

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Pulcheria

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 10

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IN BRIEF

Saint Pulcheria

5th-century empress of Constantinople, consecrated to God, protector of the faith of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon.

Feast day	September 10
Born	January 19, 399, Constantinople
Died	453, Constantinople
Era	5th century

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Pulcheria

Saint Pulcheria was an empress of Constantinople in the 5th century. Granddaughter of Theodosius I, she was proclaimed Augusta at fifteen to watch over her young brother, Emperor Theodosius II. She consecrated her virginity to God and made the imperial court a place of prayer. She played an important part in the two great councils of her century, Ephesus and Chalcedon, which defined the Church's faith in Christ and in Mary, Mother of God. She died in 453 and is commemorated in the Roman Martyrology on September 10.

Who was Saint Pulcheria?

Aelia Pulcheria was born in Constantinople on January 19, 399. She was the daughter of Emperor Arcadius and Empress Eudoxia, and the granddaughter of Theodosius I and Aelia Flacilla. Her mother died in 404 and her father in 408. The heir to the throne, her brother Theodosius II, was then only seven years old. For a few years the praetorian prefect Anthemius governed in his name.

In 414 Pulcheria, aged fifteen, was proclaimed Augusta and took charge of her brother's education. With her two sisters, Arcadia and Marina, she then made a public vow of virginity. Historians see in it a sincere act of faith, but also a way of keeping at bay ambitious men who might try to seize power through marriage.

Key dates in the life of Pulcheria

- **January 19, 399**: Born in Constantinople.
- **408**: Death of her father Arcadius; her brother Theodosius II becomes emperor at seven.

- **414**: Proclaimed Augusta, she takes a vow of virginity with her sisters.
- **421**: Theodosius II marries Athenais, who becomes Empress Eudocia.
- **431**: Council of Ephesus, which proclaims Mary *Theotokos*, Mother of God.
- **449**: Second Council of Ephesus, which Pope Leo will call a "robber council."
- **450**: Death of Theodosius II; she marries Marcian, who becomes emperor.
- **451**: Council of Chalcedon.
- **453**: Dies in Constantinople.

A court turned into a monastery

The Greek historians of the time, such as Sozomen, describe a court where psalms were sung, where people fasted twice a week and where the poor were helped. Pulcheria made sure her brother received a Christian education and learned how to conduct himself as a ruler. She had churches built, along with houses for the poor and for pilgrims; tradition credits her with founding several shrines in Constantinople dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Her time was also one of growing harshness in the Christian Empire toward pagans and Jews. History recalls that this period saw violence, as in Alexandria.

Defending Mary, Mother of God

In 428 the new bishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, refused to give Mary the title *Theotokos*, "Mother of God," and would call her only "Mother of Christ." Behind this word lay faith in the unity of Christ, true God and true man. Pulcheria opposed Nestorius, who in turn criticized her. In 431 the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius and proclaimed Mary Mother of God. Pulcheria, deeply devoted to the Virgin, rejoiced at this decision.

Disgrace and return

In 421 Pulcheria herself chose her brother's wife, Athenais, daughter of an Athenian teacher of rhetoric, baptized under the name Eudocia. Over the years, the influence of the young empress and of the court eunuchs, especially Chrysaphius, pushed Pulcheria away from power. She withdrew from the palace. In 449 a second council gathered at Ephesus imposed a teaching that diminished the humanity of Christ. Pope Saint Leo the Great denounced it and, in several letters, asked for the support of Pulcheria, in whom he saw an ally of the true faith. The bishop of Constantinople, Saint Flavian, died as a result of this council.

The empress of Chalcedon

In July 450 Theodosius II died after a fall from his horse. Pulcheria, back at the center of affairs, married an older and respected officer, Marcian, who became emperor. The marriage was never consummated: Marcian promised to respect her vow. Together they convened the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which adopted the teaching of Leo: Christ is one person in two natures, divine and human, "without confusion and without separation." The Fathers of the council acclaimed the empress as a new Helena, in memory of Saint Helena, mother of Constantine.

Pulcheria died in 453. According to the chroniclers, she left her possessions to the poor.



The Council of Chalcedon (451), convened by Marcian and Pulcheria.

Why is Saint Pulcheria venerated?

No traditional patronage is attached to Pulcheria. She exercised power in a hard world, and her actions do not escape the judgment of history. The Church has recognized in her a woman who consecrated her life to God at the very heart of the court, who served the poor and who steadfastly defended faith in Christ and in Mary, Mother of God. The Eastern Churches venerate her together with Marcian; the Latin Church honors her on September 10. She can be invoked for political leaders, for women who carry heavy responsibilities and for faithfulness in the faith.

Every time Catholics say "Holy Mary, Mother of God" in the Hail Mary, they use the title that Pulcheria defended against Nestorius. Every time they confess Christ as true God and true man, they echo the faith of Chalcedon, the council she helped to convene.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Pulcheria in art

Pulcheria is shown as a Byzantine empress, crowned and dressed in imperial robes. Icons sometimes show her with her hands raised in prayer or holding a cross. Her portrait also survives on gold coins struck in her name as Augusta, where she appears crowned, in profile. In scenes of the Council of Chalcedon she may stand beside Emperor Marcian.

Where to pray to Saint Pulcheria

No major shrine of Saint Pulcheria is known today. Constantinople, now Istanbul, was the city where she was born, reigned and died. She can be honored wherever the Church celebrates Mary, Mother of God, especially on the solemnity of January 1, and in Eastern Churches, which keep her memory together with that of Marcian.

To pray with her, use the prayer to Saint Pulcheria and the novena to Saint Pulcheria.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Pulcheria for Leaders and Faithfulness

No ancient prayer specific to Saint Pulcheria has come down to us, and no text in her own hand is known. Yet her life is bound up with a prayer that the whole Church received in her time: the invocation of Mary as Mother of God, proclaimed at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Below you will find the oldest known prayer to Mary, followed by an original prayer to Saint Pulcheria.

A prayer to Mary, Mother of God

> *"Under the shelter of your mercy we take refuge, holy Mother of God. Do not despise our prayers in our need, but always deliver us from every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin."*

Source: *Sub tuum praesidium*, a prayer to the Mother of God known from a Greek papyrus found in Egypt, usually dated to the 3rd or 4th century, and therefore older than the Council of Ephesus. It expresses the faith Pulcheria defended. Translation by Saintspedia. Many English-speaking Catholics know it as "We fly to thy protection."



Saint Pulcheria, icon.

Prayer to Saint Pulcheria for leaders and faithfulness

Saint Pulcheria, you received very young the task of watching over your brother and an empire. Pray for those who carry heavy responsibilities early in life. Give them wisdom and the strength to remain faithful.

You consecrated your life to God amid the splendor of the court. Teach me to keep a free heart amid the honors and worries of the world.

You defended faith in Christ, true God and true man, and the honor of Mary, Mother of God. Keep me in the faith of the Church. You knew disgrace and return; help me to pass through trials without resentment.

I entrust to you political leaders, women who govern and serve, and my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Pulcheria is commemorated in the Roman Martyrology on September 10. It is also fitting to pray to her on January 1, the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, whose title she defended. Her prayer suits those who hold public office, women in leadership, older siblings who care for younger ones, and anyone who feels lonely in a position of responsibility.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Pulcheria, from September 1 to 9, and read the life of Saint Pulcheria.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Pulcheria

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Pulcheria, empress of Constantinople. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish on the eve of her commemoration on September 10, begin on September 1. It can also be prayed before January 1, the solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, from December 23 to 31.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The Hail Mary has special meaning here: its words "Holy Mary, Mother of God" express the faith Pulcheria defended. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: *Lord, you gave Saint Pulcheria a heart consecrated to you at the center of power. Through her intercession and that of Mary, Mother of God, keep me faithful and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

This novena is suited to those who carry responsibility in public life, at work or in the family, and to anyone who wants to grow in love for the Mother of God.

Day 1: An orphan at the palace

Pulcheria lost her mother at five and her father at nine. Behind the splendor of the palace was a girl who had known grief very early. God did not take away her sorrow, but he gave her a mission in which to grow.

Prayer: Lord, comfort children who have lost their parents, and give them people to care for them.

Today: Pray for a family that is grieving.

Day 2: A sister who watches over

At fifteen Pulcheria took charge of the education of her younger brother, the emperor. She took on a responsibility well beyond her years.

Prayer: Lord, bless older brothers and sisters who care for younger ones, and all who carry heavy burdens early.

Today: Do something kind for a brother, sister or relative.

Day 3: A life given to God

With her sisters, Pulcheria made a public vow of virginity. In a world of ambition and alliances, she chose to belong to God. Her vow also protected her freedom: no one could use her as a pawn to seize the throne.

Prayer: Lord, bless consecrated men and women, and give me an undivided heart.

Today: Give God an extra moment of prayer.

Day 4: A court of prayer

At her court, psalms were sung, fasting was kept and the poor were helped. Faith shaped daily life, not only great occasions. Pulcheria also built churches and houses for the poor and for pilgrims, so that her prayer became visible in works of charity.

Prayer: Lord, let my home be a place of prayer and of welcome.

Today: Pray a psalm with your family or alone.

Day 5: Holy Mary, Mother of God

When Nestorius refused to call Mary Mother of God, Pulcheria stood firm. In 431 the Council of Ephesus proclaimed Mary *Theotokos*. To call Mary Mother of God is to confess that the child she bore is truly God made man.

Prayer: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary slowly.

Day 6: Disgrace without bitterness

Pushed away from power by court intrigue, Pulcheria withdrew from the palace. She lived through humiliation without abandoning her faith.

Prayer: Lord, help me to bear setbacks and injustice without resentment.

Today: Let go of a grudge, even a small one.

Day 7: An ally of the pope

When the council of 449 betrayed the faith, Pope Leo wrote to Pulcheria to ask for her support. She became his ally in defending the truth about Christ.

Prayer: Lord, bless the pope and all who serve the unity of the Church.

Today: Pray for the pope and for those who work with him.

Day 8: True God and true man

At Chalcedon, in 451, the Church confessed Christ as one person in two natures, "without confusion and without separation." Pulcheria helped convene this council, whose teaching every Christian still professes. The bishops acclaimed her as a new Helena.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, true God and true man, I believe in you; increase my faith.

Today: Pray the Creed slowly, thinking about each line.

Day 9: Leaving everything to the poor

Pulcheria died in 453 and, according to the chroniclers, left her possessions to the poor. At the end, the empress gave everything away.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Pulcheria, make me generous and faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Give something of value to someone in need.

Closing prayer

On the last evening, take a moment to look back over these nine days. Thank God for what you have received, even if your intention has not yet been answered as you hoped, and entrust the future to him with confidence.

Saint Pulcheria, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have brought before you. Pray for those who govern, for women who carry heavy responsibilities and for all who seek to remain faithful. With you, I entrust myself to Mary, Mother of God. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Pulcheria and the prayer to Saint Pulcheria.

Credits and sources

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