

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Basil the Great

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 2

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IN BRIEF

Saint Basil the Great

Monk, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, defender of the faith of Nicaea, father of Eastern monasticism and Doctor of the Church.

Feast day	January 2
Born	c. 329, Caesarea in Cappadocia (Kayseri, Turkey)
Died	January 1, 379 (according to tradition), Caesarea in Cappadocia
Canonized	Immemorial cult; declared a Doctor of the Church in 1568
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	Basilian monks and nuns, hospital administrators

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Basil the Great

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Basil the Great

Saint Basil of Caesarea, already called Basil the Great in his own lifetime, is one of the greatest Fathers of the Church. Born around 329 in Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey, he was a monk, a theologian and, from 370, bishop of Caesarea. He defended the faith of the Council of Nicaea, organized the monastic life of the Christian East and founded a true city of charity for the poor and the sick. He died around 378-379, is a Doctor of the Church, and the Latin Church celebrates him on January 2 together with his friend Saint Gregory of Nazianzus.

Who was Saint Basil the Great?

Basil came from a family of saints. His grandmother, Macrina the Elder, had received the faith from the disciples of Saint Gregory the Wonderworker. His father, Basil the Elder, was a teacher of rhetoric, and his mother was named Emmelia. His older sister, Saint Macrina the Younger, founded a community of consecrated women, and two of his brothers, Gregory of Nyssa and Peter of Sebaste, became bishops. Together with Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, he belongs to the group known as the "Cappadocian Fathers," who gave the theology of the Trinity its classic vocabulary.

A man of great learning and fragile health, Basil left a considerable body of writings: monastic rules, homilies, a treatise *On the Holy Spirit* and more than three hundred letters. The Byzantine liturgy that bears his name is still celebrated several times a year in the Eastern Churches. Pope Saint Pius V declared him a Doctor of the Church in 1568.



Saint Basil the Great, icon in the Byzantine tradition.

Key dates

- **c. 329**: Born in Caesarea in Cappadocia (today Kayseri, Turkey), into a well-to-do Christian family.
- **c. 351-355**: Studies in Constantinople, then in Athens, where he forms a deep friendship with Gregory of Nazianzus.
- **c. 356-357**: Gives up a career as a rhetorician, is baptized and visits the monks of Egypt, Palestine and Syria.
- **c. 358**: Withdraws to Pontus, near the river Iris, not far from the community of his mother and his sister Macrina, and gathers monks around him.
- **368-369**: During a great famine, he gives away his inheritance and organizes relief for the hungry.
- **370**: Elected bishop of Caesarea, metropolitan of Cappadocia.

- **c. 372**: Stands up to the prefect Modestus and the Arian emperor Valens; founds the "Basiliad," a complex of hospices and hospitals.
- **January 1, 379 (according to tradition; some recent historians suggest 377 or 378)**: Dies in Caesarea.
- **1568**: Proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Saint Pius V.

The student of Athens

Basil was first taught by his father, then attended the schools of Caesarea, Constantinople and finally Athens, the great university city of the age. There he studied rhetoric, philosophy and the Greek poets. There too he met Gregory of Nazianzus, who later wrote that the two friends knew only two roads: the one to the church and the one to the school. The future emperor Julian, known as the Apostate, attended the same lectures.

Back in Cappadocia around 355, Basil taught rhetoric with success. According to Gregory of Nyssa, his sister Macrina found him a little too proud of his eloquence and encouraged him to turn to God. Basil asked for baptism, which was then often received as an adult, and set out to observe the monks of the deserts of the East.

Lawgiver of the monks

On his return, Basil lived an ascetic life on a family estate in Pontus, on the banks of the Iris. Disciples joined him, and Gregory of Nazianzus came to share his retreat for a time. Together they compiled an anthology of Origen, the *Philokalia*.

Basil answered his monks' questions in writing. These answers, later gathered as the "Longer Rules" and "Shorter Rules," form what is called the Rule of Saint Basil. He preferred common life to complete solitude, asking in substance: "If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?" Regular prayer, work,

obedience and service of the poor: his rule remains the reference point of Eastern monasticism today, and Saint Benedict recommends it to his monks at the end of his own Rule.

A bishop before the emperor

Ordained a priest, Basil assisted Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea and succeeded him in 370. Cappadocia was then at the heart of the Arian crisis: Emperor Valens supported those who refused to recognize the Son as fully God. The prefect Modestus came to threaten Basil with confiscation, exile and death. According to Gregory of Nazianzus, the bishop replied that he owned nothing that could be confiscated, that the whole earth belongs to God, and that death would be a deliverance for him. Valens, who came to Caesarea in person, finally gave up on exiling the bishop.

Basil also worked tirelessly for the unity of the Church, writing to Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, to Pope Damasus and to the bishops of the West to end the divisions of the time. He did not live to see the Council of Constantinople in 381, which confirmed the faith he had defended.

The Basiliad, a city of charity

During the famine of 368, Basil, still a priest, sold the property he had inherited from his mother to feed the hungry without distinction of religion, and preached forcefully against hoarding. Once bishop, he built at the gates of Caesarea a vast complex later called the Basiliad: a church, a hospice for the elderly, a hospital, a house for travelers, lodgings for the staff and workshops. Gregory of Nazianzus described it as a "new city." It was one of the first great hospitals in Christian history.

His social homilies remain famous. In the one devoted to the rich man of the Gospel who wanted to build bigger barns, he writes in substance:

> *The bread you keep belongs to the hungry; the coat you store in your chest belongs to the naked.*

Theologian of the Holy Spirit

Against Eunomius, Basil defended the divinity of the Son. Then, in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, written for Bishop Amphilochius of Iconium, he showed that the Spirit receives the same worship and the same glory as the Father and the Son. He distinguished the one divine nature from the three persons, which helped the Church formulate its faith in the Trinity. His homilies on creation, the *Hexaemeron*, reveal a man attentive to the beauty of the world.

Why is Saint Basil a patron of monks and hospitals?

Basil is honored as the father of Eastern monasticism: monks and nuns of the Basilian tradition, in the Byzantine Catholic and Orthodox Churches, still live by his rule. Because he founded the Basiliad, one of the earliest Christian hospitals, he is also invoked by hospital administrators and by all who care for the sick. He unites contemplation and action, the truth of faith and service of the poor. He can be prayed to for monks, bishops, hospital staff, those who fight hunger, and unity between Catholics and Orthodox, who venerate him together.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Basil in art

In icons, Basil is shown as a bishop with a long dark beard and a lean, ascetic face. He wears the omophorion, the wide stole of Eastern bishops marked with crosses, and holds the Book of the Gospels or a scroll. He often appears beside Saint Gregory of Nazianzus and Saint John Chrysostom, the "Three Holy Hierarchs," or celebrating the liturgy at the altar.

Where to pray to Saint Basil

- **Bruges** (Belgium): the Romanesque Chapel of Saint Basil, the lower chapel of the Basilica of the Holy Blood, which keeps a relic of the saint.
- **Kayseri** (Turkey): ancient Caesarea in Cappadocia, his hometown and episcopal see; no sanctuary from his time survives.
- **Mount Athos** (Greece): the monastery of the Great Lavra venerates a skull attributed to Saint Basil.
- **Grottaferrata** (near Rome): the Abbey of Saint Mary, founded by Saint Nilus of Rossano, where Byzantine-rite monks follow the Basilian tradition.
- Every church and monastery of the Byzantine rite, where the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil is celebrated, especially on January 1 and during Lent.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Basil the Great, or follow the novena to Saint Basil, from December 24 to January 1, ending on the eve of his feast.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Basil the Great for the Poor and for Unity

Saint Basil left the Eastern Church a liturgy that bears his name and many prayers. This page offers a short prayer traditionally attributed to him, followed by an original Saintspedia prayer asking for his intercession, especially for the poor, the sick and the unity of Christians.

A prayer attributed to Saint Basil

Among the evening and night prayers of the Byzantine tradition, several are attributed to Saint Basil the Great. The attribution is not always certain, but these texts have been prayed for centuries in the Eastern Churches. Here is their spirit, in a free adaptation by Saintspedia:

> *Almighty Lord, God of the powers and of all flesh, you who dwell on high and look upon the lowly, you who search hearts and know the secrets of every person, receive our prayer at this hour. Forgive us the faults of this day, keep us in peace through this night, and raise us up in the morning to give you glory. Amen.*

Source: the Byzantine *Horologion*, a night prayer attributed to Saint Basil; free adaptation by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Basil for the poor and for unity

Saint Basil, you left the honors of a brilliant career to follow Christ who became poor: teach me to prefer God to everything.

You gave your goods to the hungry and built a city for the sick and for travelers: open my heart and my hands to those who lack bread, care or shelter. Remind me that what I keep without need belongs to the one who needs it.

You confessed the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit before the emperor: give me a right and courageous faith that yields neither to fear nor to fashion.

You worked so hard for the unity of the Church: pray that Catholics and Orthodox, who venerate you together, may one day gather around the same altar.

Watch over monks and nuns, bishops and priests, doctors, nurses and all who serve in hospitals. I also entrust to you my particular intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may I give glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

The Latin Church celebrates Saint Basil on January 2, together with Saint Gregory of Nazianzus; the Eastern Churches keep his feast on January 1. You can pray to him at the start of the new year, during Lent, at the bedside of

someone who is ill, or before taking on a commitment to serve the poor. It is also a fitting prayer for monks and religious, for hospital staff and for anyone working for Christian unity.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Basil the Great, and read the life of Saint Basil.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Basil the Great

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Basil the Great, monk, bishop of Caesarea and Doctor of the Church. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast day, January 2, begin it on December 24; it ends on January 1 and so accompanies the octave of Christmas. You can also pray it at any time of year, for the poor, the sick or the unity of Christians.

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 small act suggested for the day carries the prayer into daily life, in the spirit of Basil, for whom faith was proven in deeds. You can pray it alone, as a family or with a parish group.

Day 1: A family of saints

Basil received the faith from his grandmother Macrina, from his parents and from his sister. Holiness is often handed on through familiar faces, in the ordinary life of a family. Before he became a great bishop, Basil was a child who learned to pray at home.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for those who passed the faith on to me; make me, in turn, a witness for those close to me.

Today: Pray for a parent or godparent, living or deceased, and thank them if you can.

Day 2: Friendship in Christ

In Athens, Basil and Gregory knew only two roads: the one to the church and the one to the school. Their friendship helped them grow toward God, and it lasted through trials and disagreements. A true friend draws us closer to Christ.

Prayer: Lord, bless my friendships, and give me friends who lead me to you.

Today: Get back in touch with a friend you have lost track of.

Day 3: Giving up honors

A brilliant teacher, Basil could have built a fine career. He chose baptism and a life of poverty. Pride in our talents can become an obstacle on the road to God, and his sister Macrina had the courage to tell him so.

Prayer: Lord, purify my ambitions, and let my talents serve your glory, not my own.

Today: Do someone a quiet favor without trying to be noticed.

Day 4: Life in common

Basil asked his monks: if you live alone, whose feet will you wash? Holiness is lived with others, in patience and mutual service. Our families, parishes and workplaces are where we learn to love concretely.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love those I live with, with their gifts and their limits.

Today: Take on a household chore that nobody likes to do.

Day 5: The bread of the hungry

During the famine, Basil sold his inheritance to feed the poor, and he reminded the wealthy that bread kept without need belongs to the hungry. His words still challenge a world where so many lack the essentials.

Prayer: Lord, open my hands, and help me share what you have entrusted to me.

Today: Give to a food bank or to a charity that feeds the poorest.



Kayseri, ancient Caesarea in Cappadocia, the city of Saint Basil.

Day 6: Caring for the sick

The Basiliad welcomed the sick, the elderly and travelers. Basil saw Christ in every suffering person, and he organized care with intelligence and order. Charity, for him, was not a passing impulse but a lasting work.

Prayer: Lord, bless all who care for the sick, and give me eyes full of compassion for those who suffer.

Today: Visit or call someone who is sick or elderly.

Day 7: Faith before the powerful

Threatened with exile and death, Basil told the prefect that he owned nothing and that the whole earth belongs to God. Inner freedom makes us strong. The one who has given everything to God has nothing left to fear.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the courage to confess my faith, gently and without fear.

Today: Pray for Christians who are persecuted around the world.

Day 8: Adoring the Trinity

Basil defended the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. For him, theology led to adoration and praise. To speak rightly of God is first of all a way of giving him glory.

Prayer: Glory to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit; glory to the Father, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever.

Today: Make the Sign of the Cross slowly, thinking of each of the divine Persons.

Day 9: Working for unity

Basil wrote to Rome, to Alexandria and to the West to reconcile divided Churches. Today he is venerated by Catholics and Orthodox alike. His longing for unity remains a task entrusted to every Christian.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Basil, heal the divisions among Christians and make me a peacemaker. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christian unity, or discover a prayer from the Eastern tradition.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Basil the Great, monk and shepherd, friend of the poor and defender of the faith, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Obtain for us a right faith, a generous heart and a longing for unity. Watch over the sick and the hungry, over monks and bishops, and over all who serve in hospitals. Amen.*

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

CREDITS

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