

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Anicetus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Anicetus

Bishop of Rome in the mid-second century, a native of Syria who welcomed Saint Polycarp of Smyrna.

Feast day	April 17
Born	Emesa (Homs), Syria
Died	Rome
Era	2nd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Anicetus for Unity in Truth

Novena to Saint Anicetus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Anicetus

Saint Anicetus was, according to the traditional list of popes, the eleventh bishop of Rome, in the middle of the second century. A native of Syria, he led the Church of Rome at a time when it was shaken by currents of thought that threatened its unity, such as Gnosticism and the teaching of Marcion. His name remains linked to a brotherly meeting with Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, who came to Rome to discuss the date of Easter with him. He is listed in the Roman Martyrology on April 17, though he is often celebrated on April 20.

Who was Saint Anicetus?

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, a collection of entries on the popes written much later, Anicetus was a Syrian from the city of Emesa, today's Homs. We do not know why he came to Rome. He succeeded Saint Pius I and was followed by Saint Soter.

The dates of his time as bishop remain uncertain. Historians place him roughly between the years 150 and 168, and the *Annuario Pontificio*, the official yearbook of the Holy See, gives 153 as a possible starting date. Like the other bishops of Rome of his century, he led a community that was growing, diverse and often exposed to danger.



Saint Anicetus in the gallery of popes at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Key dates

- **Early 2nd century**: Birth at Emesa, Syria, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*.
- **c. 150-157**: He succeeds Saint Pius I at the head of the Church of Rome.
- **c. 154-155**: Saint Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, visits Rome to discuss the date of Easter.
- **After 161**: Reign of Marcus Aurelius; rise of Montanism and local persecutions.
- **c. 166-168**: Death in Rome; Saint Soter succeeds him.
- **1604**: His remains are transferred to the chapel of the Palazzo Altemps, in Rome.

Defending the faith of the apostles

The first years of Anicetus's ministry were marked by the success of Marcion in Rome. Marcion rejected the Old Testament and kept only part of the writings of the apostles. The Gnostics, for their part, promised a secret knowledge reserved for a few initiates.

Anicetus opposed these movements by relying on apostolic succession: the authentic faith is the one the bishops received from the apostles and handed on publicly, not a hidden teaching for an elite. This principle, which Saint Irenaeus would develop a few years later, remains at the heart of the Catholic understanding of Tradition.

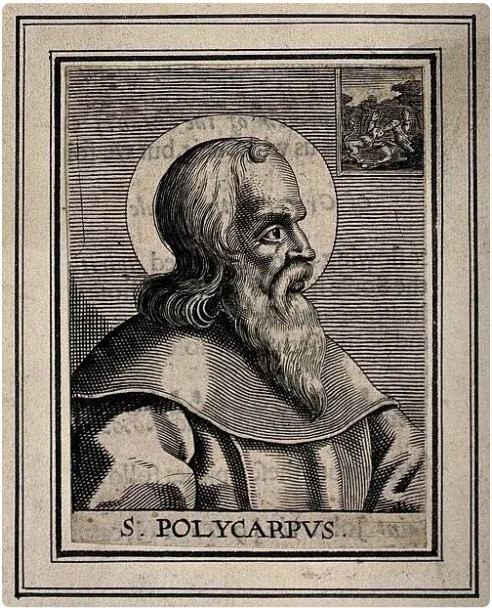
During his time as bishop, the philosopher Saint Justin Martyr taught in Rome, and the historian Hegesippus came from the East to verify the tradition of the Churches. According to Hegesippus, Eleutherius, a future pope, was then a deacon of Anicetus.

The meeting with Polycarp

The best-attested episode of his life is reported by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon and passed on by Eusebius of Caesarea. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of the apostle John, came to Rome despite his great age.

The Churches of Asia Minor celebrated Easter on the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan, whatever the day of the week; Rome always kept it on a Sunday. The two bishops could not agree. Polycarp held to the custom he had received from John; Anicetus held to the custom of the presbyters who had gone before him. Yet they parted in peace and shared communion together. According to Irenaeus, Anicetus even let Polycarp celebrate the Eucharist in his place, as a sign of respect.

Irenaeus later held up this meeting as a model, when another pope wanted to break with the Churches of Asia over the same question. Disagreement on a practice need not break the communion of faith.



Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, who came to meet Anicetus in Rome.

The first monument over Peter's tomb?

Historians often date to the time of Anicetus the building, in the Vatican necropolis, of the small monument erected over the presumed tomb of Saint Peter. This "trophy," the first core of the future basilica, was found during the excavations of 1939-1949 beneath Saint Peter's Basilica.

Martyr or not?

Tradition counts Anicetus among the martyr popes who died during the persecutions. No early document confirms this, and accounts even differ on the day of his death, placed between April 16 and 20. According to tradition,

he was buried in the cemetery on the Appian Way that would become the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus. In 1604, Pope Clement VIII had his remains transferred to the chapel of the Palazzo Altemps, in Rome.

What his holiness teaches

Saint Anicetus is the pope of faithfulness and patience. Firm on the essentials in the face of teachings that disfigured the Gospel, he was able to welcome a brother from another tradition without breaking with him. For Christians today, his example invites us to join the defense of the faith with care for unity. He is not the patron saint of a particular cause, but he is a natural intercessor for ecumenical dialogue and for those who must hold to the truth while keeping peace.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Anicetus in art

No authentic portrait of Anicetus exists. Like the other early popes, he appears in the gallery of papal portrait medallions in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome, dressed as a pope. When he is honored as a martyr, the palm may accompany him, as it does other martyr popes in Christian art.



The chapel of the Palazzo Altemps, in Rome.

Where to pray to Saint Anicetus

The remains attributed to Saint Anicetus have rested since 1604 in the chapel of the Palazzo Altemps, in Rome, near Piazza Navona. Pilgrims can also pray in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus on the Appian Way, where tradition places his first burial, and in Saint Peter's Basilica, built over the tomb of the apostle that the monument of his time honored.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Anicetus or the novena to Saint Anicetus.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Anicetus for Unity in Truth

Saint Anicetus, a Syrian who became bishop of Rome in the second century, defended the faith received from the apostles against the teachings of Marcion and the Gnostics. He is remembered above all for welcoming Saint Polycarp of Smyrna: though they disagreed on the date of Easter, they parted in peace and celebrated the Eucharist together. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Anicetus for unity in truth

Saint Anicetus, shepherd of the Church of Rome,
you came from Syria to serve the faith of the apostles
in a city full of competing voices.
Help me to hold fast to the Gospel as the Church has received it,
and not to be carried away by every new teaching.

You welcomed Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna,
even though you did not share his custom.
You listened to him, you respected him,
and you left the altar to him as a sign of honor.
Teach me that charity is not weakened by disagreement,
and that it is possible to remain brothers and sisters
when we do not see everything the same way.

Pray for the Pope and the bishops,
for all who work for the unity of Christians,
and for families and communities divided by conflict.
May we be firm in what is essential,
patient in what is secondary,
and generous in all things.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Anicetus is listed in the Roman Martyrology on April 17, though he is often celebrated on April 20. This prayer fits especially well:

- during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25);
- in the Easter season, since his meeting with Polycarp concerned the date of Easter;

- before a difficult conversation with someone whose views or customs differ from yours;
- for a parish, a family or a community where disagreements threaten peace.

A short prayer for Christian unity

> *Lord Jesus, on the night before you died, you prayed that all your disciples might be one. Through the intercession of Saint Anicetus, who received Saint Polycarp in peace, heal the divisions among Christians and lead us together to the one table of your Body and Blood. Amen.*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Anicetus or pray the novena to Saint Anicetus. His remains rest in the chapel of the Palazzo Altemps, in Rome.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Anicetus

This novena to Saint Anicetus is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the bishop of Rome who came from Syria, defended the faith of the apostles in the middle of the second century and welcomed Saint Polycarp of Smyrna in peace despite their disagreement. To end on April 17, the day the Roman Martyrology lists him, begin it on April 9. You can also pray it at any time of the year, especially for the unity of Christians and for peace in a divided community.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: A man from Syria

Anicetus was born in Emesa, today's Homs, in Syria. He came to Rome, we do not know why, and became its bishop. The Church has always been made of people from many lands. Today, Syria's Christians suffer greatly; Anicetus is one of their own.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, pray for the Christians of Syria and of the whole Middle East, and for all who have had to leave their homeland. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Christians of Syria, or support a work that helps them.

Day 2: Welcoming the stranger

A Syrian in Rome, Anicetus knew what it was to live far from home. Later, as bishop, he would welcome a guest from Asia Minor. Hospitality is one of the oldest Christian virtues.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, open my heart to newcomers in my parish, my neighborhood and my workplace. Amen.

Today: Greet and get to know someone new in your parish or community.

Day 3: The faith received from the apostles

Against Marcion and the Gnostics, Anicetus relied on the faith handed down publicly from the apostles through the bishops. The Gospel is not a secret for a few: it is a gift offered to all and received in the Church.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, strengthen my faith in the teaching of the apostles, and help me to love the Church that hands it on. Amen.

Today: Pray the Apostles' Creed slowly, word by word.

Day 4: The whole of Scripture

Marcion rejected the Old Testament and wanted to keep only part of the apostolic writings. The Church held to the whole of Scripture, in which the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ are one and the same.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, give me a love for all of Holy Scripture, the Old Testament as well as the New. Amen.

Today: Read a psalm, and pray it as Jesus himself prayed the psalms.

Day 5: Seekers of truth

In the time of Anicetus, Saint Justin taught philosophy in Rome, and Hegesippus traveled from the East to verify the tradition of the Churches. The Christian faith welcomes questions and honest research.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, pray for all who seek the truth, for students, teachers and those who doubt. Amen.

Today: Spend a few minutes reading a page about the faith that helps you understand it better.

Day 6: Polycarp comes to Rome

The aged Polycarp, disciple of the apostle John, made the long journey from Smyrna to Rome to speak with Anicetus. Each held to the custom he had received for the date of Easter. They talked as brothers, not as enemies.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, teach me to speak honestly and respectfully with those who see things differently. Amen.

Today: Have a calm conversation with someone you disagree with, listening more than speaking.

Day 7: Communion beyond disagreement

Anicetus and Polycarp could not agree, yet they parted in peace, and Anicetus let Polycarp celebrate the Eucharist in his place. Unity did not require uniformity. It required charity and a shared faith in Christ.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, pray for the unity of all Christians, and heal the divisions in my family and my community. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians of another Church or tradition, and thank God for something good in their witness.

Day 8: Honoring Peter

Historians often date to the time of Anicetus the small monument built over the tomb of Saint Peter on the Vatican Hill. The Church of Rome cared for the memory of the apostle who had given his life for Christ.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, pray for the Pope, successor of Peter, and for all who serve the unity of the Church. Amen.

Today: Pray an Our Father for the Pope and his intentions.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Tradition counts Anicetus among the martyr popes, though no early source confirms it. Whatever the manner of his death, he served the Church faithfully in dangerous times, under emperors who did not spare Christians.

Prayer: Saint Anicetus, pray for persecuted Christians, and obtain for me the grace of faithfulness to Christ to the end of my life. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians persecuted in the world today.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave your Church Saint Anicetus, a shepherd faithful to the teaching of the apostles and a friend of peace. Through his intercession, keep us firm in the true faith, patient with those who differ from us, and united in the love of your Son. Hear also the intention I have entrusted to you during these nine days. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Anicetus and the prayer to Saint Anicetus.

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