

# Novena

The word novena derives from the Latin word for nine (novem), and it refers to nine days of private or public devotion and prayer; the days can be consecutive—as the nine days of mourning following the death of an individual—or not—as in nine first Fridays of every month for nine months, as in the Novena to the Sacred Heart. Novenas usually consist of a brief scripture passage, a novena-specific prayer that is repeated every day, some type of litany or petition/response prayer, and often a hymn or canticle.

Four kinds of novenas can be distinguished: of mourning, of preparation, of prayer or petition, and of penance, arranged in order according to their historical development. The origin of setting aside nine days is not found in the Judaic tradition, but in Greco-Roman pagan celebrations. The Romans dedicated nine days of prayers to influence the gods, and both the Greeks and the Romans had periods of mourning that lasted nine days.

1. The novena of mourning developed as early as the fifth century, as Christians adopted this mourning practice.
2. The novena of preparation developed in the earlier part of the Middle Ages, at first only before Christmas and only in Spain and France. This had its origin in the nine months Our Lord was in His Blessed Mother's womb from the Incarnation to the Nativity.
3. The novena of prayer, developed in the earlier part of the Middle Ages, as the novena of preparation, arose, among the faithful, turned to the saints.
4. The novena of petition developed in the nineteenth century, the Church formally recommend novenas by the concession of Indulgences.

## Where did novenas come from?

The most common period of time during which we pray novenas is nine days. The word “novena” actually comes from the Latin for “nine.” The nine-day period of prayer has its origin in the Book of Acts. After Jesus’ Ascension into heaven, the Apostles, the Blessed Virgin, and some of Christ’s other followers all “joined in continuous prayer” (Acts 1:14) for nine days, until the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. We know it was nine days, because the Ascension happened forty days after the Resurrection (cf. Acts 1:3), and Pentecost was always celebrated fifty days after the Passover. The Resurrection happened the day following the Passover:  $50-40-1=9$ . This period the Church “joined in continuous prayer” in anticipation of the promised coming of the Holy Spirit is the first “novena.” Through the centuries, the strict period of nine days has taken various forms, including the nine First Fridays devotion recommended by our Lord to St. Margaret Mary and linked to the devotion to the Sacred Heart.

## Why would anyone pray a novena?

In general, we pray novenas for the same reason that we pray at all: because God deserves our praise, and because we need his grace. Novenas are prayers, that has special characteristics:

*Prayerful Expression*; a channel for strong spiritual sentiments or desires, when it is hard for us to find the words to express ourselves.

*Communal Expression*: staying connected with our spiritual family, the Church

By joining in the Novena of the Divine Mercy (from Good Friday to Divine Mercy Sunday), we unite ourselves to millions of other Catholics all over the world who are engaged in the same prayer. By praying a novena before a major liturgical celebration like Christmas or Pentecost, we can prepare our souls to engage in that celebration more fruitfully, less superficially.

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