BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Alexander I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Alexander I

Bishop of Rome c. 105-115, fifth successor of Saint Peter, a martyr according to a late tradition.

Feast day	May 3
Born	late 1st century, Rome (according to tradition)
Died	c. 115 (May 3 according to tradition), Rome (Via Nomentana according to tradition)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	2nd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Alexander I for the Church and Our Homes

Novena to Saint Alexander I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Alexander I

Saint Alexander I was Bishop of Rome at the beginning of the 2nd century, roughly from 105 to 115, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. According to the list handed down by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, he was the fifth successor of Saint Peter. Almost nothing certain is known of his life, and the tradition that makes him a martyr is late. He is listed in the Roman Martyrology on May 3.

Who was Saint Alexander I?

Alexander belongs to the very first bishops of Rome, those known mainly by their name and their place in the succession of the apostles. Toward the end of the 2nd century, Saint Irenaeus drew up the list of the bishops of Rome to show that the teaching of the apostles had been handed down without a break: Alexander comes after Evaristus and before Sixtus. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea, in the 4th century, credits him with about ten years as bishop. Everything else comes from later traditions, gathered at the end of the 5th and in the 6th century in the Liber Pontificalis and in Acts of martyrdom that historians judge not to be authentic. His story must therefore be read with care: it bears witness above all to the veneration that the Church of Rome kept for its first shepherds.

Key dates in the life of Alexander

- **Late 1st century**: Born, according to tradition, in Rome.
- **c. 105**: He succeeds Evaristus as Bishop of Rome; historians propose slightly different dates, such as 106 or 109.
- **Reign of Trajan (98-117)**: He governs the Church of Rome at a time when Christians are still being prosecuted.
- **c. 115**: End of his time as bishop; Sixtus I succeeds him.

- **May 3**: According to the Liber Pontificalis, he dies a martyr, beheaded on the Via Nomentana; this martyrdom is not historically certain.
- **Late 2nd century**: Saint Irenaeus names him as the fifth successor of Saint Peter.
- **834**: Part of his relics is said to have been moved to Freising, in Bavaria.
- **1855**: Discovery on the Via Nomentana of a cemetery of the martyrs Alexander, Eventius and Theodulus.

What tradition says

According to the Liber Pontificalis, Alexander was Roman by birth. The same source credits him with two liturgical customs. The first is the introduction, into the Eucharistic prayer, of the words that recall the institution of the Eucharist on the eve of the Passion; historians think rather that these words go back to the very origins of the Mass. The second is the blessing of water mixed with salt, meant to purify the homes of Christians: this is the traditional origin of holy water. A similar blessing is found in the ancient Roman liturgical books.

The Acts later attributed to him tell that in prison he healed Balbina, the daughter of his jailer, the tribune Quirinus. Father and daughter are then said to have converted and died as martyrs in their turn. This account, compiled long after the events, has no historical value, but it nourished the cult of Saint Balbina and Saint Quirinus.

A martyr of the Via Nomentana?

The Roman tradition of the late 5th century states that Alexander was beheaded on the Via Nomentana, northeast of Rome, on a May 3. In 1855, a cemetery dedicated to the martyrs Alexander, Eventius and Theodulus was in fact discovered on that road. Some archaeologists thought that this martyr Alexander was the pope. Others, such as the historian Louis Duchesne, believe

he was another martyr, confused very early with the Bishop of Rome. Saint Irenaeus, who names Alexander, says nothing of his martyrdom. The sources therefore differ, and it is honest to say so.

Cult and relics

Alexander's name is listed in the Roman Martyrology on May 3. His memorial used to appear in the universal calendar of the Church, together with the martyrs Eventius and Theodulus; today it is kept by the Martyrology and by local devotion. Part of his relics is said to be kept in the Basilica of Santa Sabina, on the Aventine, and another part in Lucca, in Tuscany. A tradition also reports a transfer to Freising, in Bavaria, in 834. The Eastern Churches also venerate him, on different dates. He is depicted as a pope, with the tiara and sometimes the palm of martyrs.

What can we learn from Saint Alexander I?

Of Saint Alexander, we know above all that he was a link in the chain that connects today's Church to the apostles. That is precisely what Saint Irenaeus wanted to show by naming him: the faith is not an invention, it is received and handed on. The tradition that credits him with holy water also reminds us that God sanctifies the simple things of daily life. We can pray to him for the pope, for the Church's faithfulness to the teaching of the apostles, and each time we make the Sign of the Cross with holy water.

Where to pray to Saint Alexander I

- **Basilica of Santa Sabina** (Rome): part of his relics is said to be kept there.
- **Via Nomentana** (Rome): the road where tradition places his martyrdom, and where the cemetery of the martyrs Alexander, Eventius and Theodulus was discovered.

- **Lucca** (Tuscany) and **Freising** (Bavaria): towns where tradition places other relics.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Alexander I for the Church and Our Homes

Saint Alexander I was Bishop of Rome at the beginning of the 2nd century, the fifth successor of Saint Peter according to Saint Irenaeus. Tradition credits him with the use of holy water and says he died a martyr on the Via Nomentana. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him the pope, the Church's faithfulness to the faith of the apostles and the sanctification of daily life.

Prayer to Saint Alexander

Saint Alexander,
shepherd of the Church of Rome
when the faith of the apostles was still close at hand,
you received and handed on what Peter had taught.
Keep the Church faithful to this heritage,
and support the pope in his mission.

Tradition says that you blessed water
to sanctify the homes of Christians.
When I trace on myself the sign of the cross,
remind me of my baptism
and make my home a place of peace and prayer.

You whom the Church honors as a witness of Christ,
give me the courage to remain faithful
when the faith is mocked or opposed.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Alexander

- On May 3, the day on which the Roman Martyrology commemorates him.
- For the pope and the bishops, successors of the apostles.
- When taking holy water at the church door or at home.
- To bless a new home and those who live in it.
- For Christians who must bear witness to their faith at the cost of their safety.

An invocation with holy water

As you make the Sign of the Cross with holy water, you can say:

> *Lord, through this water, remind me of my baptism.*
> *Keep me in your light, with those I love.*
> *Saint Alexander, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Alexander I from April 25 to May 3, and read the life of Saint Alexander I.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Alexander I

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by what is known, and what tradition reports, about Saint Alexander I, Bishop of Rome at the beginning of the 2nd century. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on May 3, the day of his memorial in the Roman Martyrology, begin on April 25. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross, with holy water if possible, and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Alexander, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. The sources on his life are few and often late: the meditations point this out when they rely on tradition.

Day 1: A link in the chain

Saint Irenaeus names Alexander as the fifth successor of Peter in Rome. His name matters because it shows that the faith was handed down without a break from the apostles.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for all those who passed on the faith to me. Grant that I in turn may hand it on faithfully.

Act of the day: Thank in prayer those who made Christ known to you.

Day 2: A Church close to the apostles

In Alexander's time, some Christians in Rome had still known disciples of the apostles. The Church lived from their witness and their memory.

Prayer: Lord, increase in me the love of the Church, which keeps the memory of the apostles and the Word of God.

Act of the day: Read a passage from the Acts of the Apostles.

Day 3: Serving in the shadows

Almost nothing certain is known about this pope. Yet he served the Church for about ten years. Hidden faithfulness counts in the eyes of God.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve without seeking recognition, knowing that you see what is hidden.

Act of the day: Do a discreet service without making it known.

Day 4: The memory of the Last Supper

Tradition credits him with inserting into the Mass the words that recall the Last Supper. These words are probably older still, but they are at the heart of every Eucharist.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, who gave your Body and Blood on the eve of your Passion, make me live from the Eucharist.

Act of the day: Attend a weekday Mass, or pray for a moment before the tabernacle.

Day 5: Holy water

According to the Liber Pontificalis, Alexander introduced the blessing of water mixed with salt to sanctify homes. Holy water reminds us of our baptism.

Prayer: Lord, purify my heart and renew in me the grace of my baptism.

Act of the day: Make the Sign of the Cross with holy water as you enter church, or keep some at home.

Day 6: Blessing the home

Holy water was meant for the homes of Christians. The home is the first place where we pray, forgive and learn to love.

Prayer: Lord, bless my home and those who live in it. May peace dwell there and may everyone be welcomed.

Act of the day: Pray as a family, or bless your home with a Sign of the Cross in each room.

Day 7: Healing and converting

The legend tells that in prison Alexander healed Balbina, the daughter of his jailer Quirinus, and that both converted. This late account expresses a truth: the witness of a Christian can open a heart.

Prayer: Lord, heal the sick whom I entrust to you, and touch the hearts of those who do not know you.

Act of the day: Visit or call someone who is ill.

Day 8: Faithful in trial

Alexander governed the Church under Trajan, when being a Christian could cost one's life. Whether or not his martyrdom is historical, he lived in a Church that knew the price of faith.

Prayer: Lord, sustain persecuted Christians. Give me the courage not to hide my faith.

Act of the day: Pray for a country where Christians suffer for their faith.

Day 9: With Peter, for the Church

As a successor of Peter, Alexander carried the care of the whole Church. Today the pope still continues this service of unity.

Prayer: Lord, bless our pope and keep the Church in unity. Through the intercession of Saint Alexander, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Pray for the pope and, if possible, take part in Mass.

Living the novena with Saint Alexander

Saint Alexander is a discreet saint, whose story is lost in the earliest times of the Church. He reminds us that the faith comes to us through a long chain of witnesses, and that God sanctifies simple gestures, such as that of holy water. During these nine days, you can pray for the pope, for your family and your home, and for persecuted Christians.

Concluding prayer

> *Saint Alexander,*
> *successor of Peter and witness to the faith of the apostles,*
> *present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me faithful to my baptism,*
> *bless my home and those I love,*
> *and sustain the Church in unity.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Alexander I at any time, and read the life of Saint Alexander I.

Credits and sources

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