

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Leo IV

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: July 17

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Leo IV

Pope from 847 to 855, builder of the Leonine Wall around the Vatican.

Feast day	July 17
Born	c. 790, Rome
Died	July 17, 855, Rome
Era	9th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Leo IV for Protection

Novena to Saint Leo IV

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Leo IV

Saint Leo IV was pope from 847 to 855, at a time when Rome lived under the threat of Saracen raids from the sea. A Benedictine monk, he surrounded the Vatican hill with a wall that still bears his name, the Leonine City, and blessed the fleet that drove back the pirates at Ostia in 849. He died on July 17, 855, and is remembered on that day, especially in the Benedictine order.

Who was Saint Leo IV?

Leo was a Roman, born around 790. He became a monk at the monastery of Saint Martin in Rome, then served the Church of Rome as a subdeacon and as cardinal priest under Pope Sergius II, who thought highly of him. When Sergius died, Leo was elected unanimously on April 10, 847.

Almost nothing is known of his inner life. The sources, above all the *Liber Pontificalis*, the ancient book of the lives of the popes, speak mainly of his buildings and his decisions. It is through them that we must approach him: a pastor who took seriously the duty of protecting his people and the holy places entrusted to him.

Key dates

- **c. 790**: Born in Rome.
- **August 846**: Saracen raiders attack Rome and plunder Saint Peter's Basilica, then outside the walls.
- **April 10, 847**: Elected pope, even before the emperor's agreement.
- **849**: Naval victory at Ostia over a Saracen fleet.
- **850**: Crowns Louis II, son of Lothair, as emperor.
- **852**: Completion of the wall of the Leonine City.

- **853**: Receives in Rome the young Alfred, future king of the Anglo-Saxons.
- **July 17, 855**: Dies in Rome.

Protecting the tomb of Peter

In 846, a few months before his election, Saracen pirates sailed up the Tiber and plundered the Basilica of Saint Peter, which then stood outside the city walls. The danger was so pressing that Leo was consecrated without waiting for the emperor's approval, normally expected at the time.

His great project was to enclose the Vatican hill within a fortified wall. Completed in 852, it was named after him: the Leonine City. He also restored Saint Peter's Basilica, damaged in the raid, and fortified other places in Lazio. These walls were not only a work of military engineering. For Leo, they protected the tomb of the Apostle Peter, the heart of the Church of Rome, and the pilgrims who came to pray there.

The victory of Ostia

In 849, learning that a large Saracen fleet was gathering off Sardinia, the pope called for help from the maritime cities of the Tyrrhenian coast, with Naples in the lead. Leo blessed the troops, who won a decisive victory at Ostia, at the mouth of the Tiber. The prisoners were put to work building the walls.

The fire in the Borgo

The *Liber Pontificalis* also says that Leo put out a fire in the Borgo district, near Saint Peter's, by his blessing. Centuries later, Raphael and his workshop made this story famous in a fresco of the Vatican Palace, *The Fire in the Borgo*, which shows the pope blessing the crowd from a loggia while the people flee the flames.



The Fire in the Borgo, a fresco by Raphael in the Vatican.

A pope at the crossroads of Europe

In 850, Leo IV crowned the Carolingian emperor Louis II, son of Lothair. He sent a golden diadem to the Breton ruler Nominoe, and in 853 he received in Rome the young prince of Wessex, Alfred, the future Alfred the Great, on whom he conferred an anointing. English-speaking readers may remember this link between an early pope and one of England's best-known kings.

Leo twice had an ambitious priest, Anastasius the Librarian, condemned; Anastasius would try to have himself elected pope after Leo's death. With Constantinople, Leo came into conflict with Patriarch Ignatius over Sicily, which Rome claimed as part of its jurisdiction.

What does his holiness teach us?

The sources do not give us Leo IV's prayers, but they show a shepherd who took his mission seriously. In a time of insecurity, he united prayer, blessing and concrete action: he called for help, organized the defense, rebuilt what had been destroyed. The walls he built still surround part of the Vatican today.

His example speaks to anyone who carries responsibility for others in difficult times: parents, pastors, mayors, rescue workers. Leo did not choose the moment of his election, which came in the aftermath of a disaster. He did not lose himself in lament either. He prayed, called on others, organized and rebuilt, and in this way he served both the city and the Church. His monastic formation under the Rule of Saint Benedict, which joins prayer and work, may help to explain this balance.

Why pray to Saint Leo IV?

Saint Leo IV has no widely known patronage. Catholics can turn to him for the pope and for the protection of the Church, for those responsible for the safety of others, and for communities living under threat. His life is a reminder that faith does not mean passivity: a bishop who prays can also build, rebuild and protect. Benedictines honor him as one of the monks who became pope.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Leo IV in art

Saint Leo IV appears as a pope in pontifical vestments. His best-known image is in Raphael's *Fire in the Borgo*, where he stands at a loggia of Saint Peter's, raising his hand in blessing over the burning district. Like other early popes, he is also known through portraits and mosaics made long after his time.



Pope Saint Leo IV.

Where to pray to Saint Leo IV

- **Rome, Saint Peter's Basilica**: the basilica he restored after the raid of 846.
- **Rome, the Leonine Walls**: sections of his wall still border Vatican City.
- **Vatican Museums**: the Room of the Fire in the Borgo, among the Raphael Rooms, recalls his blessing.

You can pray with him using the prayer to Saint Leo IV or the novena to Saint Leo IV.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Leo IV for Protection

Saint Leo IV left no prayers of his own, and no traditional prayer in his name is widely used. The ancient sources show him as a pope who blessed, protected and rebuilt in a time of danger. Below is an original prayer inspired by his life, followed by a short invocation.

A shepherd who protected his people

Elected in 847, just after Saracen raiders had plundered Saint Peter's Basilica, Leo IV surrounded the Vatican with walls, called the coastal cities to help defend Rome and blessed the fleet that won the victory of Ostia in 849. Tradition also says that he stopped a fire in the Borgo with his blessing. To pray with him is to ask God for protection, for courage in danger and for the strength to rebuild what has been broken.

Prayer to Saint Leo IV for protection

Saint Leo IV, faithful shepherd of the Church of Rome, you who watched over the tomb of the Apostle Peter and protected your people in a time of fear, pray for the Holy Father and for the whole Church.

You who did not lose heart when the sanctuary was plundered, but rebuilt it and surrounded it with walls, help me to rebuild what has been damaged in my life, my family and my community.

You who called others to help and blessed those who defended the city, teach me to ask for help in danger and to give it generously when others need me.

You whose blessing, as tradition tells, quenched the fire in the Borgo, ask the Lord to protect our homes, our churches and all who are threatened by violence or disaster.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Through your intercession, may the Lord be our refuge and our strength. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

- On his feast day, **July 17**, the anniversary of his death in 855.
- For the pope and for the protection of the Church.
- When your home, your parish or your town faces danger, violence or disaster.
- For those who protect others: police officers, firefighters, soldiers, security workers.
- When you need to rebuild after a loss or a crisis.

A short invocation

> *Saint Leo IV, guardian of the house of Peter, pray for us and protect us. Amen.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Leo IV or pray the novena to Saint Leo IV, which ends on July 17.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Leo IV

This novena to Saint Leo IV is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the Benedictine monk who became pope in 847, protected Rome against Saracen raids and surrounded the Vatican with the walls of the Leonine City. To end on his feast day, July 17, begin it on July 9. You can also pray it at any time of the year, for the Church, for the pope or for protection in times of danger.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. Finish with the small act proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: A monk in Rome

Before he was pope, Leo was a monk at the monastery of Saint Martin in Rome. The life of prayer and work under the Rule of Saint Benedict formed his heart. Everything great begins in silence before God.

Prayer: Saint Leo, help me to give God a place of silence each day, so that my actions may come from prayer. Amen.

Today: Spend ten minutes in silent prayer.

Day 2: A servant of the Church

Leo served the Church of Rome as a subdeacon and a cardinal priest. Pope Sergius II valued him. Faithful service in small things prepares us for greater responsibilities.

Prayer: Saint Leo, make me faithful in the service I am given, whatever it may be. Amen.

Today: Do a task in your parish or community that no one else wants to do.

Day 3: Called in a time of crisis

Leo was elected in 847, just after raiders had plundered Saint Peter's Basilica. He did not choose his moment. God often calls us precisely when things are difficult.

Prayer: Saint Leo, when I am called to serve in a time of crisis, give me courage and trust. Amen.

Today: Pray for people who carry heavy responsibilities during a crisis.

Day 4: Protecting what is holy

Leo surrounded the Vatican hill with walls to protect the tomb of the Apostle Peter and the pilgrims who came there. Some things are worth guarding: faith, family, the innocence of children, places of prayer.

Prayer: Saint Leo, help me to protect what is holy in my life and in the lives of those entrusted to me. Amen.

Today: Identify one thing that weakens your prayer life and set a limit on it.

Day 5: Asking for help

Facing the Saracen fleet in 849, Leo did not act alone. He called on Naples and the other coastal cities. Humility knows how to ask for help, and charity knows how to answer.

Prayer: Saint Leo, give me the humility to ask for help and the generosity to help others. Amen.

Today: Ask for help with something you have been carrying alone, or offer help to someone.

Day 6: The blessing

Before the battle of Ostia, the pope blessed the troops. A blessing is not magic: it places our efforts in God's hands. The victory was won by men who fought, but also by a Church that prayed.

Prayer: Lord, bless my work and my efforts today. Saint Leo, pray that I may do everything with you and for you. Amen.

Today: Bless your children, your family or your meal with a simple Sign of the Cross.

Day 7: The fire in the Borgo

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Leo stopped a fire in the Borgo by his blessing. Raphael painted the scene in the Vatican. There are many fires in our lives: anger, conflict, fear. Christ can calm them.

Prayer: Saint Leo, ask the Lord to quench the fires of anger and division in my heart and in my family. Amen.

Today: Calm a conflict instead of feeding it: choose a gentle word.

Day 8: Rebuilding

Leo restored Saint Peter's Basilica after the raid. He did not stay paralyzed by what had been destroyed. Rebuilding takes patience, and it is a work of hope.

Prayer: Saint Leo, help me to rebuild what has been broken in my life, one stone at a time, with trust in God. Amen.

Today: Take a first step to repair something: a relationship, a habit, a promise.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Leo IV died on July 17, 855, after eight years as pope. His walls still stand around part of the Vatican, a silent witness to a shepherd who did his duty to the end.

Prayer: Saint Leo, present my intention to the Lord, and pray for the Holy Father and for the whole Church. Amen.

Today: If you can, take part in Mass and pray for the pope.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Leo IV the grace to watch over your Church in a time of danger, to protect the tomb of the Apostle Peter and to rebuild what had been destroyed. Through his intercession, protect the pope and all your people, keep us from violence and fear, and give us the courage to build and rebuild with you. Hear the intention I place before you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Leo IV or pray the prayer to Saint Leo IV.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: PalauanLibertarian, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Fire in the Borgo, a fresco by Raphael in the Vatican.: Image: Raphael, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Pope Saint Leo IV.: Image: Unknown author, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com