

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Leo III

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: June 12

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IN BRIEF

Saint Leo III

Pope from 795 to 816, who crowned Charlemagne emperor in Rome on Christmas Day in the year 800.

Feast day	June 12
Born	c. 750, Rome
Died	June 12, 816, Rome
Canonized	Entered in the Roman Martyrology in 1673 under Pope Clement X
Era	9th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Leo III for Unity and the Falsely Accused

Novena to Saint Leo III

Credits and sources

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LIFE

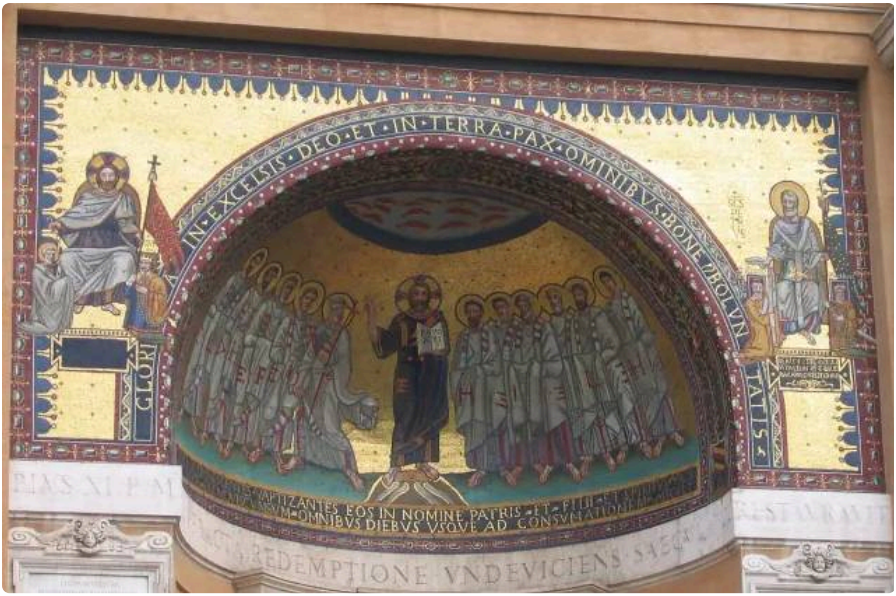
Saint Leo III

Saint Leo III was pope from 795 to 816. His name is tied to one of the most famous events of the Middle Ages: the coronation of Charlemagne as emperor in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome on Christmas Day in the year 800. The victim of a brutal assault in 799 and defended by the King of the Franks, he helped reshape the relationship between the Church and political power in the West. Added to the Roman Martyrology in 1673, he is celebrated on June 12.

Who was Saint Leo III?

Leo was born in Rome around 750; his father's name was Asuppius. He was raised from childhood in the Lateran Palace, the residence of the popes, where he received his training for the Church. A monk and then a priest, he rose through the ranks of the papal administration. When Pope Adrian I died at the end of 795, Leo was cardinal priest of Santa Susanna and treasurer of the Roman Church.

He was elected on December 26, 795, the very day of his predecessor's funeral. He immediately announced his election to Charlemagne, King of the Franks and protector of Rome, sending him the keys of the confession of Saint Peter (the shrine over the apostle's tomb) and the banner of the city. But part of the Roman aristocracy, linked to Adrian's family, remained hostile to him and spread rumors about his conduct.



The mosaic of the Leonine Triclinium at the Lateran, Rome.

Key dates in the life of Leo III

- **c. 750**: Born in Rome.
- **December 26, 795**: Elected pope.
- **April 25, 799**: Attacked during the procession of the Greater Litanies; he is held prisoner, then escapes.
- **799**: Stays with Charlemagne at Paderborn, in Saxony.
- **November 29, 799**: Triumphant return to Rome.
- **December 25, 800**: Crowns Charlemagne Emperor of the Romans in Saint Peter's.
- **June 12, 816**: Dies in Rome and is buried in Saint Peter's.
- **1673**: His name is entered in the Roman Martyrology under Pope Clement X.

The attack of 799

On April 25, 799, the day of the great procession of the Litanies, Leo III was riding toward a church in Rome when conspirators led by a nephew of Adrian I fell upon him near the monastery of San Silvestro. He was beaten and thrown to the ground; according to the accounts, his attackers tried to tear out his tongue and his eyes. Locked up in a monastery on the Caelian Hill, he escaped by night, lowered from a window with ropes, and took refuge at Saint Peter's.

Freed with the help of the Duke of Spoleto and Charlemagne's envoys, the pope set out to meet the king at Paderborn. Charlemagne received him, listened to him and cleared him of his enemies' accusations. On November 29, 799, Leo III returned to Rome, welcomed by a jubilant crowd.

The episode shows the fragility of the papacy at the time. The pope was both the bishop of Rome and the ruler of a small territory, exposed to the rivalries of powerful Roman families. Leo survived thanks to his own courage and to the protection of the Frankish king, a bond that would soon take a spectacular form.

The coronation of Charlemagne

A year later, Charlemagne came to Rome. On December 25, 800, during the Christmas Mass at Saint Peter's, Leo III placed the crown on his head and had him acclaimed Emperor of the Romans. For the first time in more than three centuries, the West once again had an emperor.

The gesture was full of meaning. By crowning the sovereign himself before having him acclaimed, the pope seemed to affirm that imperial authority passed through the Church. Charlemagne's biographer, Einhard, claims that the king would not have entered the basilica that day had he known the pope's intentions in advance. Historians still debate the exact meaning of the ceremony, but it marked the birth of an idea that would shape Europe for a thousand years.

The Creed and the Filioque

Leo III's pontificate was also marked by questions of doctrine. When Charlemagne's court added the word *Filioque* ("and the Son") to the Creed regarding the Holy Spirit, the pope did not condemn the doctrine, but he refused to change the text of the profession of faith received from the councils. He had the original Creed engraved in Latin and in Greek on metal plaques displayed in public. This care to keep the text shared with the Christians of the East is often remembered today in dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox.

Why do Catholics pray to Saint Leo III?

Saint Leo III is not the patron of a country or a profession. He was never canonized under the modern procedure: he has been venerated as a saint since his name was entered in the Roman Martyrology in 1673. The Church remembers him as a shepherd who went through violence and slander without giving up his charge, and who sought to protect Rome and the unity of the faith in a world being remade.

That is why he can be invoked for people who are falsely accused, for victims of violence and calumny, and for those who hold authority in the Church or in society. His attachment to the common text of the Creed also makes him a fitting intercessor for Christian unity.

He should not be confused with a later book of charms known as the *Enchiridion of Pope Leo*, which was falsely attributed to him and has nothing to do with the prayer of the Church.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Leo III in art

Leo III appears in papal vestments, wearing the pallium, the woolen band that symbolizes the pope's and archbishops' pastoral authority. In the mosaic of the Leonine Triclinium, made in his lifetime, his head is surrounded by a square halo, the sign used for a person still living when the image was made. He kneels

with Charlemagne before Saint Peter, who gives the pallium to the pope and a banner to the king. In medieval manuscripts and later paintings, he is most often recognized in the scene of Charlemagne's coronation, holding the crown over the kneeling emperor.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Leo III, or follow the novena to Saint Leo III from June 3 to 11.

Where to pray to Saint Leo III

Leo III was buried in Saint Peter's in Rome, beneath the basilica, alongside Saint Leo I and Saint Leo II. In Rome, the mosaic of the Leonine Triclinium, reconstructed near the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, keeps the memory of his alliance with Charlemagne. A visit to Saint Peter's is the natural place to remember him, near the tomb of the apostle whose keys he sent to the King of the Franks.

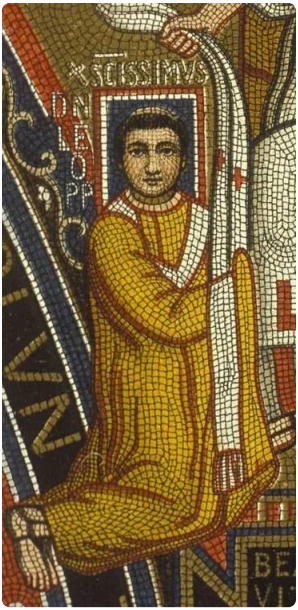
PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Leo III for Unity and the Falsely Accused

Saint Leo III left no prayer that has become traditional, and none of his words has passed into the Church's prayer. Yet one of his most significant acts concerns the common prayer of the Church: he wanted to keep the text of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed intact, as it was shared with the Christians of the East. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by that choice.

The Creed, a prayer of unity

When Charlemagne's court added the word *Filioque* to the Creed, Leo III refused to change the text received from the councils and had the original profession of faith engraved in Latin and in Greek on metal plaques. Praying the Creed with him is a way of remembering that the profession of faith is a treasure shared by all Christians, received from the early Church.



Leo III in the mosaic of the Leonine Triclinium.

Prayer to Saint Leo III

Saint Leo III, shepherd of Rome in a time of violence and rivalry, you were beaten, slandered and imprisoned: pray for those who are falsely accused and for those who suffer from the hatred of others.

You did not abandon your charge in spite of threats: obtain courage and faithfulness for those who serve the Church and for those who hold authority in the world.

You wanted to keep intact the Creed shared by the Christians of East and West: help us to seek what unites rather than what divides, and to profess the same faith together.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

May the Lord, who delivered you from your enemies, keep me in his peace. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Leo III is celebrated on June 12, the day of his death in Rome in 816. This prayer suits times when you or someone close to you is the target of false accusations, gossip or injustice. It can also accompany the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January, or be said for the pope and for bishops. You may follow it by praying the Creed slowly, as a profession of faith shared with Christians of every tradition.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Leo III, and read the life of Saint Leo III.

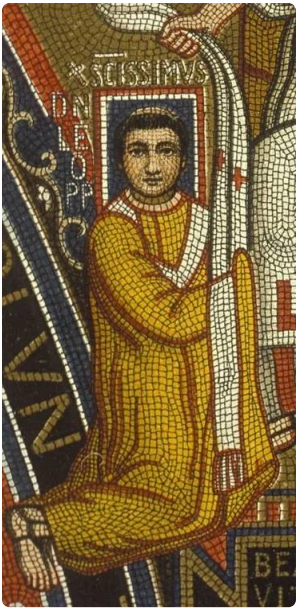
NOVENA

Novena to Saint Leo III

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Leo III, pope from 795 to 816. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on June 3; it ends on June 11, the day before his feast on June 12. You can also pray it at any time of year, especially if you are facing slander or injustice, or to pray for the unity of Christians.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. On the last day, you can also pray the Creed, the profession of faith that Leo III wanted to keep intact. The small act suggested for each day helps you carry the prayer into ordinary life.



Pope Leo III in the mosaic of the Leonine Triclinium, Rome.

Day 1: Raised in the house of the Church

Leo grew up in the Lateran Palace in Rome, close to the popes, and learned there to serve the Church. Long years of formation prepared him for a task he could not yet imagine. God often prepares us quietly for what lies ahead.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who formed me in the faith. Make me faithful in the small tasks of today.

Today: Thank, in person or in prayer, someone who passed on the faith to you.

Day 2: Called to serve

Elected pope on December 26, 795, on the very day of his predecessor's funeral, Leo had no time to prepare. He accepted a charge that would expose him to hostility and danger. His first act was to reach out to the King of the

Franks, seeking protection for the city entrusted to him.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to say yes when you call me to a responsibility, even when I feel unready.

Today: Accept a service asked of you without looking for excuses.

Day 3: Facing rumors

From the start, part of the Roman nobility spread rumors about Leo's conduct. Slander wounds deeply, and it is hard to answer. Leo did not let it turn him away from his duty.

Prayer: Lord, protect those whose reputation is being destroyed by gossip and lies. Give them peace and let the truth come to light.

Today: Refuse to repeat a piece of gossip, and say something good about the person concerned.

Day 4: The day of violence

On April 25, 799, during a procession of prayer, Leo was attacked, beaten and thrown to the ground. A man of peace was struck down in the middle of an act of worship.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you all victims of violence, especially those attacked for their faith. Heal their wounds of body and heart.

Today: Pray for persecuted Christians, or learn about their situation in one country.

Day 5: Escape by night

Locked in a monastery, Leo escaped at night, lowered from a window with ropes, and found refuge at Saint Peter's. Even in the darkest hour, a way out can open. Leo did not save himself alone: others helped him, and he went

straight to the tomb of the apostle Peter.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel trapped, give me hope and show me the way you are opening.

Today: Bring to God, in a few honest words, a situation in which you feel stuck.

Day 6: Defended and cleared

At Paderborn, Charlemagne listened to Leo and cleared him of the accusations against him. Being heard and believed is a great gift to someone who has been accused unjustly.

Prayer: Lord, make me someone who listens before judging, and who defends those who cannot defend themselves.

Today: Take the side of someone who is being treated unfairly.

Day 7: Christmas in the year 800

On Christmas Day 800, Leo crowned Charlemagne emperor in Saint Peter's. Whatever its political meaning, the ceremony took place at the Mass of the Nativity: every earthly power stands before the Child of Bethlehem, the true King.

Prayer: Lord, I pray for those who govern nations. May they use their power to serve justice and peace.

Today: Pray by name for the leaders of your country and your city.

Day 8: Guarding the common faith

Leo refused to change the text of the Creed shared with the Christians of the East and had it engraved in Latin and Greek. He chose what unites over what divides.

Prayer: Lord, heal the divisions among Christians, and make us one, as you and the Father are one.

Today: Pray the Creed slowly, thinking of Christians of other traditions.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Leo III died in Rome on June 12, 816, after more than twenty years as pope, and was buried in Saint Peter's. Through violence, slander and political storms, he kept the charge he had received. He rests near Saint Leo the Great and Saint Leo II, beneath the basilica built over the apostle's tomb.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Leo III, grant me faithfulness and peace. Amen.

Today: Pray for the pope and for your bishop.

Closing prayer

Saint Leo III, pope and shepherd, you knew violence, slander and exile, and you remained faithful. I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for all who are falsely accused, for those who hold authority and for the unity of Christians. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Leo III and the prayer to Saint Leo III.

Credits and sources

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