BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Emmelia

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 30

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IN BRIEF

Saint Emmelia

4th-century Christian of Pontus, wife of Saint Basil the Elder and mother of several saints.

Feast day	May 30
Born	late 3rd or early 4th century, Asia Minor (place unknown)
Died	c. 375, Annesi, in Pontus (Asia Minor)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Emmelia

Saint Emmelia (Emmélie or Emilia) was a Christian of Asia Minor in the 4th century, the wife of Saint Basil the Elder and the mother of an unrivaled family of saints: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Peter of Sebaste and Macrina the Younger. As a widow, she withdrew with her daughter Macrina to the family estate of Annesi, in Pontus, where a community of consecrated life was born. She died around 375. Her feast day is May 30, together with her husband.

Who was Saint Emmelia?

Emmelia belonged to one of the great Christian families of the ancient East. We do not know her life from a biography devoted to her, but from what her children say about her, above all Gregory of Nyssa in the *Life of Saint Macrina*, and from a few allusions by Gregory of Nazianzus, a friend of the family. These texts show her as a woman of faith, of character and of great tenderness, who knew how to pass on the Gospel to her children and then let herself be drawn by her eldest daughter onto the path of a more radical life. The dates of her life are known only approximately.

Key dates in the life of Emmelia

- **Late 3rd or early 4th century**: Born into a wealthy Christian family of Asia Minor that had known persecution.
- **Before 327**: Orphaned, she marries Basil, a renowned rhetorician of Pontus, son of Saint Macrina the Elder.
- **c. 327**: Birth of her eldest daughter, Macrina, after a dream reported by Gregory of Nyssa.
- **c. 329-340**: Birth of her other children, including Basil, Naucratius, Gregory and Peter; the sources speak of nine or ten children.

- **Around the middle of the 4th century**: Death of her husband, Basil the Elder.
- **After her widowhood**: With Macrina, she turns the estate of Annesi, on the river Iris, into a community of prayer and common life.
- **c. 357**: Accidental death of her son Naucratius, a trial that Macrina helps her to bear in faith.
- **c. 375**: Death of Emmelia, surrounded by her children; she is buried beside her husband.

A wife and a mother

According to Gregory of Nyssa, Emmelia, left an orphan, would have preferred not to marry, but her beauty exposed her to unwanted attention, and she chose to marry Basil, an honorable Christian man, in order to find protection. The couple settled in Pontus, at Neocaesarea, where Basil worked as a rhetorician. The household was deeply marked by faith: the grandmother, Macrina the Elder, handed on there the memory of Saint Gregory the Wonderworker, the evangelizer of the region.

Gregory of Nyssa tells that before the birth of her first daughter, Emmelia saw in a dream a radiant figure who called the child by the name of Thecla, the disciple of Saint Paul. The little girl was given her grandmother's name, Macrina, but for her mother this secret name foretold a vocation to consecrated virginity. Emmelia raised Macrina herself, teaching her to read from the Psalms and the books of Wisdom rather than from the pagan poets. Several of her children were later trained in the best schools of the time.

Widow and consecrated at Annesi

After her husband's death, Emmelia managed the family property and the settling of her children. According to the *Life of Saint Macrina*, it was her daughter who gradually drew her toward a simpler life: giving up the lifestyle

of a great household, living with the servants as with sisters, sharing the same table and the same prayer. The family estate of Annesi, on the river Iris, thus became a community of women devoted to prayer, work and charity, while Basil, back from his studies, settled not far away to lead the ascetic life.

Emmelia also knew great sorrows. Her son Naucratius, who had withdrawn as a hermit in the forest, died in an accident around 357. Gregory of Nyssa shows his mother overwhelmed, and Macrina helping her through this grief in hope. He finally relates that Emmelia, in old age, died surrounded by Macrina and Peter, entrusting her children to God. According to him, she was buried beside her husband, in the church dedicated to the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, near Annesi.

Devotion and art

The former Roman Martyrology celebrated on May 30, at Caesarea in Cappadocia, "the holy spouses Basil and Emmelia", parents of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Peter of Sebaste and Macrina. They are presented there as confessors of the faith who had to flee during the persecution and hide in the wilderness of Pontus. The Orthodox Churches celebrate Emmelia on January 1, together with her son Basil. She is rarely shown alone; she appears sometimes in series of engravings devoted to holy women, such as Jacques Callot's, or among the members of Saint Basil's family.

What can we learn from Saint Emmelia?

Emmelia is a figure of Christian motherhood. She passed on the faith to her children with intelligence, and then accepted to receive from them, especially from her daughter, a deeper way of living the Gospel. As a widow, she did not make her grief a withdrawal, but a passage toward a life given to God. She can be invoked by mothers and fathers, by widows, by those who mourn a child, and by all who hope to see faith grow in their home.

Where to pray to Saint Emmelia

- **In your parish**: on May 30, entrusting families to her, together with Saint Basil the Elder.
- **At home**: no place of pilgrimage is dedicated to her today; the family home, where she sowed the faith, is the most fitting place to pray to her.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Emmelia for Families

Saint Emmelia, wife of Saint Basil the Elder, was in the 4th century the mother of Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Peter of Sebaste and Macrina the Younger. As a widow, she consecrated her life to God with her daughter on the estate of Annesi. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to her families, mothers and widows.

Prayer to Saint Emmelia

Saint Emmelia,
faithful wife and mother of saints,
you made your home a school of prayer
where your children learned to love Christ.
Watch over my family:
may the faith be handed on there with gentleness and truth.

You knew the grief of losing your husband
and the sudden death of a son.
Comfort those who mourn,
support widows and grieving parents,
and keep them in the hope of the resurrection.

You knew how to receive from your daughter
a simpler and poorer way.
Teach me the humility to let myself be led,
even by those I have formed myself.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Emmelia

- On her feast day, May 30, together with Saint Basil the Elder.
- For mothers and fathers, and for handing on the faith to children.
- In widowhood, or for someone who has just lost a spouse.
- After the death of a child, to ask for consolation.
- When a child chooses consecrated life or the priesthood.

A short invocation

> *Saint Emmelia, mother of saints,*
> *pray for our families and for our children. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Emmelia from May 22 to 30, and read the life of Saint Emmelia.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Emmelia

This novena offers nine days with Saint Emmelia, wife of Saint Basil the Elder and mother of several saints, in the 4th century. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on her feast day, May 30, begin on May 22. You can also pray it at any other time, for example for a family intention.

How to pray this novena

Each day, make 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 Emmelia, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recalled come mainly from the *Life of Saint Macrina* written by her son Gregory of Nyssa.

Day 1: A faith received in trial

Emmelia came from a Christian family that had known persecution. She received a tested faith, and kept it as a treasure.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who handed on the faith to me at the cost of their faithfulness.

Act of the day: Pray for Christians who are persecuted today.

Day 2: The choice of marriage

Orphaned, Emmelia chose to marry Basil, an upright and believing man. Their home became a house of prayer.

Prayer: Lord, bless spouses and engaged couples. Make their love a reflection of yours.

Act of the day: Pray for a couple you know.

Day 3: A dream before a birth

Before Macrina was born, Emmelia saw in a dream her daughter being called by the name of Thecla. She welcomed this child as a gift from God, for God.

Prayer: Lord, bless expectant mothers and children not yet born.

Act of the day: Entrust to God each of your children, godchildren or loved ones, naming them.

Day 4: Teaching the Word

Emmelia taught her daughter to read from the Psalms rather than from the pagan poets. She knew that the words we receive as children shape the heart.

Prayer: Lord, grant parents and catechists to hand on your Word with joy.

Act of the day: Read a psalm, alone or with your family.

Day 5: A household of saints

Among her children, five are honored as saints. This is no accident, but the fruit of a patient climate of faith, nourished by prayer and example.

Prayer: Lord, make holiness grow in our families, through the simple gestures of daily life.

Act of the day: Take a moment of prayer as a family, even a very short one.

Day 6: Losing a husband

When Basil died, Emmelia was left alone with a large family. She did not run from her responsibility, but carried it with courage.

Prayer: Lord, support widows and widowers, and all parents who raise their children alone.

Act of the day: Visit or call someone who has lost a spouse.

Day 7: Letting oneself be led

Macrina drew her mother toward a poorer life, shared with the servants as with sisters. Emmelia accepted to learn from her daughter.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to listen to those who show me a more Gospel way.

Act of the day: Ask advice from someone younger than you, and truly listen.

Day 8: The death of a son

When Naucratius died in an accident, Emmelia was crushed. Macrina helped her to give this son back to God in hope.

Prayer: Lord, comfort parents who have lost a child, and keep them in hope.

Act of the day: Pray for children who have died and for their families.

Day 9: A death surrounded by love

In old age, Emmelia died surrounded by her children, entrusting them to God. Her life ended as it had been lived: in prayer and blessing.

Prayer: Lord, let me bless those I love to the very end. Through the intercession of Saint Emmelia, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Bless your children or loved ones with the Sign of the Cross, and attend Mass if you can.

Closing prayer

Saint Emmelia,
wife and mother, widow and consecrated woman,
present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Keep our families in the faith,
comfort those who mourn,
and teach us to live simply, under the gaze of God.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Credits and sources

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