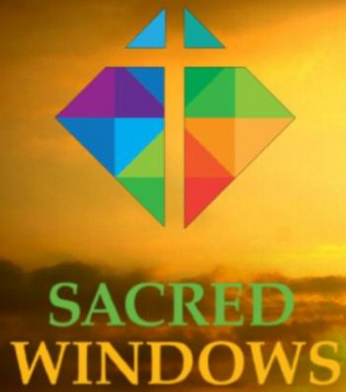




Sunday — September 6, 2026

A Martyr and His Faithful Dog

Greetings!

There is a bridge, called the Charles Bridge, in the beautiful city of Prague that bears an ominous shrine. A **bronze cross lies embedded** in the pavement of that bridge and marks the spot where a Bohemian priest was thrown off it to a watery grave below. Bohemia is the traditional name of the Czech Republic.

That priest was **St. John Nepomucene** (accent on the “u”), who is known today as the patron saint of the Seal of the Confessional. He lived and died in the late Middle Ages, and the city still remembers him as their greatest hero. I'll explain more about that title as well as the circumstances of his death below. First, the river and the bridge.



The Vltava River

The Vltava River runs through the center of Prague and is the longest river in the country. As you can see, it is spanned in numerous places by **beautiful historic bridges**, of which the Charles Bridge has the narrowest arches due to its construction in the Middle Ages.

I also find the river's name fascinating. Its series of name changes are a textbook case of **how language morphs** over time. Starting with the Latin word for “water” which is

aqua, this is the sequence of etymological changes of the name to arrive at the name we have today:

Latin: *Aqua* > **Old Germanic:** *wilt ahwa* ('wild water') > **900AD:** *Fuldaha* > **1100 AD:** *Wultha* > **Late Middle Ages:** *Wlitaua* > **Modern:** [*Vltava*](#).



I tend to choke on the Czech *vlt* pronunciation, so I'll stick with its German name which is much simpler: **the Moldau.**

The Charles Bridge

Prague is the national capital and has to be one of the most scenic cities in the world. Its most famous bridge was **built in the 1300s** to replace an older bridge that had been wiped away by a flood. It was the only bridge across the river until the late 1800s. Charles Bridge connects the (medieval) main gate to the city center.

Here is a view of the bridge at night with Prague Castle (government complex) one level above it and **St. Vitus Cathedral** above that, creating that breathtaking skyline. *Stunning*, isn't it?



A view from the bridge's eastern tower looking toward the center gives a sense of the width and length of the bridge. Note the **statues perched at intervals** on the stanchions of the bridge. It was in this river and from this bridge that a holy priest met his death. Let me tell you that sad but heroic story.



Bad King Wenceslaus

The saga of St. John Nepomucene's martyrdom begins with the death of the Emperor Charles IV of Bohemia in 1378 AD. The Emperor's father had built the magnificent St. Vitus Cathedral on the hill overlooking the city, and Emperor Charles himself established the oldest university in Central Europe. But his son, Wenceslaus IV, was **an entirely different story**. In this case, the apple fell very far from the tree.



This one was not the “Good King Wenceslaus” of the beloved Christmas carol. By all historical accounts, **he was a psychopathic maniac** who probably resembled some of our Hollywood elites more than a pious medieval king. Anyway, his legendary cruelty and penchant for violence would eventually be the death of the saint.

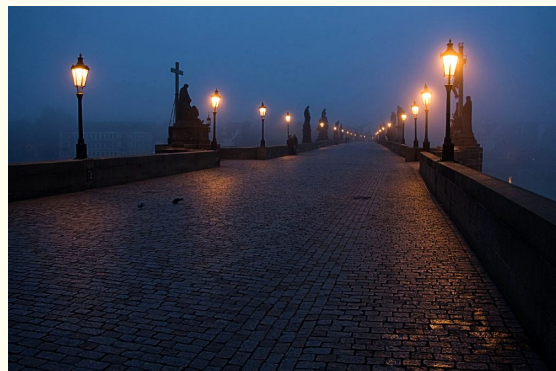
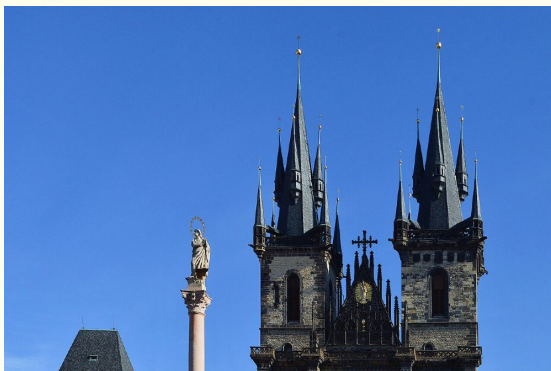
(Left: King Wenceslaus, modern name, Vaclav.)

It all came down to a property dispute. The king wanted to carve out a new diocese from an old monastery's lands and give it to one of his cronies who was under his control. But he planned to do it in **a most underhanded fashion**. Butler's *Lives of the Saints* says:

“To furnish a cathedral and endowment, [the king] proposed to confiscate the church and revenues of the ancient Benedictine Abbey of Kladau as soon as the abbot, who was very old, should die.” (*Lives*, Vol. II, 332.)

Fr. John Nepomucene was the vicar general of the Archdiocese of Prague at the time. When he got wind of the scheme, he and his Archbishop objected strenuously to the planned theft of Church assets for political gains. But **the king would not budge**. They also knew that complaining to Rome would be fruitless because in that era many secular rulers had power to appoint bishops, which was the case in Bohemia.

So, the clergymen devised a scheme of their own, and it turns out the clever clerics were two steps ahead of the king.



(Left: Pillar and towers in Prague's Old Town. Right: Charles Bridge at night.)

He Saved the Day...

With the blessing of the Archbishop, Fr. Nepomucene and one other church official worked out a plan that *as soon as* the old abbot died, the monks of the abbey were to **hold their chapter meeting and elect a new abbot**. The new man would be chosen for his steadfast commitment to keep the Church's treasures from the king. Immediately thereafter, the diocesan officials would certify the election so that the monks would retain the legal right to the property.

It all happened so quickly that the king was informed of the old abbot's death and the new abbot's installation in the same message. When it comes to **tyrants with anger issues**, however, the priests should have known that no good deed ever goes unpunished.

Predictably, when King Wenceslaus realized he'd been had, he went full Cruella de Ville on the two churchmen who had outfoxed him. (I'm not sure how the Archbishop escaped

the king's wrath, but he was probably doing an episcopal song and dance at that moment, like: "**Nepomucene? Hmmm. No. The name doesn't ring a bell.**")

...But Lost His Life

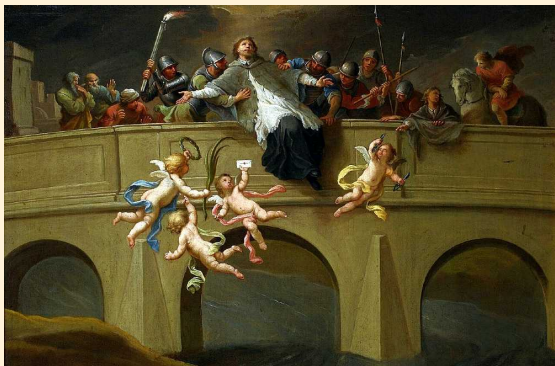
The murderous king flew into a violent rage and summoned the two priests to his court. When they were standing before him, he hit the first priest on the head with the hilt of his sword and ordered both priests to be tortured, which happened with a kind of medieval savagery.

It is said that **the king himself took a burning torch** and applied it mercilessly to the torsos of both priests until they passed out. As I said, he had anger issues.

Soon after that, even Wenceslaus realized he had made a serious mistake and ordered the men to be released under the condition that they say nothing about the incident. (As if such brutal torture and murder like this could be kept silent.)

But the good priest was **eloquent in another way**. He was already dying of his injuries and sharing in the sufferings of Christ. So, the king then tried to cover up his wicked deeds by having the priest tossed into the Moldau River in the most atrocious fashion:

He had his henchmen stretch the priest backward in the form of a circle with his feet touching his head and a gag in his mouth so he couldn't cry out. **Can you imagine?**



The king's thugs secretly carted the near-dead priest through the city **in the middle of the night** and tossed him into the river to make it look like he drowned. Nepomucene's body was discovered the next day, washed up on the banks of the river and the crime became known.

(Left: Painting by Polish artist Szymon Czechowicz (1689–1775), "Martyrdom of St. John Nepomuk," ca. 1750.)

Like those of a modern-day politician, however, the king's crimes were never punished. The Archbishop soon thereafter **wrote a letter to Rome** about the whole attempted property theft and added the story of Fr. Nepomucene's murder as an afterthought to the story. That letter, found in the Vatican's archives centuries later, is how we know about the incident.

The Other Martyrdom Story

Another story about Nepomucene's martyrdom had more popular appeal, though it is not as historically certain as the above incident. It's the reason why he is known as the **patron saint of the Seal of the Confessional**.

Again, it involves the king's violent temper. According to the story, Fr. Nepomucene was the confessor to the queen (who was a saintly woman by all accounts.) Although Wenceslaus himself was famously unfaithful to his wife, he was paranoid that his wife might be **having an affair** with another man, which was manifestly untrue. Nevertheless, the king's paranoia got the best of him.

It is said that the king tried to force Fr. Nepomucene to reveal the contents of the queen's confession to verify her adultery, but the priest *steadfastly refused* to do so. Whether or not the queen was guilty of that sin is immaterial to the moral of the story. The priest was bound in conscience to keep an individual's confession **under absolute secrecy**, and no human authority could drag it out of him. (This remains the Church's discipline for priests to this day.)



Thereafter, the story about the torture and the dumping of the priest's body in the river seems consistent with the first account, and that is why St. John Nepomucene is celebrated as the **martyr of Confession**.

Only in heaven will we know the actual reasons and circumstances of his violent death, but St. John Nepomucene undoubtedly is **the champion of countless priests** throughout the ages who have refused to breach the Seal of Confession under pressure and paid a heavy price for their fidelity.



The Bridge Monuments

There are two monuments on the Charles Bridge featuring the heroic story of the saint. The monument at the point where the saint was thrown off the bridge is striking.

Next to the **cross on the pavement**, the bronze plaque (above) shows the priest in the water crowned by five stars. Legend has it that the light of numerous stars surrounded him like a spotlight after he hit the water.

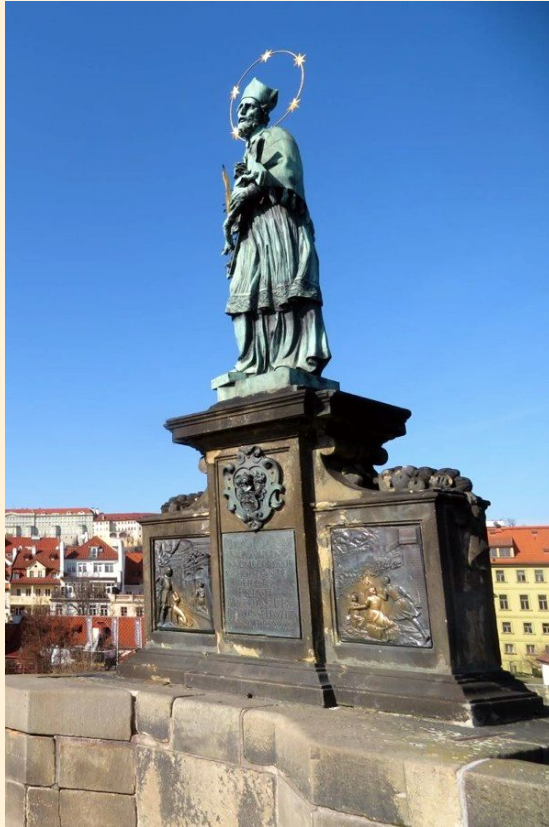


True or not, note that the stars of the monument are **six-pointed Stars of David**, perhaps in commemoration of the long-standing Jewish community in the city of Prague.

The **second monument** is further down the bridge on the stanchion. It features a statue of the **saint holding a palm branch** (symbol of his martyrdom) and a crucifix.

One is an alternative depiction of **the priest being thrown off the bridge** (right panel) with the poor queen looking on in lamentation. ↓

On the pedestal below the statue, there are two panels. →



The second panel contains an image of a dog with a soldier. **Here's that good boy**, who has been rubbed shiny by all the hands who have petted him over the years. →

About the Dog

Now, admittedly the title of this article, "A Martyr and His Faithful Dog," may be a bit misleading. (I'm going to blame my editor.)

There is no evidence that St. John Nepomucene owned a dog. Nor was it the case that a dog was present at the scene of his martyrdom. Nor does anyone know why they chose to put a dog and a soldier on the left-hand panel under the statue. It's one of those mysteries of life whose secrets we'll only unravel in heaven.

Still, many commentators have sought to plumb the mystery of the faithful little dog, and the **obvious interpretation** of the imagery is this:

Fido is a symbol of St. John Nepomucene's **loyalty** to his Master Jesus Christ, his sense of **duty** to the Church, and dare I say, his **dogged determination** to do the right thing.

Okay, perhaps I should refrain from any more puns, lest I get myself thrown off a bridge.

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Peter Darcy

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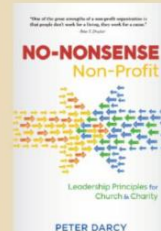
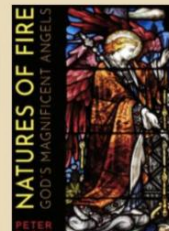
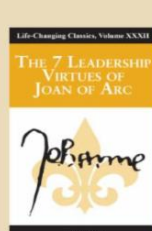
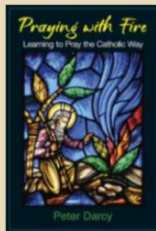


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