

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Thecla of Iconium

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 23

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IN BRIEF

Saint Thecla of Iconium

Virgin of Iconium, disciple of Saint Paul according to tradition, honored as protomartyr and equal to the apostles in the East.

Feast day	September 23, September 24 (Eastern Churches)
Born	1st century, Iconium (now Konya, Turkey), according to tradition
Died	1st century, according to tradition, Seleucia in Isauria (now Silifke, Turkey), according to tradition
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	Tarragona

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Thecla

Shrine of Saint Thecla at Ayatekla, near Silifke

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Thecla of Iconium

Saint Thecla is, according to tradition, a young woman of Iconium, in Asia Minor, who was converted by the preaching of Saint Paul. Her story comes to us through the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a 2nd-century narrative that the Church did not include among the books of the Bible, but which nourished the devotion of East and West for centuries. Honored as the first woman martyr, even though she survived her torments, and as "equal to the apostles" in the Eastern Churches, she is traditionally celebrated on September 23 in the West and September 24 in the East.

Who was Saint Thecla?

It is impossible to reconstruct Thecla's life with certainty. Everything told about her comes from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a text written in Greek in the 2nd century. Around the year 200, the writer Tertullian reports that a priest in Asia who had written such an account admitted that he composed it "out of love for Paul," and was removed from office. The text therefore belongs more to pious legend than to history.

Yet her cult is very ancient and very widespread. From the 4th century, great Fathers of the Church such as Saint Ambrose and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus held her up as an example, and a great shrine rose over her presumed tomb at Seleucia in Isauria.

Key dates in the life of Saint Thecla

- **1st century**: According to the *Acts*, Thecla hears Paul preach at Iconium and is converted.
- **Same period**: Condemned to be burned at Iconium, she is saved by a storm.

- **Afterward**: Thrown to the beasts at Antioch, she is spared and baptizes herself.
- **End of her life**: She lives in retreat near Seleucia in Isauria, where she dies according to tradition.
- **2nd century**: The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* are written.
- **Around 200**: Tertullian mentions the author of these *Acts* in his treatise *On Baptism*.
- **Late 3rd century**: Saint Methodius of Olympus makes Thecla one of the heroines of his *Symposium*.
- **384**: The pilgrim Egeria visits the shrine of Saint Thecla near Seleucia.
- **Late 5th century**: Emperor Zeno has a great basilica built on the site.
- **1321**: A relic of the saint arrives in Tarragona, Spain, whose patron she is.

The girl at the window

The *Acts* tell that Paul, arriving at Iconium, stayed with a Christian named Onesiphorus and preached there on chastity and the resurrection. In the house next door, a young woman engaged to a man of standing, Thamyris, listened to him for three days and three nights, sitting at her window, unable to tear herself away. Her worried mother and fiancé had Paul arrested. Thecla bribed the guards to join him in prison and sit at his feet.

Paul was driven out of the city. Thecla, who now refused marriage, was condemned to the stake, at her own mother's request. But just as the fire was lit, a violent storm of rain and hail put it out, and the young woman was able to escape and find the apostle again.

Antioch: the beasts of the arena

In Antioch, a powerful man named Alexander fell for Thecla and tried to seize her. She rejected him in public. Accused, she was condemned to the beasts. A noblewoman, Tryphaena, took her under her protection while she awaited her punishment.

In the arena, a lioness lay down at her feet and defended her against the other animals. Seeing a pool full of seals, Thecla threw herself into it, baptizing herself in the name of Jesus Christ. The beasts did not touch her, and the governor finally set her free.

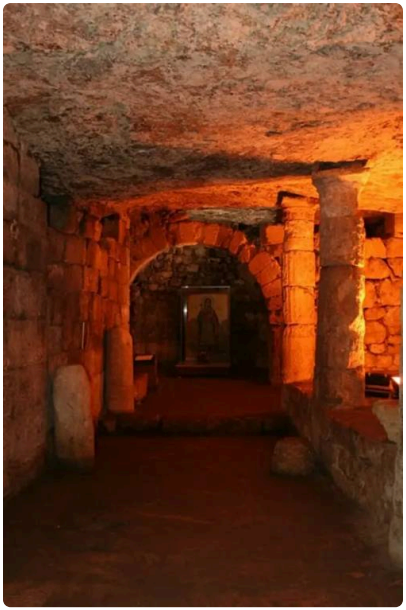
In antiquity this story, with its wondrous episodes, was read as praise of consecrated virginity and of the courage of Christian women. It also gave Thecla her attributes in art.

Seleucia and the spread of her cult

According to the *Acts*, Thecla saw Paul again at Myra, and he sent her to proclaim the Word. She returned to Iconium, then settled near Seleucia in Isauria, on the south coast of present-day Turkey, where she taught and died in peace.

Her presumed tomb became one of the great pilgrimages of the Christian East. People came there seeking healing, and communities of monks and consecrated virgins settled nearby. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus made a retreat there around 375.

In the West, her name entered some of the oldest prayers of the Church: the commendation of the soul of the dying asked God to deliver the soul of the believer as he had delivered Thecla from her torments. Milan, Tarragona and Este dedicated their cathedral or ancient basilica to her. Her memorial was removed from the General Roman Calendar in 1969 because of the legendary character of her *Acts*, but her cult continues in many Churches.



The ruins of the shrine of Saint Thecla at Ayatekla, near ancient Seleucia.

Why is Saint Thecla the patron saint of Tarragona?

Tarragona, in Catalonia, received a relic of the saint in 1321. Since then its cathedral has been dedicated to her, and the city keeps her feast with great solemnity every September. More widely, Thecla is a model for disciples who listen to the Gospel and for the women who proclaimed it. She is invoked for young people discerning their vocation, for those threatened because of their faith, and for the dying.

Beyond the legend, Thecla embodies a faith that listens, chooses and holds firm. She lets herself be seized by the Word of God, dares a choice of life against the expectations of those around her, and goes through trials without denying Christ.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Thecla in art

- **The lioness**: lying at her feet, a reminder of the arena at Antioch.
- **The pyre or flames**: the stake at Iconium, put out by the storm.
- **The book**: the Word she listened to and later proclaimed.
- **The martyr's palm**: she is honored as the first woman martyr.
- **Beside Saint Paul**: sometimes listening to him from a window, as in the fresco at Ephesus.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Thecla, or follow the novena to Saint Thecla from September 14 to 22, to finish it on the eve of her feast.

Where to pray to Saint Thecla

- **Ayatekla**, near Silifke (Turkey): the grotto and ruins of the great shrine of Saint Thecla.
- **Maaloula** (Syria): the Monastery of Mar Taqla, clinging to the cliff, where a local tradition places her retreat.
- **Tarragona** (Spain): the Cathedral of Saint Thecla, which keeps a relic of the saint.
- **Milan**: the remains of the ancient Basilica of Saint Thecla, beneath the Piazza del Duomo.
- **Este** (Italy): the Cathedral of Saint Thecla and its great painting by Tiepolo.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Thecla, Disciple of Saint Paul

No prayer composed by Saint Thecla has come down to us: the words the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* put on her lips belong to a legendary narrative and cannot be attributed to her. This page presents an ancient invocation of the Latin liturgy that names her, followed by an original prayer to Saint Thecla.

Saint Thecla in the commendation of the soul

For centuries the Latin Church accompanied the dying with a long prayer, the "commendation of the soul." A series of invocations asks God to deliver the soul of the believer as he delivered the righteous of the Old Testament and the martyrs. One of them names Thecla. English translation by Saintspedia; the Latin text is in the public domain.

> *And as you delivered blessed Thecla, your virgin and martyr, from three cruel torments, so deign to deliver the soul of your servant, and let it rejoice with you in the good things of heaven.*

Source: *Rituale Romanum*, "Ordo commendationis animae," invocations "Libera, Domine, animam servi tui." The "three torments" recall the stake and the two ordeals with the beasts described in the *Acts*.

Prayer to Saint Thecla

Saint Thecla, you listened to the Word of God until you could no longer tear yourself away: help me to open my heart to the Gospel and let it transform my life.

You dared a choice of life that those around you did not understand: support young people seeking their vocation, and all who must make a hard decision out of faithfulness to Christ.

Tradition shows you saved from the fire and protected from the beasts: I entrust to you persecuted Christians, women whose dignity is threatened, and all who are afraid.

You proclaimed Christ to the end of your life: make me a witness to the Gospel, with courage and gentleness. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

And at the hour of my death, as the Church has asked for so many of the faithful, may the Lord deliver me and welcome me close to him. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Thecla is traditionally celebrated on September 23 in the West, especially in Tarragona and Milan, and on September 24 in the Eastern Churches. You can pray to her when facing a decision about your vocation, when your faith brings you misunderstanding or danger, or at the bedside of someone who is dying.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Thecla, and discover the life of Saint Thecla.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Thecla

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition of Saint Thecla as told in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, an ancient but legendary narrative. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin on September 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross; it ends on September 22, and September 23 can be lived as a day of thanksgiving.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father. The episodes recalled here come from tradition; they are offered as images that help us pray. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

The nine days follow the path of Thecla as tradition tells it, from Iconium to Antioch and Seleucia: listening, choosing, being misunderstood, facing danger, and finally proclaiming. This novena is especially suited to young people discerning their path, to those who suffer for their faith, and to anyone who wants to listen to the Word of God more closely.

Day 1: Listening at the window

Sitting at her window, Thecla listened to Paul for three days without being able to tear herself away. Faith begins by listening to a word that touches the heart. Before doing anything, a disciple first receives.

Prayer: Lord, open my ears and my heart to your Word. Let it take hold of me and transform me.

Today: Read the Gospel of the day slowly and keep one sentence with you.

Day 2: Choosing Christ

Thecla gave up the marriage planned for her and chose to follow Christ. Every vocation, one day, asks for a choice that commits a whole life. Saying yes to God is also saying no to other paths.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the young people seeking their vocation. Give them light and the courage to answer.

Today: Pray for vocations to marriage, to the priesthood and to consecrated life.

Day 3: At the apostle's feet

Thecla gave her jewelry to the guards so she could join Paul in prison and sit at his feet. She preferred the Word to her riches. What we are ready to give up shows what we truly love.

Prayer: Lord, let nothing seem more precious to me than you. Help me let go of whatever keeps me from your presence.

Today: Remember a prisoner in your prayer, or support a prison ministry.

Day 4: Misunderstood by her own

According to the story, it was her own mother who asked for her condemnation. Following Christ can bring misunderstanding from those closest to us. Thecla did not stop loving; she simply did not turn back.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you families divided because of faith. Bring them peace and reconciliation.

Today: Make a gesture of peace toward a relative with whom things are difficult.

Day 5: The fire put out

On the pyre, a storm put out the flames. Tradition sees in it a sign that God does not abandon those who trust in him, even in the heart of the trial.

Prayer: Lord, when trials burn me, come to my help. I put my trust in you.

Today: Pray Psalm 91, "You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High."

Day 6: Defending her dignity

In Antioch, Thecla publicly rejected a powerful man who wanted to take hold of her. She defended her dignity as a woman and as one baptized, even at the cost of a condemnation.

Prayer: Lord, protect women and children who suffer violence. Help them find support, justice and healing.

Today: Support an organization that welcomes victims of violence.

Day 7: The lioness and solidarity

In the arena, a lioness defended her; before that, a noblewoman, Tryphaena, had taken her into her home. God often sends unexpected protectors. We too can become one for someone else.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for those who have protected and welcomed me. Make me, in my turn, a support for the most vulnerable.

Today: Stand up for someone who is left out or mocked.

Day 8: Baptism

Before facing the beasts, Thecla plunged into the water in the name of Jesus Christ. Baptism is the source of all her strength, as it is of ours.

Prayer: Lord, renew in me the grace of my baptism. May I live as a child of God.

Today: Make the Sign of the Cross with holy water and renew your baptismal promises.

Day 9: Proclaiming the Word

Set free, Thecla received from Paul the mission to teach the Word of God, and she ended her life in peace at Seleucia. The one who listened became the one who proclaims.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Thecla, make me a joyful witness to your Gospel. Amen.

Today: Share with someone a Gospel verse that gives you life.

Closing prayer

Saint Thecla, disciple of the Gospel and courageous witness, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for young people looking for their path, for persecuted Christians and for the dying. Obtain for me the grace to listen to the Word, to keep it and to proclaim it. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Thecla and the prayer to Saint Thecla.

PILGRIMAGE

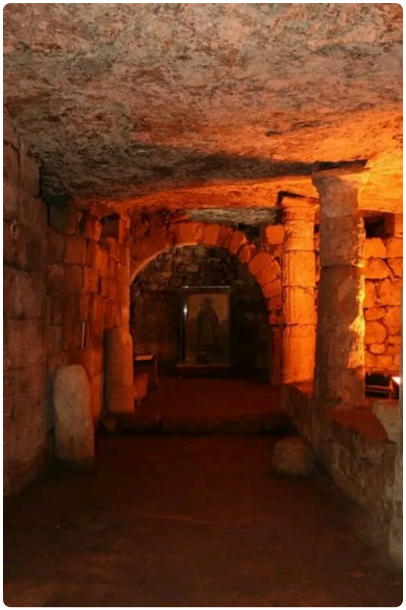
Shrine of Saint Thecla at Ayatekla, near Silifke

Ayatekla, also called Meryemlik, is an archaeological site a few miles south of Silifke, ancient Seleucia in Isauria, on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey. It is there that tradition places the retreat and death of Saint Thecla. From the 4th to the 7th century, it was one of the great pilgrimages of the Christian East.

A great pilgrimage of antiquity

According to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the saint ended her days near Seleucia. A cave there became a place of prayer very early, and a vast complex developed around it: churches, monasteries for men and women, and hostels for pilgrims. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus made a retreat there around 375. In 384, the pilgrim Egeria, who came from the West, stopped there on her way back from Jerusalem; she recounts in her travel journal that she prayed at the tomb and read the *Acts* of Saint Thecla, and found there a friend, the deaconess Marthana, who led a community of virgins.

At the end of the 5th century, Emperor Zeno, a native of Isauria, had an immense basilica raised. The sanctuary declined with the invasions of the 7th century, and only ruins remain today.



The ruins of the great Basilica of Saint Thecla at Ayatekla, near Silifke.

The cave of Saint Thecla

Beneath the basilica is a church cut into the rock, set up in the cave where, according to tradition, Thecla lived and died. It is the most moving part of the site: visitors go down a staircase and can see columns and remains of ancient decoration. The great section of the apse wall of Zeno's basilica, still standing, dominates the whole.



The rock-cut church of the cave of Saint Thecla, at Ayatekla.

Praying at Ayatekla

Ayatekla is today an archaeological site and not an active place of worship. The pilgrim can nevertheless pray there in silence, in the cave, as Egeria did in the 4th century. Before your visit, you may wish to reread the life of Saint Thecla. On site, a passage from a letter of Saint Paul and the prayer to Saint Thecla can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places connected with Saint Thecla

- **Maaloula** (Syria): the Orthodox Monastery of Mar Taqla, at the foot of the cliff, where a local tradition places the saint's retreat.
- **Tarragona** (Spain): the cathedral dedicated to Saint Thecla, which preserves a relic that arrived in the 14th century; the city celebrates her every year around September 23.

- **Milan**: the remains of the ancient Basilica of Santa Tecla, visible beneath Piazza del Duomo.
- **Este** (Italy): the Cathedral of Santa Tecla, adorned with a large painting by Tiepolo.
- **Konya** (Turkey): ancient Iconium, Thecla's hometown according to tradition.

Practical information

Ayatekla is about two and a half miles south of Silifke, in Mersin Province. The archaeological site can be visited during hours set by the Turkish authorities, which may change. There are no regular celebrations on site: check with the local tourist office or the Christian communities of Mersin if you wish to organize a group time of prayer.

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