

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Pope Saint Zosimus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 26

IN BRIEF

Pope Saint Zosimus

Pope from 417 to 418, who definitively condemned Pelagianism in his letter called the Tractoria.

Feast day	December 26
Born	Magna Graecia (southern Italy)
Died	December 26, 418, Rome
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Zosimus for Humility and Discernment

Novena to Saint Zosimus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Pope Saint Zosimus

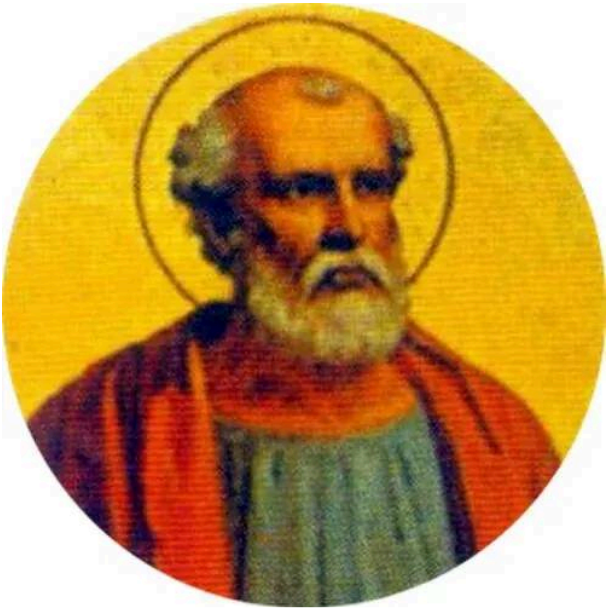
Saint Zosimus was bishop of Rome for barely twenty-one months, from March 417 to December 418. Coming from southern Italy, he succeeded Innocent I and was immediately plunged into the Pelagian controversy, in which he was at first persuaded by the accused before solemnly condemning them. His turbulent pontificate shows that a pope can be mistaken and then correct himself. His feast day is December 26.

Who was Saint Zosimus?

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Zosimus came from Magna Graecia, the Greek-speaking south of Italy; one tradition places his birth at Mesoraca, in Calabria. His Greek name fits this origin. His father was named Abramius. The historian Adolf von Harnack deduced from this a Jewish origin, a hypothesis rejected by Louis Duchesne. Nothing certain is known on this point, nor about his life before his election.

He was chosen unanimously on March 18, 417, a few days after the death of Pope Innocent I.

Historians describe him as a man of good intentions, attached to the authority of the See of Rome, but unfamiliar with Roman customs and often lacking in tact. His short pontificate was marked by hasty decisions, yet also by a real ability to listen and to change course.



Pope Zosimus in the Nuremberg Chronicle (1493).

Key dates in the life of Zosimus

- **March 18, 417**: Elected bishop of Rome.
- **March 22, 417**: Letter granting Patroclus of Arles broad rights over the bishops of southern Gaul.
- **417**: Hears Caelestius, a disciple of Pelagius, in the Basilica of San Clemente.
- **May 1, 418**: Council of Carthage against Pelagianism.
- **418**: The *Tractoria*, a letter that definitively condemns Pelagius and Caelestius.
- **December 26, 418**: Dies in Rome after a long illness.

The Pelagian affair: mistaken, then corrected

Pelagius and his disciple Caelestius taught that human beings can do good by their own strength alone, without needing God's grace. Condemned in Africa and then by Innocent I, they appealed to the new pope.

Zosimus gathered the Roman clergy in the Basilica of San Clemente to hear Caelestius, who declared that he accepted the teaching of Innocent. Soon afterward, the pope received a profession of faith from Pelagius. Convinced of their sincerity, he wrote to the African bishops to reproach them for a hasty judgment.

The African response

The African bishops, gathered around Aurelius of Carthage and Saint Augustine of Hippo, answered firmly that the pope had been deceived. Zosimus then assured them that he had not settled anything definitively.

The Council of Carthage of May 1, 418, together with the measures taken at the same time by Emperor Honorius, completed his understanding of the case. He then published the *Tractoria*, a letter addressed to all the Churches, which set out the doctrine of original sin and of the grace of Christ, and condemned Pelagius and Caelestius.

The Pelagian controversy was not a quarrel of specialists. At stake was the heart of the Gospel: whether salvation is a human achievement or a gift of God. By joining the African bishops, Zosimus confirmed the faith the Church still professes, that every good work begins with the grace of God.



The Basilica of San Clemente in Rome, where Zosimus heard Caelestius.

Arles, Africa and the right of appeal

Right after his election, Zosimus gave Bishop Patroclus of Arles the authority of a metropolitan over the provinces of Vienne and Narbonne. The bishops of Vienne, Narbonne and Marseille protested, and the question was settled only under Leo the Great.

In Africa, he received the appeal of a priest, Apiarius of Sicca, who had been excommunicated by his bishop. Zosimus based his decision on a canon he attributed to the Council of Nicaea. In fact the text came from the Council of Serdica: in the Roman manuscripts, the two series of canons followed one another without separate titles. The mistake, made in good faith, poisoned relations with the African bishops for a long time.

Behind these disputes lay a real question: how far may the bishop of Rome intervene in the affairs of local Churches? The African bishops defended their own discipline, while Rome affirmed the right of clergy to appeal to the See of Peter. Zosimus's clumsiness sharpened the debate, but the question itself would occupy the Church for a long time after him.

What can we learn from Saint Zosimus?

Zosimus is not the patron saint of any particular cause, and he is far from a flawless saint. His memory reminds us rather that a shepherd can be misled by clever speakers, can listen to those who contradict him and can revise his first impression in order to defend the common faith.

He can be a companion for:

- those who have made a mistake and must have the humility to correct it;
- leaders who need to listen to advice and criticism;
- all who seek to understand the gift of God's grace.

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

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Zosimus in art

Zosimus has no personal attribute established by tradition. In the Nuremberg Chronicle of 1493, he appears as a pope wearing the **tiara** and holding a **book**, a reminder of his letters and teaching. Like other early popes, he also figures in the series of papal portraits, in **papal vestments** and identified by his name.



The Basilica of San Lorenzo Outside the Walls, his burial place.

Where to pray to Saint Zosimus

- **Rome**: the Basilica of San Lorenzo Outside the Walls (Saint Lawrence), where he was buried.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of San Clemente, where he heard Caelestius in 417.

His name appears in the martyrologies only from the 9th century. He is celebrated today on December 26, the day after Christmas, which is also the feast of Saint Stephen, the first martyr.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Zosimus for Humility and Discernment

No traditional prayer to Saint Zosimus has come down to us. This pope, who was first deceived by Pelagius and then had the humility to correct himself and proclaim the necessity of God's grace, is a fitting intercessor for anyone who needs to admit a mistake or to rely more fully on God. Here is an original prayer inspired by his life.

Prayer to Saint Zosimus

Saint Zosimus, shepherd of the Church of Rome, you listened in good faith and were misled by clever words, but you did not cling to your error: give me the humility to recognize my mistakes and the courage to correct them.

You heeded the bishops who contradicted you and sought the truth with them: teach me to listen to those who warn me, even when their words are hard to hear.

You proclaimed to all the Churches that we are saved by the grace of Christ and not by our own strength: free me from pride and self-reliance, and open my heart to the gift of God.

Pray for the Pope and the bishops, that they may be guided by the Holy Spirit in their decisions. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

- After a mistake or a hasty judgment, when you need the humility to make amends.
- Before an important decision, to ask for discernment and good advice.
- For those who hold authority in the Church, that they may listen and decide wisely.
- When you are tempted to rely only on your own efforts.

A short prayer for grace

The *Tractoria* of Zosimus affirmed that every good work comes from the grace of Christ. Saint Augustine, who fought alongside him against Pelagianism, expressed this in a famous prayer from his *Confessions*:

> *"Give what you command, and command what you will."*

Source: Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, book X, chapter 29 (c. 400). It was precisely this sentence that troubled Pelagius when he heard it quoted in Rome.

Saint Zosimus is celebrated on December 26, the anniversary of his death in 418. You can also pray the novena to Saint Zosimus or read the life of Saint Zosimus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Zosimus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint Zosimus. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on his feast, begin on December 18: the ninth day then falls on December 26, the day after Christmas. Prayed in the last days of Advent, it prepares the heart to welcome the greatest gift of grace, the Child of Bethlehem. You can also pray it at any time, especially after a mistake or before an important decision.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps turn prayer into a concrete step.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: *Lord, you gave Saint Zosimus the humility to recognize his error and the courage to proclaim the truth of your grace. Through his intercession, make me humble and open to your gift, and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off. Perseverance matters more than perfection.

Because these days are often busy with Christmas preparations, keep the novena simple: a few quiet minutes each morning or evening are enough. It can also be prayed as a family, one person reading the meditation and another the prayer.

Day 1: Chosen by all

Zosimus was chosen unanimously as bishop of Rome in March 417. He came from southern Italy and was not familiar with Roman ways. God sometimes calls people who feel out of place, so that they may rely on him.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel unprepared for what you ask, help me to trust in your grace.

Today: Accept a responsibility you would rather avoid, entrusting it to God.

Day 2: Good intentions

Historians describe Zosimus as a man of good intentions who sometimes lacked tact. Good will is not enough; it must be joined to prudence and gentleness.

Prayer: Lord, give me wisdom and tact, so that my good intentions do not wound others.

Today: Think before speaking in a delicate conversation.

Day 3: Listening to both sides

Zosimus gathered his clergy at San Clemente to hear Caelestius himself. He wanted to listen before judging. Hearing a person out is a form of justice and respect.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to listen fully before I judge anyone.

Today: Listen patiently to someone with whom you disagree.

Day 4: Misled by clever words

Pelagius and Caelestius convinced Zosimus of their sincerity, and he blamed the African bishops. Even a good shepherd can be deceived. No one is beyond error.

Prayer: Lord, give me discernment, so that I may not be led astray by appearances or flattery.

Today: Check a piece of news or a rumor before passing it on.

Day 5: Accepting correction

The African bishops, with Saint Augustine, answered firmly that the pope had been misled. Zosimus did not harden his position. He listened to his brothers in the faith.

Prayer: Lord, soften my heart when I am corrected, and help me to receive criticism as a gift.

Today: Thank someone who has told you a hard truth.

Day 6: Changing course

After the Council of Carthage, Zosimus published the *Tractoria* and condemned Pelagianism. He was not afraid to change his position for the sake of the truth. True authority is not stubbornness.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to admit my mistakes and to repair them.

Today: Apologize to someone you have misjudged or treated unfairly.

Day 7: Everything is grace

The *Tractoria* proclaimed that we need the grace of Christ to do good and to be saved. Pride tells us we can manage alone; faith tells us everything is a gift.

Prayer: Lord, I recognize that without you I can do nothing. Fill me with your grace.

Today: Before each task, say a short prayer asking God's help.

Day 8: Mistakes made in good faith

Zosimus based a decision on a canon he believed came from Nicaea, but it came from another council. His good-faith error caused lasting tension. Our mistakes can have consequences, and we must entrust them to God's mercy.

Prayer: Lord, heal the wounds my mistakes have caused, even those I do not know about.

Today: Go to confession, or plan to go before Christmas.

Day 9: A gift from heaven

Zosimus died on December 26, 418, after a long illness. His feast falls the day after Christmas, when the Church contemplates the Child of Bethlehem, the gift of God's grace made flesh.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, born for us, I welcome you as the gift that saves me. Make my life a thanksgiving.

Today: Offer a gift of time or attention to someone who is alone during the Christmas season.

Closing prayer

Saint Zosimus, shepherd of the Church of Rome, you were misled and then corrected yourself with humility to proclaim the grace of Christ. Pray for the Pope and the bishops, for all who must make difficult decisions, and for me when I am mistaken. Obtain for me humility, discernment and trust in the grace of God, without which I can do nothing. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You may also pray the prayer to Saint Zosimus or read the life of Saint Zosimus.

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