BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Athanasius the Athonite

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 5

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IN BRIEF

Saint Athanasius the Athonite

Byzantine monk of the 10th century, founder of the Great Lavra and father of the monasticism of Mount Athos.

Feast day	July 5
Born	c. 930, Trebizond (today Trabzon, Turkey)
Died	July 5, c. 1000, Great Lavra, Mount Athos (Greece)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	10th century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Athanasius the Athonite

Saint Athanasius the Athonite was a Byzantine monk of the 10th century, born in Trebizond around 930. Founder in 963 of the Great Lavra, the first great monastery of Mount Athos, he is regarded as the father of organized monastic life on the "Holy Mountain". He died around the year 1000, on the building site of a church. His feast day is July 5.

Who was Saint Athanasius the Athonite?

Mount Athos, a mountainous peninsula in northern Greece, is home today to twenty monasteries and forms a monastic republic unique in the world. Before Athanasius, a few hermits lived scattered there in huts or caves. Athanasius founded the first great community monastery there and gave it a rule. He is one of the greatest figures of Eastern monasticism, honored by the Catholic Church and by the Orthodox Churches. His life is known to us through two ancient Lives written by monks of the Great Lavra, and through the monastery's foundation documents. Some dates are still debated, especially that of his death.

Key dates in the life of Athanasius

- **c. 930**: Born in Trebizond, on the Black Sea, under the name Abramios, into a family of the Byzantine aristocracy.
- **Childhood**: Orphaned very young, he is raised by a relative of his mother.
- **Youth**: He studies in Constantinople, where he becomes a teacher.
- **Then**: He meets the abbot Michael Maleinos and becomes a monk on Mount Kyminas, in Bithynia, under the name Athanasius.
- **A few years later**: He withdraws in secret to Mount Athos to live as a hermit.

- **963**: With the support of his friend Nikephoros Phokas, now emperor, he founds the Great Lavra.
- **970s**: Emperor John Tzimiskes protects the monastery and grants it a charter.
- **July 5, c. 1000**: He dies in an accident, crushed by the collapse of a dome under construction.

From teacher to monk

Abramios was born in Trebizond into a noble family. Orphaned of both father and mother shortly after his birth, he was taken in by a relative who raised him with care. Gifted for study, he went to Constantinople and became a teacher there. It was there that he met Michael Maleinos, abbot of a monastery on Mount Kyminas, in Bithynia. This meeting turned his life upside down: he followed the monk, received the habit under the name Athanasius and learned the life of prayer and obedience. At the monastery he became friends with his master's nephew, Nikephoros Phokas, a general with a great future ahead of him.

But Athanasius was seeking greater solitude. One day he disappeared. He was found later on Mount Athos, where he was living incognito as a hermit, having taken with him only his clothes, two books and the cowl of his spiritual father.

The founder of the Great Lavra

Nikephoros Phokas, who held him in high esteem, had him searched for. Having become emperor in 963, he supported the founding of a great monastery. Athanasius then built the Great Lavra, at the southeastern tip of the peninsula. It was the first monastery on Athos where the monks lived in community, under the authority of an abbot. Athanasius wrote a rule for them, the typikon, inspired by Saint Basil and Saint Theodore the Studite.

This novelty did not please everyone: some hermits of the mountain, attached to their independence, opposed him. After the murder of Nikephoros Phokas in 969, Athanasius went through a difficult period and left Athos for a time. The new emperor, John Tzimiskes, nevertheless took the monastery under his protection, and Athanasius returned to lead his community. Other monasteries were founded on the model of the Great Lavra.

A builder abbot

Athanasius did not merely govern: he worked with his hands alongside his monks. The Lives show him in turn as a mason, a carpenter and a joiner. He welcomed many disciples. It was on a building site that he met his death, on July 5, around the year 1000: the dome of a church under construction collapsed and crushed him. The sources do not agree on the exact year, which some place a few years later.

Devotion and art

Athanasius was venerated from his death as the father of Athonite monasticism. His tomb is at the Great Lavra, in the chapel of the Forty Martyrs, near the monastery's main church. He is celebrated on July 5. He is shown as an elderly monk with a long beard, often holding a scroll.

What can we learn from Saint Athanasius the Athonite?

Athanasius gave up a brilliant career to follow Christ in monastic life. He loved solitude, but agreed to found and guide a community, because God asked it of him. He prayed, governed and worked with his hands until his last day. You can pray to him for monks and nuns, for those who found or lead a work, and for construction workers.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Athanasius the Athonite and the novena to Saint Athanasius the Athonite.

Where to pray to Saint Athanasius the Athonite

- **The Great Lavra** (Mount Athos, Greece): the monastery he founded, where his tomb is found.
- **Trebizond** (Trabzon, Turkey): his native city.
- **In any church**, on July 5, his feast day.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Athanasius the Athonite for Monks and Builders

Saint Athanasius the Athonite, a teacher who became a monk, founded in 963 the Great Lavra, the first great monastery of Mount Athos, and died on the building site of a church he was building with his brothers. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him monks and nuns, those who found or lead a work, and those who work with their hands.

Prayer to Saint Athanasius the Athonite

Saint Athanasius,
you left the honors and learning of the world
to seek God in prayer and silence.
Teach me to give him first place.

You loved solitude,
and you agreed to build a house
where your brothers could pray together:
help me to serve where God calls me,
even when it is not my choice.

You worked with your hands
until your last day:
bless monks and nuns,
those who lead a community,
and all who build and work hard.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Athanasius the Athonite

- On his feast day, July 5.
- For monks, nuns and religious vocations.
- When founding a work, an association or a community.
- For construction workers and those who work on building sites.
- When a responsibility is given to you against your wishes.

A short invocation

> *Saint Athanasius, father of the monks of the Holy Mountain,*
> *pray for us and teach us to pray. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Athanasius the Athonite from June 27 to July 5, and read the life of Saint Athanasius the Athonite.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Athanasius the Athonite

This novena offers nine days of prayer with Saint Athanasius the Athonite, a Byzantine monk and founder of the Great Lavra of Mount Athos in the 10th century. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on his feast day, July 5, begin on June 27. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Athanasius, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: An orphan taken in

Abramios lost his parents very early. A relative of his mother welcomed and raised him. The charity of a family prepared the vocation of a saint.

Prayer: Lord, bless families who take in a child who is not their own, and comfort orphans.

Act of the day: Pray for foster families, or support a charity for children.

Day 2: A love of learning

Gifted for study, Abramios became a teacher in Constantinople. Knowledge is a gift of God, to be placed at the service of others.

Prayer: Lord, bless pupils, students and their teachers. Make our intelligence a path toward you.

Act of the day: Pray for a teacher who left a mark on you.

Day 3: A decisive meeting

Meeting the abbot Michael Maleinos changed the young teacher's life. He followed him and became a monk.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the people who led me to you. Make me attentive to those you place on my path.

Act of the day: Thank, with a word or a prayer, someone who helped you in faith.

Day 4: The desire for solitude

Athanasius left in secret for Mount Athos, with almost nothing. He wanted to be alone with God, far from others' eyes.

Prayer: Lord, give me a taste for silence and hidden prayer.

Act of the day: Take time to pray alone, in a quiet place.

Day 5: Agreeing to build

Found by his friend who had become emperor, Athanasius agreed to found a monastery. He gave up his solitude to serve his brothers.

Prayer: Lord, when you ask me to change my plans, help me to obey with trust.

Act of the day: Willingly accept a task you had not chosen.

Day 6: A rule for living together

Athanasius gave the Great Lavra a rule of common life. Prayer, work and obedience each found their proper place in it.

Prayer: Lord, help me to put order into my life, so that prayer has its place in it every day.

Act of the day: Set a precise time for prayer in your day, and keep to it.

Day 7: Facing opposition

Some hermits opposed Athanasius, and the death of Nikephoros Phokas deprived him of a protector. He knew trial and misunderstanding.

Prayer: Lord, support those who are misunderstood in their mission. Keep me from resentment.

Act of the day: Pray for someone who opposes you.

Day 8: Working with his hands

The abbot of the Great Lavra became a mason, a carpenter and a joiner alongside his monks. He did not give orders from afar.

Prayer: Lord, bless the work of laborers and craftsmen. Teach me to serve without thinking myself above others.

Act of the day: Do a manual task as a service to someone.

Day 9: Dying on the building site

Athanasius died crushed by a dome under construction, in the middle of his work. He left this world as he had served it: at work.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Athanasius, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will, and let me serve you to the end.

Act of the day: Pray for the victims of workplace accidents, and if possible attend Mass.

Living the novena with Saint Athanasius

Athanasius was a teacher, a hermit, a founder and a builder. During these nine days, you can entrust to him religious communities, those who are beginning a new work, and those who work hard with their hands. The Great Lavra, where monks have prayed for more than a thousand years, is the fruit of his faithfulness.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Athanasius,*
> *monk of the Holy Mountain and father of the Great Lavra,*
> *you sought God in silence*
> *and built for your brothers a house of prayer.*
> *Present to God the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me faithful in prayer and in work,*
> *and bless those who serve with humility.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Athanasius the Athonite at any time, and read the life of Saint Athanasius the Athonite.

PILGRIMAGE

The Great Lavra Monastery, Mount Athos

The monastery of the Great Lavra is the oldest and largest of the twenty monasteries of Mount Athos, in Greece. Founded in 963 by Saint Athanasius the Athonite, it holds first place in the hierarchy of the monastic republic. It stands at the southeastern tip of the peninsula, at the foot of the mountain. Today it is an Orthodox monastery, where the prayer of the monks has continued for more than a thousand years.

History

Before Athanasius, Athos sheltered only scattered hermits. With the support of Emperor Nikephoros Phokas, Athanasius founded there in 963 a great community monastery, a "lavra", and gave it a rule. After the death of Nikephoros, Emperor John Tzimiskes took the monastery under his protection. The Great Lavra became the model for many other foundations, and Athos gradually became the "Holy Mountain" of the Christian East. Several sketes, small communities of monks, still depend on the Great Lavra today.

What you can see

The monastery looks like a small fortified medieval town, surrounded by walls and towers, with many chapels inside. The main church, the katholikon, was among the first buildings constructed. First dedicated to the Annunciation, it was later placed under the name of Saint Athanasius. The founder's tomb is in the chapel of the Forty Martyrs, near the entrance of the church. In front of

the katholikon stands a cypress that tradition says was planted by Athanasius himself. The monastery library holds more than two thousand manuscripts, including ancient witnesses of the Greek Bible.

Praying on site

Before you set out, you can read the life of Saint Athanasius the Athonite. At the monastery, it is possible to pray near his tomb and to join the monks' services in silence. Entrust to him monastic life and Christian unity, then say the prayer to Saint Athanasius the Athonite. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Mount Athos follows particular rules. According to a thousand-year-old tradition, only men may enter, and they must obtain in advance a residence permit issued by the administration of the Holy Mountain. Access is by boat, from the coast of Chalkidiki. Women can see the monasteries from the boats that sail along the coast. Visiting and lodging conditions change: check with the Mount Athos pilgrims' office before planning any trip.

Credits and sources

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