BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Hilarion of Gaza

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: October 21

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IN BRIEF

Saint Hilarion of Gaza

4th-century hermit, disciple of Saint Anthony and father of monasticism in Palestine.

Feast day	October 21
Born	c. 291, Thabatha, south of Gaza (Palestine)
Died	371, near Paphos (Cyprus)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Hilarion of Gaza

Saint Hilarion, also called Hilarion the Great, was a 4th-century hermit, born around 291 near Gaza, in Palestine, and died in 371 in Cyprus. A disciple of Saint Anthony, he is considered the father of monastic life in Palestine. His life is known to us through Saint Jerome, who made it one of the first great hagiographical works in Latin. His feast day is October 21.

Who was Saint Hilarion?

Hilarion belongs to the great generation of the Desert Fathers. What we know of him comes mainly from the *Life of Hilarion* written by Saint Jerome around 390, which draws in part on the testimony of Saint Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, who had known him. Jerome placed it beside two other Lives of monks, those of Paul of Thebes and Malchus. The account is rich in miracles and follows the models of hagiography: one recognizes in it gestures from the Gospel and episodes from the life of Anthony. Historians nevertheless regard Hilarion's existence as certain, and archaeologists have found near Gaza the great monastery that bore his name.

Key dates in the life of Hilarion

- **c. 291**: Born at Thabatha, a village south of Gaza, into a wealthy pagan family.
- **c. 305**: As a student in Alexandria, he is converted to Christ and goes to find Saint Anthony in the desert.
- **c. 306**: Back in Palestine, he learns of his parents' death, gives away his goods and withdraws to the desert near Maiuma, the port of Gaza.
- **c. 306-328**: He lives alone for some twenty years in extreme poverty.

- **330s**: His reputation draws disciples and the sick; a community forms around him.
- **c. 356**: After Anthony's death, he leaves Palestine for Egypt in search of solitude.
- **c. 360-365**: He moves to Sicily, then to Dalmatia, followed everywhere by his fame.
- **371**: Dies in Cyprus, near Paphos, at about eighty years of age.
- **Shortly after**: His disciple Hesychius secretly brings his body back to his monastery in Palestine.

The disciple of Anthony

According to Jerome, Hilarion was born into a pagan family who sent him to study in Alexandria. There he discovered Christ and heard of Anthony, the hermit of the Egyptian desert. He went to join him and stayed near him for a while to learn his way of life. But the crowd of visitors around Anthony troubled him: he wanted greater solitude. Back in Palestine at about fifteen years of age, he learned that his parents had died. He gave part of his goods to his brothers, the rest to the poor, and settled in the desert, between the sea and a marsh, near Maiuma.

Twenty years of solitude

Jerome describes a life of extreme austerity. Hilarion ate very little, a few figs or some lentils at sunset, later dry bread and herbs. He lived in a tiny hut, barely big enough to lie down in, wove rush baskets to earn his living and recited the Scriptures he knew by heart. Like Anthony, he knew spiritual combat: temptations, fears and weariness, which he faced through prayer and fasting. For about twenty-two years he remained almost alone.

Wonderworker and father of monks

Then people began to come. A barren woman asked him to pray for her and became a mother; the sick, the blind, the paralyzed and the possessed went away healed. Jerome multiplies the miracle stories, in which Hilarion often takes up the gestures and words of Jesus. Little by little, disciples settled around him. Hilarion organized their life as a *laura*: each lived in his own cell, but all gathered regularly for common prayer, under the guidance of an elder. This form of life, between solitude and community, would have great success in Palestine.

Fame, however, became a burden for one who loved silence. Around 356, learning of Anthony's death, Hilarion left for Egypt and went to pray on the mountain where his master had lived. Under Emperor Julian, hostile to Christians, his monastery in Palestine was destroyed and he had to flee. He went to Sicily, then Dalmatia, then Cyprus, each time seeking a hidden place, and each time discovered by those who needed him. Near Paphos he finally found an isolated retreat, where he died in 371, at about eighty years of age. His faithful disciple Hesychius then carried away his body, incorrupt according to Jerome, to bury it in his monastery in Palestine, as he had wished.

Devotion and memory

Hilarion is venerated as a saint by Catholics and Orthodox, who celebrate him on October 21. The *Golden Legend* made his story popular in the West, and some places bear his name, such as Saint-Hilarion in the Yvelines, in France, or in Quebec. In 1997, archaeologists uncovered, at the site of Tell Umm el-'Amr, about six miles south of Gaza, the remains of a vast Byzantine monastery identified as that of Saint Hilarion, one of the largest in the Middle East. The site was excavated with the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem.

He is shown as an old hermit in a monk's habit, sometimes driving out demons or surrounded by the sick. His name remains linked to the origins of Palestinian monasticism, from which great saints such as Euthymius and Sabas would later come.

What can we learn from Saint Hilarion?

Hilarion sought God in silence all his life, and all his life he was overtaken by others. He never refused to pray for those who came to him, even when he longed for solitude. His life shows that the desert is not an escape, but a place where one becomes able to carry the sufferings of the world. You can pray to him for monks and hermits, for the sick, for those who seek a little silence in an over-full life, and for peace in the Holy Land, especially in Gaza.

Where to pray to Saint Hilarion

- **Tell Umm el-'Amr** (Nuseirat, Gaza Strip): the ruins of his monastery, hard to reach today; one can pray from afar for this place and its people.
- **Saint-Hilarion** (Yvelines, France): the village that bears his name.
- **Everywhere**: on October 21, in prayer for monastic life and for peace in the Holy Land.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Hilarion for the Sick and for Peace in the Holy Land

Saint Hilarion, a disciple of Saint Anthony, lived as a hermit near Gaza in the 4th century and founded monastic life in Palestine. All his life he sought silence, and all his life he welcomed those who came to ask for his prayer. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him the sick, monks and peace in the Holy Land.

Prayer to Saint Hilarion

Saint Hilarion,
you left the books and goods of this world
to seek God in the desert of Gaza.
Teach me to make room for God
in my overcrowded life.

You fought temptations
with prayer and fasting.
Support me when I am tempted,
when fear or weariness overtake me,
and keep me faithful to Christ.

You never refused your prayer
to the sick who came to you;
intercede for those who suffer in body and mind.
Watch over the land where you lived,
and obtain peace for Gaza and the Holy Land.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Hilarion

- On his feast day, October 21.
- For the sick, especially those medicine cannot cure.
- For monks, nuns and hermits.
- In a time of temptation or spiritual struggle.
- For peace in Gaza and throughout the Holy Land.

A short invocation

> *Saint Hilarion, hermit of Gaza,*
> *keep us in prayer and obtain peace for your land. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Hilarion from October 13 to 21, and read the life of Saint Hilarion.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Hilarion of Gaza

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint Hilarion, hermit of Gaza, as told by Saint Jerome, in an account that mixes memories and wonders. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, October 21, begin on October 13. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Hilarion, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: Discovering Christ

Born into a pagan family, Hilarion discovers Christ during his studies in Alexandria. Faith is first of all an encounter.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for making yourself known to me. Make yourself known to those who are still seeking you.

Act of the day: Pray for students and young people who are asking questions about faith.

Day 2: Learning from a master

Hilarion goes to find Saint Anthony in the desert to learn from him. We need witnesses to learn how to pray.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to let myself be taught by those who know you better than I do.

Act of the day: Read a few lines by a saint or a Father of the Church.

Day 3: Giving everything

When his parents die, Hilarion gives his goods to his brothers and to the poor. He keeps nothing for himself.

Prayer: Lord, free me from what weighs me down, and make me free to follow you.

Act of the day: Give away a useful object you no longer use.

Day 4: The desert

In a tiny hut, between the sea and the marsh, Hilarion lives alone with God for twenty years. The desert is the place of listening.

Prayer: Lord, lead me into the desert and speak to my heart.

Act of the day: Take a quarter of an hour of complete silence to pray.

Day 5: Spiritual combat

Like his master Anthony, Hilarion knows temptations and fears. He faces them with prayer, fasting and the Word of God.

Prayer: Lord, when I am tempted, be my shield. Do not let me be separated from you.

Act of the day: Choose a small fast today and offer it for someone.

Day 6: Not refusing one's prayer

A barren woman comes to ask him to pray for her. Hilarion, who wanted to remain alone, listens to her. It will be the first of countless requests.

Prayer: Lord, never let me close my heart to someone who asks me to pray for them.

Act of the day: Ask someone if they have an intention to entrust to you, and pray for it.

Day 7: Healing in the name of Jesus

Jerome recounts many healings: the blind, the paralyzed, sick children. Hilarion heals by calling on the name of Jesus.

Prayer: Jesus, physician of bodies and souls, heal the sick whom I entrust to you.

Act of the day: Visit or call someone who is sick.

Day 8: Always on the road

Fleeing fame and persecution, Hilarion goes to Egypt, Sicily, Dalmatia and Cyprus. Everywhere he seeks God, and everywhere people come looking for him.

Prayer: Lord, protect those who are forced to flee, and help me to seek your presence wherever I am.

Act of the day: Pray for refugees and for Christians driven from their land.

Day 9: Giving one's soul to God

Near Paphos, at about eighty years of age, Hilarion dies in 371. According to Jerome, he encourages himself to go forth without fear to the Lord he has served all his life.

Prayer: Lord, grant me to die without fear, in trust. Through the intercession of Saint Hilarion, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Pray for peace in Gaza and attend Mass if possible.

Closing prayer

Saint Hilarion,
hermit of Gaza and disciple of Anthony,
you sought God in silence
and served him in the sick.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you,
and obtain peace for the land where you lived.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Hilarion at any time, and read the life of Saint Hilarion.

Credits and sources

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