BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Alexius of Rome

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Alexius of Rome

Beggar saint of Roman and Eastern tradition, called the Man of God, whose life is known through a legend.

Feast day	July 17
Born	late 4th century, according to legend, Rome, according to legend
Died	c. 411 - 412, according to tradition, Rome, according to legend
Canonized	immemorial cult (feast removed from the General Roman Calendar in 1969)
Era	5th century
Patron saint of	beggars, pilgrims, travelers, nurses, belt makers

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Alexius, the Man of God

Basilica of Saints Boniface and Alexius (Rome)

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Alexius of Rome

Saint Alexius, called "the Man of God," is a saint who was very popular in the Middle Ages, whose life tradition places in Rome and Edessa at the beginning of the 5th century. According to his legend, this son of a Roman senator gave up marriage and his wealth to live as a beggar, then came back to die, unknown to all, under the staircase of his parents' house. His story is largely legendary, but it nourished the piety of all Christendom. His feast day is July 17.

Who was Saint Alexius?

Two things must be distinguished: the account of Alexius's life, and the devotion it inspired. Historians have shown that the *Life* of Saint Alexius, written in Greek, was born from the merging of two older stories. The first, in Syriac, tells of a "Man of God" of Edessa, who died a beggar in front of the city's church after revealing to the doorkeeper that he came from a noble family of Rome. The second is the life of a saint of Constantinople, John Calybites. Around the 8th century, these two stories were combined and transposed to Rome. The result was a "story useful to the soul," which met with immense success. It is therefore impossible to reconstruct a historical biography of Alexius; but the message of his story, a love of God that goes as far as total self-stripping, has touched generations of Christians.

Key dates in the life of Alexius

- **According to legend, late 4th century**: Born in Rome, son of the senator Euphemian and his wife Aglaës.
- **According to legend, on his wedding night**: He persuades his bride to give up marriage, then flees and sails for Syria.

- **According to legend, seventeen years**: He lives as a beggar under the porch of a church of the Mother of God in Edessa, until his holiness is discovered.
- **According to legend, seventeen more years**: Brought back to Rome by a storm, he lives unrecognized under the staircase of his parents' palace.
- **c. 411 - 412, according to tradition**: He dies, holding the account of his life in his hand, in the reign of Emperor Honorius.
- **c. 950**: The Synaxarion of Constantinople summarizes his legend in its final form.
- **c. 980 - 986**: His cult reaches Rome; the church of Saint Boniface on the Aventine is also dedicated to him.
- **11th century**: The *Life of Saint Alexis*, one of the oldest poems in French literature, is composed.
- **1969**: His feast is removed from the General Roman Calendar because of the serious historical difficulties of his record.

The story of the legend

According to the legend, Alexius was the only son of Euphemian, a very devout Roman senator, and of his wife Aglaës. His parents betrothed him to a virtuous young woman. On the wedding night, Alexius persuaded her to give up marriage in order to give herself to God, and then he fled. He sailed for Syria and reached Edessa, in Mesopotamia. There he gave all his goods to the poor and became a beggar under the porch of the church of the Mother of God. He lived there seventeen years in prayer and privation. But the doorkeeper, enlightened by the Virgin Mary, discovered his holiness, and crowds came running.

To escape this glory, Alexius set sail again, intending to reach Tarsus, the homeland of Saint Paul. A storm drove his ship to Rome. Unrecognizable after so many years of privation, he asked for hospitality from his own father, who

did not recognize him and had him lodged under the staircase of his palace. For seventeen more years, Alexius lived there in poverty, fed on his father's orders and insulted by the servants. Feeling death approach, he wrote the account of his life on a piece of parchment. A heavenly voice then announced in Rome the death of "the Man of God." He was found dead, his parchment clutched in his hand. Only on reading this text did his parents and his bride discover who he was.

A cult that came from the East

The name of Alexius is absent from all martyrologies and calendars before the year 1000. His legend took shape in the East around the 8th century, and his cult developed first in the Byzantine world. Around 980, it reached Rome. In 977, Pope Benedict VII had settled on the Aventine, in the church of Saint Boniface, an exiled Syrian metropolitan, Sergius of Damascus, with a community of Greek monks. It was probably through them that devotion to Alexius took root in the city: in 986 the church received a second dedication, to Saint Alexius. From Rome his cult spread rapidly throughout Europe.

His *Life* was translated into Latin and then into many languages. In France, the *Life of Saint Alexis*, composed in the 11th century, is one of the first great texts of French literature. Over the centuries, his figure inspired poems, plays, an opera by Stefano Landi (1632) and a cantata by Rimsky-Korsakov.

Devotion today and art

In 1969, during the reform of the liturgical calendar that followed the Second Vatican Council, the feast of Saint Alexius on July 17 was removed from the General Roman Calendar. The official document lists him among the "saints who present serious historical difficulties." Since then his feast is no longer celebrated throughout the Church, but his memory remains, especially in

Rome and in the communities that took him as patron. The Orthodox Churches honor him on March 17. His head is venerated at the monastery of Agia Lavra, near Kalavryta, in Greece.

He is shown as a pilgrim or a beggar, often lying under a staircase, holding a parchment. He is invoked as patron of beggars, pilgrims and travelers, as well as of nurses and belt makers.

What can we learn from Saint Alexius?

Even if his story is legendary, Saint Alexius passes on a profound insight of the Gospel: one can leave everything for Christ, even one's name and reputation, and live hidden among one's own. His figure reminds us that the poor we pass every day, on the doorstep of our homes, may be "men of God" whom we do not recognize. We can pray to him for the homeless, for beggars and pilgrims, and to learn humility.

Where to pray to Saint Alexius

- **Basilica of Saints Boniface and Alexius** (Aventine, Rome): the church dedicated to him since 986, where steps of the staircase under which, according to tradition, he died are shown.
- **Basilica of San Clemente** (Rome): the lower basilica keeps an 11th-century fresco telling his life.
- **Monastery of Agia Lavra** (Kalavryta, Greece): an Orthodox monastery where his head is venerated.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Alexius for the Poor and the Homeless

Saint Alexius, "the Man of God," is the hero of a legend much loved in the Middle Ages: the son of a Roman senator, he is said to have left everything to live as a beggar, then to have died unknown under the staircase of his parents' house. Even if his story is legendary, it expresses the Gospel call to self-stripping and humility. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. Through his intercession, it entrusts to God beggars, the homeless and pilgrims.

Prayer to Saint Alexius

Saint Alexius, man of God,
you who left everything for Christ,
wealth, honors and even your name,
teach me not to cling
to what passes away.

You lived poor among the poor,
at the door of a church and then at the door of your home,
without anyone recognizing you.
Open my eyes so that I may see Christ
in the beggar I pass,
and give me a generous heart toward him.

Watch over those who sleep outside,
over pilgrims and travelers,
and over those who care for the sick.
Obtain for me the humility to serve unseen,
for the glory of God alone.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Alexius

- On July 17, the day on which he is traditionally remembered.
- For homeless people and beggars.
- Before a pilgrimage or a journey.
- For nurses and caregivers.
- When you want to learn to give without seeking recognition.

A short invocation

> *Saint Alexius, man of God, teach us to recognize Christ in the poor. Pray for us.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Alexius from July 9 to 17, and read the life of Saint Alexius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Alexius, the Man of God

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It follows the legend of Saint Alexius, "the Man of God," as tradition has handed it down. These accounts are not a historical biography, but they carry a true Gospel message. To finish it on July 17, the day of his memory, begin on July 9. 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 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 Alexius, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A rich and devout family

According to the legend, Alexius was born into a noble family of Rome, both wealthy and deeply believing. His parents shared their goods with the poor.

Prayer: Lord, bless families who hand on the faith and care for the poor.

Act of the day: Pray for your parents, living or departed.

Day 2: A call stronger than anything

On his wedding night, Alexius chose to leave everything for God. The legend expresses in a radical way the call of Christ: "Come, follow me."

Prayer: Lord, let nothing come before your love in my life.

Act of the day: Name an attachment that keeps you from God and entrust it to him.

Day 3: Giving everything

In Edessa, Alexius gave all his goods to the poor. He kept nothing for himself.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the spirit of possession and make me generous.

Act of the day: Give something useful to you to someone who needs it.

Day 4: A beggar at the church door

Alexius lived seventeen years under the porch of a church of the Mother of God. He prayed and received alms like the other poor.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, who watch over the poor, teach me to look at them with tenderness.

Act of the day: Greet and help someone who begs near your home or your church.

Day 5: Fleeing honors

When his holiness was discovered, Alexius fled. He did not want to be admired, but to remain hidden in God.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from seeking the admiration of others, and give me humility.

Act of the day: Do a service without anyone knowing.

Day 6: The storm that brought him home

A storm drove Alexius's ship to Rome. God brought him back where he had not expected to return.

Prayer: Lord, in the storms of my life, lead me where you will.

Act of the day: Pray for those who travel and those at sea.

Day 7: Under the staircase

Alexius lived seventeen years under the staircase of his father's house, unknown, insulted by the servants. He accepted humiliation in silence.

Prayer: Jesus, you who were despised, give me patience when I am hurt or ignored.

Act of the day: Forgive someone who has treated you with disrespect.

Day 8: Those we do not recognize

His parents fed the beggar without knowing he was their son. Christ too hides in the poor: "You did it to me."

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes so that I may recognize you in the poor and the stranger.

Act of the day: Support an organization that helps homeless people.

Day 9: The Man of God

According to the legend, Alexius died holding the account of his life, and a voice from heaven proclaimed him "Man of God." What was hidden was finally revealed.

Prayer: Lord, let my life be hidden in you, for your glory alone. Through the intercession of Saint Alexius, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass or pray for people who have died on the street.

Closing prayer

Saint Alexius, man of God,
poor among the poor and hidden from the eyes of the world,
present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Teach me detachment and humility,
and help me recognize Christ in those who are hungry.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saints Boniface and Alexius (Rome)

The Basilica of Saints Boniface and Alexius (Santi Bonifacio e Alessio) stands in Rome, at the top of the Aventine, one of the city's seven hills. It is the church where Saint Alexius, "the Man of God," has been venerated for more than a thousand years. Tradition links it with the memory of his parents' house, and steps of the staircase under which he is said to have died are shown there. The basilica has been entrusted since 1860 to the Somascan Fathers.

An ancient church dedicated to two saints

The origin of the church is very old: it was first the chapel of a small monastery, dedicated to Saint Boniface alone, a martyr of Tarsus. In 977, Pope Benedict VII settled there an exiled Syrian metropolitan, Sergius of Damascus, who founded a community of Greek monks. It was probably through them that devotion to Saint Alexius, born in the East, reached Rome: in 986 the church received a second dedication, to Saint Alexius. It was restored by Pope Honorius III in 1216, and then several more times. In the 18th century, the architect Tommaso De Marchis transformed its interior in the Baroque style and gave it its present facade. The Somascan Fathers restored it again between 1852 and 1860.

What you can see

In the nave, a statue of Saint Alexius by the sculptor Andrea Bergondi, from the 18th century, lies beneath a case of crystal and gilded wood. This holds what tradition presents as a few steps of the staircase of the family house, under which the beggar saint is said to have lived and died. In the transept, a chapel houses an ancient icon of the Virgin, known as the Madonna of Saint

Alexius, which legend says the saint brought back from the East. Beneath the church, a Romanesque crypt keeps 12th-century frescoes and an altar containing relics of Saint Thomas Becket. Outside, note the Romanesque bell tower and the cloister.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Alexius. Before the staircase, entrust to him the homeless, beggars and pilgrims, then say the prayer to Saint Alexius. You can also pray before the icon of the Virgin, honored here for centuries. July 17 is a special day to come. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

The basilica is on the Aventine, in a quiet district, not far from the basilica of Santa Sabina and the Orange Garden. It can be reached on foot from the Circus Maximus or the Circo Massimo metro station. It is a working place of worship: modest dress and silence are requested, especially during Mass. Opening hours and service times may vary: check with the basilica before your visit.

Credits and sources

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