BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Ephrem the Syrian

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: June 9

IN BRIEF

Saint Ephrem the Syrian

4th-century Syriac deacon, poet and theologian, called the Harp of the Holy Spirit, Doctor of the Church.

Feast day	June 9
Born	c. 306, Nisibis (today Nusaybin, Turkey)
Died	June 9, 373 (most probable date), Edessa (today Şanlıurfa, Turkey)
Canonized	immemorial cult; proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Benedict XV on October 5, 1920
Era	4th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Ephrem, Harp of the Holy Spirit

Novena to Saint Ephrem the Syrian

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Ephrem the Syrian

Saint Ephrem the Syrian, also called Ephrem of Nisibis, was a 4th-century Christian deacon and poet, born around 306 in Nisibis, on the border between the Roman Empire and Persia, and who died at Edessa in 373. The author of hundreds of hymns in the Syriac language, he received the title "Harp of the Holy Spirit". Pope Benedict XV proclaimed him a Doctor of the Church in 1920. The Latin Church celebrates him on June 9, the Byzantine-rite Churches on January 28.

Who was Saint Ephrem?

Ephrem belongs to Syriac-speaking Christianity, Syriac being a form of Aramaic, the language of Jesus. This Christianity grew up in Mesopotamia, far from the great Greek and Latin schools, with its own way of expressing the faith: through images, symbols and songs rather than definitions. Ephrem is its greatest representative. Theologian, interpreter of Scripture and teacher, he was above all a poet, who put the doctrine of the Church into hymns so that the people could sing it. His real life can be reconstructed from his own writings; later accounts, which make him a monk and credit him with great journeys, are largely legendary.

Key dates in the life of Ephrem

- **c. 306**: Born at Nisibis (today Nusaybin, in Turkey), probably into a Christian family.
- **After 308**: He grows up under the guidance of James, first bishop of Nisibis, who makes him a teacher of the Church.
- **338, 346 and 350**: Nisibis withstands three sieges by the Persian king Shapur II; Ephrem sings of the city's deliverance.

- **363**: After the defeat of Emperor Julian, Nisibis is handed over to Persia; Ephrem goes into exile with the Christians of the city.
- **363-373**: Settled at Edessa (today Şanlıurfa), he teaches and composes many hymns in defense of the faith of Nicaea.
- **June 9, 373**: Most probable date of his death, at Edessa, while he was caring for the sick during an epidemic.
- **October 5, 1920**: Pope Benedict XV proclaims him a Doctor of the Church.
- **November 28, 2007**: Pope Benedict XVI devotes a catechesis to him at a general audience.

The teacher of Nisibis

Nisibis was a frontier city, contested between Rome and Persia, where several languages were spoken and where pagans, Jews and various Christian groups lived side by side. Ephrem was baptized as a young man. He probably joined the "sons of the covenant", Christians who committed themselves to continence and to the service of the Church without living in a monastery. Bishop James, for whom he kept great affection, appointed him a teacher, a title still highly respected among Syriac Christians, and he was ordained a deacon. He would remain a deacon all his life.

He then began to compose hymns and biblical commentaries for the instruction of the faithful. He describes himself as a simple herdsman serving the shepherd. During the Persian sieges of Nisibis, he saw in the city's resistance a sign of God's protection; in 350, when King Shapur diverted a river to bring down the walls, he compared the city to Noah's ark floating on the waters.

Exile in Edessa

In 363, Emperor Jovian had to hand Nisibis over to the Persians, on condition that the Christians could leave the city. Ephrem, nearing sixty, left with the refugees, first for Amida, then for Edessa. This great city of the Syriac world was then divided among many rival doctrines: Arians, followers of Marcion, Manichaeans, disciples of the philosopher Bardaisan. Ephrem resumed his teaching and became a defender of the faith of the Council of Nicaea.

His method was original. His opponents spread their ideas through songs; he in turn composed hymns on popular tunes and, according to the Syrian bishop Jacob of Serugh, had them sung by choirs of women. Faith thus became music that the people kept in memory. According to tradition, he died ten years later, in 373, after caring for and comforting the sick during an epidemic that struck Edessa.

The Harp of the Holy Spirit

More than four hundred of Ephrem's hymns have come down to us, and we know that many others are lost. These hymns, called *madrāšê*, are gathered in collections: on faith, on paradise, on virginity, on the Nativity, against heresies, and the hymns of Nisibis. He also wrote homilies in verse and prose commentaries, notably on the *Diatessaron*, the harmony of the four Gospels then used in the Syriac Churches, and on Genesis and Exodus.

His poetry contemplates Christ through the symbols of Scripture and creation: the pearl, the garment, the light, the medicine. He sings with particular tenderness of the Virgin Mary, the Church and the Incarnation. He insists on respect for mystery: for him, what we understand of a word of God is always less than what it contains, just as a thirsty man does not drain the spring. His works were so loved that for centuries hundreds of texts were composed under his name, mostly in Greek; scholars speak of "Ephrem the

Greek" to distinguish them from his authentic writings. The famous Lenten prayer attributed to Saint Ephrem, recited in the Byzantine Churches, belongs to this body of texts.

Cult and iconography

Ephrem is venerated by all the Churches, East and West. The Syriac Churches still use his hymns in their liturgy, often in reworked versions. By proclaiming him a Doctor of the Church on October 5, 1920, Benedict XV wished to honor in him the richness of the Syriac tradition. His memorial, long kept on June 18 in the Latin calendar, is now celebrated on June 9, the probable date of his death; the Byzantine Churches keep his feast on January 28. Icons show him as a monk, often with a scroll or a book, sometimes in the scene of his dormition, surrounded by monks: an image that reflects the later tradition which made him an ascetic of the desert.

What can we learn from Saint Ephrem?

Ephrem shows that theology can be sung. He did not set thought against prayer: he wanted the truth of the faith to become praise, and the people to carry it on their lips. Exiled, he rebuilt his life and his service in a foreign city. A deacon to the end, he died serving the sick. We can pray to him for catechists, for musicians and cantors of the Church, for the Christians of the East and for refugees.

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

Where to pray to Saint Ephrem

- **Paris**: the church of Saint-Éphrem-le-Syriaque, rue des Carmes, in the Latin Quarter.

- With the Syriac Catholic and Maronite communities, who keep alive the liturgy in which his hymns resound.
- In any church on June 9, the day of his memorial in the Roman calendar.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Ephrem, Harp of the Holy Spirit

Saint Ephrem, deacon of Nisibis and Edessa, put the faith of the Church into hymns so that the people could sing it. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It draws on the images he loved, the spring, the light and the harp, and entrusts to him those who sing God's praise, catechists, the Christians of the East and exiles.

Prayer to Saint Ephrem

Saint Ephrem,
Harp of the Holy Spirit,
you sang of Christ in the language of his people
and taught the faithful to praise God with all their heart.
Put a song of thanksgiving on my lips,
and wonder at his mysteries in my heart.

You knew that the word of God is a spring
that our thirst can never exhaust:
teach me to return to it each day
with humility and joy.

Exiled from your city, you served without growing weary,
and gave your last strength to the sick.
Watch over refugees and the Christians of the East,
bless those who teach the faith and those who sing in our churches,
and keep us faithful to Christ, Son of the Virgin Mary.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Ephrem

- On his feast day, June 9 (January 28 in the Byzantine-rite Churches).
- Before singing at Mass or preparing the liturgy.
- For catechists, teachers and all who hand on the faith.
- For the Christians of the East, exiles and refugees.
- During Lent, when the prayer attributed to him is traditionally recited.

The Lenten prayer attributed to Saint Ephrem

The Byzantine Churches recite during Lent a prayer placed under his name. It is probably not his own, but it has entered tradition under his patronage. Here is a translation:

> *O Lord and Master of my life,*
> *take from me the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power and idle talk.*
> *Grant to your servant the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love.*
> *Yes, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother,*
> *for you are blessed unto ages of ages. Amen.*

Source: Lenten prayer of the Byzantine liturgy, attributed to Saint Ephrem.

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Ephrem from June 1 to 9, and read the life of Saint Ephrem.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Ephrem the Syrian

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It follows the life of Saint Ephrem the Syrian, deacon, poet and Doctor of the Church, and draws on the themes of his hymns. To finish it on his feast day in the Roman calendar, June 9, begin on June 1. If you follow the Byzantine calendar, which keeps his feast on January 28, begin on January 20. 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 Ephrem, pray for us." If you can, sing a hymn: it was the way of praying Saint Ephrem loved most.

Day 1: A frontier city

Ephrem was born in Nisibis, a city contested between two empires, where languages and religions mingled. It was there that he received the faith and baptism.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the place and the family where I received the faith. Help me bear witness to it where I live.

Act of the day: Give thanks for your baptism, making the Sign of the Cross with holy water.

Day 2: A bishop as a father

Bishop James of Nisibis trained Ephrem and entrusted him with teaching. Ephrem kept a deep affection for him.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who formed me in the faith, and give your Church shepherds who are fathers.

Act of the day: Pray for a priest or teacher who has mattered to you.

Day 3: Serving as a deacon

Ephrem remained a deacon all his life. He served the Word, the poor and the community, without seeking any other place.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve without seeking honors. Bless the deacons of your Church.

Act of the day: Do a discreet service without speaking of it.

Day 4: God protects his city

During the sieges of Nisibis, Ephrem saw the city hold firm, and compared it to Noah's ark floating above the waters.

Prayer: Lord, be my refuge in trials, and protect cities at war and their inhabitants.

Act of the day: Pray for a country at war and for those who live there.

Day 5: Taking the road of exile

In 363, Nisibis passed into Persian hands. Ephrem, nearly sixty, left with the refugees and began his life again at Edessa.

Prayer: Lord, watch over those who must leave their country. Give them a brotherly welcome and the strength to begin again.

Act of the day: Support an association that welcomes refugees, or pray for the Christians of the East.

Day 6: Singing the faith

At Edessa, Ephrem composed hymns on popular tunes and had them sung by choirs of women. The truth of the faith became a song everyone remembered.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, make my life a song of praise, and bless all who sing in our churches.

Act of the day: Sing or listen to a hymn and pray it attentively.

Day 7: The inexhaustible spring

Ephrem taught that the word of God is like a spring: whoever drinks does not drain it, and can always come back.

Prayer: Lord, give me thirst for your word, and the humility to recognize that it always surpasses me.

Act of the day: Read a psalm and keep one verse with you for the day.

Day 8: With Mary

Ephrem sang of the Virgin Mary with great tenderness: in her, the Son of God took our flesh.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, Mother of the Lord, teach me to welcome Christ as you did. Saint Ephrem, help me to love her.

Act of the day: Pray a decade of the Rosary meditating on the Annunciation.

Day 9: Serving the sick

According to tradition, Ephrem died in 373 after caring for the sick during an epidemic at Edessa. His life as a singer of God ended in service.

Prayer: Lord, bless the sick and those who care for them. Through the intercession of Saint Ephrem, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Visit or call someone who is ill.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Ephrem,*
> *deacon of Nisibis and Harp of the Spirit,*
> *you sang of Christ and served your brothers to the end.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Give me a heart that praises,*
> *a faith that wonders*
> *and hands ready to serve.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Credits and sources

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