BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Melania the Elder

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 26

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IN BRIEF

Saint Melania the Elder

Roman noblewoman of the 4th century, a widow who became a nun and founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives.

Feast day	January 26
Born	c. 350, Roman Empire (a family of the Roman aristocracy)
Died	c. 410, not known with certainty
Canonized	ancient cult, not listed in the Roman Martyrology
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Melania the Elder

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Melania the Elder

Saint Melania the Elder was a Roman aristocrat of the 4th century, born around 350. Widowed very young, she left Rome for the deserts of Egypt, then founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives, in Jerusalem, around 380. Grandmother of Saint Melania the Younger, she is counted among the "Desert Mothers". She died around 410. The French-language calendar of saints celebrates her on January 26.

Who was Saint Melania the Elder?

Melania belonged to the high nobility of the late Roman Empire. She is called "the Elder" to distinguish her from her granddaughter, Saint Melania the Younger, who later followed the same path. Her name is linked to the beginnings of monasticism: she knew the monks of Egypt, welcomed pilgrims in Jerusalem and encouraged several great figures of her time to give themselves to God. What we know of her comes mainly from authors who knew her, such as Palladius, who praises her in his accounts of the monks, and Saint Jerome, who admired her before distancing himself from her. The sources are few and the dates remain approximate.

Key dates in the life of Melania the Elder

- **c. 350**: Born into a family of the Roman aristocracy.
- **Youth**: She marries Valerius Maximus Basilius, a high Roman official; among their children is Publicola, future father of Melania the Younger.
- **c. 372**: After the death of her husband and two of her sons, she leaves for Egypt and visits the monks of the Nitrian desert with Rufinus of Aquileia.
- **Then**: She settles in Jerusalem, where she meets Evagrius Ponticus and encourages him to embrace monastic life.

- **c. 380**: She founds a double monastery on the Mount of Olives.
- **Late 4th century**: A disagreement separates her from Saint Jerome, who had first admired her.
- **c. 410**: Death of Melania, after a life devoted to prayer and hospitality.

A widow who chose God

Melania married a high Roman official, Valerius Maximus Basilius. While still young, she suffered a series of terrible bereavements: her husband died, and almost at the same time two of her sons. Saint Jerome, recalling these trials, admired the strength with which she bore them. Rather than closing in on her grief, Melania entrusted the son who remained to God and decided to devote her life to prayer. Around 372, she left Rome for Egypt.

In the Egyptian desert, then in Jerusalem

In Lower Egypt, Melania traveled through the Nitrian desert, where hundreds of monks were living at the time. She visited their communities in the company of the priest Rufinus of Aquileia and supported the monks with her wealth. She then went to Jerusalem. There she met Evagrius Ponticus, a brilliant cleric who had come from Constantinople, and convinced him to embrace monastic life: he would become one of the great spiritual masters of the desert.

Around 380, Melania founded a double monastery on the Mount of Olives, bringing together a community of women and a community of men. The monastery welcomed pilgrims who came to pray at the holy places. Her granddaughter, Melania the Younger, would later develop it and make it even more famous.

An influence on a whole family

Melania the Elder deeply marked her family. It was by following her advice that her granddaughter and her husband, Pinian, freed their many slaves and sold their vast estates to give the proceeds to monasteries and churches. Thus, from one generation to the next, the same family chose to leave everything for Christ. Her relationships were not always simple: Saint Jerome, at first full of admiration, ended up disowning her because of a disagreement linked to the controversies of the time. Palladius, on the contrary, praised her warmly.

Devotion and memory

Melania the Elder is counted among the "Desert Mothers", the women who lived asceticism and prayer in the first centuries of monasticism. The French-language calendar of saints lists her on January 26. Her cult remains discreet: she has no known shrine or tomb, and her memory has been handed down mainly through her granddaughter and through the writings of the early monks.

What can we learn from Saint Melania the Elder?

Melania went through grief without closing herself off. She made her fortune an instrument of charity, and her house a place of welcome for pilgrims. She knew how to encourage others to answer God's call. You can pray to her for widows and grieving parents, for those seeking their vocation, and for families in which faith is passed on from one generation to the next.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Melania the Elder and the novena to Saint Melania the Elder.

Where to pray to Saint Melania the Elder

- **The Mount of Olives** (Jerusalem): the place where she founded her monastery, which no longer exists.

- **Anywhere**, especially on January 26, by reading the stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Melania the Elder for the Grieving

Saint Melania the Elder, a Roman noblewoman of the 4th century, left Rome after the death of her husband and two of her sons to live as a nun in Jerusalem, where she founded a monastery around 380. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to her the grieving, families and those seeking their vocation.

Prayer to Saint Melania the Elder

Saint Melania,
you who knew the loss of your husband and your children,
you did not let grief close your heart:
you placed everything in the hands of God.
Sustain those who mourn a loved one,
and open them to hope.

You left the honors of Rome
to seek God in the desert and in Jerusalem.
You put your wealth at the service of monks and the poor,
and your house at the service of pilgrims.
Teach me detachment and sharing.

You who encouraged so many souls to follow Christ,
watch over our families,
and help our children to hear God's call.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Melania the Elder

- On her feast day, January 26.
- In a time of mourning, especially for widows and parents who have lost a child.
- For young people seeking their vocation.
- For families in which faith is passed on between grandparents and grandchildren.
- Before a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

A prayer for the grieving

> *Lord, comfort those who mourn and keep our departed in your peace.*
> *Saint Melania, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Melania the Elder from January 18 to 26, and discover the life of Saint Melania the Elder.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Melania the Elder

This novena is inspired by the life of Saint Melania the Elder, a Roman noblewoman who became a nun in Jerusalem in the 4th century. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, January 26, begin on January 18. You can also pray it at any other time of the year, especially in a time of mourning.

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 Melania, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A woman of Rome

Melania was born around 350 into a wealthy Roman family. She had everything the world can offer: rank, fortune, a family.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to see in all I have a gift from your hand, and to give it back to you.

Act of the day: Give thanks for your family and for all you have received.

Day 2: The trial of grief

Melania lost her husband and two of her sons almost at the same time. She knew the deepest sorrow.

Prayer: Lord, be close to those who mourn. Comfort them and do not leave them alone.

Act of the day: Write to or call a person who is grieving.

Day 3: Entrusting everything to God

Instead of closing in on herself, Melania entrusted those she loved to God and decided to give him her life.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those I love, living and departed. Keep them in your love.

Act of the day: Pray for your departed, naming them one by one.

Day 4: Going to the desert

Around 372, Melania left for Egypt and discovered the life of the monks of the Nitrian desert. She put herself in their school.

Prayer: Lord, help me to love prayer and to seek your face in silence.

Act of the day: Take a time of silence and read a saying of the Desert Fathers.

Day 5: Serving those who pray

Melania supported the monks with her wealth. Her riches became an instrument in the service of God and others.

Prayer: Lord, make my possessions a means of service, and not a chain that binds me.

Act of the day: Make a donation to a religious community or a charity.

Day 6: Encouraging a vocation

In Jerusalem, Melania helped Evagrius Ponticus to embrace monastic life. A right word can change a life.

Prayer: Lord, give me words that encourage, and help me to support others in answering your call.

Act of the day: Pray for vocations, and encourage a young person who is looking for their way.

Day 7: Building a house of prayer

Around 380, Melania founded a monastery on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus prayed before his Passion.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you who prayed in the garden of Olives, teach me to pray in times of trial.

Act of the day: Read the account of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46).

Day 8: Passing on the faith

Melania's advice marked her granddaughter, who would also choose to give everything. Faith is passed on from one generation to the next.

Prayer: Lord, bless grandparents, and help them to pass on the faith to their grandchildren.

Act of the day: Pray for your grandparents or grandchildren, or pay them a visit.

Day 9: Toward the peace of God

Melania died around 410, after a life of prayer, hospitality and charity. She found in God the peace the world cannot give.

Prayer: Lord, give me your peace at the end of my road. Through the intercession of Saint Melania the Elder, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass if possible, and entrust your departed to God there.

Living the novena with Saint Melania the Elder

Melania went through grief with faith and made her life a gift. During these nine days, you can carry the grieving, widows, families, and all who are seeking their vocation. You can also read some stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, whom she knew and supported.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Melania,*
> *mother tried by sorrow and servant of God,*
> *you sought the Lord in the desert and in Jerusalem.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Comfort those who mourn,*
> *and keep our families in the faith.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Credits and sources

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