shut him out: they go to find him with the news.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those who have drifted away from the Church. Let them find an open door to return.

Today: Reach out to someone you no longer see at Mass or in your community.

Day 5: Speaking one's doubts

"Unless I see, I will not believe." Thomas does not hide what he thinks. God prefers an honest question to a faith that is only for show.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the honesty to recognize my doubts and the trust to hand them over to you.

Today: Talk about your faith and your questions with a priest or a believing friend.

Day 6: Staying with the others

Eight days later, Thomas is there, among the disciples. He still doubts, but he has not left. It is there that Christ comes to meet him. The community of faith carries us when our own faith is weak.

Prayer: Lord, keep me in the communion of your Church, even in days of darkness.

Today: Take part in Sunday Mass with renewed attention.



Praying with Saint Thomas the Apostle.

Day 7: The wounds of Christ

Jesus shows his hands and his side. The risen Lord keeps the marks of his Passion: love does not erase wounds, it transfigures them. It is by his wounds that Thomas recognizes him. Our own wounds, offered to him, can also become places of encounter.

Prayer: Jesus, by your wounds, heal mine. Teach me to recognize you in those who suffer.

Today: Visit or help someone who is sick or wounded by life.

Day 8: "My Lord and my God"

Thomas does not touch: he adores. His confession of faith is the highest in the Gospels. Doubt passed through becomes a deeper faith. The one who demanded proof ends up needing none: the presence of the Lord is enough.

Prayer: "My Lord and my God!" I recognize you present in my life, even when I cannot see you.

Today: At your next Mass, say silently "My Lord and my God" at the elevation of the Host.

Day 9: To the ends of the earth

According to tradition, Thomas carried the Gospel as far as India, where he gave his life. The one who had doubted became a witness to the ends of the known world, and the Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala still carry his faith today.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Thomas, make me a witness of your Resurrection. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Christians of India and Asia, or support a missionary organization.

Closing prayer

Saint Thomas, apostle of Christ, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for me and for all who doubt. Obtain for us the grace to believe without having seen, and to meet the living Lord in the midst of his Church. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Thomas and the "My Lord and my God" prayer.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica-Cathedral of Saint Thomas the Apostle in Ortona

The Basilica-Cathedral of Saint Thomas the Apostle in Ortona, a small town in Abruzzo on the Adriatic, has kept the relics of the apostle Thomas since 1258. It is the chief place of pilgrimage dedicated to Saint Thomas in Europe, and one of the few shrines in the world that holds the body of one of the twelve apostles.

From Edessa to Ortona: the journey of the relics

According to tradition, the remains of the apostle, who died in India, were brought back to Edessa, in Mesopotamia, present-day Şanlıurfa in Turkey. The pilgrim Egeria says she prayed at his tomb there in 384. The relics were then taken to the Greek island of Chios, in the Aegean Sea. In 1258, ships from Ortona taking part in an expedition to the East, under the navigator Leone Acciaiuoli, brought them back to their city. A tombstone bearing a Greek inscription, which came from Chios with the relics, is still preserved.



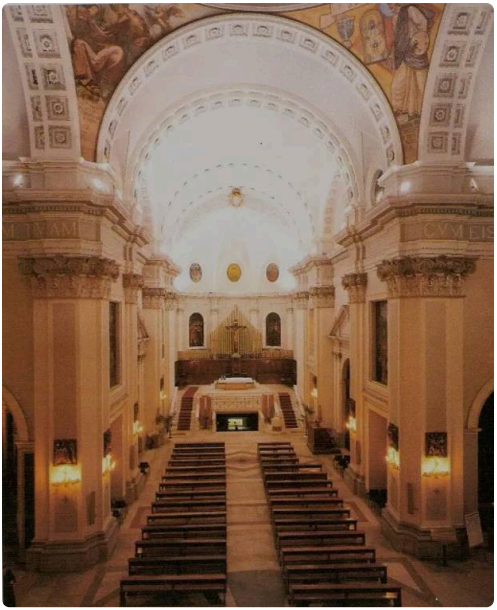
Basilica-Cathedral of Saint Thomas the Apostle in Ortona.

A cathedral rebuilt more than once

The cathedral has had a turbulent history. Burned during an Ottoman raid in the 16th century, it was rebuilt; the relics escaped the fire. In December 1943, during the fierce Battle of Ortona between German and Allied troops, the building was largely destroyed. It was rebuilt after the war. The relics rest in the crypt, beneath the altar, in a precious urn that pilgrims come to venerate.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Thomas

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Thomas or chapter 20 of the Gospel according to Saint John. In the crypt, a time of silence is a good moment to entrust an intention, for example for someone who doubts or has drifted from the faith. The prayer "My Lord and my God" suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.



Basilica-Cathedral of Saint Thomas the Apostle in Ortona, the interior.

Other places associated with Saint Thomas

- **Chennai** (India): the San Thome Basilica in Mylapore, rebuilt in the late 19th century over his traditional tomb.
- **Chennai**: Saint Thomas Mount, the hill where tradition places his martyrdom.
- **Kerala** (India): the churches of the Saint Thomas Christians, notably at Kodungallur, where tradition places his arrival in 52.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, whose chapel of relics displays a relic attributed to the apostle.
- **Florence**: the church of Orsanmichele, where Verrocchio's bronze group depicts Christ and Saint Thomas.

Practical information

Ortona is on the Adriatic coast, south of Pescara, whose airport and train station are the nearest. The cathedral overlooks the old town, not far from the Aragonese castle that looks out over the sea. Feasts in honor of the apostle are celebrated in Ortona throughout the year. Check the times of Masses and visits with the parish or the Archdiocese of Lanciano-Ortona before you come.

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