

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Pope Saint Gelasius I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: November 21

IN BRIEF

Pope Saint Gelasius I

Pope from 492 to 496, author of the famous doctrine of the two powers.

Feast day	November 21
Died	November 21, 496, Rome
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Gelasius I for the Church and Those Who Govern

Novena to Saint Gelasius I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Pope Saint Gelasius I

Saint Gelasius I was bishop of Rome from 492 to 496. His pontificate lasted only four and a half years, but his letters left a lasting mark on Christian thinking about the relationship between the Church and political power. An unbending defender of the Roman primacy during the Acacian Schism and attentive to the poor of his diocese, he is celebrated on November 21, the anniversary of his death.

Who was Saint Gelasius I?

Little is known about his life before his election. The *Liber Pontificalis*, the ancient chronicle of the popes, describes him as the son of a certain Valerius and a native of Africa. Yet in a letter to the emperor, Gelasius presents himself as "Roman born." Historians therefore often lean toward a birth in Rome into a family of African origin. He is usually counted, with Saint Victor I and Saint Miltiades, among the popes linked to Roman Africa.

Before his election he was the closest collaborator of his predecessor, Pope Felix III, whose letters he drafted. He succeeded him on March 1, 492, the very day Felix died. This long apprenticeship at the heart of the Roman Church explains the assurance with which he governed from the first day.



Pope Gelasius I, imaginary portrait.

Key dates in the life of Gelasius I

- **Before 492**: Collaborator and secretary of Pope Felix III.
- **March 1, 492**: Elected bishop of Rome.
- **493**: The Ostrogothic king Theodoric takes power in Italy.
- **494**: Letter to Emperor Anastasius I on the two powers.
- **November 21, 496**: Dies in Rome.

The time of the Acacian Schism

Since 476, Italy had been ruled by barbarian leaders, while the Roman Empire lived on in Constantinople. In 482, hoping to calm the disputes over the nature of Christ, Emperor Zeno, at the urging of Patriarch Acacius, issued an "edict of union" (the *Henotikon*) that passed over the Council of Chalcedon in

silence. That council, in 451, had defined that Christ is one person in two natures, divine and human, following the teaching of Pope Saint Leo the Great.

Rome saw the edict as a betrayal of the faith and broke communion with Constantinople. This was the Acacian Schism, which lasted thirty-five years. Gelasius held to this position without yielding, against Emperor Anastasius and despite pressure from Theodoric, the new master of Italy. For him, peace between Churches could not be bought at the price of the truth of the faith. He did not live to see the end of the schism, which came only in 519, under Pope Hormisdas, when Constantinople accepted once again the faith of Chalcedon and communion with Rome.

The letter on the two powers

In 494 Gelasius wrote to Emperor Anastasius a letter that became famous. In it he states that the world is governed by two principles: "the sacred authority of the bishops and the royal power." The charge of priests is, in his view, the heavier of the two, because they will have to answer before God even for kings. The emperor rules over the human race, but in matters of faith he is a son of the Church like every Christian. The letter is often cited by its Latin opening words, *Duo quippe sunt*, "For there are two." Gelasius does not confuse the two powers, nor does he set them against each other: each comes from God and has its own field, and each must respect the other.

This text, known as the "Gelasian" doctrine of the two powers, was read and reread throughout the Middle Ages, notably by Pope Saint Gregory VII in his struggle for the freedom of the Church. It remains one of the founding texts in the long Christian reflection on the distinction between spiritual and temporal authority.

An attentive shepherd

In Rome, Gelasius watched over the recruitment and conduct of the clergy. He had an inventory drawn up of the Church's revenues and divided its resources into four shares: one for the bishop, one for the clergy, one for the poor and one for the upkeep of churches. In this way the poor received a fixed share, rather than depending on the generosity of the moment.

What is wrongly attributed to him

Several texts bear his name without being his work. The "Gelasian Sacramentary," a collection of liturgical prayers, is a 6th-century compilation. The "Decree of Gelasius," which distinguishes the accepted books from the apocryphal ones, was composed in Gaul from Roman materials.

Finally, the tradition that he abolished the pagan festival of the Lupercalia to create Candlemas, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, does not stand up to examination: the feast is attested in Jerusalem as early as the end of the 4th century.



Old Saint Peter's Basilica, in the time of the popes of late Antiquity.

Why is Saint Gelasius I remembered today?

No traditional patronage is attached to Saint Gelasius. He is remembered above all as a man of conviction, who refused to sacrifice the truth of the faith to political arrangements and who affirmed the freedom of the Church before the powers of this world. Christians in public life, lawyers, and all who seek the right relationship between conscience and authority can find in him a clear witness. His care for the poor also reminds us that sound doctrine and concrete charity go together.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Gelasius I in art

- **Papal vestments**, often with the tiara in later imaginary portraits, since no likeness of him from his own time survives.
- **A raised hand in blessing**, as in the series of papal portraits.

- **A book or a letter**, recalling his writings and his famous letter to the emperor.



The Mausoleum of Theodoric in Ravenna, recalling the king who ruled Italy in the time of Gelasius.

Where to pray to Saint Gelasius I

No major shrine is dedicated to Saint Gelasius. Pilgrims to Rome can remember him at Saint Peter's Basilica, the heart of the Roman Church he served and defended. You can also pray with him using the prayer to Saint Gelasius I and the novena to Saint Gelasius I.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Gelasius I for the Church and Those Who Govern

Saint Gelasius I, pope from 492 to 496, is remembered for his firmness in the faith during the Acacian Schism, for his famous letter on the two powers, and for the share of the Church's goods he reserved for the poor. No traditional prayer addressed to him has come down to us. Saintspedia offers here an original prayer inspired by his life and teaching.

Prayer to Saint Gelasius I

Saint Gelasius, faithful shepherd of the Church of Rome, you did not trade the truth of the faith for the favor of emperors and kings. Give me the courage to remain faithful to Christ when it costs me something.

You who reminded the powerful that they too are sons of the Church, pray for those who govern nations, cities and institutions, that they may serve the common good and respect the conscience of every person.

You who set aside a fixed share of the Church's goods for the poor, open my heart and my hands to those in need, not only from time to time but faithfully.

Pray for the Pope and for all the bishops, that they may guide the Church in truth and unity. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me a faith that is clear, firm and full of charity, until the day I see the Lord face to face. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Gelasius I is celebrated on November 21, the anniversary of his death in Rome in 496. This prayer is especially suitable:

- for the Pope and the bishops, particularly in times of division in the Church;
- for Christians in public life, politicians, judges and civil servants;
- when you are under pressure to compromise your convictions;
- for the unity of Christians of East and West;
- before deciding how to share your resources with the poor.

A short prayer for those who govern

> *Lord, from you comes all authority. Give to those who govern us wisdom, justice and respect for the freedom of conscience, and give to your Church the courage to speak the truth with love. Through the prayers of Saint Gelasius, may every power serve your Kingdom of justice and peace. Amen.*

This short prayer is also an original text by Saintspedia. For nine days of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Gelasius I, and read the life of Saint Gelasius I.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Gelasius I

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and writings of Pope Saint Gelasius I. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish on the eve of his feast of November 21, begin on November 12. It can also be prayed at any time for the Church, for those who govern, or for the grace of firmness in the faith.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the 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 each day helps turn the prayer into a concrete step.

You may begin each day with this prayer: *Lord, you gave your Church a faithful shepherd in Saint Gelasius. Through his intercession, strengthen my faith, make my charity generous, and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off. What matters is perseverance, not perfection.

Day 1: A faithful collaborator

Before becoming pope, Gelasius served his predecessor Felix III for years, drafting his letters. He learned to serve the Church in the shadows before being asked to lead it. Faithfulness in a secondary role is often the best preparation for responsibility.

Prayer: Lord, help me to serve faithfully wherever I am placed, without seeking the first place.

Today: Help a colleague or a family member with a task, without expecting thanks.

Day 2: Rooted in two continents

The ancient chronicle says he came from Africa, and he called himself Roman born. Gelasius reminds us that the Church has always been made of many peoples, gathered into one family by the same faith.

Prayer: Lord, make your Church a home for every people, language and culture.

Today: Pray for the Church in Africa, and for a Christian community very different from your own.

Day 3: The truth about Christ

At the heart of the Acacian Schism was the faith of Chalcedon: Christ is truly God and truly man. Gelasius would not let that confession be blurred for the sake of political peace. To know who Jesus really is matters for everything else.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, true God and true man, help me to know you better and to love you more.

Today: Read slowly the Creed and pause on the words about Christ.

Day 4: Firmness without hatred

Gelasius held his position against the emperor and the patriarch for the whole of his pontificate. Firmness in the faith is not harshness toward people; it is fidelity to a truth that does not belong to us and that we have no right to bargain away.

Prayer: Lord, give me a firm faith and a gentle heart.

Today: In a disagreement, defend what is true without raising your voice or wounding the other.



Pope Gelasius I, imaginary portrait.

Day 5: The two powers

In his letter to Emperor Anastasius, Gelasius distinguished the sacred authority of bishops from the royal power. Each has its own field, and each must respect the other. Our faith is not a private opinion, but neither is it a political tool.

Prayer: Lord, give wisdom and justice to those who govern, and freedom to your Church.

Today: Pray by name for the leaders of your country, your city or your workplace.

Day 6: Even emperors are children of God

Gelasius reminded the emperor that, in matters of faith, he was a son of the Church like any Christian. No one is above God's law, and no one is too great to need his mercy.

Prayer: Lord, keep me humble before you, whatever authority I may have over others.

Today: Examine how you use the authority you have, at home, at work or in your community.

Day 7: A share for the poor

Gelasius divided the resources of the Church into four parts and reserved one for the poor. Charity was not left to chance or mood; it was written into the way the Church was run. Generosity that is planned and regular often reaches further than a sudden impulse, because the poor can count on it.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to give regularly and generously to those in need.

Today: Set aside a fixed sum, even a small one, for the poor or for a charity.

Day 8: Caring for the clergy

Gelasius watched closely over the recruitment and conduct of the clergy of Rome. A Church is renewed when its ministers are well chosen, well formed and supported in their mission.

Prayer: Lord, send holy priests to your Church, and keep in your grace those who already serve.

Today: Pray for the seminarians of your diocese, or thank your parish priest.

Day 9: Unity in truth

Gelasius died without seeing the end of the schism with Constantinople, which came only years later. He sowed in faithfulness what others would reap. Christian unity is God's work, and it grows through the patience of many generations.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the prayers of Saint Gelasius, make your Church one in truth and love. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christian unity, especially between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

Closing prayer

Saint Gelasius, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have carried. Pray for the Pope and the bishops, for those who govern the nations and for the poor. Obtain for me a faith that does not bend before the powerful, a charity that does not forget the weakest, and a love for the unity of the Church. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Gelasius I and the prayer to Saint Gelasius I.

Credits and sources

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