

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Agatho

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 10

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IN BRIEF

Saint Agatho

Pope from 678 to 681, who led the Third Council of Constantinople to profess the two wills of Christ.

Feast day	January 10
Born	Sicily
Died	January 10, 681, Rome
Era	7th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Agatho for Christian Unity

Novena to Saint Agatho

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Agatho

Saint Agatho was pope from 678 to 681. His Greek name means "the Good." A Sicilian of Greek culture, he was the pope of the Third Council of Constantinople, which ended the dispute over Monothelitism and restored communion between Rome and the East. He died in January 681, before the council closed. He is venerated by both Catholics and Orthodox, and the Catholic calendar celebrates him on January 10.

Who was Saint Agatho?

The sources on his early life are thin. He is said to have been born in Sicily, into a wealthy and devout Greek family, and to have lived for a long time in Palermo.

An old tradition identifies him with a monk named Agatho mentioned by Saint Gregory the Great in a letter to the abbot of a monastery in Palermo. In that letter, Gregory allows the abbot to receive Agatho as long as his wife agrees to enter a convent herself. If this identification were correct, Agatho would have been a hundred years old when he was elected pope, which many historians find unlikely. His age and his monastic past must therefore be treated as uncertain.

Key dates

- **June 27, 678**: Consecrated bishop of Rome after the death of Pope Donus.
- **679**: Lateran synod on the case of Wilfrid, bishop of York.
- **Spring 680**: Councils held across the West to prepare the delegation sent to the East.
- **November 7, 680**: Opening of the Third Council of Constantinople, the sixth ecumenical council.

- **January 10, 681**: Dies in Rome and is buried in Saint Peter's.
- **September 681**: Close of the council, which recognizes the faith of the Church in his letter.

The question of Christ's two wills

For half a century, a doctrine supported by the Byzantine court had divided Christians: Monothelitism, the claim that Christ had only one will. It aimed to reconcile the Empire with the Christians who rejected the Council of Chalcedon, but in practice it cut away part of Christ's humanity. Pope Saint Martin I had condemned it in 649, which cost him arrest and exile.

The question may sound abstract, but it was about who Jesus really is. The Council of Chalcedon, in 451, had taught that Christ is one person in two natures, divine and human. If his human nature is complete, it must include a human will, the capacity to choose, to consent and to obey. Denying that will meant making Christ's humanity a kind of shell moved from the outside.

A generation later, Emperor Constantine IV wanted to put an end to this schism and proposed a meeting. Agatho seized the opportunity. Before sending his legates, he had councils held throughout the West, so that the delegation would carry the common faith of the Latin Churches, and not only the opinion of Rome.



The Third Council of Constantinople (680-681), Byzantine depiction.

"Peter has spoken through Agatho"

The council opened in the imperial palace on November 7, 680. Agatho's long doctrinal letter was read there. It set out the traditional faith: Christ, true God and true man, has two wills, divine and human, with his human will fully in harmony with his divine will.

Patriarch George of Constantinople and most of the bishops accepted it. The acts of the council record the acclamation that Peter had spoken through the mouth of Agatho. The council condemned Monothelitism and its defenders, among whom it also counted Pope Honorius I.

Agatho did not live to see this outcome. He had died in January, and it was his successor, Saint Leo II, who received the council's decrees.

A pope between Rome, England and Byzantium

His short pontificate also reached the far West, and English readers will recognize the names involved. Wilfrid, bishop of York, came to Rome to challenge the division of his diocese decided by Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury. A synod held at the Lateran accepted the division but asked that Wilfrid himself choose the new bishops.

With the emperor, Agatho also negotiated a reduction of the tax that popes had to pay to the imperial treasury at their consecration.

Why pray to Saint Agatho?

Saint Agatho has no traditional patronage. But he served unity without brutality. Instead of imposing a decision, he consulted the Churches of the West, then offered the East a clear word at the moment it was looking for one.

His work reminds us that defending the faith touches very concrete realities. To say that Christ has a human will is to say that God took the whole of our humanity seriously, even obedience and inner struggle. In the Garden of

Gethsemane, Jesus prayed "not my will, but yours be done": that prayer only makes sense if he truly had a human will to offer. Christians can turn to Saint Agatho to pray for the unity of Catholics and Orthodox, for those who serve in councils and synods, and for the grace to unite their own will to God's.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Agatho in art

No portrait from his lifetime survives. He appears in a Byzantine miniature of the Menologion of Basil II, a sign of his veneration in the East, and in a marble statue made around 1655 for Palermo Cathedral, where he wears the papal tiara. Like most early popes, he is recognized by his name and his papal attributes rather than by a personal symbol. Scenes of the Third Council of Constantinople also recall his role.

Where to pray to Saint Agatho

Agatho was buried in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. In Sicily, Palermo, where tradition places his youth, honors him with a statue at its cathedral. Anyone praying for Christian unity can also remember him during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which begins a few days after his feast.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Agatho or the novena to Saint Agatho.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Agatho for Christian Unity

No traditional prayer to Saint Agatho has come down to us. This Sicilian pope, who consulted the Churches of the West before speaking and helped the Third Council of Constantinople profess that Christ has a true human will, can nonetheless guide our prayer. Here is an original prayer for unity and for the grace to accept God's will, followed by the words of Jesus in Gethsemane that sum up the faith Agatho defended.

Prayer to Saint Agatho for Christian unity

Saint Agatho, good shepherd of the Church of Rome, you listened to your brother bishops before speaking, and you offered the East a clear word of faith when it was searching for the truth: pray for the unity of all Christians, especially Catholics and Orthodox, who honor you together.

You professed that Christ, true God and true man, has a human will fully united to the will of his Father: help me to unite my own will to God's, in the great decisions of my life and in the small choices of each day.

Bless the Pope, the bishops and all who gather to discern the good of the Church. Give them patience, humility and the courage of truth.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

May I one day share with you the joy of the Kingdom, where all are one in Christ. Amen.

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

A word of the Gospel

> *"Father, if thou wilt, remove this chalice from me: but yet not my will, but thine be done."*

Source: Gospel of Luke 22:42, Douay-Rheims translation. These words of Christ in the Garden of Olives were at the heart of the debate on the two wills: they show a true human will freely offered to the Father.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Agatho is celebrated on January 10, the anniversary of his death in Rome in 681. This date comes shortly before the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, held each year from January 18 to 25 in many countries. You can pray to him:

- for the reconciliation of Catholics and Orthodox;
- before an important decision, to accept God's will;
- for the Pope, for bishops and for synods;
- for a divided family or community.

To go further, pray the novena to Saint Agatho, or read the life of Saint Agatho.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Agatho

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Agatho, pope from 678 to 681, who prepared the Third Council of Constantinople and helped restore communion between Rome and the East. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, begin on January 1, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God; it ends on January 10. You can also pray it during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, or at any time for a divided family or community.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act proposed for each day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

You may begin each day with the sign of the cross and this short invocation:

> *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Saint Agatho, servant of unity, pray for us. Amen.*

Day 1: The good shepherd

Agatho means "the Good" in Greek. Goodness is not weakness: it is the strength of a heart that wants the true good of others. Agatho put this goodness at the service of the whole Church.

Prayer: Lord, you alone are good. Make my heart good, patient and generous toward those around me.

Today: Do a kind act for someone who does not expect it.

Day 2: A hidden past

We know little of Agatho's life before he became pope. Sicily, Palermo, perhaps a monastery: most of his years remain hidden. God works in hidden years too, preparing us for what he will ask later.

Prayer: Lord, I offer you the ordinary, unseen days of my life. Use them to prepare me for your will.

Today: Do your daily duties carefully, offering them to God.

Day 3: Listening before speaking

Before sending legates to the East, Agatho had councils held across the West. He wanted to speak with the voice of the whole Latin Church, not only his own. True authority listens before it decides.

Prayer: Saint Agatho, teach me to listen to others with patience before giving my opinion.

Today: In a conversation, listen fully before answering.

Day 4: The courage of the martyrs

A generation earlier, Pope Martin I had been arrested and exiled for condemning Monothelitism. Agatho built on the faithfulness of those who had suffered for the truth.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for those who suffered to keep the faith alive. Give courage to Christians persecuted today.

Today: Pray for a country where Christians are persecuted.

Day 5: True God and true man

The council professed that Christ is fully God and fully man, with a human will as well as a divine will. God did not pretend to be human: he took on our whole humanity, including our freedom.

Prayer: Jesus, true God and true man, thank you for sharing everything of our human life. Help me to trust you in all things.

Today: Read slowly the account of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46).

Day 6: Not my will, but yours

In the Garden of Olives, Jesus freely offered his human will to the Father. This is the heart of what Agatho defended. Our own freedom finds its fullness when it says yes to God.

Prayer: Father, not my will but yours be done. Give me the grace to say yes to you, even when it is hard.

Today: Offer to God a situation you are struggling to accept.

Day 7: Peter speaks

When the bishops heard Agatho's letter, they acclaimed that Peter had spoken through him. The ministry of the Pope serves the unity of the faith, so that all may confess the same Lord.

Prayer: Lord, bless our Holy Father the Pope. Keep him faithful, wise and strong in the service of unity.

Today: Pray an Our Father and a Hail Mary for the Pope.

Day 8: East and West

Agatho, a Greek-speaking Sicilian, helped bring Rome and Constantinople back into communion. He is honored by Catholics and Orthodox alike. The wound of division between Christians still calls for prayer and patience.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you prayed that all may be one. Heal the divisions among your disciples.

Today: Learn something about an Eastern Christian tradition, or pray for an Orthodox Christian you know.

Day 9: Sowing without harvesting

Agatho died before the council closed. He did not see the fruit of his work, but it was not lost. Many of our efforts will bear fruit only after us, and God gathers them.

Prayer: Saint Agatho, help me to work faithfully even when I do not see results, trusting that God brings everything to completion.

Today: Continue a good work you were tempted to abandon.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Agatho, good shepherd and servant of unity, you confessed Christ true God and true man and you helped bring the Churches of East and West back into communion. Obtain for me the grace to unite my will to the will of the Father, to listen before I speak, and to work for peace in my family, my parish and the whole Church. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To continue, pray the prayer to Saint Agatho or read his life.

Credits and sources

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