BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Pachomius the Great

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 9

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IN BRIEF

Saint Pachomius the Great

4th-century Egyptian monk, founder of cenobitism, monastic life in community.

Feast day	May 9
Born	c. 292, near Chenoboskion (today Nag Hammadi, Upper Egypt)
Died	May 9, 348 (sources vary between May 3 and 15), Upper Egypt, in one of his monasteries
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Pachomius the Great

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Pachomius the Great

Saint Pachomius the Great, also called Pachomius of Tabennisi, was a 4th-century Egyptian monk, born around 292 in Upper Egypt, who died in 348. A former soldier converted to Christianity, he is considered the founder of monastic life in community, cenobitism. Around Tabennisi, on the banks of the Nile, he organized several monasteries and wrote the first known monastic rule. The Catholic Church celebrates him on May 9, the Orthodox Churches on May 15.

Who was Saint Pachomius?

Before Pachomius, the monks of Egypt lived mostly as hermits, alone or in small groups around a master, like Saint Anthony the Great. Pachomius had a different intuition: to gather men under one roof, with a rule, a timetable, shared work and common prayer, under the authority of a superior. This form of life, called cenobitism, from the Greek *koinos bios*, "common life", went on to inspire all of monasticism, in East and West. His life is known to us through several ancient *Lives*, in Coptic, Greek, Latin, Syriac and Arabic, which derive from 4th-century texts but differ among themselves on many details.

Key dates in the life of Pachomius

- **c. 292**: Born in a village of Upper Egypt, near present-day Nag Hammadi, into a pagan family.
- **c. 312**: At about twenty, he is forcibly enlisted in the imperial army.
- **c. 314**: Back in civilian life, he is taken in by Christians whose charity overwhelms him; he asks for baptism.
- **c. 317**: He goes to learn from the hermit Palamon in the desert, for about seven years.

- **c. 320-323**: At Tabennisi, on the bank of the Nile, he founds his first community.
- **Following years**: His sister Mary founds a community of women; Pachomius founds several other monasteries in the region.
- **346-348**: An epidemic strikes the monasteries of Egypt.
- **May 9, 348**: He dies, carried off by the epidemic, according to the date kept by the Catholic Church.
- **c. 404**: Saint Jerome translates his rule into Latin, making it known in the West.

The soldier converted by charity

Pachomius was born into a modest background in Upper Egypt, where Coptic was spoken and Greek influence was slight. He was raised in the pagan religion. At about twenty, he was forcibly enlisted in the emperor's army. According to his *Life*, it was Christians of Thebes who came to his aid when he was destitute: they fed and comforted him without expecting anything in return. Moved by this free charity, he promised God to serve others in his turn. Once released from the army, he asked for baptism.

The hermit who became a founder

After his baptism, Pachomius wanted to give himself entirely to God. Around 317, he went to an old hermit, Palamon, and shared his life of prayer, fasting and manual work for about seven years. Tradition says that one day, at Tabennisi, an abandoned village on the bank of the Nile, he heard a voice asking him to settle there and welcome brothers. Encouraged by Palamon, he settled there with a few companions.

The beginnings were difficult, but candidates flocked to him. Houses and a place of prayer were built, surrounded by a wall. His sister Mary, who came to see him, founded a community of women on the other bank. Around

Tabennisi, Pachomius founded or took in several other monasteries, six to nine according to the sources, gathering hundreds of monks. He remained their superior general, helped by disciples such as Saint Theodore, who would succeed him.

The first rule of common life

Pachomius was an organizer. His monks lived in houses of about twenty members, grouped according to their trade, weavers, farmers, scribes and others, under the direction of a leader. Each house followed the same timetable. According to tradition, an angel gave him his rule; in reality, he developed it gradually and adapted it to needs. It already contains the main features of religious life: an examination of candidates and a trial period, during which they learned to read so as to meditate on Scripture; a simple habit, the same for all; the sharing of all goods; meals taken together, with fast days; common prayer morning and evening; obedience to superiors. Pachomius did not want his monks to seek the priesthood, and those who were already priests were treated like the other brothers.

Written in Coptic, the rule was soon translated into Greek and Syriac, then into Latin by Saint Jerome. It had a great impact in East and West, where founders such as Saint John Cassian, and later Saint Benedict, received the heritage of the monks of Egypt.

Death and cult

From 346, an epidemic struck the monasteries of Egypt. Pachomius fell victim to it in 348. The sources hesitate over the day of his death, between May 3 and May 15. The Catholic Church celebrates him on May 9, the Orthodox Churches on May 15, and the Coptic Church honors him as well. He is shown

as a monk, receiving the book of the rule from an angel, or, according to a legend, crossing the Nile carried by crocodiles. His Coptic name is said to mean "great eagle" or "royal falcon".

What can we learn from Saint Pachomius?

Pachomius discovered God through the kindness of strangers, and he wanted in turn to build a place where people help one another to live the Gospel. He understood that no one becomes a saint alone: fraternal life, shared work, obedience and common prayer are a path to God. Every monastery today owes him something. We can pray to him for religious communities, for families and all who live together, for former soldiers and for those who discover the faith as adults.

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

Where to pray to Saint Pachomius

- In a monastery, with a community living the tradition of common life of which he is the father.
- With Coptic communities, which keep his memory alive in Egypt and throughout the world.
- In any church on May 9, the day of his memorial in the Roman Martyrology.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Pachomius for Fraternal Life

Saint Pachomius, a former soldier converted by the charity of a few Christians, founded on the banks of the Nile the first monasteries of common life. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him fraternal life, religious communities, families and those who are discovering the faith.

Prayer to Saint Pachomius

Saint Pachomius,
you recognized Christ
in the kindness of those who helped you,
and you promised to serve your brothers in turn.
Open my eyes to those who need me,
and make me attentive without expecting anything back.

Father of monks,
you gathered men and women
so that they might seek God together,
in prayer, work and obedience.
Teach me to live in peace with those around me,
to carry their burdens and to let myself be helped.

Bless monasteries, religious communities and our families,
support those who are beginning to believe,
and keep us united in the love of Christ.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Pachomius

- On his feast day, May 9 (May 15 in the Orthodox Churches).
- When common life is difficult, in community, in the family or at work.
- For monks, nuns and religious vocations.
- For adults preparing for baptism.
- For soldiers and former soldiers.

An invocation for fraternal life

> *Lord, make us brothers and sisters who love and serve one another.*
> *Saint Pachomius, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Pachomius from May 1 to 9, and read the life of Saint Pachomius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Pachomius the Great

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It follows the life of Saint Pachomius the Great, a former soldier who became a monk and the founder of monastic life in community, as told by his ancient *Lives*. To finish it on his feast day, May 9, begin on May 1. If you follow the Orthodox calendar, which celebrates him on May 15, begin on May 7. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

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 Pachomius, pray for us." If you can, pray this novena with others, as a family or a community.

Day 1: Born far from the faith

Pachomius was born into a pagan family in Upper Egypt. Yet God was waiting for him, and would come to find him by unexpected paths.

Prayer: Lord, you seek each person where they are. I entrust to you those who do not yet know you.

Act of the day: Pray for someone around you who does not believe.

Day 2: A soldier against his will

At twenty, Pachomius was forcibly enlisted in the army. He knew constraint, separation and destitution.

Prayer: Lord, watch over soldiers, over those far from their loved ones and over those who suffer violence.

Act of the day: Pray for those in the military and for peace in the world.

Day 3: The charity that converts

Christians came to the aid of Pachomius without asking anything of him. Their free kindness touched him so deeply that he wanted to know their God.

Prayer: Lord, let my life speak of you through charity more than through words.

Act of the day: Help a stranger today, discreetly.

Day 4: Baptism

Released from the army, Pachomius asked for baptism and promised to serve others. His new life began.

Prayer: Lord, renew in me the grace of my baptism, and grant me to serve you in my brothers and sisters.

Act of the day: Renew your baptismal promises by reciting the Creed.

Day 5: At the school of an elder

For seven years, Pachomius learned prayer, fasting and work from the hermit Palamon. He accepted being a disciple before becoming a master.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to learn, and wise guides on your path.

Act of the day: Ask advice of someone more experienced in the faith.

Day 6: A voice at Tabennisi

According to tradition, Pachomius heard a voice at Tabennisi asking him to welcome brothers. He obeyed, and common life was born on the bank of the Nile.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to your calls, and give me the courage to answer them.

Act of the day: Take a moment of silence to listen to what God is asking of you.

Day 7: Living together

Pachomius organized his monks in houses, with a timetable, shared work and common prayer. Fraternal life became a path of holiness.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family and my community. Teach us to bear with one another and to love one another.

Act of the day: Make a gesture of peace toward someone with whom living together is difficult.

Day 8: A sister on the other bank

Mary, the sister of Pachomius, founded a community of women on the other bank of the Nile. Brother and sister each served God in their own place.

Prayer: Lord, bless nuns and women religious, and the bonds between brothers and sisters.

Act of the day: Pray for a community of sisters, or visit a brother or sister.

Day 9: Dying among his brothers

In 348, an epidemic struck the monasteries, and Pachomius died among his monks. The work he founded outlived him and spread throughout the Church.

Prayer: Lord, bless the sick and those who care for them. Through the intercession of Saint Pachomius, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Pray for monasteries throughout the world.

Closing prayer

Saint Pachomius,
converted soldier and father of monks,
you built houses where people seek God together.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Teach me the charity that does not count,
the obedience that sets free
and the joy of fraternal life.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Credits and sources

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