

27. November 2025

THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

Saint Barlaam and Josaphat: The true King

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, I would like to tell you about two saints who are likely unfamiliar to us today, but whose story was so popular in the Middle Ages that it was said some knew it better than the Holy Scriptures.

They are the hermit Saint Barlaam and the Indian prince Josaphat. Saint John Damascene, a Church Father born around 650, is considered the author of their story. Ancient Indian chronicles recount that some hermits from the desert of Thebaid traveled to the land of the Hindus, where they converted people of all castes to Christianity. Many of them imitated the example of the apostles of Egypt and devoted themselves to contemplation in solitude. Their numbers were considerable, so the “new religion” attracted the attention of kings. Then Abener, a powerful king of India whose kingdom bordered Persia, rose up and began to persecute Christians. He worshiped the god Brahma and indulged in every sensual pleasure. But no matter how rich the treasure of his palace was, and no matter how much his clothes were adorned with gold and precious stones, his soul was poor in wisdom.

This king had a son named Josaphat. The following oracle had been pronounced about him: “The son will surpass the father and will be at the head of a monarchy a thousand times greater, but he will establish the throne of his glory in another kingdom.”

In order to protect his son from the new religion, the king locked him away in the palace of a distant city. However, when he reached adulthood, the prince asked his father for permission to leave the palace. Thus he began to learn about the great misery suffered by the people—something he had never seen before.

The account of St. John Damascene continues:

In the deserts of Sennaar lived a priest in constant union with God, whose name was Barlaam. His spirit was great; his heart was the dwelling place of the Holy One. Barlaam saw Prince Josaphat in a vision, understood God’s will, and set out dressed as a

merchant. When he arrived at the city where the prince resided, he went to the palace steward and said:

“Your servant brings from a distant country a precious stone of unparalleled value, which has no equal and which has the power to open the eyes of wisdom to the blind of spirit, to sharpen the ear to perceive the melodies of another blissful world, to heal the diseases of the soul, and to drive away hostile spirits.”

Having said this, he was allowed to appear before the prince, who welcomed him with an open heart. Barlaam said to him: “O sun of your kingdom! I too have a king who gave me the stone and said to me, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is like a sower’ (Matthew 13).” Then he revealed the meaning of the parable and concluded: “Whoever receives the seed in good soil will grow in the light of the sun and, thanks to the power of the miraculous stone, will himself become light and bear fruit in abundance.”

Josaphat replied: “A fire has been burning within me for a long time, and I will continue to be consumed inside unless a divinity takes pity on me and pours balm on my soul. It seems to me that you are no ordinary man, but a messenger of our God, sent to heal my wounded soul.”

Thus the prince opened himself to the wisdom that emanated from the lips of the holy hermit and asked him: “Your words surprise me. Who are you? And who is this king who has given you the parable of the seed?”

Then Barlaam was able to enter through the open door to the prince’s heart and said to him: “This king is the King of all kings. From him emanates immortality. His throne far surpasses all others. The splendor of his throne is so great that no one who beholds it remains alive. He is the thrice-holy, the God above all gods, the incomprehensible, who has manifested himself in human form.” Barlaam explained the Christian faith to him from the beginning, telling him about the creation of paradise, the fall into sin, and the Redemption through Jesus Christ.

Upon hearing the Good News, Josaphat’s soul was filled with light and joy. He rose from his throne, threw himself into Barlaam’s arms, weeping, and exclaimed: “If I am not mistaken, messenger of God, that is the miraculous stone that only pure souls and pure eyes can see, for behold! Your message has dispelled the night and sadness of my

soul. Are these the powers of the miraculous stone, or have you seen even greater things?”

Barlaam replied: “You have understood me well, O prince! The face of God, which had been hidden from the world, has finally appeared and manifested itself. Christianity is the miraculous stone. I will tell you even more about its power.”

Then he began to explain the Gospel to him, and the Spirit of God performed his wonderful work in that heart, so that at the end of the catechesis the prince asked: “Man of God, what must I do to attain salvation?”

Barlaam replied: “Repent and receive baptism for the forgiveness of sins; thus you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will bring you ever closer to the knowledge of the living God.”

So it came to pass, and Josaphat received baptism. After many other conversations with the prince, Barlaam returned to the desert.

When the king learned of his son’s conversion, he did everything possible to return him to the religion of his ancestors, even by force. However, Josaphat managed to escape all attacks and remained faithful to the Lord, whom he had just come to know.

Finally, his father gave him a part of his kingdom, and Josaphat became a benevolent ruler who won the hearts of his subjects and, thanks to his fervor, won their souls for God. At the end of his life, his father was also touched by the grace of the Lord. He wrote to his son: “Son of heaven and my son! Dark thoughts take hold of my soul and rob my life of all sweetness. My eyes have been opened, and I have seen how all my glory is approaching ruin, while for you the sun of eternal glory is already rising here on earth. I have been able to contemplate the book of my life and have found in it nothing but vanity, foolishness, and sin. All my life I have turned my face away from the light of truth, rejected salvation, and turned my desires into gods. My son, save your father from the despair that is coming; pull me out of this terrible uncertainty between life and death!”

Josaphat announced the Good News to him, and his father was baptized before he died. Then his son took over the government of the whole kingdom. But when he turned

forty, he handed over his throne to another trusted Christian and went himself to the desert where Barlaam was, who welcomed him into his cave. When Barlaam died, Josaphat buried him next to the cave. He himself lived another thirty years as a hermit.

May these two saints intercede for us before God so that many more people in India may find the way to the one Savior of all humanity.