

St. John's Newsletter



Novena - a tradition of prayer and devotion

A novena is a nine-day period of private or public prayer to obtain special graces, to implore special favors, or make special petitions. (Novena is derived from the Latin word for nine.) Novenas hold a legitimate place in our Catholic spirituality. The Church emphasizes that the novena is a pious, spiritual exercise to increase the faith of the individual, and that the individual should be truly devout, always remembering the goodness of the Lord who answers all of our prayers according to His divine will.

In the New Testament at the Ascension, our Lord commissioned the apostles and then told them to return to Jerusalem and to await the coming of the Holy Spirit. Acts of the Apostles recounts, "After that they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet near Jerusalem— a mere Sabbath's journey away. Together they devoted themselves to constant prayer" (Acts 1:12,14). Nine days later, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles at Pentecost. Perhaps, this "nine-day period of prayer" of the apostles is the basis for the novena.

Novenas of Mourning

As Catholics, we believe that when someone dies, their soul goes to heaven, hell, or purgatory. Souls in purgatory need purification before they can reach heaven, and our prayers can help with that purification process. Novenas of mourning originated from an early Christian custom of offering nine days of prayers and Masses for the repose of a recently departed soul. A novena can be started 9 days before the anniversary of a deceased person's passing, 9 days after a person dies, or any time. Even if we are not sure where the souls of our departed loved ones went, the Church encourages us to pray for them.

Novenas of Petition

Considered the most common type of novena, novenas of petition offer a special intention directly to God or ask for the intercession of a particular saint. For example, someone who is looking for work may pray a novena to St. Joseph the Worker, or someone with anxiety may pray a novena to St. Dymphna. This novena doesn't need to include a formal set of prayers (for example, praying the Rosary every day) and the petition could be specific or general. When praying this novena, we develop trust in whatever response we get by the end of the novena. Even if we don't get what we ask for (or if a response comes later than the ninth day of our novena), through prayer, we submit ourselves to God's will.

Novenas of Indulgences

Novenas of indulgences, also called novenas of penance, offer opportunity to remove temporal punishment of sin. Even after attending Confession, not all temporal punishment of sin can be removed. Praying more than 30 novenas gives someone the opportunity to receive partial indulgences and plenary indulgences, as granted by the Church.

Novenas of Preparation

Lastly, we have novenas of preparation. This type of novena is prayed in anticipation of a major feast day or an important event like a wedding or baptism. Novenas in preparation for Christmas developed in the Middle Ages: the nine days reflected the nine months that Mary was pregnant with Jesus.

Overall, novenas are an opportunity to be committed to daily prayer and a reminder to be steadfast in our relationship with God.

Sources: <https://catholicstraightanswers.com/what-is-a-novena/>
<https://slmedia.org/blog/four-novenas>

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