



ST COLUMBANS MISSION SOCIETY



VISIO DIVINA

2027

A resource to help you pray using
the images and Art Guide of the 2027 Columban Art Calendar

Art Guide compiled by Dr Ursula Betka, Art Historian, Teacher and Iconographer | Resource concept & design by Ajesh Abraham
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“SACRED ART

is true and beautiful when its form corresponds to its particular vocation: evoking
and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God.

CCC2502

What is Visio Divina?

Visio Divina, translated from Latin as "divine seeing", is a type of prayer that uses images. It is similar to the Lectio Divina ("divine reading") prayer, but instead of Scripture, art is used to help focus our mind on prayer. Praying with art allows us to connect with God on a multisensory level.

Steps for doing a Visio Divina reflection

Preparation

You can do the Visio Divina reflection alone or in a small group. Choose from 13 available images, which you can display on a screen or print out. Find a comfortable space without distractions for the exercise. Stay calm and open your heart and mind to listen to God.

Step 1: Gaze (Visio)

Take your time to observe the image closely, paying attention to every detail, hue, texture, person, location, and object. Keep your gaze fixed on the picture for a while and allow yourself to connect with it on a deeper level.

Step 2: Meditate

Take a moment to reflect on the image and consider what catches your eye. Are there any particular items or aspects of the art that are capturing your attention? If you are discussing the image as a group, feel free to share your thoughts on what stands out to you with others.

Step 3: Contemplate

Engage with the art provided in this resource by reading the Art Guide Reflection or scanning the QR code to watch the Art Guide video. Reflect on the related Scripture for each image and contemplate its meaning. Consider what new insights the image and reflection offer, and listen carefully to what God may be saying to you through this experience. If you are doing this activity as a group, allow each person to share their reflection in the group.

Step 4: Pray and Act

The final step is to spend some time in prayer and discernment as a response to God. This response can be transformative when one accepts God's promptings and seeks His help if prayer prompts action. Allow each person to share their responses in the group.





FRONT COVER

The Good Shepherd, c. 1650–60 (oil on canvas), Philippe de Champaigne (1602–74), Bridgeman Images.

The Good Shepherd, c. 1650–60 (oil on canvas), Philippe de Champaigne (1602–74), Bridgeman Images.

The image of Christ as the Good Shepherd has a long tradition harking back to early Christian times, often appearing in catacomb paintings and relief sculptures on sarcophagi. The much-loved parable of the Good Shepherd, narrated by Jesus to his disciples, likens God's love to a caring shepherd who does not allow even one sheep from his flock to stray without being sought and found.

"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep ... I am the good shepherd, and I know My own, and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep." (John 10: 11–12; 14–16)

Shepherding flocks was one of the most common occupations for rural people in Palestine and its surrounds. The disciples knew well the commitment and care that the shepherd had for his flock of sheep.

This painting by Champaigne continues a long tradition of imaging Jesus bearing a shepherd's staff, with the lost sheep now draped securely and tenderly around Jesus' shoulders. The Lord's brightly coloured garments in this representation contrast with post-Renaissance depictions of the Lord dressed as a humble shepherd in simple undyed clothing. Instead, the artist uses the pink-red

undergarment and deep blue robe most often associated with icons of Christ as the Redeemer king of the world. Christ is thus represented in both his human and divine nature, with the sheep as the redeemed Christian souls of human creation.

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FRONT COVER

The Good Shepherd, c. 1650–60 (oil on canvas), Philippe de Champaigne (1602–74), Bridgeman Images.



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JANUARY

Twelve Years Old Christ in the Temple, 1810–1821 (tavola), Joseph Anton Koch (1768–1839), Mondadori Portfolio/Electa/Antonio Quattrone with permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture, Bridgeman Images.

Twelve Years Old Christ in the Temple, 1810–1821 (tavola), Joseph Anton Koch (1768–1839), Mondadori Portfolio/Electa/Antonio Quattrone with permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture, Bridgeman Images.

The gospel story of Mary and Joseph losing the 12-year-old Jesus and finding him in the Temple of Jerusalem, as represented in this painting, conveys two key meditations. The first focuses on Jesus, depicted in the centre seated on the Rabbi's throne and explaining the meaning of Sacred Scripture to learned teachers. The second turns to contemplate Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph. Having lost their son for three days, they had searched all of Jerusalem to find him and were sick with worry. On finding their son teaching in the Temple, his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you" (Luke 2:41–48).

The painting captures the moment of discovery for Mary and Joseph. Dressed in bright red and green, Mary's emotive reaction draws deep empathy from all parents who have lost and then found their child.

This charged moment reveals that the boy Jesus, while still living with his family, was aware of a calling from the Father as God's anointed one.

Jesus debating Hebrew Scripture with the temple elders is also a powerful sign that his life's purpose was to focus on a renewal of moral consciousness and a revelation of the profound callings of the prophets.

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JANUARY

Twelve Years Old Christ in the Temple, 1810–1821 (tavola), Joseph Anton Koch (1768–1839), Mondadori Portfolio/Electa/Antonio Quattrone with permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture, Bridgeman Images.





FEBRUARY

Detail of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple (fresco) Bernardino Luini (c. 1480–1532), © Ghigo Roli. All rights reserved 2026, Bridgeman Images.

Detail of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple (fresco), Bernardino Luini (c. 1480–1532) © Ghigo Roli. All rights reserved 2026, Bridgeman Images

The feast of the Presentation in the Temple is celebrated on 2nd February, exactly forty days after Christmas. Mary was required under Jewish law to present her first-born son to the Lord.

This detail from Luini's painting draws attention to four key protagonists in the gospel story: Mary, baby Jesus, the devout man Simeon, and the prophetess Anna. We witness the poignant moment when the aged Simeon embraces the Christ child, the words celebrated in the great canticle for the feast – the Nunc Dimittus – resounding:

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people; A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel. (Luke 2:29–32)

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Simeon knew he would not die before seeing the Messiah.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be rejected. Indeed, as a result of him the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your own soul!" (Luke 2:34–35)

The old and wise Anna stands between them, gesturing to heaven, recalling the Hebrew prophet Isaiah's words: "He was pierced for our transgressions" (Isaiah 53:5). Anna perceives that Mary's sorrow was to be deeply united with Christ's mission of salvation.

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FEBRUARY

Detail of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple (fresco), Bernardino Luini (c. 1480–1532), © Ghigo Roli. All rights reserved 2026, Bridgeman Images





MARCH

The Three Marys at the Sepulchre, c. 1684/85 (oil on canvas), Giovanni Battista Gaulli (Baciccio) (1639–1709), © Fitzwilliam Museum/Bridgeman Images.

The Three Marys at the Sepulchre, c. 1684/85 (oil on canvas), Giovanni Battista Gaulli (Baciccio) (1639–1709), © Fitzwilliam Museum/Bridgeman Images

Baciccio's painting captures a poignant moment in the gospel narrative of Jesus' Resurrection. A group of three women visit Jesus' tomb and are told by the attending angels that He has risen from the dead.

Mary Magdalene is named in all four Gospels as one of the three, but the accounts feature different combinations of the other eyewitnesses. The "Three Marys" usually includes Mary Magdalene, Mary of Clopas or Mary, the mother of James, and Mary Salome.

Mary Magdalene is shown at the centre of the composition, identified by her characteristic attribute of a red dress and long flowing hair. She also bears a vessel full of myrrh to anoint the body of Jesus.

St Luke's account of the three women's experience of divine revelation appears to be the main source of the imagery in this painting.

Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them,

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here but has been raised." (Luke 24: 1–6)

The artist amplifies the significance of the two men in bright garments by presenting them as winged angelic messengers. One gestures to heaven, as he responds, "He isn't here, but has been raised."

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MARCH

The Three Marys at the Sepulchre, c. 1684/85 (oil on canvas), Giovanni Battista Gaulli (Baciccio) (1639–1709), © Fitzwilliam Museum/Bridgeman Images





APRIL

St Mark the Evangelist, 18th century (oil on canvas), Italian School, © Antonio & Roberto Tartaglione, Bridgeman Images

St Mark the Evangelist, 18th century (oil on canvas), Italian School, © Antonio & Roberto Tartaglione, Bridgeman Images

St Mark, as one of the Twelve Apostles, is credited in Catholic tradition with writing one of the four canonical Gospels (the other three were written by the apostles Matthew and John, and the Evangelist Luke). The feast of St Mark is celebrated on April 25th, where the saint is acclaimed in his dual role of Apostle and Evangelist. The painting depicts St Mark in his most traditional guise as evangelist or gospel writer, suspended in a moment of reflection on his life shared with his teacher, Jesus. With a quill-feather pen in hand, he dips it into the ink pot, inviting us to share his reflections and read his gospel again.

Artists often portray St Mark as a mature man with a long greying beard, actively writing his gospel on either a codex or a scroll. Before portraits of the man emerged in art, the Evangelist was depicted symbolically as a winged lion. All four evangelists were also initially represented by the “four living creatures” described in the Book of Revelation (Ch. 4).

The Golden Legend, a popular thirteenth-century text, recounts the adventurous story of the transfer of St Mark’s body from Alexandria to Venice, where his remains were subsequently interred on holy ground, thus inspiring the construction of Venice’s great Basilica of San Marco.

Perhaps the most memorable of the symbolic depictions of St Mark the Evangelist is the monumental sculpture of the Winged Lion of St Mark in Venice, acclaiming that city’s patron saint.

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APRIL

St Mark the Evangelist, 18th century (oil on canvas), Italian School, © Antonio & Roberto Tartaglione, Bridgeman Images





MAY

St Matthias (oil on copper), Robert van den Hoecke (1622–68), Bridgeman Images

St Matthias (oil on copper), Robert van den Hoecke (1622–68), Bridgeman Images

The feast of St Matthias is celebrated on 14th May. The Acts of the Apostles (1:12–26) describes St Matthias as the apostle chosen to replace Judas Iscariot.

After the Ascension of Christ, Peter, standing before a crowd of disciples, declared that they needed to elect a disciple to replace Judas — the one who had betrayed Jesus with a kiss in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. Two men were singled out, Barsabbas and Matthias. Both had followed the Lord since his baptism. Lots were drawn as the group prayed for guidance, and Matthias was chosen. The new twelfth apostle pledged himself to the calling and challenge of Christ, to ministry and evangelisation of all nations.

Hoecke's oil painting on copper narrates the gruesome martyrdom of Matthias by stoning, then beheading. According to the popular thirteenth-century text known as The Golden Legend, which records the heroic deeds

of the saints, Matthias was publicly beheaded after trial by the High Priest of Judea.

To the left of the painting, the saint stands in glory, depicted as a monumental and imposing figure. The large axe in his right hand relates to the manner of his martyrdom, while the Gospel refers to his preaching mission, perhaps in Judea or Ethiopia. In the background behind his statuesque figure, we see a complex narrative that pinpoints many anecdotal aspects of the saint's legend. The cityscape includes a pagan statue on a pedestal, along with soldiers and bystanders. In the centre of the town square, we observe the decapitation of Matthias on the orders of the High Priest.

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MAY

St Matthias (oil on copper), Robert van den Hoecke (1622–68), Bridgeman Images



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JUNE

The Deliverance of St Paul and St Barnabas, 18th century (oil on canvas), Claude-Guy Halle (1652-1736), Bridgeman Images

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Halle's painting depicts a moment of conversion following the miraculous deliverance of Saints Paul and Barnabas from imprisonment while on their preaching mission. Paul, centre, stretches out his arm towards heaven, while Barnabas beside him blesses the kneeling figure.

The Holy Spirit commissioned Paul and Barnabas for missionary work:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have for them ..." (Acts of the Apostles 13:2–3)

Under divine guidance, the two were instrumental in establishing Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire in the one hundred or so years after the death and resurrection of Christ. They journeyed afar to preach in major cities and synagogues of the Roman Empire, sailing first from the seaport of Seleucia, then on to the great city of Antioch, where many of the local population were converted. Later, on the island of Cyprus (from where the Levite Barnabas originated and was an early disciple of Jesus), they preached in the Jewish temples of Salamis and Paphos. While the artist has not specified the precise location of their preaching activity, he does suggest a sense of "difference" from the peoples of Asia Minor, along with a range of diverse reactions from astonishment and apprehension to profound spiritual conversion.

The Acts of the Apostles explains that Paul's teachings during his missionary journeys stressed three key aspects of Christianity: salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; Jews and Gentiles united in the body of Christ; and the Holy Spirit as the instrument and power of personal transformation.

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JUNE

The Deliverance of St Paul and St Barnabas, 18th century (oil on canvas), Claude-Guy Halle (1652–1736), Bridgeman Images





JULY

Ruth in Boaz's Field, 1828 (oil on canvas), Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872), Bridgeman Images.

Ruth in Boaz's Field, 1828 (oil on canvas), Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872), Bridgeman Images.

Taking its subject matter from the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible, this delightful painting creates an idealised rural setting for a wheat harvest near the walls of Bethlehem. The painting focuses on the moment the young widow Ruth first meets the landlord Boaz, who will later become her husband. Its significance in the Christian calendar is that this meeting prefigures the Annunciation: among Ruth and Boaz's descendants will be King David, Mary, Joseph, and the divine child, Jesus.

The main focus of the painting is on Ruth, who is gathering grain after the harvest to support herself and her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi — perhaps the figure in the red dress with a scythe in hand. The landowner Boaz, on the far left, opens his palm in a rhetorical gesture. Ruth reciprocates by holding out a handful of grain.

According to the Book of Ruth, Boaz wished to show how much he admired Ruth for her loyalty to her mother-in-law. He had heard of her difficulties and instructed the labourers of the field to leave plenty of grain for her to gather at the harvest. The artist depicts groups of workers, some tying the sheaves while another group — seated on a log in the distance — rest in the shade of some trees and drink water from a flagon.

Schnorr was a major figure in a group of German and Austrian artists called the Nazarenes. They aimed to imbue their work with the authentic spiritual values and purity of form they had observed in the Italian Renaissance paintings.

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Ruth in Boaz's Field, 1828 (oil on canvas), Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872), Bridgeman Images





AUGUST

The Assumption of the Virgin (oil on canvas), Guillaume Courtois (1628–79),
© Agnew's, London, Bridgeman Images

The Assumption of the Virgin (oil on canvas), Guillaume Courtois (1628–79), © Agnew's, London, Bridgeman Images

The feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, celebrated on 15th August, acclaims the glorification of the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven, and the most powerful intercessor with Christ for the salvation of humanity. Mary as the Mother of God — Theotokos — is deemed worthy to be “assumed” body and soul into heaven without any bodily corruption.

The artistic detail in this painting depicts the Virgin Mary's mortal body being transported by the angelic cherubs, often envisioned in art as endearing winged babies. In traditional Christian angelology, Cherubim are regarded as the second-highest order of the ninefold celestial hierarchy of angels. It is thus fitting that cherubs bear the mortal body of Mary into the clouds, to the celestial throne of God in heaven.

A feast in honour of the Virgin Mary on 15th August was introduced into Jerusalem early in the fifth century, spreading throughout the east after the formal recognition of Mary as Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

However, the official proclamation of the Assumption as dogma did not occur until 1950, when the Church stated that “The immaculate Mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary, having completed

the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory”. The status of Mary as mediator or intercessor for those still on their pilgrim way was enhanced by her being glorified in heaven — in both body and soul. Seated beside her Son, she shares, in a special way, in the mystery of His resurrection and ascension.

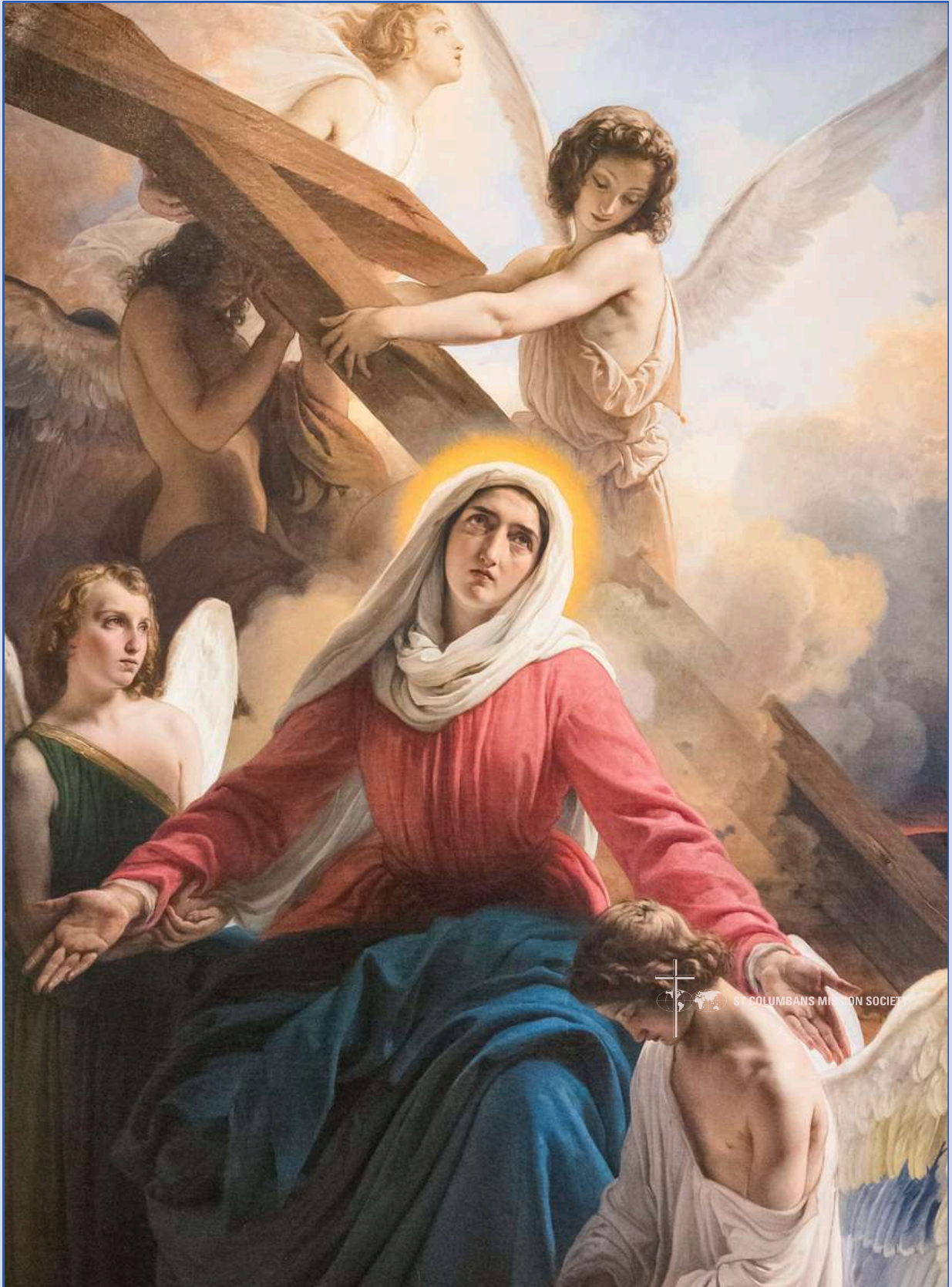
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AUGUST

The Assumption of the Virgin (oil on canvas), Guillaume Courtois (1628–79), © Agnew's, London, Bridgeman Images





SEPTEMBER

L'addolorata, 1842 (oil on canvas), Francesco Hayez (1791–1882), © Stefano Baldini.
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L'addolorata, 1842 (oil on canvas), Francesco Hayez (1791–1882), © Stefano Baldini. All rights reserved 2026. Bridgeman Images

L'addolorata, which translates as the sorrowful one, refers to the long history of devotion to Mater dolorosa (Mother of Sorrows). The Italian title acclaims Mary as the mother of Jesus, who accompanied her son in His Passion and death on the cross at Calvary and experienced His salvific agony in her grief. Mary the Mater dolorosa thus signifies her role in Christian devotion as the one who, by the divine plan, participated in the redemptive suffering of her Son.

The much-loved devotional hymn for this title is the Stabat Mater Dolorosa, written in the thirteenth century by a Franciscan friar, and sung during Lent and the praying of the Stations of the Cross. The chant resonates with Mary's intense grief as she watched her son suffer and die at the foot of the cross: "At the Cross her station keeping."

This detail of the painting is focused on Mary immediately after the deposition of Jesus from the Cross. Surrounded by angels who support the weighty wood, Mary is depicted looking towards heaven and radiant with a golden halo, signifying her role in God's redemptive plan for humanity. Mary, as the Mother of Sorrows, along with the wood of the Cross, is presented in this painting as a visual icon for meditation on divine salvation.

The hallowed wood of the Cross is a powerful relic of healing, and Mary is the great intercessor for humanity, who hears our prayers and intercedes on our behalf to bring healing, unity, and oneness with Christ the divine saviour.

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SEPTEMBER

L'addolorata, 1842 (oil on canvas), Francesco Hayez (1791–1882), © Stefano Baldini. All rights reserved 2026. Bridgeman Images





OCTOBER

Le songe de Saint Bruno (St Bruno's dream), 1645–1648 (oil painting on canvas),
Eustache Le Sueur (1617–55) (studio of), © Erich Lessing/Bridgeman Images

Le songe de Saint Bruno (St Bruno's dream), 1645–1648 (oil painting on canvas), Eustache Le Sueur (1617–55) (studio of), © Erich Lessing/Bridgeman Images

St Bruno, also known as Bruno of Cologne, was born around 1030 and became an acclaimed teacher at the Reims Cathedral school. He was also an advisor to his former pupil, Pope Urban II. With his feast day celebrated on 6th October, St Bruno is venerated as the founder of the Carthusian order in the eleventh century.

Le Sueur's oil painting on canvas depicts one episode from the life of St Bruno. Created between 1645 and 1648 for the cloister of the Charterhouse of Paris, under the Carthusian monastic order, the image was originally part of a series of twenty-two large narrative panels. This scene records the appearance of three angels to St Bruno, who lies asleep beneath a blue-canopied bed. The angels direct Bruno through his dream to visit St Hugh, the bishop of Grenoble. In a parallel dream, the bishop envisioned the divine presence dwelling in the rugged Chartreuse Mountains north of Grenoble. Above was a circle of seven golden stars. The next morning, seven men led by Bruno sought advice about a place of retreat in a wilderness for a life of prayer. There they established the mother house of the Carthusian order. As the fame of Bruno and the Chartreuse monks expanded, more and more men were attracted to a life of prayer, penitence, and labour.

In art, St Bruno is sometimes depicted with a halo of golden stars, relating to the divine manifestation of seven golden stars hovering over the founding site of the first Carthusian monastery.

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OCTOBER

Le songe de Saint Bruno (St Bruno's dream), 1645–1648 (oil painting on canvas), Eustache Le Sueur (1617–55) (studio of), © Erich Lessing/Bridgeman Images





NOVEMBER

St Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1670 (oil on canvas), Onorio Marinari (1627–1715) (attr. to), © Wallace Collection, London, UK. Bridgeman Images

St Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1670 (oil on canvas), Onorio Marinari (1627–1715) (attr. to), © Wallace Collection, London, UK. Bridgeman Images

The feast day of Saint Catherine of Alexandria falls on 25th November in most Christian Churches. Marinari, working in the seventeenth century, portrays St Catherine as an elegantly dressed, beautiful young lady adorned in yellow and pink silks with neatly braided hair. The portrayal highlights her royal status. By tradition, Catherine was the daughter of the governor of Alexandria in Roman Egypt during the reign of the Roman emperor Maxentius (306–312 AD).

Catherine is also revered for her wisdom and learning. Marinari represents the saint in private study seated before a large book. Her concentrated engagement relates both to her conversion to Christianity and the fact that she vehemently debated with Roman pagan scholars on the redemptive life and death of Christ. We are further reminded of her role as a patron of young maidens, scholars, theologians, philosophers, archivists, and librarians.

When Catherine refused his advances and persuasions, he attempted to kill her by subjecting her to a cruel torture upon a four-spiked wheel. When she did not submit to death by torture, the emperor had her beheaded. The spiked wheel is a recurring symbol of Catherine's impending martyrdom. Marinari refers to her bravery in torture by including parts of the broken wheel, resting on a pink silk cloth beside the cushioned book support.

St Catherine is revered as a martyr for her faith in Christ. The legend describes how her beauty and regal status attracted the attention of Emperor Maxentius, who tried to marry her while also hoping to undermine her Christian faith.

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NOVEMBER

St Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1670 (oil on canvas), Onorio Marinari (1627–1715) (attr. to), © Wallace Collection, London, UK. Bridgeman Images





DECEMBER

The Holy Family (1870) (pastel on paper), Jean-Baptiste Auguste Leloir (1809–1892), Little Palace, © Sylvain Collet, Bridgeman Images

This delicate pastel drawing on paper depicts Jesus, Mary, and Joseph sheltering in a humble lodging in Bethlehem among farm animals, a setting endearing to Christians worldwide in the gospel story of Jesus' birth. The ox and ass are depicted in the shadows of the composition, representing the Jews, Gentiles, and all the world who recognise Jesus as the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah (1:3) wrote:

The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib, but Israel does not know me, my people do not understand.

Leloir's unusual interpretation of the Nativity depicts the newborn Christ-child in the arms of Joseph, rather than sleeping within a traditional manger. Adorned with a brilliantly golden halo, the naked babe at the centre of the composition is elevated by Joseph upon a white cloth. Jesus is acclaimed not only as a helpless baby but also as the redeemer Christ, through a symbolic reference to the Eucharistic miracle and the elevation of the host at Mass. Mary, mother of Jesus, while reclining upon her simple bed, clasps her hands in prayerful adoration and witness to the newborn Emmanuel — God with us. In this portrayal of the Holy Family at the Nativity of Jesus, Joseph's elevated status refers to his key role as the protector, provider, and legal father of Jesus in the Jewish tradition.

By working with pastel colours on paper, Leloir has also evoked a velvety soft palette of earthy umbers and greens, in delicate harmony with Mary's soft blue cloak — symbolic of her purity and ethereal holiness.

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DECEMBER

The Holy Family (1870) (pastel on paper), Jean-Baptiste Auguste Leloir (1809–1892), Little Palace, © Sylvain Collet, Bridgeman Images

