

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Eustochium

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 28

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IN BRIEF

Saint Eustochium

Roman virgin, daughter of Saint Paula and disciple of Saint Jerome, abbess of the nuns of Bethlehem.

Feast day	September 28
Born	c. 368, Rome
Died	c. 419, Bethlehem
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Eustochium, Friend of the Word of God

Novena to Saint Eustochium

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Eustochium

Saint Eustochium was a young Roman noblewoman of the fourth century, daughter of Saint Paula and disciple of Saint Jerome. Consecrated to God as a teenager, she followed her mother to the Holy Land, helped her found monasteries in Bethlehem, and then led the community of nuns alone until her death around 419. A woman of prayer and study who read the Bible in Hebrew, she inspired several of Saint Jerome's works. The Roman Martyrology celebrates her on September 28.

Who was Saint Eustochium?

Julia Eustochium belonged to the highest aristocracy of Rome. Almost everything we know about her comes from the letters of Saint Jerome, who was her spiritual guide for more than thirty years and addressed some of his most famous writings to her.

Through her, we glimpse one of the first great movements of women's monastic life in the West: educated, often wealthy women who gave up marriage and luxury for a life of poverty, prayer and study of Scripture. Her Greek name, *Eustochium*, suggests the idea of "reaching the goal", of aiming true.



Saint Eustochium, by Juan de Valdés Leal (Bowes Museum).

Key dates in the life of Saint Eustochium

- **c. 368**: Born in Rome, to the senator Toxotius and Paula.
- **c. 380**: Her father dies; her mother chooses a life of renunciation and prayer.
- **382-385**: Saint Jerome, in Rome, becomes the spiritual guide of Paula and Eustochium.
- **c. 384**: She makes a vow of virginity; Jerome writes her his great letter on virginity (Letter 22).
- **385-386**: She leaves for the East with her mother, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and to visit the monks of Egypt.
- **386-389**: In Bethlehem, foundation of a monastery for women, a monastery for men and a guesthouse for pilgrims.
- **404**: Saint Paula dies; Eustochium takes charge of the nuns.

- **416-417**: The Bethlehem monasteries are attacked and set on fire; Jerome and Eustochium appeal to Pope Innocent I.
- **c. 419**: Dies in Bethlehem, on September 28 according to tradition, and is buried near her mother.

A daughter of the Roman aristocracy

Eustochium was born around 368 into an illustrious family. Her mother Paula, according to Jerome, descended from the Gracchi and the Scipios; her father Toxotius was a senator. She had a brother and three sisters, among them Blesilla, who turned to an ascetic life before dying very young.

When her father died, Paula, still young, refused to remarry and adopted with her daughter a life of simplicity and prayer, within the circle of Christian women who gathered on the Aventine Hill around the noblewoman Marcella.

When Jerome stayed in Rome from 382 to 385, in the service of Pope Damasus, the two women became his disciples. He explained Scripture to them and encouraged them to learn Greek and Hebrew. Part of the family disapproved. Jerome tells that Eustochium's uncle Hymettius and his wife Praetextata tried to bring her back to worldly life by dressing her and doing her hair in the latest fashion, in vain.

The letter on virginity

Around 384, Eustochium, then about sixteen, consecrated her virginity to Christ. On this occasion Jerome wrote her a long letter, *Letter 22*, often called the treatise "on keeping virginity". It became one of the most widely read texts of Christian antiquity.

Jerome describes the life of the consecrated virgin as that of a bride of Christ, nourished by night prayer, reading and simplicity of life. He also tells of his own dream in which he was accused of being "a Ciceronian, not a Christian".

The tone, at times biting toward the Roman clergy, helped earn him enemies.

> *"Ever let the privacy of your chamber guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within." (Jerome, Letter 22, to Eustochium)*



The departure of Saint Paula and Saint Eustochium for the Holy Land, by Giuseppe Bottani.

From Rome to Bethlehem

In 385, after the death of Damasus, Jerome left Rome. Paula and Eustochium followed him soon after. Together they visited the holy places of Palestine, then Egypt, where they met the desert monks of Nitria. In 386 they settled for good in Bethlehem, near the grotto of the Nativity.

With Paula's fortune, they founded a monastery for women, organized in three groups according to the sisters' social background, a monastery for men entrusted to Jerome, and a guesthouse to welcome the many pilgrims flocking

to the holy places. The nuns gathered several times a day in the oratory to sing the psalms, worked with their hands and learned Scripture by heart.

A woman of study

Eustochium spoke Latin and Greek fluently and read Hebrew. Her knowledge of the Bible and her questions spurred on the work of Jerome, who was then translating the Bible from the Hebrew.

He dedicated to her, together with her mother, several prefaces and commentaries, notably his commentaries on the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. After Paula's death in 404, he addressed to her the long eulogy of her mother (Letter 108). Eustochium thus played a discreet but real part in the history of the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible used for centuries.

Abbess in a time of trial

On the death of Saint Paula, Eustochium took charge of the nuns. The family fortune was spent, and times were hard. In 416 or 417, armed bands attacked the Bethlehem monasteries, looted them and burned part of the buildings; servants were killed. Supporters of Pelagius, against whom Jerome had written, were suspected.

Jerome and Eustochium wrote to Pope Innocent I, who sharply rebuked the bishop of Jerusalem for failing to protect them. Eustochium died soon after, around 419, about a year before Jerome. Her niece succeeded her.

Why pray to Saint Eustochium?

Saint Eustochium has no official patronage, but her life gives clear reasons to turn to her. She is a reminder that the study of God's Word has never been reserved to men or to clergy. She joined prayer and intelligence, hidden life and

service to pilgrims, and stayed faithful to her consecration through the trials of a poor and threatened community.

She can be invoked by consecrated persons, students of theology and Scripture, translators, and mothers and daughters who walk together in faith.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Eustochium in art

Painters have often shown her alongside her mother and Saint Jerome, dressed as a nun, with a book or scroll in her hand, as in the painting attributed to Francisco de Zurbarán in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Scenes of the departure of Paula and Eustochium for the Holy Land are also found.



Saint Jerome with Saint Paula and Saint Eustochium, painting attributed to Zurbarán.

Where to pray to Saint Eustochium

- **Bethlehem**: the Grottoes of Saint Jerome, beneath the Church of Saint Catherine, where tradition places the tomb of Paula and Eustochium.
- **Bethlehem**: the Basilica of the Nativity, next to the site of their monasteries.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, which claims relics of Saint Jerome, her teacher.
- The monasteries of the Order of Saint Jerome (Hieronymites) in Spain, which honor her as a founding figure.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Eustochium and the novena to Saint Eustochium.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Eustochium, Friend of the Word of God

Saint Eustochium, consecrated virgin and abbess in Bethlehem, can be invoked by consecrated persons, by those who study the Word of God and by families. No traditional prayer of her own has come down to us, so this page offers an original prayer, followed by a short invocation together with her mother, Saint Paula. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

Prayer to Saint Eustochium

Saint Eustochium,
while still young you chose Christ as your only Bridegroom.
Teach me to give him the first place in my life.

You left Rome, its wealth and its honors,
to live poor in Bethlehem, near the manger.
Give me a simple heart, free from the things that pass away.

You read Scripture in Hebrew and in Greek,
and you helped Saint Jerome in his work.
Give me a taste for the Word of God:
may I read it every day, ponder it,
and let it transform my life.

You guided your sisters in poverty and in trial,
when the monasteries were attacked.
Support all who carry a heavy responsibility,
and all who live the consecrated life today.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).
Through your intercession, may I seek God with perseverance,
and reach, as your name promises, the true goal of my life.
Amen.



Saint Paula and Saint Eustochium, mother and daughter.

Invocation with Saint Paula

> *Saint Paula and Saint Eustochium, mother and daughter united in the same love of Christ, pray for our families. Help parents and children to walk together in faith, to understand and support one another. Amen.*

When to pray this prayer

Saint Eustochium is celebrated on September 28, two days before Saint Jerome. You can pray to her:

- at the time of a religious profession or consecration;
- before an exam or a piece of Bible study;
- for a family relationship that needs healing, especially between a mother and her daughter;

- for the monasteries and Christians of the Holy Land.

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Eustochium

This novena to Saint Eustochium is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the young Roman noblewoman who gave her life to Christ, followed her mother Saint Paula to Bethlehem, studied Scripture with Saint Jerome and led the nuns of Bethlehem through hard times. To end on her feast day, September 28, begin it on September 20. You can also pray it at any time, for a vocation, a time of study or a family.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act suggested. Since Eustochium loved the Bible, you might keep a Bible open beside you and read a few verses each day. If you miss a day, simply continue the next, without discouragement.

Day 1: A name that points to the goal

Her Greek name, Eustochium, suggests "reaching the goal" or "aiming true". Her whole life was directed toward one aim: belonging to Christ. We too need to ask what the real goal of our life is.

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, help me to keep my eyes fixed on God, the true goal of my life. Amen.

Today: Write down in one sentence what you most want your life to be about.

Day 2: Mother and daughter

When her father died, Eustochium and her mother Paula chose together a life of simplicity and prayer. Their bond of faith lasted all their lives, from Rome to Bethlehem. Families can be places where faith is shared and strengthened.

Prayer: Saint Paula and Saint Eustochium, pray for mothers and daughters, and for all parents and children, that they may support one another in faith. Amen.

Today: Reach out to a parent or child with a word of affection.

Day 3: Resisting the pressure of the world

Jerome tells that an uncle and aunt tried to draw Eustochium back to worldly life by dressing her in fashionable clothes and styling her hair. She did not give in. Faith sometimes means quietly going against the current.

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, give me the courage to stay faithful to Christ when others pull me in another direction. Amen.

Today: Give up one thing done only to impress others.

Day 4: Consecrated to Christ

Around 384, at about sixteen, Eustochium consecrated her virginity to Christ. Jerome wrote her a famous letter on this way of life, nourished by prayer at night, reading and simplicity. A life given to God is a life of love, not of loss.

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, pray for all consecrated men and women, and for young people discerning their vocation. Amen.

Today: Pray for a priest, a religious sister or brother you know.

Day 5: Learning the Word of God

Encouraged by Jerome, Eustochium learned Greek and Hebrew so that she could read Scripture in its original languages. Her love for the Bible was a love for God who speaks.

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, give me a hunger for the Word of God and the perseverance to read it every day. Amen.

Today: Read a psalm slowly, and choose one verse to carry through the day.

Day 6: Leaving everything for Bethlehem

In 385 and 386, Eustochium left Rome with her mother, visited the holy places and the monks of Egypt, and settled in Bethlehem, near the grotto where Christ was born. She chose to live close to the poverty of the manger.

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, help me to let go of what holds me back from following Jesus more closely. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Christians of the Holy Land.

Day 7: Welcoming pilgrims

In Bethlehem, Paula and Eustochium founded not only monasteries but also a guesthouse for the many pilgrims. Prayer and hospitality went hand in hand. Welcoming others is a way of welcoming Christ.

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, make my heart and my home open to those who are far from home. Amen.

Today: Do something concrete for a stranger, a migrant or a newcomer.

Day 8: Leading in hard times

After Paula's death, Eustochium led the nuns with little money. Around 416, armed bands attacked and burned the monasteries. She did not abandon her sisters, and with Jerome she appealed to Pope Innocent I.

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, support all who carry heavy responsibilities, and all communities facing violence or poverty. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians who are persecuted today.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Eustochium died in Bethlehem around 419 and was buried near her mother, close to the grotto of the Nativity. She remained faithful to her first promise until the end, having truly "reached the goal".

Prayer: Saint Eustochium, obtain for me the grace of perseverance, so that I too may reach the goal of eternal life. Amen.

Today: Thank God for the people who have helped you grow in faith.

Closing prayer

On the last day, end the novena with this prayer:

> *Lord our God, you gave Saint Eustochium a great love for your Word and the strength to serve you in poverty and in trial. Through her intercession, give us a love for Scripture, faithfulness in our vocation and courage in difficult times. Bless our families, consecrated persons and the Christians of the Holy Land. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Eustochium on any day, and read her life.

CREDITS

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