

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Helena, Mother of Constantine

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 18

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IN BRIEF

Saint Helena, Mother of Constantine

Roman empress, mother of Emperor Constantine, pilgrim to the Holy Land associated with the finding of the True Cross.

Feast day	August 18, May 21 (Eastern Churches)
Born	c. 248-250, Probably Drepanum, Bithynia (now Turkey)
Died	c. 329-330
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	archaeologists, converts, difficult marriages, divorced people

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Helena and the Holy Cross

Novena to Saint Helena

Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Helena, Mother of Constantine

Saint Helena was the mother of Emperor Constantine, the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity. A woman of humble birth who became an empress, she set out late in life as a pilgrim to the Holy Land, where she founded churches on the sites of Christ's life. A tradition that appeared at the end of the 4th century credits her with finding the Cross of Christ in Jerusalem. She died around 329-330 and is celebrated on August 18 in the Latin Church, and on May 21, together with her son, in the Eastern Churches.

Who was Saint Helena?

Flavia Iulia Helena was born around 248-250, probably at Drepanum in Bithynia (in today's Turkey), a town Constantine later renamed Helenopolis in her honor. Her origins were humble: at the end of the 4th century, Saint Ambrose of Milan calls her a *stabularia*, meaning a servant at an inn or a posting station.

She became the companion, perhaps the wife, of a Roman officer, Constantius, later nicknamed Chlorus. Their son Constantine was born around 272 at Naissus, today Niš in Serbia. Around 289, for political reasons, Constantius left her to marry Theodora, the stepdaughter of Emperor Maximian, before becoming Caesar and then Augustus himself. Helena then lived in the shadows for many years.

Everything changed when her son became emperor in 306. He called her back to court, surrounded her with honors and, around 324, gave her the title of *Augusta*. In medieval England a legend made her a British princess, the daughter of "Old King Coel" of Colchester, but it has no historical basis. Constantine, however, was indeed proclaimed emperor at York.

Key dates in the life of Saint Helena

- **Around 248-250**: Born, probably at Drepanum in Bithynia.
- **Around 272**: Birth of her son Constantine at Naissus.
- **Around 289**: Constantius Chlorus leaves her to marry Theodora.
- **306**: Constantine is proclaimed emperor at York.
- **312**: Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge, in Rome.
- **313**: Freedom of worship is granted to Christians.
- **Around 324**: Helena receives the title of *Augusta*.
- **Around 326-328**: Pilgrimage to Palestine; founding of the churches of Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives.
- **Around 329-330**: Dies with her son at her side, according to Eusebius of Caesarea.
- **End of the 4th century**: Saint Ambrose and other writers record the tradition that Helena found the Cross.

A Christian empress

We do not know when Helena became a Christian. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who lived at the time, writes that it was Constantine who brought her to the faith, but he then portrays her as a woman of deep piety. In Rome she lived in the Sessorian Palace, near the Lateran, and she is associated with her son's generosity toward the Church of Rome.

The sources describe her visiting churches and mingling with ordinary believers, giving alms to the poor, to soldiers and to prisoners, and obtaining the release of men condemned to the mines.

Pilgrim to the Holy Land

Nearly eighty years old, Helena undertook a long journey to Palestine around 326-328. In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius says she came to pray in the places where Christ had walked and had two churches built: one in Bethlehem, over the grotto of the Nativity, the other on the Mount of Olives, at the place associated with the Ascension. At the same time Constantine had the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre built in Jerusalem, over the tomb of Christ, which had been found beneath a pagan temple.

This journey of an elderly empress had enormous resonance. It makes Helena the first great figure of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The tradition of the True Cross

Eusebius says nothing about the finding of the Cross. The tradition appears at the end of the 4th century, in the writings of Saint Ambrose in 395, then of Rufinus of Aquileia and other authors: Helena had the ground of Golgotha excavated and found three crosses, and the Cross of Christ was recognized through a miracle. We also know that fragments of the wood of the Cross were venerated in Jerusalem by the middle of the 4th century.

The Church honors this tradition without vouching for every detail. It has left a deep mark on Christian art, from Piero della Francesca to Agnolo Gaddi, and on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 14.

Helena died around 329-330, probably soon after her return, with Constantine present according to Eusebius. Her body was laid in Rome, in a mausoleum on the Via Labicana; her great porphyry sarcophagus is now kept in the Vatican Museums.

Why is Saint Helena the patron saint of archaeologists?

Because of the tradition of the excavations on Golgotha, Helena is invoked as the patron of archaeologists and of those who search for traces of the past. More broadly, her life speaks to many people: divorced or abandoned spouses, mothers, the elderly, converts and pilgrims. Catholics pray to her for families in trial, for older people, for pilgrims and for the conversion of loved ones.

Her story shows that it is never too late to give oneself to God. Rejected and long forgotten, then raised to the highest honors, she put her power at the service of the poor and of the faith, and in old age she went to stand where Christ had lived, died and risen.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Helena in art

- **A large cross**: her main attribute, recalling the finding of the True Cross.
- **The crown and imperial robes**: she is shown as an empress, the *Augusta*.
- **Nails**: sometimes she holds the nails of the Passion, also linked to the tradition of the finding.
- **Beside Constantine**: in Eastern icons, mother and son stand on either side of the Cross.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Helena and the Holy Cross, or follow the novena to Saint Helena from August 9 to 17.

Where to pray to Saint Helena

- **Rome**: the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem (Santa Croce in Gerusalemme), built in her palace, and the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, which claims her relics.
- **Paris**: the church of Saint-Leu-Saint-Gilles, which since the 19th century has kept relics that came from the Abbey of Hautvillers, in Champagne.

- **Jerusalem**: the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre and its Chapel of Saint Helena, next to the crypt of the Finding of the Cross.
- **Bethlehem**: the Basilica of the Nativity, heir to the church she had built.
- **Trier** (Germany): the cathedral, built according to tradition on part of her palace.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Helena and the Holy Cross

No prayer written by Saint Helena has come down to us. Since her memory is inseparable from the Cross of Christ, this page offers an ancient verse of the Latin liturgy in honor of the Cross, followed by an original prayer to Saint Helena.

"O Crux ave, spes unica"

Since the Middle Ages, this verse has closed the hymn *Vexilla Regis*, written around 569 by Venantius Fortunatus for the arrival in Poitiers of a relic of the Cross sent from Constantinople to Saint Radegund. The verse itself was added later to the poet's text. English translation by Saintspedia; the Latin text is in the public domain.

> *O Crux, ave, spes unica,*
> *hoc Passionis tempore,*
> *piis adauge gratiam,*
> *reisque dele crimina.*
>
> *Hail, O Cross, our only hope!*
> *In this time of the Passion,*
> *increase grace in the faithful,*
> *and wipe away the sins of the guilty.*

Source: the hymn *Vexilla Regis prodeunt*, Liturgy of the Hours for Passiontide. On the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, September 14, the second line becomes *in hac triumphi gloria*, "in this glory of triumph."

Prayer to Saint Helena

Saint Helena, you knew the lowliness of a humble station and the humiliation of being cast aside: pray for all who feel forgotten or rejected.

Raised to honor, you opened your hands to the poor, to soldiers and to prisoners: teach me to put what I have at the service of my brothers and sisters.

In your old age you took the road to Jerusalem to pray where Christ had lived: give me a pilgrim's heart that never stops seeking the Lord.

The Church links your name to the Cross of Christ: help me to recognize, in the midst of my trials, the Cross that saves. I entrust to you my family, my children and my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me the grace never to be ashamed of the Cross, and to carry it with hope until the resurrection. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Helena is celebrated on August 18 in the Latin Church, and on May 21, together with Constantine, in the Eastern Churches. You can also pray to her on September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Her prayer suits moments of abandonment or separation, a late conversion, a pilgrimage, or a family in difficulty.

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Helena

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Helena and the tradition of the Cross. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin on August 9; it ends on August 17, and August 18, her feast day, can be lived as a day of thanksgiving. It can also be prayed before September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, or at any time of year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father. If you can, pray before a cross. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

The nine days follow the path of Helena's life: her humble beginnings, the pain of being abandoned, her motherhood, her coming to faith, her charity, and finally her pilgrimage to Bethlehem, Golgotha and the Mount of Olives. You can pray it alone, as a family or with a parish group, for a particular intention or simply to grow in love for the Cross of Christ.



Saint Helena, statue by Andrea Bolgi in Saint Peter's Basilica (17th century).

Day 1: Humble beginnings

According to Saint Ambrose, Helena was a servant at an inn. God does not look at birth or rank, but at the heart. The first will often be last, and the last first. The future empress began where many people still live today: in hard and unnoticed work.

Prayer: Lord, teach me never to look down on anyone, and to recognize the dignity of every person.

Today: Sincerely thank someone whose work usually goes unnoticed.

Day 2: The trial of abandonment

Constantius left Helena for a more advantageous marriage, and she lived in the shadows for long years. God did not forget her. Those who have been set aside are not set aside in his eyes.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those who are separated, abandoned or betrayed. Comfort them and lift them up.

Today: Get in touch with someone going through a separation.

Day 3: A mother

Helena raised a son who would become emperor. The sources speak of the affection and respect Constantine had for her. Motherhood is a vocation that lasts a whole life, through every season of a child's journey.

Prayer: Lord, bless all mothers, especially those who raise their children alone.

Today: Pray for your mother, living or deceased, and for a mother who is struggling.

Day 4: Coming to faith

We do not know when Helena became a Christian; Eusebius thought it was late in life, through her son. There is no age limit for meeting Christ. He comes to each person at the hour he chooses.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you all who are searching for faith, at any age. Come and meet them.

Today: Pray for someone close to you who does not know Christ.

Day 5: Open hands

As empress, Helena gave her wealth to the poor, to soldiers and to prisoners. Power only makes sense when it serves the smallest. What we hold is entrusted to us, not owned for ourselves alone.

Prayer: Lord, make me a good steward of what you have entrusted to me, at the service of those who lack everything.

Today: Make a donation to a charity that helps prisoners or the homeless.

Day 6: A pilgrim at eighty

Nearly eighty years old, Helena set out for the Holy Land. Age did not stop her from going toward Christ. Old age can be a time of great spiritual energy.

Prayer: Lord, bless the elderly. Help them keep a young heart, open to your grace.

Today: Visit or call an older person.

Day 7: Bethlehem, the God who became small

Helena had a church built over the grotto of the Nativity. Before the Cross, there is the manger: the almighty God became a child. Our faith begins with the humility of Bethlehem.

Prayer: Jesus, born in Bethlehem, teach me the simplicity and humility of your childhood.

Today: Read the account of the Nativity in Luke 2:1-20.

Day 8: The wood of the Cross

Tradition says that Helena had the Cross sought on Golgotha. This wood of shame has become the sign of the love that saves. To seek the Cross is to seek the love of Christ, who loved us to the end.

Prayer: Hail, O Cross, our only hope. Lord Jesus, help me to carry my cross with you.

Today: Make the Sign of the Cross slowly and attentively, and repeat it several times during the day.

Day 9: The Mount of Olives, hope

Helena also had a church built on the Mount of Olives, the place associated with the Ascension. The Cross is not the end: it opens onto the resurrection and heaven.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Helena, make the hope of heaven grow in me. Amen.

Today: Read the account of the Ascension in Acts 1:6-11.

Closing prayer

Saint Helena, mother and pilgrim, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for families, for mothers and the elderly, for those who are alone and for those who are searching for God. Obtain for me the grace to love the Cross of Christ and to live by it with hope. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Helena and the prayer to Saint Helena and the Holy Cross.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in Rome

The Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme*, in Rome, was built in the 4th century in the palace where Saint Helena lived. It keeps relics of the Passion venerated for centuries and a chapel dedicated to the saint. It is one of the seven traditional churches of the Roman pilgrimage.

The empress's palace

In the early 4th century, Helena lived in Rome in the Sessorian Palace, an imperial residence near today's Porta Maggiore, not far from the Lateran. A large hall of the palace was turned into a church, probably during Helena's lifetime or shortly after her death, to house a relic of the Cross. It was called the "Helenian" basilica, then "Holy Cross in Jerusalem," as if a piece of Jerusalem were present in Rome. The building has been remodeled many times, and its present facade dates from the 18th century.



The facade of the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, in Rome.

The Chapel of Saint Helena

Below the level of the choir, the Chapel of Saint Helena is the oldest heart of the shrine. According to tradition, its floor was covered with earth brought from Golgotha by the empress. The vault is decorated with a Renaissance mosaic showing Christ, the evangelists and saints, and a statue of the saint holding the cross is venerated there.

The Chapel of the Relics

A chapel built in the 20th century displays the relics of the Passion kept in the basilica: fragments of the wood of the Cross, a nail, thorns, and a wooden tablet bearing an inscription, presented by tradition as part of the title of the Cross. These relics, whose historical authenticity cannot be established, are venerated as signs that lead back to the Passion of Christ.

Praying at the Holy Cross in Jerusalem

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Helena. Once there, a time of silence in the Chapel of Saint Helena, then before the relics of the Cross, lets you entrust an intention and meditate on the Passion of Christ. The prayer to Saint Helena and the Glorious Cross can accompany this moment. Good Friday and September 14, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, are particularly fitting days. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places connected with Saint Helena

- **Rome**: the Church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli, on the Capitoline Hill, which claims her relics, and the Vatican Museums, where her porphyry sarcophagus is found.
- **Paris**: the Church of Saint-Leu-Saint-Gilles, which keeps relics from the Abbey of Hautvillers.
- **Jerusalem**: the Chapel of Saint Helena in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.
- **Bethlehem**: the Church of the Nativity.
- **Trier** (Germany): the cathedral, linked by tradition to her palace.

Practical information

The basilica is in the Esquilino district, a few minutes' walk from Saint John Lateran, and is well served by public transport. It is part of the Seven Churches pilgrimage route in Rome. Mass times and access to the Chapel of the Relics may vary: check with the basilica before you come.

Credits and sources

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