

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Gregory the Illuminator

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 30

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IN BRIEF

Saint Gregory the Illuminator

Apostle of Armenia and first catholicos, who converted King Tiridates at the beginning of the 4th century.

Feast day	September 30
Born	c. 257
Died	c. 331
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial veneration)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	Armenia

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Gregory the Illuminator

Saint Gregory the Illuminator is the apostle of Armenia. Born around 257 and died around 331, he obtained, according to tradition, the conversion of King Tiridates after surviving for many years at the bottom of a pit. Thanks to him, Armenia became, at the beginning of the 4th century, the first kingdom to officially adopt Christianity. The first catholicos of the Armenian Church, he is venerated by both the Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic Churches, and the Roman Martyrology remembers him on September 30.

Who was Saint Gregory the Illuminator?

His title, "the Illuminator," says it all: he is the one who brought the light of Christ to an entire people. What we know of his life comes mainly from the *History of the Armenians* attributed to Agathangelos, written in the 5th century. This account mixes historical memories with many marvelous elements, and historians read it with caution. But Gregory's work, the Christianization of Armenia and the organization of its Church, is a solid historical fact.

Christianity was already present in Armenia before him, brought there according to tradition by the apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. But it was Gregory who made it the religion of the kingdom, founded bishoprics and trained a clergy.

Key dates in the life of Gregory the Illuminator

- **Around 257**: Born in Armenia, according to tradition into a noble family of Parthian origin.
- **Youth**: Raised in a Christian setting in Caesarea in Cappadocia; he marries and has two sons, Vrtanes and Aristakes.

- **Late 3rd century**: He refuses to sacrifice to the goddess Anahit; King Tiridates has him thrown into a pit at Khor Virap.
- **Around 301**: Freed, he obtains the healing and conversion of the king; Armenia becomes a Christian kingdom (the traditional date is 301; some historians suggest 314).
- **Around 314**: Ordained bishop in Caesarea in Cappadocia, he becomes the first catholicos of Armenia.
- **325**: His son Aristakes represents Armenia at the Council of Nicaea.
- **Around 331**: Dies in retirement, according to tradition in a cave in the region of Daranali.

The prisoner of Khor Virap

According to Agathangelos, Gregory returned to Armenia and entered the service of King Tiridates. During a feast in honor of the goddess Anahit, he refused to lay an offering before the idol. The king had him tortured, then thrown into a deep pit at Khor Virap, near the ancient capital Artashat, at the foot of Mount Ararat. Tradition says he remained there about thirteen years, secretly fed by a charitable woman, and that he survived among the snakes.

Meanwhile, Tiridates persecuted the Christians. The account tells of the martyrdom of a group of virgins who had taken refuge in Armenia, among them Saint Hripsime and Saint Gayane, whose churches are still venerated in Etchmiadzin. The king was then struck by a strange illness: tradition says he believed he had been turned into a wild boar. His sister, Khosrovidukht, learned in a dream that only Gregory could heal him.

The conversion of a kingdom

Brought out of the pit, Gregory prayed for the king, who was healed. Tiridates converted and was baptized with his court, followed by a large part of the people. The pagan temples were turned into churches. Gregory went to be

ordained bishop in Caesarea in Cappadocia, from where, according to tradition, he brought back relics of Saint John the Baptist. He organized the Church, founded bishoprics and schools, and entrusted teaching to priests trained in Greek and Syriac.

Tradition also tells of a vision: Christ, "the Only-Begotten," appeared to him and showed him with a golden hammer the place to build the first cathedral. This place was called Etchmiadzin, "where the Only-Begotten descended." The Cathedral of Etchmiadzin, in Vagharshapat, is still today the seat of the Catholicos of All Armenians.

A family of shepherds of the Church

Gregory had been married before his ordination. His two sons became priests. Aristakes succeeded him as catholicos and represented Armenia at the Council of Nicaea in 325. For nearly a century, Gregory's descendants governed the Armenian Church; the last of them was Saint Sahak the Great, who, with Saint Mesrop Mashtots, gave Armenia its alphabet. Gregory himself withdrew into solitude at the end of his life and died around 331.

His relics and his memory

Gregory's relics were scattered over the centuries. Some were venerated in Naples, in the church of San Gregorio Armeno, which bears his name. In 2000, for the 1700th anniversary of the baptism of Armenia, Pope Saint John Paul II gave a relic of Saint Gregory to Catholicos Karekin II, who brought it back to Etchmiadzin. In 2005, a statue of the saint was placed in an outer niche of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

For Armenians, the feast of Saint Gregory is one of the most important of the year; the Armenian Apostolic Church is sometimes called "Gregorian" in his honor.

Why is Saint Gregory the Illuminator the patron saint of Armenia?

Gregory is honored as the patron of Armenia because he made it the first Christian kingdom and gave its Church its first structure. Armenians all over the world, in their homeland and throughout the diaspora, see him as their father in the faith.

He went through the most extreme trial without denying his faith, and came out of it not to take revenge, but to heal his persecutor. His life speaks of the strength of faithfulness and forgiveness. It also reminds us that the Gospel can become the soul of an entire people. You can pray to him for the Christians of Armenia, for prisoners, for those going through a long time of darkness, and for the conversion of persecutors. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Gregory the Illuminator and the novena to Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Gregory the Illuminator in art

Gregory is usually shown as a bishop with a white beard, wearing liturgical vestments marked with crosses, holding a book of the Gospels and often blessing with his right hand. This is how he appears in the Byzantine mosaic of the Pammakaristos church in Istanbul. Armenian art also depicts him in the pit of Khor Virap, or healing King Tiridates, sometimes shown with the head of a boar.

Where to pray to Saint Gregory the Illuminator

- **Khor Virap** (Armenia): the monastery built over the pit where he was imprisoned, at the foot of Mount Ararat.
- **Etchmiadzin** (Vagharshapat): the cathedral whose founding tradition attributes to him, seat of the Catholicos of All Armenians.

- **Yerevan**: the Cathedral of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, consecrated in 2001 for the 1700th anniversary of the baptism of Armenia.
- **Naples**: the church of San Gregorio Armeno, long the guardian of his relics.
- **Rome**: his statue on the outside of Saint Peter's Basilica.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Gregory the Illuminator for Armenia and Prisoners

There is no traditional English prayer to Saint Gregory the Illuminator that can be quoted with certainty. Saintspedia offers below an original prayer inspired by what the Armenian tradition remembers of him: the prisoner of Khor Virap, the man of forgiveness who healed his persecutor, the apostle who brought the light of Christ to an entire people.

Light in the pit

According to Agathangelos, Gregory spent many years at the bottom of a pit, in darkness. When he came out, it was not to take revenge on the king who had thrown him there, but to pray for him and heal him. We can meditate with him on the words of the prologue of Saint John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Prayer to Saint Gregory the Illuminator for Armenia and for prisoners

Saint Gregory, you refused to worship idols: help me to place nothing above God.

You kept the faith at the bottom of the pit for many long years: be close to those who are imprisoned, sick, shut in by loneliness or despair. Let the light of Christ shine for them.

Once freed, you prayed for your persecutor and healed him: teach me to forgive, and to desire the good even of those who have hurt me.

Apostle of Armenia, watch over the Armenian people, in Armenia and throughout the world. Keep them in the faith, console them in their wounds and give them peace. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may my life in turn become a small light for those around me. 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 remembers Saint Gregory the Illuminator on September 30. The Armenian Church celebrates him on several movable dates during the year.

You can pray to him:

- for the Christians of Armenia and the Armenian diaspora;
- for prisoners, hostages and all who are held unjustly;

- in a long time of trial or darkness;
- when you find it hard to forgive;
- for the conversion of those who persecute Christians.

To go further, pray the novena to Saint Gregory the Illuminator or read the life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Gregory the Illuminator

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator as told by the Armenian tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his memorial in the Roman calendar, September 30, begin on September 21. You can also pray it at any time of year, especially for the Armenian people, for a prisoner, or in a long season of trial.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short 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 you carry the prayer into your life. If you miss a day, simply continue.

The Armenian Church honors Gregory as its father in the faith, and is sometimes even called "Gregorian" in his honor. Gregory's story moves from darkness to light. Let these nine days accompany you, too, from whatever darkness you carry toward the light of Christ.

Day 1: Raised in the faith

According to tradition, Gregory was raised in a Christian setting in Caesarea in Cappadocia. The faith he would one day bring to a whole kingdom was first received as a child, from others.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who passed on the faith to me. Bless parents, godparents and catechists. Saint Gregory, pray for me. Amen.

Today: Thank, in person or in prayer, someone who helped you to believe.

Day 2: Refusing the idols

At a feast of the goddess Anahit, Gregory refused to lay an offering before the idol, even though he was in the king's service. Today's idols are often money, success or the opinion of others.

Prayer: Lord, show me the idols in my life and give me the courage to place nothing above you. Amen.

Today: Give up for one day something that takes too much place in your heart.

Day 3: The bottom of the pit

Thrown into the pit of Khor Virap, Gregory remained there, according to tradition, about thirteen years. He kept the faith in darkness, cold and solitude.

Prayer: Lord, be close to all who are imprisoned, and to all who feel trapped in a pit of suffering or despair. Amen.

Today: Pray for prisoners, or write to someone who is isolated.

Day 4: The hidden charity

Tradition says that a charitable woman secretly brought food to Gregory throughout his captivity. Without her, the apostle of Armenia would not have survived. Hidden acts of love can change history.

Prayer: Lord, make me faithful in the small, hidden acts of charity that you alone see. Amen.

Today: Do a kind act for someone without them knowing it was you.

Day 5: The witness of the martyrs

While Gregory was in the pit, Saint Hripsime, Saint Gayane and their companions gave their lives for Christ. Their blood, as the Church Fathers said, became a seed of new Christians.

Prayer: Lord, strengthen persecuted Christians today, and may their witness bear fruit. Saint Hripsime and Saint Gayane, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Learn about a country where Christians are persecuted and pray for them.

Day 6: Healing the persecutor

Brought out of the pit, Gregory did not take revenge. He prayed for Tiridates, the king who had tortured him, and the king was healed. This is the heart of the Gospel: to love one's enemies.

Prayer: Lord, heal my wounds and teach me to forgive those who have hurt me, and to desire their good. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for someone you find hard to forgive.

Day 7: A people baptized

Tiridates was baptized with his court, followed by a large part of the people. Armenia became the first Christian kingdom. The Gospel is not only for individuals; it can shape the life of a whole people.

Prayer: Lord, may your Gospel penetrate our families, our cities and our nations. Watch over the Armenian people. Amen.

Today: Renew your baptismal promises in prayer: reject sin and profess the Creed.

Day 8: Building the Church

Gregory founded bishoprics and schools, trained priests and, according to tradition, saw in a vision the place to build the Cathedral of Etchmiadzin. A fervent faith needs to be organized, taught and passed on.

Prayer: Lord, bless bishops, priests and all who build up your Church. Help me to take my place in it. Amen.

Today: Offer your help to your parish for a concrete service.

Day 9: Withdrawing into God

At the end of his life, Gregory left his responsibilities to his son Aristakes and withdrew into solitude. After so much work, he returned to the essential: prayer and union with God.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to find time for silence with you, and prepare me to meet you at the end of my life. Amen.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in silent prayer, away from screens.

Closing prayer

Saint Gregory the Illuminator, you kept the faith in the darkness of the pit and brought the light of Christ to an entire people. Intercede for me and for the intention I have entrusted to you during these nine days. Obtain for prisoners and for all who suffer the light of hope, for persecutors the grace of conversion, and for me a heart that knows how to forgive. Watch over Armenia and the Armenian people throughout the world. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

PILGRIMAGE

Khor Virap Monastery, Prison of Saint Gregory the Illuminator

The monastery of Khor Virap stands on a hill in the Ararat plain, in southern Armenia, right next to the Turkish border. Tradition places there the pit where Saint Gregory the Illuminator was imprisoned before converting King Tiridates. It is one of the pilgrimage sites most dear to Armenians, and one of the finest viewpoints on Mount Ararat.

The "deep pit"

The name Khor Virap means "deep pit" in Armenian. The site is close to the ruins of Artashat, the kingdom's ancient capital, where tradition places the royal prison. According to Agathangelos's account, it was here that Gregory was thrown by order of the king for refusing to honor the goddess Anahit, and that he remained for about twelve years before being released to heal the king. A first chapel is said to have been built on the spot in the 7th century; the present buildings, the main church and the enclosure, date mostly from reconstructions of the modern era.



Khor Virap monastery in the Ararat plain.

What you can see there

Inside the enclosure, a small chapel shelters the entrance to the traditional pit. You go down by a narrow, almost vertical metal ladder to an underground chamber a few meters across. The place is cramped and the descent takes a bit of agility. The main church, dedicated to the Mother of God (Surp Astvatsatsin), is the center of the monastery's liturgical life.

From the hill, the view stretches over the Araks plain and, beyond the border, to the two peaks of Ararat, the biblical mountain of Noah's ark, so present in the Armenian imagination.

Praying at Khor Virap

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Gregory the Illuminator. At the bottom of the pit, a moment of silence lets you entrust prisoners, the sick, and those shut in by trial. The prayer to Saint Gregory the Illuminator suits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Gregory

- **Etchmiadzin** (Vagharshapat): the mother cathedral of the Armenians, whose founding tradition attributes to Gregory, and the churches of Saint Hripsime and Saint Gayane, dedicated to the martyrs of the persecution.
- **Yerevan**: the Cathedral of Saint Gregory the Illuminator, consecrated in 2001.
- **Naples**: the church of San Gregorio Armeno.

Practical information

Khor Virap is in Ararat Province, about forty kilometers (25 miles) south of Yerevan, near the village of Lusarat. The site can be reached by car or on excursions from the capital. The monastery belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The descent into the pit is not recommended for people with reduced mobility or a fear of heights. Dress modestly to enter the churches, and ask on site about service times.

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