

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Pope Saint Gregory III

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 10

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IN BRIEF

Pope Saint Gregory III

Syrian-born pope from 731 to 741, defender of holy images against Byzantine iconoclasm.

Feast day	December 10
Born	Syria
Died	741, Rome
Era	8th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Gregory III for the Christians of the East

Novena to Saint Gregory III

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Pope Saint Gregory III

Saint Gregory III was pope from 731 to 741. Born in Syria, he was the last bishop of Rome to come from the East, and for nearly thirteen centuries he remained the last pope born outside Europe, until the election of Pope Francis in 2013. His pontificate unfolded between two threats: the iconoclast crisis launched by the Byzantine emperor and the pressure of the Lombards on Rome. The Roman Martyrology commemorates him on December 10.

Who was Saint Gregory III?

Very little is known about his life before his election. He was the son of a Syrian named John; his family had perhaps taken refuge in Rome after the Arab conquest of Syria. He spoke both Latin and Greek, and two ancient sources describe him as a monk. His titular church was San Crisogono, in Trastevere, dedicated to the martyr Saint Chrysogonus.

His biographers describe him as a gentle and wise man, steeped in the Scriptures and knowing the psalms by heart. On the death of Pope Saint Gregory II, he was elected by the people of Rome on February 11, 731. He was the fifth pope of Syrian origin.



The church of San Crisogono in Rome, the titular church of Gregory III.

Key dates in the life of Gregory III

- **February 11, 731**: Elected in Rome.
- **March 18, 731**: Consecrated, after receiving the approval of the exarch of Ravenna.
- **731**: A synod in Rome condemns iconoclasm.
- **732**: He sends the pallium to Saint Boniface.
- **739**: Appeals to Charles Martel against the Lombards.
- **741**: Dies in Rome, at the end of the year.

The last pope to seek the approval of Byzantium

In the 8th century Rome was still, in theory, part of the Byzantine Empire, represented in Italy by the exarch of Ravenna. Gregory III was the last pope to request the exarch's approval before being consecrated, which delayed his

consecration by more than a month.

This detail marks the end of an era. After him, the papacy would turn more and more toward the West, and the bond between Rome and Constantinople would continue to loosen in the decades that followed.

The defense of holy images

Emperor Leo III the Isaurian had forbidden the veneration of images, and icons were being removed or destroyed in the churches of the empire. His predecessor Gregory II had already protested, but the conflict now became open. In 731, at the very start of his pontificate, Gregory gathered a synod in Rome that condemned iconoclasm and excommunicated those who destroyed or profaned images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the apostles and the saints.

The legates sent to carry this decree to Constantinople were arrested on the way. In retaliation, the emperor removed the regions of southern Italy from the pope's jurisdiction and confiscated property of the Roman Church in Sicily. The crisis also brought to Rome Byzantine artists driven out by persecution, who enriched the churches of the city.

At the same time in the East, Saint John Damascene was also defending the veneration of images in his writings. For both of them, honoring an icon is not idolatry: the honor passes to the one it represents, Christ made visible in the flesh, and his saints.



Gregory III in the gallery of papal portraits at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Boniface, the Franks and the poor

Gregory III supported the mission of Saint Boniface, the Anglo-Saxon monk from Wessex who became the apostle of Germany. He sent him the pallium, the woolen band worn by archbishops as a sign of their communion with the pope, and entrusted him with organizing new dioceses. Through Boniface, the pope's support reached the young Churches beyond the Rhine, where English missionaries were then playing a leading role.

The Lombards, a Germanic people settled in northern and central Italy since the 6th century, were then ruled by King Liutprand and were steadily pressing on the lands around Rome. Faced with this threat, he had the city walls restored and, in 739, asked for the help of Charles Martel, leader of the Franks.

Charles did not respond, but this appeal opened the way to the alliance between the papacy and the Franks that his son Pepin the Short would bring about.

His contemporaries also remembered his charity: he ransomed captives and came to the aid of widows and orphans.

Why is Saint Gregory III remembered today?

No particular patronage is attached to Saint Gregory III. He is remembered as a learned and gentle shepherd who held firm on the veneration of images before the emperor, while protecting the Romans and the poorest in practical ways. The sources about him remain thin, but his pontificate stands at the turning point that moved the papacy from the Byzantine horizon to the Frankish world.

For Catholics of the Middle East, he is also a reminder that the Church of Rome has received shepherds from Syria, and that the Christian roots of that land run deep.

His memory also speaks to all who love sacred art. The icons, statues and stained glass windows that help us pray today owe something to the popes and theologians who, like Gregory III, defended the place of images in Christian worship at a time when it was seriously threatened. His commemoration on December 10, in the heart of Advent, invites us to contemplate the face of the God who became visible in Jesus Christ.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Gregory III in art

- **Papal vestments** and a halo, in the series of papal portraits.
- **The mosaic medallion** of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, where he appears among the popes in chronological order.

- **An icon** held or venerated, in modern images recalling his defense of holy images.



The walls of Rome, which Gregory III had restored.

Where to pray to Saint Gregory III

No major shrine is dedicated to Saint Gregory III. In Rome, pilgrims can remember him at the church of San Crisogono in Trastevere, his titular church, and at Saint Peter's Basilica, the heart of the Church he served. You can also pray with him using the prayer to Saint Gregory III and the novena to Saint Gregory III.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Gregory III for the Christians of the East

Saint Gregory III, pope from 731 to 741, was born in Syria and defended the veneration of holy images against the iconoclast emperor of Byzantium. His biographers remember him as a gentle man who knew the psalms by heart and cared for captives, widows and orphans. No traditional prayer addressed to him has come down to us, so Saintspedia offers here an original prayer inspired by his life.

Prayer to Saint Gregory III

Saint Gregory III, shepherd of the Church of Rome, you came from the land of Syria to serve the successor of Peter. Pray for the Christians of the Middle East, who keep the faith in the lands where it was first proclaimed.

You who defended the holy images of Christ, of the Virgin Mary and of the saints, help me to welcome the beauty that leads to God, and to see in every face the image of the Creator.

You who knew the psalms by heart, teach me to make the prayer of the Church my own, morning and evening.

You who ransomed captives and helped widows and orphans, open my heart to those who are alone, imprisoned or abandoned. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me gentleness, wisdom and firmness in the faith, until the day I contemplate the face of the Lord. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

The Roman Martyrology commemorates Saint Gregory III on December 10, during Advent. This prayer is especially fitting:

- for the persecuted Christians of Syria and the whole Middle East;
- for artists, iconographers and all who serve the Church through beauty;
- before praying with an icon or a sacred image;
- for refugees, captives, widows and orphans;
- for the Pope and for the unity of the Churches of East and West.

A short prayer before an icon

> *Lord Jesus, you are the image of the invisible God. As I look upon this icon, let my eyes pass beyond the colors to you, and let my heart be renewed in your likeness. Through the prayers of Saint Gregory III, keep me faithful to the faith of the Church. Amen.*

This invocation, inspired by the Letter to the Colossians, is also an original text by Saintspedia. For nine days of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Gregory III, and read the life of Saint Gregory III.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Gregory III

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint Gregory III. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish on the eve of his commemoration of December 10, begin on December 1, in the first days of Advent. It can also be prayed at any time for the Christians of the Middle East or for the unity of the Church.

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. If you can, pray in front of an icon or a sacred image, in the spirit of the pope who defended them. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life.

You may begin each day with this prayer: *Lord, you gave your Church a gentle and faithful shepherd in Saint Gregory III. Through his intercession, show me your face and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

If you miss a day, simply continue where you stopped. What matters is perseverance in trust.

Day 1: From Syria to Rome

Gregory was the son of a Syrian named John, whose family had perhaps fled to Rome after the Arab conquest. The Church of Rome welcomed him and later chose him as its bishop. Exile can become, in God's hands, the beginning of a mission.

Prayer: Lord, protect refugees and exiles, and let them find a home among your people.

Today: Pray for a refugee family, or support an organization that welcomes them.

Day 2: The Christians of the East

Syria was one of the first lands of the Gospel: it was at Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. Gregory carried that heritage with him. Today the Christians of the Middle East often live through great trials.

Prayer: Lord, strengthen the Christians of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and the Holy Land, and give peace to their lands.

Today: Learn something about an Eastern Catholic Church and pray for it.

Day 3: The psalms by heart

His biographers say he knew the psalms by heart. The psalms were his daily bread, the words with which he spoke to God in joy and in distress. They can become ours too.

Prayer: Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Today: Pray one psalm slowly, perhaps Psalm 23, and learn one verse by heart.

Day 4: Gentleness and wisdom

His contemporaries remembered him as a gentle and wise man. In a time of conflict, he did not answer violence with violence. Gentleness is not weakness; it is the strength of those who trust in God.

Prayer: Lord, make me gentle and humble of heart, like you.

Today: Respond with gentleness to a person who irritates you.



Pope Gregory III, mosaic medallion at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Day 5: The face of Christ

In 731 Gregory gathered a synod to defend the holy images. Because the Son of God became man, his face can be shown and contemplated. The icon is a window opened onto the mystery of the Incarnation, which we prepare to celebrate at Christmas.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, image of the invisible God, let me contemplate your face and be transformed by it.

Today: Spend five minutes in silence before an image of Christ.

Day 6: Mary and the saints

The synod of Rome defended the images of the Virgin Mary, the apostles and the saints. They remind us that we are not alone: a great cloud of witnesses surrounds us and prays for us.

Prayer: Holy Mary and all the saints, pray for us and lead us to Christ.

Today: Place an image of Mary or of your patron saint where you will see it every day.

Day 7: Firm before the powerful

The emperor arrested his legates and confiscated the goods of the Roman Church. Gregory did not give way. Faithfulness sometimes has a cost, but the truth of the faith is not ours to negotiate.

Prayer: Lord, give me courage when my faith is mocked or opposed.

Today: Pray for Christians who suffer for their faith.

Day 8: Supporting the missionaries

Gregory sent the pallium to Saint Boniface, the English monk who was evangelizing Germany. The pope encouraged from afar those who carried the Gospel to new peoples. Every missionary needs others who pray and support him.

Prayer: Lord, bless missionaries throughout the world, and send new workers into your harvest.

Today: Pray for a missionary, or give to a missionary work.

Day 9: Captives, widows and orphans

Gregory restored the walls of Rome to protect his people, ransomed captives and helped widows and orphans. His defense of holy images went together with care for the living images of God, the poor.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Gregory III, make me attentive to the poor in whom you are present. Amen.

Today: Do a concrete act of charity for someone who is alone or in need.

Closing prayer

Saint Gregory III, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have carried. Pray for the Christians of the East, for the Pope and the bishops, for artists who serve the faith, and for all who are captive or abandoned. Obtain for me a gentle heart, a firm faith and eyes open to the face of Christ, as I prepare to welcome him at Christmas. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Gregory III and the prayer to Saint Gregory III.

CREDITS

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