

BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Pope Saint Innocent I

*Life, prayer and novena*

Feast day: March 12

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IN BRIEF

## Pope Saint Innocent I

*Pope from 401 to 417, arbiter of the Church at the time of the sack of Rome by Alaric.*

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| **Feast day** | March 12 |
| **Born** | Albano Laziale, Italy |
| **Died** | March 12, 417, Rome |
| **Era** | 5th century |

## In this booklet


Life

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Novena to Saint Innocent I

Credits and sources



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LIFE

# Pope Saint Innocent I

Saint Innocent I was bishop of Rome from 401 to 417, in the years when the Western Roman Empire was crumbling. His pontificate was marked by the sack of Rome by Alaric's Visigoths in 410. In those troubled times he acted as arbiter of disputes across the whole Church, defended the exiled Saint John Chrysostom and confirmed the condemnation of Pelagius. His feast day is March 12, the day of his death.

## Who was Saint Innocent I?

Little is known of his life before his election. According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, the ancient chronicle of the popes, he came from Albano, in Latium, and his father was also named Innocentius. In one of his letters, Saint Jerome calls him the son of his predecessor, Pope Anastasius I. Historians still debate whether Jerome meant a real family tie or a spiritual bond between two members of the Roman clergy.

Trained in the service of the Church of Rome, Innocent was chosen unanimously by the clergy and the people after the death of Anastasius, in December 401.

## Key dates in the life of Innocent I

- **December 21, 401**: Succeeds Pope Anastasius I.
- **c. 404-407**: Supports John Chrysostom, the deposed and exiled bishop of Constantinople.
- **August 24, 410**: Alaric's Visigoths enter Rome while the pope is in Ravenna.
- **416-417**: Confirms the decisions of the African councils against Pelagianism.

- **March 12, 417**: Dies in Rome; Zosimus succeeds him.

## A pope in the fall of Rome

During Alaric's siege of Rome, in 408-410, Innocent accompanied a delegation of senators to Emperor Honorius, who had taken refuge in Ravenna, in an attempt to obtain peace. The efforts failed. On August 24, 410, the city was taken and plundered for three days. The pope was unable to return to Rome until 412.

What struck his contemporaries was that the authority of the bishop of Rome emerged strengthened from the ordeal, at the very moment when imperial power was collapsing in the West. Christians in shock looked to the successor of Peter as a point of stability in a world falling apart.

The shock of 410 was immense across the Christian world. Many pagans blamed the abandonment of the old gods for the disaster, and it was partly in answer to them that Saint Augustine began writing *The City of God*. Innocent, for his part, faced the crisis as a pastor, seeking peace for his people and holding the Church together.

## The arbiter of the Church

Letters reached Innocent from every direction, asking him to settle questions of discipline and doctrine. His answers, called decretals, form one of the earliest cores of Church law.

To Bishop Exuperius of Toulouse he sent a list of the books of Sacred Scripture that corresponds to the canon the Council of Trent would confirm more than a thousand years later.

### The defender of John Chrysostom

Innocent also took up the defense of Saint John Chrysostom, the great preacher and bishop of Constantinople, who had been deposed by his opponents and then exiled under pressure from Empress Eudoxia. Innocent refused to recognize the deposition, wrote him letters of comfort and tried, without success, to have a council called to judge the case fairly.

## Against Pelagius

The monk Pelagius taught that human beings can reach the good by their own strength alone, which played down the role of God's grace. The bishops of Africa condemned his teaching at two councils, in Carthage and Milevis, and then asked Rome to confirm their decisions. Saint Augustine of Hippo was among the signatories.

Innocent replied by approving their judgment and praising their recourse to the See of Peter. For the Church the question was central: is salvation a human achievement or a gift of God? By siding with the African bishops, Innocent affirmed that no one can do the good that leads to salvation without God's grace. The Church still prays in this spirit when it asks God to inspire and accompany every good work.

The controversy flared up again under his successor, Saint Zosimus.

## What can we learn from Saint Innocent I?

Innocent I is not the patron saint of any particular cause, and he left no miracle stories or spiritual writings. His holiness can be read in the faithfulness of a shepherd who, amid the ruins of a world, sought to preserve the unity of the faith and protect the most vulnerable, from John Chrysostom to the monks of Bethlehem.

He can be a companion for those who:

- live through times of crisis, when familiar structures collapse;
- carry responsibility for unity in a family, a parish or a community;
- stand by people who are unjustly accused or rejected.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Innocent I and the novena to Saint Innocent I.

## Symbols and how to recognize Saint Innocent I in art

Like the other early popes, Innocent I appears mainly in the long series of papal portraits painted in medallions at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls in Rome. He is shown in **papal vestments**, identified by his name. Later images may give him the **papal tiara** or **keys**, the common signs of the successors of Peter, rather than personal attributes.



*The collegiate church of Gandersheim, which keeps relics attributed to Innocent I.*

## Where to pray to Saint Innocent I

- **Rome**: the Basilica of San Vitale, originally dedicated to Saints Gervasius and Protasius, built during his pontificate.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of San Martino ai Monti, where part of his relics are said to have been placed and where his statue stands.
- **Bad Gandersheim, Germany**: the former collegiate church, where his relics and those of Anastasius I are said to have been brought in the 9th century.

The Roman Martyrology commemorates him on March 12. From the 13th to the 20th century, he was celebrated on July 28.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Innocent I in Times of Crisis

No ancient prayer addressed to Saint Innocent I has come down to us. This pope, who guided the Church through the sack of Rome in 410, can nevertheless be invoked by anyone living through a time of upheaval, or who is responsible for keeping a community united. Here is an original prayer inspired by his life.

## Prayer to Saint Innocent I

*Saint Innocent, shepherd of the Church of Rome, you remained faithful when the walls of the city fell and the world you knew seemed to collapse: help me to stay steady in faith when everything around me is shaken.*

*You sought peace for your people and went to plead for them before the powerful: teach me to work for peace with courage and patience.*

*You defended Saint John Chrysostom when he was unjustly deposed and exiled: give me the strength to stand by those who are accused, rejected or forgotten.*

*You confirmed that without the grace of God we can do nothing good: keep me humble, and open my heart to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.*

*Pray for our Holy Father, for the bishops and for the unity of the Church. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).*

*Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

## When to pray this prayer

- In times of crisis, when familiar certainties collapse, whether in society, at work or in a family.
- For the Pope, the bishops and all who carry responsibility for unity in the Church.
- For people who are unjustly accused, exiled or abandoned by their friends.
- When you feel tempted to rely only on your own strength.

## A short prayer of trust in grace

The teaching that Innocent I defended against Pelagius is summed up in an ancient prayer of the Roman liturgy, still prayed today:

> *Direct, we pray, O Lord, our actions by your inspiration and further them with your constant help, that all we do may always begin from you and by you be brought to completion. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Source: traditional Latin collect *Actiones nostras*, from the Roman liturgy, free translation by Saintspedia.

Saint Innocent I is commemorated on March 12, the anniversary of his death in 417. You can also pray the novena to Saint Innocent I or read the life of Saint Innocent I.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Innocent I

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint Innocent I. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on his feast, begin on March 4: the ninth day then falls on March 12. As it takes place during Lent, it can accompany a time of conversion. You may also pray it at any time, especially in a period of crisis, for the Church or for someone unjustly treated.

## How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before 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 turn prayer into a concrete step.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: *Lord, you gave your Church a faithful shepherd in Saint Innocent I during a time of upheaval. Through his intercession, keep me steady in faith and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off. Perseverance matters more than perfection.

You can pray this novena alone or with others, at home or before the Blessed Sacrament. Those who pray it for a person in difficulty may wish to tell that person, as a sign of friendship and support.

## Day 1: Chosen by all

After the death of Anastasius I, Innocent was chosen unanimously by the clergy and people of Rome. He had served the Roman Church before he was asked to lead it. Trust is built through years of faithful service.

**Prayer:** Lord, make me faithful in small things, so that others may rely on me.

**Today:** Keep a promise you have been putting off.

## Day 2: When the walls fall

In 410 Rome, the city everyone believed eternal, was taken and plundered. Innocent lived through the end of a world. Even when everything seems to collapse, God remains, and his Church continues.

**Prayer:** Lord, when my certainties are shaken, be my rock and my refuge.

**Today:** Name before God one thing that worries you about the future, and entrust it to him.

## Day 3: Pleading for peace

During the siege, Innocent went with a delegation to Emperor Honorius in Ravenna to try to obtain peace. The attempt failed, but he did not stay idle. Working for peace is a duty even when success is uncertain.

**Prayer:** Lord, make me a peacemaker in my family, my work and my neighborhood.

**Today:** Take a first step toward reconciliation with someone.

## Day 4: Far from home

After the sack of the city, Innocent could not return to Rome until 412. For a while he was a shepherd separated from his flock. Many people today live far from their home, through exile, migration or work.

**Prayer:** Lord, comfort refugees, migrants and all who live far from their homeland.

**Today:** Support a charity that helps refugees, or pray for them by name if you know any.

## Day 5: A shepherd for the whole Church

Bishops from many regions wrote to Innocent, and his answers helped shape Church law. He understood that serving unity means listening, answering and taking responsibility.

**Prayer:** Lord, bless our Holy Father and the bishops. Give them wisdom and courage to guide your people.

**Today:** Pray for the Pope and for your own bishop by name.

## Day 6: The Word of God

Innocent sent Bishop Exuperius of Toulouse a list of the books of Scripture, the same canon the Church still reads today. The Bible is a treasure received, guarded and handed on.

**Prayer:** Lord, give me a love for your Word and the desire to read it every day.

**Today:** Read one chapter of a Gospel slowly.

## Day 7: Standing by the persecuted

When Saint John Chrysostom was deposed and exiled, Innocent refused to accept the injustice and wrote to comfort him. Faithfulness to a friend in disgrace is a rare form of courage.

**Prayer:** Lord, give me the courage to defend those who are wrongly accused and to stay close to them.

**Today:** Reach out to someone who is isolated or rejected.

## Day 8: Everything is grace

Against Pelagius, Innocent confirmed with the African bishops that human beings cannot reach salvation by their own strength alone. All good begins with God's grace.

**Prayer:** Lord, I give up the illusion of saving myself. Fill me with your grace, and let me do good through you.

**Today:** Before each important task, ask God's help in a short prayer.

## Day 9: Faithful to the end

Innocent died in Rome on March 12, 417, after more than fifteen years of service in a very hard time. He left no miracle stories, only the witness of a faithful shepherd. Holiness is often hidden in perseverance.

**Prayer:** Lord, give me the grace to persevere in my vocation until the end.

**Today:** Thank God for those who serve the Church quietly, and thank one of them in person.

## Closing prayer

Saint Innocent I, shepherd of Rome in the time of its fall, you held fast to the faith, sought peace for your people and defended those unjustly accused. Pray for the Church, for the Pope and for the bishops. Help me to remain steady in times of crisis, to trust in God's grace more than in my own strength and to stand by those who suffer injustice. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You may also pray the prayer to Saint Innocent I or read the life of Saint Innocent I.

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