

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Gregory VII

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: May 25

IN BRIEF

Saint Gregory VII

Pope from 1073 to 1085, leader of the Gregorian Reform and defender of the freedom of the Church.

Feast day	May 25
Born	c. 1020-1025, Sovana, Tuscany, Italy
Died	May 25, 1085, Salerno, Italy
Canonized	1606, by Pope Paul V (beatified in 1584)
Era	11th century

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Gregory VII

Tomb of Saint Gregory VII in Salerno Cathedral

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Gregory VII

Saint Gregory VII, born Hildebrand, is one of the popes who left the deepest mark on the history of the Church. A Tuscan monk who advised several popes before being elected himself in 1073, he led a sweeping reform against simony and for the dignity of the clergy, and defended the freedom of the Church against the power of princes. His clash with Emperor Henry IV, with the famous scene at Canossa, has never been forgotten. He died in exile in Salerno on May 25, 1085, and the Church celebrates him on that day.

Who was Saint Gregory VII?

Hildebrand was born around 1020-1025 in Sovana, in Tuscany, into a family of modest means. He was sent to Rome as a boy and grew up around the monastery of Saint Mary on the Aventine and the clergy of the Lateran. He became a monk, most likely in Rome.

He attached himself to Pope Gregory VI, and when that pope was deposed in 1046, Hildebrand followed him into exile in Germany, to Cologne. Loyalty to a man who had lost everything was one of the first signs of his character.

In 1049 the new pope, Saint Leo IX, an Alsatian bishop determined to reform the Church, brought him back to Rome. For nearly a quarter of a century, under five successive popes, Hildebrand was one of the main architects of reform: administrator of the property of the Roman Church, papal legate in France and Germany, then archdeacon of Rome. He worked alongside figures such as Saint Peter Damian.

Key dates

- **c. 1020-1025**: Born in Sovana, Tuscany.

- **1046-1047**: Follows Pope Gregory VI into exile in Cologne.
- **1049**: Returns to Rome with Leo IX and begins his work for reform.
- **1059**: Decree of Pope Nicholas II reserving the election of the pope to the cardinals, a measure he is associated with.
- **April 22, 1073**: Elected pope as Gregory VII, during the funeral of Alexander II.
- **1075**: The *Dictatus papae* is drawn up; lay investiture is condemned.
- **February 1076**: Excommunicates Emperor Henry IV, who had tried to depose him at the synod of Worms.
- **January 1077**: Henry IV comes as a penitent to the castle of Canossa and receives absolution.
- **1080**: Excommunicates Henry IV again; the emperor has an antipope, Clement III, elected.
- **1084**: Henry IV takes Rome; the Normans of Robert Guiscard free the pope, but the city is sacked.
- **May 25, 1085**: Dies in exile in Salerno.
- **1584**: Beatified by Gregory XIII; canonized in 1606 under Paul V.

The Gregorian Reform

In the eleventh century, the Western Church suffered from deep wounds. Church offices were bought and sold: this was simony, named after Simon the magician, who tried to buy the power of the apostles (Acts 8). Many clerics ignored the discipline of celibacy. Above all, bishops and abbots were often chosen and installed by princes, who handed them the crozier and the ring, the signs of their spiritual office, with their own hands. This was called lay investiture.

Once pope, Gregory VII carried forward, with new determination, the reform his predecessors had begun. He held synods in Rome, sent legates across Europe and, in 1075, forbade lay people to grant investiture to Church offices. The *Dictatus papae*, a list of propositions preserved in his register, strongly affirms the authority of the pope in the Church.

The movement that still bears his name, the Gregorian Reform, profoundly renewed the clergy and helped to distinguish spiritual power from temporal power. Much of what Catholics today take for granted, such as bishops chosen for the good of souls rather than for political loyalty, owes something to this struggle.

Canossa and the Investiture Controversy

The reform collided head-on with the young German king Henry IV, who claimed the right to appoint the bishops of the Empire. In January 1076, at Worms, he had a group of German bishops declare the pope deposed. Gregory answered by excommunicating him and releasing his subjects from their oath of loyalty.

Threatened by a revolt of the German princes, Henry changed tactics. In January 1077 he crossed the Alps in the middle of winter and presented himself at the castle of Canossa, in Emilia, where the pope was staying as the guest of Countess Matilda of Tuscany. According to the chroniclers, he waited three days in the snow, dressed as a penitent, before being received and absolved, thanks in particular to the intercession of Matilda and of Abbot Hugh of Cluny. "Going to Canossa" has remained a proverb for humbling oneself.

The reconciliation did not last. In 1080 Gregory excommunicated Henry again, and Henry had an antipope elected. In 1084 the emperor seized Rome. The pope, besieged in Castel Sant'Angelo, was rescued by the Normans of

Robert Guiscard, but their troops sacked the city, which turned the Romans against him. Gregory had to leave and took refuge in Salerno, under Norman protection.



The ruins of the castle of Canossa, in Emilia.

Death in exile

In Salerno, ill and aging, Gregory VII died on May 25, 1085. His biographers record his last words, which echo a verse of the Psalms: "I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore I die in exile." He was buried in the cathedral of Saint Matthew, which the Norman prince had just built.

The Investiture Controversy was only settled in 1122, with the Concordat of Worms, which largely took up the distinction he had defended between the spiritual and the temporal.

What his holiness teaches us

Gregory VII was a man of conviction, sometimes unbending, who wanted a Church that was free, untainted by compromise and focused on its mission. He paid for this struggle with exile. His holiness lies in his love of justice and of the Church, in his life as a monk and in his faithfulness to the end.

Why pray to Saint Gregory VII?

Saint Gregory VII has no traditional patronage of a trade or a country. He is prayed to for the Church and the pope, for religious freedom, for those who hold authority, and for all who suffer because of their integrity. His own story, a reformer driven from his city, makes him a close friend of those who feel that doing the right thing has cost them dearly.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Gregory VII, built on his last words, or follow the novena to Saint Gregory VII from May 16 to 24, so that it ends on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Gregory VII in art

Gregory VII is shown as a pope, in pontifical vestments, often wearing the papal tiara, as in medieval illuminated manuscripts of his life. He is frequently pictured in scenes of the Canossa episode, receiving Henry IV or alongside Countess Matilda of Tuscany and Abbot Hugh of Cluny.

Where to pray to Saint Gregory VII

- **Salerno** (Campania, Italy): the cathedral of Saint Matthew, where his tomb is found.
- **Sovana** (Tuscany): his home village, with its Romanesque cathedral.
- **Canossa** (Emilia-Romagna): the ruins of Matilda's castle, where Henry IV did penance.

- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, which he long had charge of before his election.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Gregory VII: "I Have Loved Justice"

Saint Gregory VII left a large register of letters, but no prayer widely known under his name. His most famous words are those he is said to have spoken as he died, in exile in Salerno. This page presents those last words, then an original prayer to Saint Gregory VII written by Saintspedia.

"I have loved justice and hated iniquity"

According to his early biographers, Gregory VII, close to death on May 25, 1085, took up a verse of Psalm 45 (44 in the Latin numbering), verse 8, adding a few words about his own fate:

> *"I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore I die in exile."*

Latin text: *Dilexi iustitiam et odivi iniquitatem, propterea morior in exilio.* Source: medieval accounts of the pope's death, taken up in particular by Paul of Bernried in his *Life of Gregory VII* (12th century). Translation by Saintspedia; the text is in the public domain.

The psalm says of the messianic king: "You love justice and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you." By quoting this verse, Gregory placed his apparent failure in the light of Christ, whose love of justice led him to the cross.



Saint Gregory VII in a medieval work.

Prayer to Saint Gregory VII

Saint Gregory VII, you were a monk before you were a pope, and you longed for a Church that was pure and free: pray for us.

You fought against the selling of holy things and against the subjection of the Church to the powerful. Help us to serve God without calculation and without seeking our own advantage. Give the pastors of the Church inner freedom and the courage of the Gospel.

You granted pardon to the king who came as a penitent to Canossa: teach us to join firmness with mercy. You died in exile, far from Rome: support all who suffer because of their faithfulness to justice.

I entrust to you the pope and the bishops, Christians deprived of religious freedom, those who hold authority, and my own intention (name it in silence).

May we be able to say with you, at the evening of our life: I have loved justice. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Gregory VII is celebrated on May 25, the anniversary of his death, as an optional memorial in the Roman calendar. On the same day the Church also honors Saint Bede the Venerable and Saint Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi.

This prayer suits times when the Church is going through trials, when you pray for the pope or for persecuted Christians, before taking a difficult decision that costs you something, or when you feel that your honesty has been

met with injustice. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Gregory VII, and discover the life of Saint Gregory VII.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Gregory VII

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Gregory VII. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on May 25, begin on May 16: it ends on May 24. You can also pray it at any time of year, for the Church, for the pope and the bishops, for Christians who lack religious freedom, or when your own faithfulness to what is right is costing 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. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into concrete life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow the road of Hildebrand: the boy from a Tuscan village, the monk, the loyal companion of an exiled pope, the tireless servant of reform, the pope who fought for the freedom of the Church, the shepherd who forgave at Canossa, and the old man who died far from Rome, at peace with his conscience.

Day 1: A child of Tuscany

Hildebrand was born in a small village in Tuscany, into a family of modest means. Nothing marked him out for a great destiny. God often chooses simple people for great missions, so that his work is seen as his and not ours.

Prayer: Lord, you look upon the lowly. Help me to welcome with trust what you expect of me, even when I feel small before it.

Today: Thank God for one grace you received in your childhood.

Day 2: The monk

Before he was an influential churchman, Hildebrand was a monk. Prayer, silence and the rule shaped his heart. All his later strength came from this hidden root: a life given first to God before it was given to any cause.

Prayer: Lord, give me a taste for faithful prayer, every day, even when it feels dry.

Today: Set a fixed time for daily prayer and keep to it.

Day 3: Faithful in exile

As a young man, he followed Pope Gregory VI into exile in Cologne. He did not abandon the man who had lost everything. Friendship is proved when there is nothing left to gain from it.

Prayer: Lord, make me faithful to my friends in hard times, and attentive to those whom everyone else has left behind.

Today: Reach out to someone who is going through a difficult period.

Day 4: Serving without being in the spotlight

For nearly twenty-five years, Hildebrand served several popes without being in the first place himself. He administered, traveled as a legate, advised and worked, for the Church and not for his own glory.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve without looking for recognition, and to rejoice when good is done, whoever gets the credit.

Today: Do one discreet service in your family or your parish.

Day 5: Holy things are not for sale

Gregory VII fought simony, the trade in Church offices. The gifts of God are free, and they must be given freely. This challenge reaches every believer: do I serve God, or do I use him?

Prayer: Lord, purify my intentions. May I never serve you out of self-interest.

Today: Read the story of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-24).



Salerno Cathedral, where Saint Gregory VII is buried.

Day 6: The freedom of the Church

Gregory wanted pastors to be chosen to serve God, not to please the powerful. The freedom of the Church is not a privilege: it exists to serve the Gospel. Today many Christians still live without the freedom to worship and to speak of their faith.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the Christians deprived of religious freedom. Give them strength and peace.

Today: Pray for a country where religious freedom is under threat.

Day 7: The pardon of Canossa

When Henry IV came as a penitent to Canossa, Gregory, after three days, opened the door and absolved him. Even in the middle of a bitter conflict, forgiveness remains possible, and the door of mercy is never fully closed.

Prayer: Lord, give me the grace to forgive the one who has wronged me, and to ask forgiveness in my turn.

Today: Take one step toward reconciliation, or prepare for the sacrament of confession.

Day 8: Apparent failure

Driven out of Rome, Gregory seemed to have lost everything. Yet the work he had sown bore fruit after him, and the Concordat of Worms in 1122 largely confirmed what he had defended. God does not measure success as we do.

Prayer: Lord, when my efforts seem useless, teach me to trust you with what comes next.

Today: Entrust to God a project that did not succeed.

Day 9: I have loved justice

"I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore I die in exile." Gregory died far from Rome, but at peace with his conscience. His last words are not bitterness: they are a confession of love, in the words of a psalm.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Gregory VII, make me love justice and remain faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray Psalm 45, or do one concrete act of justice.

Closing prayer

Saint Gregory VII, monk and pope, servant of justice and of the freedom of the Church, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for the pope, for the bishops and for all who suffer because of their integrity. Obtain for us a heart that is free and faithful. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Tomb of Saint Gregory VII in Salerno Cathedral

Saint Gregory VII rests in the Cathedral of Salerno, in Campania, where he died in exile on May 25, 1085. Dedicated to the Apostle Saint Matthew, whose relics it keeps, this cathedral had just been built by the Norman prince Robert Guiscard, protector of the pope. It is the main place where people come to pray to the pope of the Gregorian reform.

A Norman Cathedral for the Apostle Matthew

Robert Guiscard took Salerno in 1076 and soon afterward began building a new cathedral to house the relics of Saint Matthew. The building was consecrated by Gregory VII himself, who had taken refuge in the city after leaving Rome in 1084. You enter through a spacious arcaded atrium, overlooked by a 12th-century campanile, and through a bronze door cast in Constantinople. The interior was largely transformed in the Baroque period, but it keeps medieval ambos and mosaic pavements.



The Cathedral of Saint Matthew in Salerno.

The Tomb of Gregory VII

The pope was buried in the cathedral shortly after his death. His tomb is now in a chapel to the right of the choir. Before it, one recalls his last words: "I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore I die in exile." In the richly decorated crypt rest the relics of Saint Matthew.

Praying at the Tomb of Saint Gregory VII

Before your visit, you might reread the life of Saint Gregory VII. Once there, a time of silence before his tomb allows you to entrust an intention for the Church, for those in authority or for those who suffer because of their uprightness. The prayer to Saint Gregory VII can accompany this moment, before you go down to pray to Saint Matthew in the crypt. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other Places Associated with Saint Gregory VII

- **Sovana** (Tuscany): his native village, with its Romanesque cathedral.
- **Canossa** (Emilia-Romagna): the ruins of Countess Matilda's castle, the site of Henry IV's penance in 1077.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, of which he had charge before his election, and Castel Sant'Angelo, where he was besieged in 1084.
- **Salerno**: the crypt of Saint Matthew, in the same cathedral.

Practical Information

Salerno can be reached by train from Naples or Rome. The cathedral is in the historic center, a few minutes' walk from the waterfront. May 25, the feast of Saint Gregory VII, and September 21, the feast of Saint Matthew, patron of the city, are important dates for the local community. Check Mass and visiting times with the Archdiocese of Salerno before you come.

Credits and sources

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