

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Olympias the Deaconess

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Olympias the Deaconess

Noble widow of Constantinople, deaconess, benefactor of the poor and faithful friend of Saint John Chrysostom.

Feast day	December 17, July 25 (Eastern Churches)
Born	c. 368, Constantinople
Died	c. 408, Nicomedia (İzmit, Turkey)
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Olympias for Generosity and Faithfulness

Novena to Saint Olympias the Deaconess

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Olympias the Deaconess

Saint Olympias, also called Olympias the Deaconess, was a noblewoman of Constantinople in the fourth century, probably the richest woman in the Eastern Roman Empire. Widowed at about nineteen, she refused to remarry, gave her fortune to the poor and to the Church, became a deaconess and was the faithful friend of Saint John Chrysostom, who wrote her seventeen famous letters from exile. She died in exile around 408. The Roman Martyrology commemorates her on December 17, and the Eastern Churches on July 25.

Who was Saint Olympias?

Olympias was born around 368 in Constantinople, the new capital of the Empire. We know her better than most women of her time, thanks to several witnesses: Bishop Palladius, who wrote about her; the historian Sozomen; the letters of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus; and above all the letters John Chrysostom sent her. She also knew Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who dedicated a commentary on the Song of Songs to her.

Her grandfather, Ablabius, a man of humble origins, had risen to the highest offices of the Empire. Her father, Count Anysius Seleucus, was a devout man and a correspondent of Gregory of Nazianzus. Orphaned very young, Olympias was entrusted to her uncle Procopius, who had her educated by a woman of great virtue, Theodosia, the sister of Bishop Amphilochius of Iconium. There she received a solid Christian formation and a fine Greek education.

Key dates in the life of Olympias

- **Around 368**: Born in Constantinople.

- **Around 384-386**: Marries Nebridius, prefect of Constantinople; widowed after twenty months.
- **After her husband's death**: Refuses to marry Elpidius, a relative of Emperor Theodosius; her property is placed under guardianship.
- **Around 391**: Theodosius returns to her the free use of her fortune.
- **Around 393-394**: Bishop Nectarius ordains her a deaconess.
- **398**: John Chrysostom becomes Bishop of Constantinople and her spiritual guide.
- **404**: After Chrysostom's exile, she is falsely accused of setting fire to Hagia Sophia.
- **404-407**: She receives seventeen letters of consolation from him.
- **Around 408**: Dies in exile in Nicomedia.

A widow who said no to the emperor

Beautiful, cultured and immensely rich, Olympias was the most sought-after bride at court. She married Nebridius, prefect of the city; Gregory of Nazianzus, invited to the wedding, sent her a poem of advice on married life. But she was widowed after twenty months, at about nineteen. She then decided not to remarry and to live for God.

Suitors pressed around her. Emperor Theodosius wanted her to marry one of his relatives, Elpidius. She refused. The offended emperor had her property placed under guardianship until she reached the age of thirty. She replied with faith-filled irony that he had shown himself as wise as a bishop in relieving her of the heavy burden of her wealth, and that he would increase her joy by having it distributed to the churches and the poor. A few years later, Theodosius gave her back control of her fortune.

The deaconess of Constantinople

Around 393 or 394, Bishop Nectarius ordained her a deaconess, when she was only about twenty-five. In the early Church, deaconesses helped in particular with preparing women for baptism and with serving the poor. Olympias founded a monastery for women near the great church, where dozens of nuns soon lived, along with buildings devoted to charity: a hospice and a place to receive pilgrims and the poor.

She ransomed slaves, fed the needy and supported visiting bishops, while living very poorly herself and spending her nights in prayer. Her generosity was so great that John Chrysostom had to urge her to use more discernment in her giving.

The friend of John Chrysostom

In 398 John Chrysostom became Bishop of Constantinople. Olympias became his spiritual daughter and his most faithful collaborator. When he was exiled in 404, she stayed close to him through prayer and letters. She herself was falsely accused of taking part in the fire that destroyed the cathedral of Hagia Sophia on the day the bishop left. Despite her firm answers before the judges, she was sentenced to a heavy fine, harassed and then exiled, first to Cyzicus and then to Nicomedia.

During these years John Chrysostom wrote her seventeen letters, among the finest in early Christian literature. Forgetting his own sufferings, he consoled her in her discouragement and spoke to her of providence, patience and the meaning of Christian suffering. These letters have been preserved and are available in English translation. Olympias died in exile around 408, shortly after her friend.

Why pray to Saint Olympias?

Saint Olympias has no official patronage, but her life speaks to many situations. She made her wealth an instrument of charity and her widowhood a path of self-giving. She was able to say no to an emperor and remained faithful to a persecuted friend at the cost of her own freedom.

She can be invoked by widows, by those who have financial responsibilities and must decide how to use money well, by women serving the Church, and by people going through discouragement or depression, as she did in exile, when the letters of her friend gave her back hope.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Olympias in art

Saint Olympias appears mainly in Byzantine icons and frescoes. She is shown as a woman in dark, simple clothing, the dress of a widow and consecrated woman, often holding a cross. Inscriptions in Greek usually name her "the Deaconess."

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

Where to pray to Saint Olympias

- **Istanbul**: the former Constantinople, where she lived and founded her monastery near Hagia Sophia.
- **İzmit** (Turkey): ancient Nicomedia, the place of her exile and death.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Olympias for Generosity and Faithfulness

Saint Olympias left no prayer, but we have the seventeen letters Saint John Chrysostom sent her from exile, and a reply she made to Emperor Theodosius as reported by her biographers. Saintspedia invites you to meditate on that reply, and then offers an original prayer inspired by her life.

A reply to the emperor

When Theodosius seized her property because she refused to marry one of his relatives, Olympias answered him, according to the tradition reported by Palladius, that he had shown kindness "not only as a sovereign but as a bishop" by relieving her of the burden of her wealth, and that he would increase her joy still more by having it distributed to the churches and the poor. She added that she feared the vanity that comes with gifts one makes oneself.

Source: Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom*, and hagiographical tradition; summary by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Olympias for generosity and faithfulness

Saint Olympias, you received great riches and gave them to the poor: teach me to use what I have with freedom and generosity.

You refused a marriage the emperor wanted, to remain faithful to your choice: give me the courage to follow my conscience.

You served the Church as a deaconess: bless the women who devote themselves to serving the poor, the sick and the teaching of the faith.

You were falsely accused and exiled, and you knew discouragement: support those going through trials, slander or depression. May the words of your friend John Chrysostom give them back hope. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may I be a faithful friend in times of trial and a joyful servant of the poor. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Olympias is commemorated on December 17 in the Roman Martyrology and on July 25 in the Eastern Churches. You can pray to her:

- in widowhood, or for a widow you know;
- before a decision about money, a gift or an inheritance;
- for a friend who is going through a hard time;
- in a season of discouragement.

You can also pray over nine days with the novena to Saint Olympias. To get to know her better, read the life of Saint Olympias.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Olympias the Deaconess

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Olympias, the widow and deaconess of Constantinople who was the friend of Saint John Chrysostom. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on her feast day in the Roman Martyrology, December 17, begin on December 9; to follow the Eastern calendar, begin on July 17 to end on July 25. You can also pray it at any time: in widowhood, in discouragement, or before a decision about money.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

Day 1: An orphan well taught

Olympias lost her parents very young. Her uncle entrusted her to Theodosia, a woman of great virtue, who gave her a solid Christian formation. A good teacher can shape a whole life. Olympias received from Theodosia not only knowledge but a way of living, and she would pass it on to the women of her monastery.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who taught me the faith. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, watch over orphans and bless those who educate them. Amen.

Today: Thank, in person or in prayer, someone who helped form your faith.

Day 2: Widowed young

Married to Nebridius, she was widowed after twenty months, at about nineteen. Instead of closing in on her grief, she chose to give her life to God.

Prayer: Lord, you are close to the brokenhearted. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, comfort widows and widowers, and open for them a path of peace. Amen.

Today: Call or visit someone who has lost a husband or wife.

Day 3: Free before the powerful

Emperor Theodosius wanted her to marry his relative. She refused, even when he had her property taken under guardianship. She would not let anyone decide her vocation for her.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me inner freedom. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, help me to follow my conscience even when it costs me. Amen.

Today: Make one choice according to your conscience rather than the pressure of others.

Day 4: Wealth as a burden

She answered the emperor that he had relieved her of a heavy burden and that he would increase her joy by giving her riches to the poor. She saw money not as security but as something to share.

Prayer: Lord, free me from attachment to possessions. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, teach me to see what I own as a gift entrusted to me for others. Amen.

Today: Give something away generously, without being asked.

Day 5: Serving as a deaconess

Ordained a deaconess by Bishop Nectarius, she helped prepare women for baptism and served the poor. She founded a monastery and a hospice near the great church of Constantinople.

Prayer: Lord, bless all who serve in your Church. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, give me a heart ready to serve in humble and practical ways. Amen.

Today: Offer an hour of your time to your parish or to a charity.

Day 6: Generosity and discernment

Her generosity was so great that John Chrysostom asked her to give with more discernment. True charity is generous, but also wise.

Prayer: Lord, give me both a generous heart and a wise mind. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, help me to give where it truly helps. Amen.

Today: Learn about a charity before supporting it, and choose one to help.

Day 7: A faithful friend

When John Chrysostom was exiled, Olympias stayed faithful to him through prayer and letters. True friendship shows itself in times of trial.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you call us your friends. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, make me a faithful friend, especially to those who are rejected or persecuted. Amen.

Today: Write to a friend who is going through a difficult time.

Day 8: Falsely accused

She was wrongly accused of setting fire to Hagia Sophia, fined, harassed and sent into exile. She answered her judges firmly, without giving way to hatred.

Prayer: Lord, you were falsely accused and condemned. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, support all who suffer slander and injustice, and give them peace. Amen.

Today: Refuse to repeat a rumor, and speak well of someone who is criticized.

Day 9: Hope in exile

In exile she knew deep discouragement. Chrysostom's letters spoke to her of providence and patience. She died in Nicomedia around 408, faithful to the end. Her story reminds us that the saints also knew sadness, and that friendship and the word of God can carry us through it.

Prayer: God of all consolation, lift up those who are discouraged or depressed. Through the intercession of Saint Olympias, give them hope and friends who support them. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone suffering from depression, and offer them a sign of attention.

Closing prayer

Saint Olympias, widow and deaconess, friend of John Chrysostom, you gave your wealth to the poor, your freedom to God and your faithfulness to a persecuted friend. Watch over widows, over those who serve the Church, and over all who are discouraged. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried through these nine days, and help me to trust in His providence. Amen.

CREDITS

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