

## 4. February 2026 LIVES OF SAINTS

### ‘Saint Joseph of Leonisa and the unconditional response to God's call’

The life of today's saint shows how many obstacles are sometimes placed in the way of those destined for a great mission by God. In the story we will hear today, it was not so much external enemies — although these also joined in later — but rather his own family who resisted. Such resistance can be even more challenging to confront, given that these are people with whom one has grown up and is bound by blood or friendship, yet who oppose God's plans due to their lack of comprehension. This was the case with Saint Joseph of Leonisa in the 16th century.

His family had high expectations for the brilliant career the young man could achieve in the world. His marriage to a noble lady of extraordinary beauty and great fortune had already been arranged. However, Joseph fled his father's house and requested admission to the Capuchins in Assisi, the birthplace of St Francis. But even in the convent, where the young man had begun his novitiate, his relatives did not give him any respite.

The serene bliss of the novice within the monastery walls was soon disturbed. One day, there was a great commotion outside the small convent. Suddenly, ladders were placed against the garden walls, as if for an assault. A mob of angry men stormed the monastery. They were the relatives of the young novice who wanted to take him home.

He was subjected to bitter accusations and threats, as well as pleas and promises to renounce his vocation. But it was all in vain. Blinded by vehement anger, the relatives rushed at Joseph, intent on taking him away by force. He resisted in order to protect his vocation and shouted for help. Several friars then arrived to defend their novice.

When a person responds to the call of God, who has chosen them for a special mission, they may soon face difficulties and attacks seeking to dissuade them from the path they have taken. In Joseph of Leonisa's case, it was the painful experience of seeing his relatives claim a right that did not belong to them, since the Lord had laid his hands on

Joseph and called him to follow Christ more closely. With God's help, he overcame this severe trial.

His subsequent path was immensely fruitful. He submitted himself docilely to monastic discipline, was ordained a priest and subsequently sent as a missionary to the East. After a turbulent journey, he arrived in the coastal area of Constantinople. Completely abandoned and unknown in that region, it is said that Father Joseph prayed to God. Suddenly, a charming child emerged from the bushes, took the missionary by the hand and led him through the city until he reached an old, ruined monastery where some Capuchin missionaries who had preceded him had temporarily settled. Once there, the child disappeared. The missionary had reached the destination of his apostolic zeal: Constantinople. His heart bled when he saw the crowds in the narrow, dirty alleys and wide streets, and the large squares with their fairy-tale splendour and marble palaces next to the Golden Horn.

The wide field of work in Constantinople offered an abundant and varied apostolic task. Thousands of Christian slaves languished in dungeons, urged to convert to Islam through harsh mistreatment. In the port's galleys, many Christians, most of whom had been kidnapped, were chained to the rowing benches with iron shackles and tortured by cruel overseers until they died from the lashes or exhaustion from rowing.

Father Joseph was a great comfort to the prisoners. They saw him as an angel, alleviating their physical and spiritual suffering. However, the missionary was not satisfied with this work; his ardent apostolic heart urged him to devote himself to the conversion of Muslims.

The beginning of this work was encouraging. Indeed, it was the missionary's love and zeal that led a high-ranking Turkish pasha to convert to Christianity. This unfortunate man had once been archbishop of the Greek Church but had renounced his Christian faith.

Following the example of St Francis, the founder of his order, Father Joseph wanted to appeal to the Sultan to at least abolish the death penalty imposed on converts. However, the Sultan's guards arrested him, sentencing him to death without trial. He was hanged on a gallows with two hooks, one through his left hand and the other through his right foot. A fire was lit beneath the gallows to torture and suffocate him. As he neared death,

the angelic child reappeared, freed him and healed him. He was told that God was now calling him to a mission among Christians.

Upon returning to Italy, he received the papal blessing. His superiors appointed him as penitential preacher and missionary in the province of Umbria, near his place of birth. For more than twenty years, he carried out this ministry with great zeal, bringing indescribable blessings to thousands of souls. The Lord also confirmed his testimony through many miracles. He used to preach two or three times a day, but reportedly did so up to eleven or twelve times.

On February 4th, he passed away in the Capuchin monastery in Amatrice, a small town in the Diocese of Rieti. He was 56 years old, 40 of which he had spent in the Holy Order.

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**Meditation on the day's Gospel:** <https://en.elijamission.net/the-rejection-of-jesus-in-nazareth/>