

10. September 2026 -
THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS
“St. Empress Pulcheria—a second Helena”
(January 19, 399–453, in Constantinople)

The Lord can awaken His followers and guide them toward great holiness. This does not always mean entering a monastery or living as a hermit. It can even happen at an imperial court, where pomp and a life of luxury are often the norm. Yet time and again there are outstanding examples of people who, amid all the luxury that may surround them and all the temptations that power can exert on human beings, become shining examples for many, resisting the pull of an often vain and empty court life and instead humbly entering the service of the Lord.

One such figure was Saint Pulcheria, Empress of the Eastern Roman Empire. Saint Cyril the Bishop reportedly called her *“the most chaste bride of Christ, the ornament of the world, the adornment of the Church,”* and the Fathers of the Council of Chalcedon called her *“the guardian of the faith, the founder of peace, the fighter against heretics, the new Helena.”*

She was the daughter of Emperor Arcadius. By the age of nine, she was an orphan. God wished to use her as an instrument of His holy plans and graciously drew her heart to Him. From an early age, He bestowed upon her the gift of wisdom, a love for prayer and solitude, and manly courage. Like a devout mother, she taught her little brother, Theodosius, who was destined to become emperor, how to pray. She instructed him in the Catholic faith, took him to church, and taught him everything that would make him a devout prince. She also served as both mother and father to her two younger sisters. She loved Jesus so dearly that she vowed to remain a virgin forever and persuaded her two sisters to do the same.

At the age of 15, she and her brother Theodosius were elevated to co-rulers of the empire. She was now required to govern on her brother’s behalf. Although she was now an empress, constantly occupied with the most important affairs of the empire, and universally admired and praised for her wisdom, she remained humble and modest. Whenever she made any important decision, she always did so in her brother’s name, so that he might receive the honor while she herself remained unnoticed. The imperial palace, formerly a place of magnificent festivities, became like a monastery under her

supervision due to its strict discipline and order. No man was permitted to enter her or her sisters' chambers. She only saw and spoke to men in public. When state affairs did not prevent her, she prayed, read, or did needlework with her sisters. She also mortified her body through fasting and night vigils and joyfully renounced the pleasures of the court. Whenever she had to issue an order or carry out an important task, she first implored God for wisdom. Then she sought counsel from wise men before proceeding.

Though she was a fragile young woman, she ruled the vast Roman Empire with such wisdom and strength that her subjects were happier and more content than ever before, and the Roman name was more feared and honored by foreign peoples than ever before under her rule. She was truly an ornament to the world.

Yet she was not spared from attacks against her person or the Cross. The situation changed when her brother married. His wife, Eudoxia, had embraced the Christian faith and came under the influence of circles that turned her against Pulcheria. When she became Augusta alongside Theodosius, her influence grew, and she promoted the Monophysite heresy. As a result, Pulcheria was removed from the court. She, who had long yearned for rest and solitude and loved peace above all else, withdrew to a country estate, where, far from the world, she devoted herself to prayer, reading, and meditation on Holy Scripture, and lived in the most intimate union with God.

Yet she was forced to witness how the once well-ordered empire was sinking ever deeper into chaos. It was Saint Pope Leo who urged her to defend the cause of God and the Church.

Pulcheria then sought an audience with her imperial brother, opening his eyes to the deception that had led him to the brink of the abyss. He heeded her and had his wife's advisor exiled and executed.

Soon after, the emperor died, and Eudoxia withdrew to the Holy Land, where she lived a life of penance and eventually passed away.

Pulcheria then became the sole empress of the Eastern Empire. The empire's nobles pressured her to marry. In Marcian, she found a man willing to enter into a Josephite marriage with her, so that she would not be placed in a difficult position regarding the vow she had made since childhood.

Both had no other goal in mind than to make their subjects happy, to promote religion and piety throughout the empire, to live a holy life, and to die in peace.

Seeing the terrible harm that heresy was causing and the confusion it was bringing to the entire Church, they gladly accepted the Pope's proposal to convene a general council. The council convened in Chalcedon in 451. Four papal envoys and 250 bishops were present, as well as Emperor Marcian, who attended several sessions. The heresy, which denied the divinity of Christ and His holy Incarnation, was unanimously condemned. Saint Pulcheria and her husband were universally praised and honored as defenders of the holy faith, and they also strove to ensure that the council's decrees were enforced everywhere.

Thus, the holy empress finally succeeded in restoring peace to the empire and fulfilling her desire to do good. She built churches, founded hospitals, and generously endowed them. She visited the poor herself and helped meet their needs.

She died at the age of fifty-four and bequeathed all her possessions, over which she had free disposal, to the poor. God had given the world and the Church a second Helena!

Meditation on the day's Gospel: <https://en.elijamission.net/the-way-of-god-2/>