

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Nicholas I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: November 13

IN BRIEF

Saint Nicholas I

Pope from 858 to 867, called the Great, defender of the moral authority of the pope before kings and bishops.

Feast day	November 13
Born	c. 800, Rome
Died	November 13, 867, Rome
Era	9th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Nicholas I for the Courage of Truth

Novena to Saint Nicholas I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

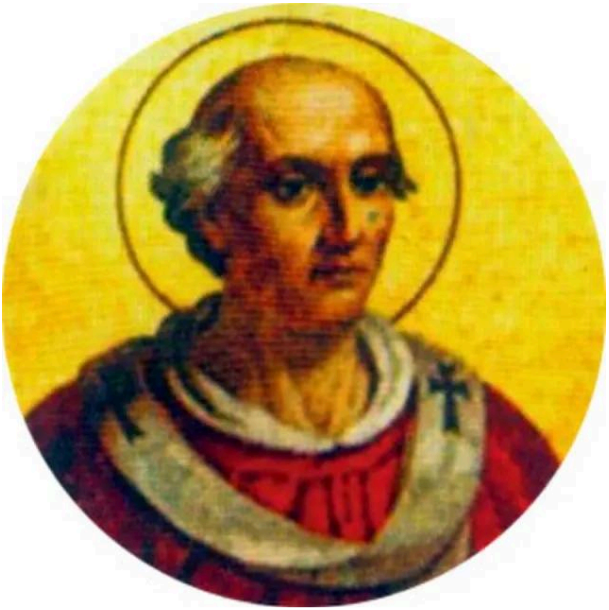
Saint Nicholas I

Saint Nicholas I, known as "the Great," was pope from 858 to 867. In the middle of the ninth century, as the Carolingian Empire was breaking apart, he asserted with unprecedented firmness the moral authority of the pope over bishops, kings and the emperor. He defended a queen rejected by her husband, protected bishops against their archbishops and stood up to Patriarch Photius of Constantinople. He died on November 13, 867, and is celebrated on that day. He should not be confused with Saint Nicholas of Myra, the fourth-century bishop honored on December 6.

Who was Saint Nicholas I?

Nicholas was born around 800 in Rome, into a family of the Roman nobility; his father, Theodore, was in charge of one of the districts of the city. He spent his career at the Lateran Palace, in the service of the popes. Saint Leo IV ordained him a subdeacon, and he became a close collaborator of Benedict III. When Benedict died, Nicholas was elected pope on April 24, 858, with the support of Emperor Louis II.

From the start, he showed his independence from the emperor. Historians regard his pontificate as one of the high points of the history of the papacy in the early Middle Ages. It was entirely shaped by one idea: the pope has received from Saint Peter the task of watching over the whole Church, and no one, neither bishop nor prince, can escape that responsibility.



Saint Nicholas I in the gallery of popes at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Key dates

- **Around 800**: Birth in Rome.
- **April 24, 858**: Election as pope.
- **861**: Excommunication of Archbishop John of Ravenna; start of the case of Rothad of Soissons.
- **863**: He annuls the Council of Metz, which had approved the divorce of Lothair II, and suspends Photius.
- **865**: Lothair II is forced to take back his lawful wife, Theutberga.
- **866**: Replies sent to the newly converted Bulgarians.
- **Summer 867**: A synod gathered by Photius in Constantinople claims to depose him.
- **November 13, 867**: Death in Rome.
- **1630**: Pope Urban VIII adds his name to the Roman Martyrology.

Defender of marriage and of the weak

The divorce of King Lothair II

The most famous case of his pontificate concerns King Lothair II of Lotharingia. Lothair wanted to put away his wife, Queen Theutberga, in order to marry his concubine Waldrada, with whom he had a son. In 863, a council held at Metz, presided over by the archbishops of Cologne and Trier, approved the divorce.

Nicholas annulled its decisions, deposed the two archbishops and, despite heavy pressure, compelled the king to take Theutberga back in 865. For the pope, God's law on marriage applied to kings as much as to any of the faithful. A rejected queen, with little power of her own, found in Rome a defender.

Bishops unjustly removed

He also stepped in on behalf of bishops threatened by their superiors. Rothad, bishop of Soissons, had been deposed by a council called by the powerful Archbishop Hincmar of Reims. Nicholas summoned him to Rome, judged the case and restored him to his see. In the same way, he called to order Archbishop John of Ravenna, who was encroaching on the rights of the bishops under him and of the Holy See.

Rome, Constantinople and the Bulgarians

In the East, Emperor Michael III had Patriarch Ignatius deposed in 858 and raised in his place Photius, a very learned layman. The legates sent by Nicholas at first approved this choice at the council of 861. But the pope, informed by the supporters of Ignatius, disowned his legates in 863 and suspended Photius.

The rivalry grew sharper when the Bulgarians, recently converted, turned to Rome. In 866 Nicholas answered their many questions in a long text that remained famous, the *Responses to the Questions of the Bulgarians*. In it he set

out the faith and the Latin customs, and in particular he condemned the use of torture to obtain confessions. In 867, Photius gathered a synod that claimed to excommunicate the pope. Nicholas died before learning what came of it.

This conflict foreshadowed the tensions that would eventually separate the Churches of East and West. Historians also point out that Nicholas's ideas on papal power relied in part on the "False Decretals," a collection of texts forged in the ninth century and attributed to the early popes.

Why is Saint Nicholas I called "the Great"?

From the moment of his death, Nicholas was regarded as one of the greatest popes of his time. The chronicler Regino of Prüm wrote in the early tenth century that since Saint Gregory the Great, no bishop of Rome could be compared to him. Only a few popes have received the title "the Great," and he is one of them.

His cult is attested in the fourteenth century, and his name was entered in the Roman Martyrology in 1630. Saint Nicholas I is not the patron saint of a particular cause. Beyond the debates of historians about his idea of papal power, the Church honors in him a shepherd who did not bend before the powerful and who took up the defense of those who had no one to defend them: an abandoned queen, bishops unjustly deposed, prisoners subjected to torture. For this reason, many people turn to him to ask for the courage of truth, for justice toward the weak and for faithfulness in marriage.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Nicholas I in art

No portrait made in his lifetime survives. He is shown as a pope, in papal vestments, with the tiara or the keys of Saint Peter, as in the series of mosaic medallions of the popes at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome. Unlike Saint Nicholas of Myra, he is not shown with three children, three golden balls or a ship: those symbols belong to the bishop of Myra.



Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Where to pray to Saint Nicholas I

There is no major shrine dedicated to Saint Nicholas I. The places linked to his life are in Rome: the Lateran, where he served the popes for many years, and Saint Peter's Basilica, the heart of the ministry he received from the apostle. You can pray to him anywhere, especially on November 13, with the prayer to Saint Nicholas I.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Nicholas I for the Courage of Truth

No traditional prayer to Saint Nicholas I has come into common use. Below you will find the judgment a chronicler of the following century passed on him, then an original prayer to Saint Nicholas I, the ninth-century pope who stood up to kings for the sake of God's law and defended those who had no defender. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

The witness of a chronicler

> *"Since blessed Gregory, no bishop raised to the pontifical throne in the city of Rome can be compared to him."*

Source: Regino of Prüm, *Chronicle*, under the year 868, written in the early tenth century.

Prayer to Saint Nicholas I for the Courage of Truth

Saint Nicholas, shepherd of the Church of Rome,
you did not bend before kings when they wanted to twist the law of God.
Give me the courage of truth, even when it is unwelcome.

You defended an abandoned wife:
pray for wounded marriages, for those who have been betrayed,
and for the faithfulness of husbands and wives.

You protected bishops unjustly deposed and condemned the torture of prisoners:
obtain that justice be done to the weak,
and that the dignity of every accused person be respected.

You carried the concern of the Churches of East and West:
pray for the unity of Christians.
I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Teach me to join firmness with charity,
and to serve the Church without seeking my own glory. Amen.

This original text by Saintspedia may be freely used for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

- On November 13, the feast of Saint Nicholas I, the day of his death in 867.
- When you need courage to speak the truth to someone more powerful than you.
- For a marriage in crisis, or for a spouse who has been abandoned.
- For people falsely accused, for prisoners and for victims of torture.

- For the pope, the bishops and the unity of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

To learn more about his life, read the page on Saint Nicholas I, or pray the novena to Saint Nicholas I, from November 5 to November 13.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Nicholas I

This novena to Saint Nicholas I is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the pope of the ninth century, called "the Great," who defended the law of God before kings, protected the weak and carried the concern of the whole Church, East and West. To end on November 13, his feast day, begin it on November 5. You can also pray it at any time of the year, especially for the courage of truth, for a marriage in difficulty or for justice for the weak.

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. End 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 life of service

Nicholas spent his whole career at the Lateran, in the service of the popes, long before becoming pope himself. His greatness was prepared by years of patient and often unseen work.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, help me to do my daily work faithfully, as a service offered to God and to others. Amen.

Today: Do one ordinary task of your day with special care, offering it to God.

Day 2: Receiving a charge from Peter

Elected pope on April 24, 858, Nicholas was convinced that he had received from Saint Peter the duty of watching over the whole Church. He did not see his office as an honor but as a responsibility before God.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, pray for the pope and for all who carry responsibility in the Church, that they may serve with faith and humility. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Holy Father by name.

Day 3: Not bending before the powerful

When King Lothair II wanted to put away his wife, a council of bishops approved his divorce. Nicholas annulled its decisions despite the pressure. God's law, he said, applies to kings as to everyone.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, give me the courage to speak the truth with charity, even when it costs me. Amen.

Today: Refuse one small compromise with the truth: a flattering lie, a convenient silence.

Day 4: For faithful marriages

Queen Theutberga was rejected by her husband. The pope took her side and obliged the king to take her back. Behind a political affair, there was a wife who had been abandoned.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, pray for husbands and wives, for marriages in crisis and for spouses who have been betrayed or left alone. Amen.

Today: Pray for a couple you know who is going through a difficult time, or do something kind for your own spouse.

Day 5: Justice for the weak

Rothad, bishop of Soissons, had been deposed by a powerful archbishop. Nicholas called him to Rome, judged the case and restored him. He did not let the strongest have the last word.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, obtain justice for those who are crushed by people more powerful than they are. Amen.

Today: Stand up, in a word or an act, for someone who is treated unfairly around you.

Day 6: Against torture

In his replies to the Bulgarians, in 866, Nicholas condemned the use of torture to obtain confessions. More than a thousand years ago, a pope reminded rulers that every accused person keeps his dignity.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, pray for prisoners, for those falsely accused and for victims of torture throughout the world. Amen.

Today: Pray for those in prison, or learn about an organization that defends their dignity.

Day 7: Teaching new Christians

The Bulgarians, newly baptized, sent the pope many questions about the faith and daily Christian life. He answered them one by one, patiently. Every new believer deserves to be accompanied.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, pray for catechumens, for newly baptized adults and for those who teach the faith. Amen.

Today: Pray for those preparing for baptism in your parish, or answer kindly a question someone asks you about your faith.

Day 8: East and West

The conflict between Nicholas and Patriarch Photius foreshadowed the later separation of the Churches of East and West. Today, Catholics and Orthodox pray and work to heal this ancient wound.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, pray for the unity of Christians, and especially for reconciliation between Catholics and Orthodox. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Christians of the Eastern Churches, or learn about one of their traditions.

Day 9: Firmness and charity

Nicholas died on November 13, 867. The Church honors in him a shepherd who did not bend before the powerful and who defended those who had no defender. True firmness is a form of love.

Prayer: Saint Nicholas, teach me to join firmness and charity, and to serve without seeking my own glory. Amen.

Today: Give thanks for a person who once told you a hard truth out of love.

Closing prayer

Lord God, you gave your Church in Saint Nicholas I a shepherd who was firm in truth and attentive to the weak. Through his prayers, give us the courage to obey your law before all human power, protect marriages and families, grant justice to the oppressed and gather all Christians in unity. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

On November 13, if you can, attend Mass or spend a few minutes before the Blessed Sacrament, and give thanks for the shepherds God gives to his Church. You may also continue to pray the prayer to Saint Nicholas I whenever you need courage to stand for what is right.

CREDITS

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