

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Gregory the Great

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Gregory the Great

Pope from 590 to 604, monk, Father and Doctor of the Church, apostle of the English.

Feast day	September 3
Born	c. 540, Rome, Italy
Died	March 12, 604, Rome, Italy
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial cult); proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 1298
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	musicians, singers, teachers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Gregory the Great, Pope and Doctor of the Church

Novena to Saint Gregory the Great

San Gregorio al Celio, Saint Gregory's Monastery in Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Gregory the Great

Saint Gregory the Great, pope from 590 to 604, is one of the major figures of the passage from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. A former prefect of Rome who became a monk, elected pope in the middle of a plague, he governed the Church in an Italy ravaged by war, fed the people of Rome, sent missionaries to England and left writings that formed generations of pastors. A Father and Doctor of the Church, he is celebrated on September 3, the anniversary of his ordination as Bishop of Rome.

Who was Saint Gregory the Great?

Gregory was born around 540 in Rome, into a family of senatorial rank and deep Christian faith. His father Gordianus owned vast estates, his mother Silvia is honored as a saint, and Pope Felix III was among his ancestors.

He grew up in a city impoverished by the wars between the Byzantines and the Ostrogoths, then threatened by the Lombards, who invaded Italy in 568. Well trained in law and letters, he entered public service and, around 573, became prefect of Rome, the highest civil office in the city.

Key dates

- **c. 540**: Born in Rome.
- **c. 573**: Prefect of the city of Rome.
- **c. 574-575**: Becomes a monk and turns the family home on the Caelian Hill into a monastery dedicated to Saint Andrew.
- **c. 579-586**: As a deacon, represents the pope at the imperial court in Constantinople.

- **February 590**: Pope Pelagius II dies of the plague; Gregory is elected to succeed him.
- **September 3, 590**: Ordained Bishop of Rome.
- **c. 591**: Completes the *Pastoral Rule*.
- **593-594**: Writes the *Dialogues*, whose second book tells the life of Saint Benedict.
- **596**: Sends the monk Augustine and his companions to evangelize England.
- **March 12, 604**: Dies in Rome and is buried in Saint Peter's.
- **1298**: Pope Boniface VIII proclaims him a Doctor of the Church, with Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome.

From the palace to the monastery

When his father died, Gregory gave up his career. He founded six monasteries on the family lands in Sicily and turned his own house on the Caelian Hill into a monastery under the patronage of Saint Andrew. There he lived as a simple monk, in prayer, fasting and the reading of Scripture, to the point of damaging his health. All his life he would long for those years of silence.

Pope Pelagius II nevertheless drew him out of his retreat. He ordained him a deacon and sent him as his representative, or apocrisiarius, to the court of Constantinople, where Gregory stayed about six years. There he began his *Moralia on Job*, a vast spiritual commentary read in every medieval monastery.

A pope in troubled times

In 590 the plague struck Rome and carried off Pope Pelagius II. The clergy and people chose Gregory, who tried to escape the office. While waiting for the emperor's confirmation, he organized a great penitential procession through the city. A later tradition relates that during this procession the Archangel

Michael appeared on top of the mausoleum of Hadrian, sheathing his sword as a sign that the plague was ending; the building has since been called Castel Sant'Angelo, the Castle of the Holy Angel.

As pope, Gregory had to make up for the almost total absence of imperial authority. He organized the food supply of Rome from the Church's estates, ransomed prisoners, negotiated with the Lombards who besieged the city and protected its people. He called himself "servant of the servants of God," a title his successors have kept. His correspondence, more than eight hundred letters of which survive, shows a precise administrator and a pastor attentive to the details of each person's life.



The Archangel Michael on top of Castel Sant'Angelo, a memory of the procession of 590.

"Not Angles, but angels": the mission to England

According to a story told by Saint Bede the Venerable, before he became pope Gregory saw some young English slaves for sale in a Roman market and exclaimed that they were not Angles but angels. Whether or not the anecdote is historical, the missionary project was very real. In 596 he sent the prior of his monastery, Augustine, with about forty monks. They landed in Kent in 597, and King Æthelberht received baptism.

Gregory followed the mission through his letters. He advised the missionaries not to destroy the pagan temples but to turn them into churches, respecting what could be respected in local customs. This is why the English have long called him "the Apostle of the English," and why Canterbury traces its Christian roots to him.

A teacher of pastors

The *Pastoral Rule*, written at the start of his pontificate, describes what a bishop should be: a man of prayer and action, who adapts his words to each person and begins by reforming himself. It became the handbook of bishops throughout the Middle Ages. His *Homilies on the Gospels* and on Ezekiel, and his *Dialogues*, which made the figure of Saint Benedict widely known, nourished the piety of the West.

Why is Saint Gregory the patron saint of musicians?

Tradition credits him with the chant that bears his name, Gregorian chant. Historians think this repertoire took shape later, but Gregory did work to organize the Roman liturgy, and medieval artists liked to show him dictating chant under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He is therefore the patron of musicians and singers, especially church choirs, and of teachers, for his work as a teacher of pastors.

Gregory did not choose the burden he carried; he accepted it as a service, in spite of fragile health and a deep love for contemplative life. He shows that one can govern without seeking power, and that prayer does not take us away from the concrete needs of the poor. He is invoked for the pope and the bishops, for leaders, for church musicians and for teachers.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Gregory in art

- **Papal vestments** and often the papal tiara, since he is one of the four great Latin Doctors.
- **A dove** at his ear or on his shoulder, the Holy Spirit inspiring his writings.
- **A book or a writing desk**, for his many works.
- **A secretary** peering at him from behind a curtain, as in the miniature of Trier.

Where to pray to Saint Gregory the Great

- **Rome**: the Church of San Gregorio al Celio, on the site of his monastery of Saint Andrew.
- **Rome**: Saint Peter's Basilica, where his relics rest beneath the altar dedicated to him, in the Clementine Chapel.
- **Rome**: Castel Sant'Angelo, linked to the memory of the procession of 590.
- **Canterbury, England**: the cathedral and the ruins of Saint Augustine's Abbey, fruits of the mission he sent.



San Gregorio al Celio in Rome, on the site of the monastery founded by Gregory.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Gregory the Great, with three of his own sayings, or follow the novena to Saint Gregory the Great from August 25 to September 2, ending on the eve of his feast.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Gregory the Great, Pope and Doctor of the Church

Saint Gregory the Great did not leave a single prayer that bears his name, but his homilies and his *Pastoral Rule* contain famous sayings that can be meditated on and prayed. This page presents three of them, with their sources, followed by an original prayer to Saint Gregory for the Church and its pastors.

Three sayings of Saint Gregory

Translations from the Latin are by Saintspedia; the original texts are in the public domain.

> *"The proof of love is the work accomplished."*

Source: *Homilies on the Gospels*, homily 30, 1, preached on Pentecost on the words of Jesus: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word" (John 14:23). In Latin: *Probatio dilectionis exhibitio est operis*.

> *"The divine words grow with the one who reads them."*

Source: *Homilies on Ezekiel*, book I, homily 7, 8. This sentence is quoted by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 94) to show that our understanding of Scripture grows with a life of faith.

> *"The government of souls is the art of arts."*

Source: *Pastoral Rule*, part one, chapter 1. In Latin: *ars est artium regimen animarum*. Gregory explains there that no one should presume to guide others without long preparation.

Prayer to Saint Gregory the Great

> *Saint Gregory, you left honors behind for the silence of the monastery, then out of obedience accepted the care of the whole Church: pray for me.*
>
> *You called yourself the servant of the servants of God: teach me to serve without seeking the first place, and to carry my responsibilities with humility.*
>
> *You fed the hungry of Rome and ransomed captives: open my eyes to the poor around me. You sent missionaries to the ends of the known world: give me the desire to share the faith with respect.*
>
> *I entrust to you the pope, the bishops and priests, those who teach and those who sing the praise of God. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).*
>
> *May the Word of God grow in me as I read it, and may my love be proved by my deeds. Amen.*

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Gregory is celebrated on September 3, the anniversary of his episcopal ordination in 590; before the reform of the calendar in 1969, his feast was on March 12, the day of his death. You can pray to him for the pope and the

pastors of the Church, for a difficult mission, for a choir or a school, or for the dead: the tradition of "Gregorian Masses," thirty Masses celebrated on consecutive days for one deceased person, goes back to a story in his *Dialogues*.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Gregory the Great, and discover the life of Saint Gregory the Great.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Gregory the Great

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and writings of Saint Gregory the Great. It is not an official liturgical text or a text written by the saint. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on August 25: it ends on September 2, the day before his feast on September 3. You can also pray it at any time of year, for the Church and its pastors, before taking on a new responsibility, or for a mission that seems beyond you.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. Those who are able may sing or listen to a piece of Gregorian chant, in memory of the tradition that links it to Saint Gregory. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow the path of his life: the young prefect who gave everything up, the monk who loved silence, the pope who accepted a burden he had not sought, the shepherd who fed Rome in time of plague and war, and the teacher who sent missionaries to England and taught that love is proved by deeds.



Saint Gregory the Great, in a church window or statue.

Day 1: Leaving honors behind

As prefect of Rome, Gregory had everything the world could offer. Yet he chose to leave it all to give himself to God in a monastery. He did not despise his gifts; he simply put God first.

Prayer: Lord, free me from what weighs me down, and teach me to seek your Kingdom first.

Today: Let go of an object or a habit that takes up too much room in your life.

Day 2: A love for silence

All his life, Gregory missed the peace of the monastery of Saint Andrew. Silence and the reading of Scripture were for him the source of all action. A pastor who no longer prays soon has nothing left to give.

Prayer: Lord, give me each day a moment of silence to listen to you.

Today: Take fifteen minutes of silence, without a screen.

Day 3: Accepting the burden

Elected pope against his will, Gregory accepted out of obedience. Sometimes God calls us where we had not planned to go, and gives the strength for it along the way.

Prayer: Lord, make me ready for the mission you entrust to me, even if it is beyond me.

Today: Accept with a good heart a responsibility you have been hesitating to take on.

Day 4: Praying in times of trial

When the plague struck, Gregory called Rome to prayer and penance. In the face of a common disaster he did not set faith against action: he prayed, and he organized relief.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the cities and countries struck by epidemic, war or disaster.

Today: Support an organization that brings emergency aid.

Day 5: Feeding the poor

Gregory had grain distributed to the poor of Rome and, according to tradition, welcomed poor people at his table every day. For him, a shepherd is first of all responsible for the lives of the weakest.

Prayer: Lord, open my hands and my heart to those who are hungry, near me and far away.

Today: Share a meal or give to a food bank.

Day 6: Servant of the servants

Gregory refused pompous titles and called himself "servant of the servants of God." In the Church, authority is a service.

Prayer: Lord, I pray for the pope and for the bishops. Keep them humble and close to their people.

Today: Do a quiet favor for someone you supervise or work alongside.



Praying with Saint Gregory the Great.

Day 7: The Word that grows

"The divine words grow with the one who reads them." The more we read Scripture with faith, the more its depth is revealed. Scripture does not change, but the reader who prays with it grows.

Prayer: Lord, make me love your Word. May it grow in me and transform me.

Today: Read a chapter of one of the Gospels slowly.

Day 8: Sending out on mission

Gregory sent monks to England, a distant and unknown land. He asked them to respect what was good in the customs of the peoples they met.

Prayer: Lord, bless the missionaries of today. Give me, in my own measure, the grace to bear witness to you with respect.

Today: Pray for a country where the Church is small or little known.

Day 9: Love proved by deeds

"The proof of love is the work accomplished." At the end of this novena, Gregory invites us to turn our prayer into action.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Gregory the Great, may my love for you be seen in my life. Amen.

Today: Choose one concrete commitment to keep in the weeks ahead.

Closing prayer

Saint Gregory the Great, shepherd and teacher, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for the Church, for her pastors, for the poor and for the peoples who do not yet know Christ. Obtain for me the grace to unite prayer and service, as you did all your life. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

San Gregorio al Celio, Saint Gregory's Monastery in Rome

The church of San Gregorio Magno al Celio, on the Caelian Hill in Rome, stands on the site of the family home that Saint Gregory turned into a monastery around 575. He left from here to become pope, and from here, in 596, Augustine's mission set out for England. His relics rest in Saint Peter's Basilica.

The Monastery of Saint Andrew

When Gregory gave up his career, he dedicated his family's residence, on the slopes of the Caelian facing the Palatine, as a monastery dedicated to the apostle Andrew. He lived there as a monk before being sent to Constantinople, then became its abbot on his return. After his death, the monastery took his name. Today it is entrusted to Camaldolese monks, of the Benedictine tradition.



San Gregorio al Celio, Saint Gregory's monastery in Rome.

The church and its oratories

The present church, rebuilt in the Baroque period, is preceded by a 17th-century facade and a grand staircase. A small room is shown there as Gregory's cell, with an ancient marble seat known as "Saint Gregory's chair." Beside the church, three oratories are dedicated to Saint Silvia, his mother, to Saint Andrew, and to Saint Barbara. In the Oratory of Saint Andrew, frescoes by Domenichino and Guido Reni depict the apostle's martyrdom. The Oratory of Saint Barbara keeps a marble table where, according to tradition, Gregory served a meal each day to twelve poor men; legend adds that an angel once came and sat among them.

Praying at San Gregorio

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Gregory the Great. On site, the table of the poor invites you to entrust the hungry to God, and the memory of the missionaries who set out from here in 596 reminds us that every prayer opens onto the world. The prayer to Saint Gregory the Great can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



San Gregorio al Celio, Saint Gregory's monastery in Rome, interior.

Other places of Saint Gregory

- **Saint Peter's Basilica** (Vatican): his relics rest beneath the altar of Saint Gregory, in the Clementine Chapel.
- **Castel Sant'Angelo** (Rome): the statue of the Archangel Michael recalls the procession of 590.
- **Basilica of Saint Mary Major** (Rome): one of the gathering points of the great procession against the plague.

- **Canterbury** (England): the cathedral and the ruins of Saint Augustine's Abbey, founded following the mission of 597.

Practical information

San Gregorio al Celio is a few minutes' walk from the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus, near the Circo Massimo metro station. The Missionaries of Charity, founded by Saint Teresa of Calcutta, run a house of welcome nearby. The oratories are not always open: ask on site or check with the Camaldolese community. On September 3, his feast day, a special celebration is held.

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