BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Tarsilla

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 24

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IN BRIEF

Saint Tarsilla

Roman virgin of the 6th century, paternal aunt of Pope Saint Gregory the Great, who died on Christmas Eve.

Feast day	December 24
Born	6th century, Rome
Died	December 24, second half of the 6th century, Rome
Canonized	immemorial cult

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Tarsilla

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Tarsilla

Saint Tarsilla was a Roman woman of the 6th century, a paternal aunt of Pope Saint Gregory the Great. Consecrated to God with her sisters Emiliana and Gordiana, she led a life of prayer and penance in the family home in Rome. All we know of her comes from her nephew, who told the story of her death in a homily and in his Dialogues. Her feast day is December 24, Christmas Eve.

Who was Saint Tarsilla?

Tarsilla belonged to a great Christian family of Rome. Her brother Gordianus, a Roman patrician, was the father of Gregory, the future pope (590 to 604); Gregory's mother, Saint Silvia, is also honored as a saint. According to Gregory, the family counted among its ancestors Pope Felix, bishop of Rome at the end of the 5th century. Tarsilla and her two sisters, Emiliana and Gordiana, chose to consecrate themselves to God without entering a monastery: they lived together in their own house, as consecrated virgins, sharing prayer, fasting and a hidden life. We know neither the date of her birth nor the exact year of her death, which took place before Gregory preached the homily in which he tells her story, at the beginning of his pontificate.

Key dates in the life of Tarsilla

- **6th century**: Born in Rome, into a noble Christian family; she is the sister of Gordianus, father of the future Pope Gregory.
- **Date unknown**: With her sisters Emiliana and Gordiana, she consecrates herself to God and lives a life of prayer in the family home.
- **Shortly before her death**: According to Gregory, Pope Felix, her ancestor, appears to her in a vision and shows her the dwelling that awaits her.

- **December 24, second half of the 6th century**: Struck by fever, she dies in Rome, saying that she sees Jesus coming.
- **Shortly after**: According to the same account, she appears to her sister Emiliana and invites her to celebrate the Epiphany with her in heaven.
- **c. 591**: Gregory, now pope, tells of her death in a homily on the Gospel, and again in his Dialogues.
- **1632**: The Lorraine engraver Jacques Callot depicts her in an etching.

Three sisters consecrated to God

Gregory presents his three aunts as both an example and a warning. All three, he says, had been called on the same day and had committed themselves with the same fervor. Tarsilla and Emiliana grew in the love of God; they lived in recollection, denied themselves many things and avoided idle talk. Gordiana, however, gradually grew weary: she sought the company of worldly women and found the retired life hard to bear. Her sisters corrected her gently and worried about her. Gregory says that Tarsilla was, of the three, the most constant in prayer, the strictest with herself and the most modest in her bearing. From this story he draws the lesson that many are called but few are chosen: it is not enough to have begun well, one must persevere.

A death turned toward Christ

According to Gregory, Tarsilla one day saw in a vision her ancestor, Pope Felix, who showed her a shining dwelling and said: "Come, I will receive you into this house of light." Shortly afterward, she fell ill with fever. At the moment of death, surrounded by many people who had come to be with her, she raised her eyes and cried out: "Stand back, Jesus is coming!" Then she gave up her soul. A very sweet fragrance filled the room, a sign, for those present, of the Lord's presence. When her body was prepared for burial, it was found that the

skin of her elbows and knees had hardened like a camel's, from praying for long hours on her knees, leaning on her elbows. Gregory reports this detail with emotion: it reveals the whole secret of her life.

Tarsilla died on Christmas Eve. According to the rest of the account, a few days later she appeared to her sister Emiliana and said: "Come. I celebrated Christmas without you, but we will celebrate the Epiphany together." Emiliana died in turn before January 6. Gordiana, left alone, eventually abandoned her consecration and married the steward of her estates.

Devotion and art

Saint Tarsilla is listed in the Roman Martyrology on December 24, the same day as other saints such as Adela of Pfalzel or Delphinus of Bordeaux. Her cult is ancient and rests entirely on the testimony of Gregory the Great, who made her known throughout the Church through his homily and his Dialogues, which were read all through the Middle Ages. No shrine is known where her relics are venerated. She is rarely depicted; the engraver Jacques Callot devoted a small etching to her in 1632. She is shown at prayer, sometimes with the vision of Christ coming to take her.

What can we learn from Saint Tarsilla?

Tarsilla founded nothing and wrote nothing. Her holiness is hidden in a Roman house, in daily prayer and in faithfulness. Her nephew chose her to recall a simple truth: perseverance matters as much as the first enthusiasm. Her knees worn by prayer speak of the patience of a life given to God without display. And her last cry, "Jesus is coming!", makes her a saint of Advent and of Christmas Eve, a woman who waited for the Lord and saw him come. You can pray to her for perseverance in prayer, for consecrated persons and for the dying.

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

Where to pray to Saint Tarsilla

- **Rome**: the city where she lived and died; the Caelian Hill keeps the memory of Saint Gregory and his family.
- **At home**: like her, in the quiet of a house, during Christmas night or the vigil.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Tarsilla for Perseverance in Prayer

Saint Tarsilla, aunt of Pope Saint Gregory the Great, lived a hidden life of prayer and penance in Rome in the 6th century. She died on Christmas Eve, crying out: "Jesus is coming!" Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to her perseverance in prayer, waiting for the Lord, and the hour of our death.

Prayer to Saint Tarsilla

Saint Tarsilla,
in the silence of a house in Rome
you gave your life to God,
day after day, without growing weary.
Your knees worn by prayer
speak of your patience and your love.
Teach me to pray faithfully,
even when fervor fades.

You saw the light of the Father's house
and recognized the Lord coming toward you.
Keep me watchful as I wait,
so that on the day he comes
I may say with you: "Jesus is coming!"

Watch over those consecrated to God,
over those who doubt their calling,
and over all who will die this night.
With your sister Emiliana and Saint Gregory,
pray for us to Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Tarsilla

- On December 24, her feast day, during the Christmas vigil.
- During Advent, to learn to wait for the Lord.
- When prayer becomes difficult and you are tempted to give up.
- For nuns, consecrated virgins and all who have given themselves to God.
- At the bedside of someone sick or dying, that they may welcome Christ in peace.

A short invocation

> *Come, Lord Jesus, do not delay.*
> *Saint Tarsilla, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Tarsilla from December 16 to 24, and read the life of Saint Tarsilla.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Tarsilla

This novena is inspired by the life of Saint Tarsilla, aunt of Pope Saint Gregory the Great, who died in Rome on Christmas Eve in the 6th 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, December 24, begin on December 16: it then accompanies the last days of Advent. 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 Tarsilla, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recalled come from Saint Gregory's account, in a homily on the Gospel and in his Dialogues.

Day 1: A family of saints

Tarsilla was born into a family where faith was alive: her brother Gordianus and her sister-in-law Silvia gave the Church Pope Gregory. Holiness is often handed on quietly within a home.

Prayer: Lord, bless our families. Make faith grow in them, and help us to support one another on the way to you.

Act of the day: Pray for each member of your family by name.

Day 2: Called on the same day

With her sisters Emiliana and Gordiana, Tarsilla consecrated herself to God. All three had received the same call. A vocation is a gift, but it asks for an answer renewed every day.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the call you gave me at baptism. Help me to answer you again today.

Act of the day: Reread your baptismal promises, or your commitment, and say them again to the Lord.

Day 3: A hidden life

Tarsilla did not enter a great monastery. She lived her consecration in her own house, in Rome, away from the eyes of others. God sees in secret.

Prayer: Father, you who see in secret, teach me to do good without seeking to be seen.

Act of the day: Do a discreet service without telling anyone.

Day 4: Knees worn by prayer

After her death, it was found that the skin of her knees and elbows had hardened from so much prayer. Her prayer was not a quick moment, but a long faithfulness.

Prayer: Lord, give me the desire to stay with you a long time, and the patience to pray even in dryness.

Act of the day: Take ten minutes of silent prayer, kneeling if you can.

Day 5: Persevering

Gordiana, the third sister, grew weary and gradually abandoned the path she had chosen. Gregory draws a lesson from this: many are called, few are chosen. Every beginning needs perseverance.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from lukewarmness. When I grow tired, give me back the joy of my first love.

Act of the day: Take up again a good resolution you had dropped.

Day 6: Correcting gently

Tarsilla and Emiliana worried about their sister and corrected her gently. To love someone is also to help them remain faithful.

Prayer: Lord, help me to speak with charity to those I love when they drift away from you.

Act of the day: Pray for someone who has drifted away from the faith.

Day 7: The house of light

According to Gregory, Tarsilla saw in a vision a shining dwelling and heard: "Come, I will receive you into this house of light." Heaven is a home prepared for us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you went to prepare a place for us. Keep my heart turned toward the Father's house.

Act of the day: Meditate on the Gospel of Saint John, chapter 14, verses 1 to 6.

Day 8: "Jesus is coming!"

At the moment of death, Tarsilla asked those around her to stand back, for Jesus was coming. Her whole life had been a waiting for the Lord.

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus. Help me to recognize you when you come, in prayer, in the poor and at the hour of my death.

Act of the day: Visit or call someone who is sick or elderly.

Day 9: Christmas Eve

Tarsilla died on Christmas Eve. She entered into the light just as the Church was preparing to welcome the Child of Bethlehem.

Prayer: Lord, may your Son find in me an open home. Through the intercession of Saint Tarsilla, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Christmas Mass, and pray for those who will spend this night alone.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Tarsilla,*
> *you who prayed without growing weary*
> *and saw the Lord coming,*
> *present to him the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me faithful to the end*
> *and prepare my heart to welcome him.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Credits and sources

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