

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Aphrahat the Persian Sage

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 29

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IN BRIEF

Saint Aphrahat the Persian Sage

Fourth-century Syriac Christian writer in the Persian Empire, author of the Demonstrations.

Feast day	January 29
Died	after 345
Era	4th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Aphrahat for the Christians of the East

Novena to Saint Aphrahat the Persian Sage

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Aphrahat the Persian Sage

Saint Aphrahat, called from early times "the Persian Sage," is, together with Saint Ephrem, the oldest writer of Christian literature in the Syriac language. He lived in the first half of the fourth century in the Sasanian Persian Empire, where Christians suffered a terrible persecution. His twenty-three *Demonstrations*, written between 336 and 345, are a unique witness to the faith and life of the Church in Mesopotamia. His feast day is January 29.

Who was Saint Aphrahat?

Very little is known about his life. His name, *Aphrahat* in Syriac, is the form of a Persian name borne by several Parthian kings, and it is attested for the author of the *Demonstrations* only from the tenth century. Before that he was known by his baptismal name, Jacob.

This led to centuries of confusion with another Syrian Father, Bishop Jacob of Nisibis, to whom his works were long attributed. Yet Jacob of Nisibis lived in the Roman Empire, while the author of the *Demonstrations* dates his writings by the regnal years of the Persian king Shapur II.

His writings suggest that he belonged to a community of ascetics and held some responsibility in the Church, perhaps as a bishop: the fourteenth *Demonstration* is a circular letter written in the name of a synod. A late note, in a manuscript of 1364, calls him bishop of the monastery of Mar Mattai near Mosul, but this testimony is too recent to be reliable. He probably died shortly after 345.

Key dates in the life of Saint Aphrahat

- **Early fourth century**: Lives in the Sasanian Persian Empire under King Shapur II.

- **336-337**: Writes the first ten *Demonstrations*, on the Christian life.
- **341**: Execution of the metropolitan Simon and beginning of a violent persecution of the Christians of Persia.
- **344**: Writes twelve more *Demonstrations*, in the setting of the persecution.
- **345**: Writes the twenty-third *Demonstration*, "On the Grape Cluster."
- **Shortly after 345**: Dies, at a date and place unknown.

The Demonstrations, a treasure of the Syriac Church

The first twenty-two *Demonstrations* are arranged according to the order of the Syriac alphabet, each beginning with a different letter. The first ten, from 336-337, deal with faith, love, fasting, prayer, ascetics, penitents, the resurrection, humility and pastors.

The second series, from 344, takes up persecution, death and the last things, and several texts seek to define the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, which was very present in Mesopotamia. Aphrahat presents himself as "a disciple of the Holy Scriptures," and his texts are woven with biblical quotations.

A faith from before the great controversies

What is striking in Aphrahat is the absence of the disputes shaking the Church of the Roman Empire at the same time: he mentions neither Arius nor the Council of Nicaea, at which no representative of the Church of Persia had been present. His profession of faith is very simple, close to the oldest Christian creeds:

> *"One must believe in God, the Lord of all, who made heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them. He made Adam in his image; he gave the Law to Moses; he sent his Spirit upon the prophets; then he sent his Christ into the world."*

He describes a Church in which baptism is given on Easter night, followed by anointing and the Eucharist, and where consecrated men and women, the "sons of the covenant," live in continence in the service of the community. These pages are of great interest to historians of the origins of Syrian monasticism.



The monastery of Mar Mattai near Mosul, to which a late tradition links Aphrahat.

What we know and what we do not

Theodoret of Cyrrhus speaks of a hermit of Persian origin named Aphrahat who lived near Antioch under the emperor Valens and opposed the Arians. The chronology makes it hard to identify him with the author of the *Demonstrations*, who died shortly after 345, and nothing allows a firm conclusion.

What is certain is that the Church has recognized in the Persian Sage a witness of the faith. He is venerated by the Syriac Churches, Orthodox and Eastern Catholic, and is listed on January 29 in the Roman Martyrology. Pope Benedict XVI devoted his general audience of November 21, 2007, to him, in a series of catecheses on the Fathers of the Church.

Why pray to Saint Aphrahat for the Christians of the East?

Aphrahat is not the official patron of a country or a profession. But he wrote for a Church poor in means, a minority and persecuted, on the border between two empires. He nourished it with Scripture, prayer and humility, reminding it that faith is proven in love.

That is why he is a natural intercessor for the Christians of the Middle East, especially those of Iraq and Iran, the lands where he lived, for persecuted Christians everywhere, and for all who meditate on the Word of God. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Aphrahat and the novena to Saint Aphrahat.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Aphrahat in art

No ancient portrait of Aphrahat exists, and he is rarely depicted. When he is, it is as an ascetic or hermit in prayer, in keeping with his description of the consecrated life and the account of Theodoret. A nineteenth-century engraving, published in 1886 in a French book on the desert Fathers of the East, shows him in this way. A book or scroll, the sign of a writer and teacher, suits the author of the *Demonstrations*.

Where to pray to Saint Aphrahat

No tomb or relic of Aphrahat is known, since the place of his death is unknown. A late tradition links him to the monastery of Mar Mattai, on Mount Alfaf near Mosul in northern Iraq, one of the oldest Christian monasteries still in use. He can be prayed to anywhere, and especially alongside the Christian communities of Middle Eastern origin now spread around the world.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Aphrahat for the Christians of the East

There is no traditional prayer to Saint Aphrahat in use in the Latin Church. His *Demonstrations*, however, have preserved his own words. Here are two short passages, with their source, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia to the Persian Sage.

Two words of Aphrahat to reflect on

> *"One must believe in the resurrection of the dead. One must believe in the sacrament of baptism. This is the faith of the Church of God."*

Source: Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, I (On Faith), section 19, written in 336-337. English rendering by Saintspedia; a French translation appears in the Sources Chrétiennes series, no. 349.

> *"A disciple of the Holy Scriptures."*

Source: Aphrahat, *Demonstrations*, XXII, section 26, where the author describes himself in this way at the end of the alphabetical series, in 344.

Prayer to Saint Aphrahat for the Christians of the East

Saint Aphrahat, disciple of the Holy Scriptures, you fed your Church with the Word of God: give me a love for the Bible, the patience to meditate on it, and the simplicity to live it.

You wrote for Christians persecuted under the king of Persia: pray for the Christians of the East, of Iraq, of Iran, and of every land where believing in Christ comes at a high price. Keep them in faith and in the hope of the resurrection.

You taught prayer, fasting and humility: teach me to pray from the depths of my heart, and to show my faith through love for those who suffer.

I entrust to you the unity of the Churches of East and West, and my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Aphrahat the Persian Sage is commemorated on January 29 in the Roman Martyrology. This prayer is especially fitting:

- for the Christians of the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Iran;
- for persecuted Christians and for those who have fled their homeland;
- for the unity of the Churches of East and West;
- for students of Scripture and for anyone beginning to read the Bible regularly.

You can also pray the novena to Saint Aphrahat from January 21 to 29, and read the life of Saint Aphrahat the Persian Sage.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Aphrahat the Persian Sage

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and the *Demonstrations* of Saint Aphrahat, the Persian Sage. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, January 29, begin it on January 21. It can also be prayed at any time, especially for persecuted Christians, for the Christians of Iraq and Iran, or to grow in love for Scripture.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The themes follow those of Aphrahat's first *Demonstrations*: faith, love, fasting, prayer, humility and the resurrection. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life.

Day 1: A disciple of the Scriptures

Aphrahat called himself "a disciple of the Holy Scriptures." His writings are woven with quotations from the Bible. He did not seek to be original: he wanted to listen to the Word and pass it on faithfully.

Prayer: Lord, make me a disciple of your Word. Give me a hunger for Scripture and a heart ready to receive it.

Today: Read one psalm slowly, and keep one verse in your heart through the day.

Day 2: Faith

The first *Demonstration* is about faith. Aphrahat's creed is simple: God the Creator, who made Adam in his image, gave the Law to Moses, sent his Spirit upon the prophets and then sent his Christ into the world. Faith is not complicated; it is a trust that shapes a whole life.

Prayer: Lord, I believe; help my unbelief. Strengthen my faith in you, Creator and Savior.

Today: Pray the Creed slowly, pausing on each line.

Day 3: Love

The second *Demonstration* is about love. For Aphrahat, faith that does not become love is incomplete. The Law and the prophets, as Jesus taught, hang on love of God and of neighbor. Love is the measure by which our faith will be judged.

Prayer: Lord, let my faith become love, in my words and in my actions.

Today: Do one concrete act of kindness for someone who does not expect it.

Day 4: Fasting

Aphrahat wrote on fasting and taught that true fasting is not only from food, but from evil. Fasting frees the heart to pray and to give. A fast that leaves us harsh with others has missed its purpose.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to fast from what separates me from you: harsh words, envy, distraction.

Today: Give up one small comfort and offer it for persecuted Christians.

Day 5: Prayer

In his *Demonstration* on prayer, Aphrahat insists on purity of heart: the prayer God receives is the one that comes from a heart at peace with others. Prayer and reconciliation go together. We cannot speak to the Father while closing our hearts to his children.

Prayer: Lord, purify my heart so that my prayer may rise to you like incense.

Today: Before praying, forgive someone in your heart.

Day 6: The sons and daughters of the covenant

Aphrahat describes men and women consecrated to God, the "sons of the covenant," who lived in continence to serve the community. They are among the roots of Syriac monastic life. Every Christian, through baptism, belongs to God's covenant.

Prayer: Lord, bless all consecrated men and women, and help me to live my own baptism faithfully.

Today: Pray for a priest, religious sister or brother you know.

Day 7: Humility

Aphrahat wrote on humility, the virtue that makes room for God. The humble person does not seek the first place but serves. Christ, who humbled himself, is the model. Aphrahat himself left us almost nothing about his own life: his humility is also in his silence.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, make my heart like yours.

Today: Do a hidden service without telling anyone.

Day 8: In the time of persecution

From 341, the Christians of Persia suffered a violent persecution under King Shapur II. Aphrahat wrote his second series of *Demonstrations* in that setting, to strengthen his brothers and sisters. Today, too, many Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere suffer for their faith.

Prayer: Lord, protect persecuted Christians. Give them courage, and touch the hearts of their persecutors.

Today: Learn about a persecuted Christian community, or support an organization that helps it.

Day 9: The hope of the resurrection

"One must believe in the resurrection of the dead," wrote Aphrahat. In a Church threatened with death, he kept hope alive. Persecution does not have the last word: Christ is risen, and those who belong to him will rise with him.

Prayer: Lord, risen from the dead, fill me with the hope of the resurrection, and hear the intention of this novena through the prayers of Saint Aphrahat.

Today: Pray for your loved ones who have died, entrusting them to the risen Christ.

Closing prayer

Saint Aphrahat, Persian Sage and disciple of the Holy Scriptures, you strengthened a persecuted Church with the Word of God, prayer and humility. Pray for the Christians of the East and for all who suffer for the name of Jesus. Teach us to believe simply, to love concretely and to hope in the resurrection. I entrust to you the intention of this novena: (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Aphrahat and the prayer to Saint Aphrahat.

Credits and sources

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