BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Macarius the Great

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Macarius the Great

4th-century Egyptian monk, Desert Father, disciple of Saint Anthony and founder of monastic life at Scetis.

Feast day	January 19
Born	beginning of the 4th century, Upper Egypt
Died	c. 390, desert of Scetis (Wadi El Natrun, Egypt)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century

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Monastery of Saint Macarius, Wadi El Natrun

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Macarius the Great

Saint Macarius of Scetis, also called Macarius the Great or Macarius of Egypt, was a monk of the 4th century, one of the most famous Desert Fathers. Born in Upper Egypt at the beginning of the century, a disciple of Saint Anthony, he founded monastic life in the desert of Scetis, today's Wadi El Natrun, west of the Nile Delta, where he died around 390. His feast day is January 19.

Who was Saint Macarius of Scetis?

Macarius is one of the great figures of the origins of Christian monasticism. He should not be confused with his contemporary and namesake Macarius of Alexandria, also a monk in Egypt: ancient accounts often mix them up. What we know about him comes mainly from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, collections of the words and deeds of the first monks, and from a very rich Coptic tradition. An important spiritual work circulates under his name, the *Spiritual Homilies*, but scholars have long debated who really wrote them.

Key dates in the life of Macarius

- **Beginning of the 4th century**: Born in Upper Egypt.
- **Around the age of thirty**: He settles in the desert of Scetis, west of the Nile Delta.
- **Afterward**: He puts himself at the school of Saint Anthony the Great; his early wisdom earns him the nickname "the young old man".
- **Around the age of forty**: He is ordained a priest to serve the monks of Scetis.
- **c. 374**: Opposed to Arianism, he is exiled to an island in the Nile by Lucius, the Arian bishop of Alexandria.

- **Shortly after**: He returns to the desert, where Evagrius Ponticus becomes his disciple.
- **c. 390**: He dies at Scetis, aged over ninety.

The father of the monks of Scetis

Traditions differ about his youth and his first trade. At about thirty, he went to the desert of Scetis, an arid, salty region west of the Nile. He first lived there as a hermit, then disciples came to settle around him. Macarius offered them a form of life halfway between complete solitude and community life: each lived in his own cell, but all came together for common prayer and the Eucharist, and helped each other to live. This organization into colonies of hermits left a lasting mark on Eastern monasticism.

A disciple of Saint Anthony, whom he visited several times, Macarius is described as a man of great gentleness. The accounts credit him with gifts of healing and prophecy. Ordained a priest at about forty, he celebrated for the monks of the desert.

Words of a Desert Father

The *Sayings* record many of his words. To monks who asked him how to pray, he replied that there is no need for long speeches: it is enough to stretch out your hands and say "Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy on me", and, in the struggle, "Lord, help me". Other stories show him bearing insults without defending himself, or covering the faults of his brothers. A tradition taken up by the *Golden Legend* says that after killing a flea that had bitten him, he stayed exposed in the desert for six months to atone for this impulse of revenge. These stories, often picturesque, all teach the same thing: humility and mercy.

The trial of exile and his death

At the time of the Arian crisis, Macarius remained faithful to the faith of the Council of Nicaea. Around 374, the Arian bishop Lucius, installed in Alexandria, had the leading monks exiled to an island in the Nile. Macarius was later able to return to Scetis. In his last years, he received among his disciples Evagrius Ponticus, who would become a great teacher of the spiritual life. He died around 390, over ninety years old.

Devotion and art

The monastery that bears his name, Deir Abu Makar, still exists in Wadi El Natrun; it keeps relics attributed to Macarius the Great. Saint Macarius is listed in the Roman Martyrology on January 19, a date also kept by the Orthodox Churches; other calendars, in East and West alike, celebrate him on January 15. He is shown as an old monk with a long white beard, sometimes accompanied by a cherub, according to a Coptic tradition.

What can we learn from Saint Macarius of Scetis?

Macarius reminds us that the deepest prayer can fit in a few words, if it comes from a humble heart. He also shows that solitude is not isolation: his monks lived alone, but in brotherly charity. You can pray to him to learn to pray simply, for monks and nuns, for those who must forgive an offense and for those going through an inner desert.

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

Where to pray to Saint Macarius of Scetis

- **The monastery of Saint Macarius** (Wadi El Natrun, Egypt): founded where he lived, it keeps his relics; today it belongs to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

- **The desert of Wadi El Natrun**: ancient Scetis, where several ancient monasteries are still inhabited.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Macarius of Scetis to Learn to Pray

Saint Macarius of Scetis, one of the great Desert Fathers of Egypt in the 4th century, taught his monks a simple and humble prayer. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. You can add to it the short prayer that the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* attribute to him.

Prayer to Saint Macarius of Scetis

Saint Macarius,
you who sought God in the desert of Scetis,
and who learned in silence
the gentleness and humility of Christ,
teach me to pray with a simple heart.

You who covered the faults of your brothers
and bore insults without answering,
give me a merciful heart,
slow to judge and quick to forgive.

Father of monks,
watch over those who live in prayer,
and over all who are crossing an inner desert.
May I know how to say at every hour:
"Lord, have mercy on me."
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The prayer of Saint Macarius

According to the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Macarius advised those who asked him how to pray to stretch out their hands and say:

> *Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy on me.*

And, in moments of struggle: "Lord, help me." (Source: *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, alphabetical collection, Macarius.)

When to pray to Saint Macarius

- On his feast day, January 19.
- When you no longer know how to pray.
- When you must forgive an offense or bear an injustice.
- For monks, nuns and hermits.
- In times of spiritual dryness.

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Macarius from January 11 to January 19, and read the life of Saint Macarius of Scetis.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Macarius of Scetis

This novena is inspired by the life and words of Saint Macarius of Scetis, an Egyptian Desert Father of the 4th century. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on his feast day, January 19, begin on January 11. You can also pray it at any other time.

How to pray this novena

Each day, make 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 Macarius, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recounted come from ancient stories of the Desert Fathers, which often mix up several monks of the same name.

Day 1: Going into the desert

At about thirty, Macarius left everything for the desert of Scetis. The desert is the place where one finds oneself alone before God.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to make room for you, leaving behind what clutters my life.

Act of the day: Take a quarter of an hour of silence, without your phone, to pray.

Day 2: At the school of a master

Macarius put himself at the school of Saint Anthony. The greatest monks were first disciples.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to learn and to ask for advice.

Act of the day: Read a saying of a saint and keep it in mind all day.

Day 3: The young old man

Macarius was nicknamed "the young old man", so wise was he before his time. Wisdom comes from prayer, not from years.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me wisdom of heart, whatever my age.

Act of the day: Pray for young people who are looking for their path.

Day 4: Praying simply

Macarius taught that there is no need for long speeches: "Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy on me."

Prayer: Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy on me.

Act of the day: Repeat this prayer of Macarius several times today, with open hands.

Day 5: Alone and together

The disciples of Macarius each lived in a cell, but came together to pray and help one another. Christian solitude is never closed to others.

Prayer: Lord, bless monks and nuns, and make our communities places of brotherhood.

Act of the day: Visit or call a person who lives alone.

Day 6: Covering the faults of the brothers

The stories say that Macarius covered the faults of his brothers, as God covers ours. He did not judge.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from judging my neighbor. Give me your merciful gaze.

Act of the day: Give up today any criticism of someone who is not present.

Day 7: Bearing insults

Macarius accepted insults without defending himself. He imitated Christ, gentle and humble of heart.

Prayer: Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, make my heart like yours.

Act of the day: Let a hurtful word pass without answering it, and pray for the one who said it.

Day 8: Faithful in exile

Around 374, Macarius was exiled for his faithfulness to the faith of Nicaea. He later returned to the desert, without bitterness.

Prayer: Lord, keep me faithful to the faith of your Church, even when it is challenged.

Act of the day: Pray the Creed slowly.

Day 9: Handing on

At the end of his life, Macarius trained Evagrius and many others. He died around 390, aged over ninety, surrounded by his disciples.

Prayer: Lord, make me a witness for those who will come after me. Through the intercession of Saint Macarius, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Share with someone close to you a word of the Gospel that gives you life.

Closing prayer

Saint Macarius,
father of the monks of Scetis,
you found God in the silence of the desert.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you,
and teach me to say to him with trust:
"As you will and as you know, have mercy on me."
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Monastery of Saint Macarius, Wadi El Natrun

The monastery of Saint Macarius, called Deir Abu Makar in Arabic, stands in the desert of Wadi El Natrun, ancient Scetis, a little more than ninety kilometers from Cairo, in Egypt. It rises on the spot where Saint Macarius the Great gathered his disciples in the 4th century, and it keeps his relics. It is one of the oldest Christian monasteries still inhabited in the world. Today it belongs to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Sixteen centuries of monastic life

The monastery grew out of the community formed around Macarius, in a desert where hundreds of monks lived. To protect themselves from raids coming from the desert, the monks built walls and a fortified tower where they could take refuge. Tradition keeps the memory of forty-nine monks killed during an attack in 444, because they refused to shelter in the tower; a chapel is dedicated to them.

The monastery went through centuries of decline. In 1969, at the request of the Coptic patriarch Cyril VI, it was restored and repopulated under the leadership of the monk Matta el Meskeen, a major spiritual figure of the Coptic Church in the 20th century. Today it has more than a hundred monks, who farm large areas of land reclaimed from the desert.

What you can see

The main church houses three ancient sanctuaries. One of them is dedicated to the "three Macarii": there one venerates the relics of Saint Macarius the Great, Saint Macarius of Alexandria and a bishop Macarius honored by the Coptic

Church. The sanctuaries preserve ancient wall paintings, including rare depictions of the four Living Creatures of Ezekiel's vision. You can also see the fortified tower, the chapel of the Forty-Nine Martyrs, another church that keeps the relics of Saint John the Dwarf, and a cave associated with Saint Macarius.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Macarius of Scetis. Before his relics, entrust your prayer to him, along with the monks of East and West and the unity of Christians, then say the prayer to Saint Macarius or simply his short prayer: "Lord, as you will and as you know, have mercy on me." These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places in Wadi El Natrun

- **The other monasteries of Wadi El Natrun**: several ancient monasteries, still inhabited, recall that Scetis was one of the great centers of Christian monasticism.
- **The desert itself**: an arid, salty landscape that helps one understand the life of the Desert Fathers.

Practical information

Wadi El Natrun lies near the desert road linking Cairo and Alexandria. Saint Macarius is a living monastery and a place of prayer: modest dress and respect for silence are requested. The conditions for welcoming visitors may vary and some areas are reserved for the monks: check with the monastery or a pilgrimage organizer before you come.

Credits and sources

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