BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Ephigenia of Ethiopia

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 21

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IN BRIEF

Saint Ephigenia of Ethiopia

Virgin of Ethiopia of the 1st century, baptized and consecrated to God by the apostle Matthew according to tradition.

Feast day	September 21
Born	1st century, Ethiopia (according to tradition)
Died	1st century, Ethiopia (according to tradition)
Canonized	immemorial cult

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Ephigenia for Faithfulness and the Protection of Homes

Novena to Saint Ephigenia of Ethiopia

Church of Santa Efigênia, Ouro Preto

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Ephigenia of Ethiopia

Saint Ephigenia (also Iphigenia), known as Ephigenia of Ethiopia, was a virgin of the 1st century who, according to tradition, was baptized by the apostle Saint Matthew during his mission in Ethiopia and consecrated herself to God. She is known mainly through *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine. Her feast day is September 21, the same day as Saint Matthew, and she is greatly venerated in Brazil and Latin America.

Who was Saint Ephigenia?

All that we know of Ephigenia comes from legendary accounts, connected with the tradition of the apostle Matthew's mission in Africa. The best known is that of *The Golden Legend*, written in the 13th century by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine. So it must be said clearly: her story belongs to pious tradition, not to documented history. The Church nevertheless entered her in the Roman Martyrology, which presents her soberly: "In Ethiopia, Saint Iphigenia, virgin, who was baptized and consecrated to God by the blessed apostle Matthew, ended her holy life in peace." Above all, her cult has become very important in the Portuguese and Spanish speaking world, where she is honored as one of the great Black saints.

Key dates in the life of Ephigenia

- **1st century**: According to tradition, the apostle Matthew proclaims the Gospel in Ethiopia; Ephigenia, the king's daughter, is converted with her family.
- **1st century**: Consecrated to God, she is placed at the head of a community of virgins.

- **1st century**: According to the account, she refuses to marry the new king Hirtacus, who has Saint Matthew killed.
- **Date unknown**: She dies in peace, according to the Roman Martyrology.
- **13th century**: Jacobus de Voragine tells her story in *The Golden Legend*.
- **Late 14th century**: The Venetian bishop Pietro de' Natali mentions her in his collection of saints' lives.
- **1586**: She appears in the Roman Martyrology published by Cardinal Baronius, on September 21.
- **1738**: The Brazilian religious José Pereira de Santana publishes in Lisbon a life of the saint, presenting her as a Black woman.
- **18th century**: Her cult grows in Brazil, especially in Ouro Preto, where a church is dedicated to her.

The account of The Golden Legend

According to *The Golden Legend*, Ephigenia was the daughter of Egippus, king of Ethiopia (or Nubia). Saint Matthew, who had come to preach in that country, converted the king, the queen, their son and their daughter. He founded a Church and entrusted to Ephigenia, who had consecrated herself to Christ, the leadership of a community of more than two hundred virgins.

When Egippus died, his brother Hirtacus took the throne and wanted to marry the young woman. He asked the apostle to persuade her. The following Sunday, Matthew preached before the king and explained that Ephigenia, being consecrated, already belonged to the eternal King and could not be given to another. Enraged, Hirtacus had the apostle stabbed while he was celebrating, then tried to set fire to the house of the virgins. The account says that the flames turned back against the palace. The king, struck by illness, came to a tragic end, and Ephigenia's brother succeeded him, helping the Churches to spread throughout the kingdom.

A saint venerated in the Afro-American world

From the early modern period, Saint Ephigenia was honored in Spain, in Portugal and above all in their colonies in America, alongside other African saints. Brotherhoods of Black people, free or enslaved, chose her as their patron and built churches in her honor. In Brazil, the church of Santa Efigênia in Ouro Preto, in Minas Gerais, is a famous witness to this, and the popular festival of the Congado there associates Our Lady of the Rosary with the saint. She is often depicted as a nun, holding a small house or church in flames, in memory of the burning of her convent; for this reason popular piety invokes her against fire and for the protection of homes.

What can we learn from Saint Ephigenia?

Beyond the legendary details, the figure of Ephigenia says two things. First, the freedom of a woman who chose to give herself to Christ and stood firm before power. Second, the universality of the Church: from the beginning, tradition wished to recognize an African saint among the first fruits of the apostles' preaching. Those who suffered slavery found in her a sister and a protector. We can pray to her for consecrated women, for the Christians of Africa and for all who struggle for their dignity.

Where to pray to Saint Ephigenia

- **Ouro Preto** (Minas Gerais, Brazil): the church of Santa Efigênia, a major center of her cult.
- **São Paulo** (Brazil): the church of Santa Ifigênia, in the city center.
- In any church, on September 21, in union with the feast of Saint Matthew.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Ephigenia for Faithfulness and the Protection of Homes

Saint Ephigenia, virgin of Ethiopia, was according to tradition baptized by the apostle Saint Matthew and consecrated herself to Christ, refusing to marry a king. She is much loved in Brazil and Latin America. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to her consecrated women, the Christians of Africa, those who struggle for their dignity and the protection of homes.

Prayer to Saint Ephigenia

Saint Ephigenia,
daughter of Africa and daughter of the Church,
you received from the apostle Matthew the word of life
and gave your heart to Christ without reserve.
Teach me to belong to him entirely.

Before the anger of a king,
you remained faithful to your consecration.
Give me the strength to stay faithful
when my faith is put to the test.
Support consecrated women and young people who hesitate.

You whom the poor and the enslaved took as their sister,
watch over those whose dignity is wounded,
keep our homes and those who live in them,
and strengthen the faith of the Christians of Africa.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Ephigenia

- On her feast day, September 21, in union with the feast of Saint Matthew.
- For nuns and women who consecrate themselves to God.
- For the Christians of Africa and of countries where the faith is young.
- For those who suffer from racism or injustice.
- For the protection of your home and your family.

A prayer for the home

> *Lord, keep our home and those who live in it,*
> *and make it a dwelling of peace.*
> *Saint Ephigenia, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Ephigenia from September 13 to 21, and read the life of Saint Ephigenia.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Ephigenia of Ethiopia

This novena is an original composition inspired by the tradition about Saint Ephigenia, virgin of Ethiopia, baptized according to the account by the apostle Saint Matthew. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, September 21, begin on September 13. 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 Ephigenia, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recounted come from *The Golden Legend* and from tradition: they are not history in the modern sense, but they nourish prayer.

Day 1: The Gospel to the ends of the earth

According to tradition, the apostle Matthew carried the Gospel to Ethiopia. Christ had sent his disciples to all nations: no people is a stranger to his love.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for wanting to reach every people. Open my heart to the universality of your Church.

Act of the day: Pray for the Church in a country of Africa.

Day 2: A family that welcomes the faith

The account says that the king, the queen, their son and Ephigenia received baptism together. Faith entered a whole household.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family. Make the faith received in baptism grow in each of us.

Act of the day: Pray together, with family or friends, even for a moment.

Day 3: Giving oneself to Christ

Ephigenia chose to consecrate herself to God. She did not refuse love: she gave it entirely to Christ.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love you with all my heart, in the state of life that is mine.

Act of the day: Pray for nuns and for vocations.

Day 4: Guiding others

According to the Legend, the apostle entrusted Ephigenia with a community of more than two hundred virgins. She received the task of leading her sisters to God.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who have responsibility in the Church. Give them wisdom and humility.

Act of the day: Pray for a religious superior, a priest or a Church leader.

Day 5: Resisting power

The new king wanted to marry Ephigenia. She refused, faithful to her consecration. Faith gives a freedom that no power can take away.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to remain faithful to what I have promised, even under pressure.

Act of the day: Keep a promise you had neglected.

Day 6: The witness of the apostle

Saint Matthew defended Ephigenia and paid with his life for his fidelity to the truth. He died while celebrating the holy mysteries.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who defend the weakest, and give strength to persecuted Christians.

Act of the day: Pray for Christians who risk their lives for their faith.

Day 7: The fire that does not destroy

The king wanted to burn the house of the virgins, but the account says the flames turned away from it. That is why Ephigenia is depicted with a house in flames, and why she is invoked for the protection of homes.

Prayer: Lord, keep our homes and those who live in them. Put out in us the fire of anger.

Act of the day: Bless your home with a prayer, room by room.

Day 8: A sister for the oppressed

Centuries later, Africans enslaved in America chose Ephigenia as their patron. They recognized in her a sister, a sign that God forgets no one.

Prayer: Lord, heal the wounds of racism and injustice. Make us builders of fraternity.

Act of the day: Make a concrete gesture of respect toward someone different from you.

Day 9: A life ended in peace

The Roman Martyrology says that Ephigenia "ended her holy life in peace". After the trials, God's peace has the last word.

Prayer: Lord, give me your peace. Through the intercession of Saint Ephigenia, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it be your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass on the feast of Saint Matthew if you can.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Ephigenia,*
> *virgin of Ethiopia, spiritual daughter of the apostle Matthew,*
> *you who remained faithful to Christ before the king,*
> *present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep our homes in peace*
> *and make us brothers and sisters.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

PILGRIMAGE

Church of Santa Efigênia, Ouro Preto

The church of Santa Efigênia stands on one of the hills of Ouro Preto, the former gold capital of the state of Minas Gerais, in Brazil. Built in the 18th century by a brotherhood of Black believers, it is one of the great places of the cult of Saint Ephigenia, the virgin of Ethiopia baptized, according to tradition, by the apostle Saint Matthew.

A church born of the faith of Black brotherhoods

In the 18th century, the gold rush brought a very large number of enslaved Africans to Minas Gerais. In colonial society, religious brotherhoods were one of the few places where they could gather, pray, help one another and give their dead a dignified burial. Several of these brotherhoods chose as patrons saints from Africa, such as Saint Ephigenia, in whom they recognized their brothers and sisters in the faith.

It was a brotherhood of Black people that had the church of Santa Efigênia in Ouro Preto built during the 18th century. A local tradition links its construction to Chico Rei, an enslaved African king who is said to have bought back his freedom and that of his people with gold; this story, handed down orally, is not established by documents, but it shows the place this church holds in the memory of people of African descent.

What you can see

The church is an example of the Baroque art of Minas Gerais, with its white façade and towers, and an interior decorated with carved and gilded wood. The statue of Saint Ephigenia holds a place of honor. The whole town of Ouro Preto, with its many Baroque churches, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. From the forecourt, the view stretches over the roofs and hills of the town.

Praying there

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Ephigenia. In the church, entrust to her consecrated women, the Christians of Africa and those who suffer injustice, and pray for all who prayed here in the suffering of slavery. Then say the prayer to Saint Ephigenia. The popular festivals of the Congado, which honor Our Lady of the Rosary and Saint Ephigenia, are a high point of the religious life of the town. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Ouro Preto is about a hundred kilometers from Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais, and can be reached by road. The town is very hilly: bring good shoes to climb up to the church. It is a place of worship: modest dress and silence are requested. Opening hours, Mass times and visits may vary: check with the parish or the Ouro Preto tourist office before your visit.

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