

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Apollonia of Alexandria

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 9

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IN BRIEF

Saint Apollonia of Alexandria

Virgin and martyr of Alexandria in the 3rd century, invoked against toothache and patron saint of dentists.

Feast day	February 9
Died	249, Alexandria, Egypt
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	dentists, toothache sufferers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Apollonia for Toothache

Novena to Saint Apollonia

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Apollonia of Alexandria

Saint Apollonia was a Christian virgin of Alexandria, in Egypt, martyred in 249 during a riot against the Christians. Her tormentors broke her jaw and knocked out her teeth before threatening her with fire. We know of her martyrdom through a letter by Saint Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria at the same time, which makes it one of the most reliable accounts of the period. Invoked against toothache and honored as the patron saint of dentists, she is remembered on February 9.

Who was Saint Apollonia?

Everything we know about Apollonia comes from a letter of Saint Dionysius of Alexandria to Fabius, bishop of Antioch, which the historian Eusebius of Caesarea copied into his *Ecclesiastical History*. Dionysius was a direct witness of the events.

He describes Apollonia as a "most admirable virgin," already advanced in years, which contradicts later images that show her as a young girl. She probably belonged to a group of consecrated virgins who served the Church of Alexandria.

Later, in the Middle Ages, legendary accounts made her the daughter of a pagan magistrate, martyred in Rome. These versions have no historical basis: the only reliable source is the letter of Dionysius.

Key dates in the life of Saint Apollonia

- **3rd century**: A consecrated virgin in the Church of Alexandria.
- **249**: Toward the end of the reign of Emperor Philip the Arab, a riot against the Christians breaks out in Alexandria, stirred up by a soothsayer.

- **During the riot**: After the old man Metras and a Christian woman named Quinta, Apollonia is seized, tortured, and dies in the flames.
- **250**: Emperor Decius orders everyone to sacrifice to the gods, and the persecution becomes general.
- **Around 251**: Dionysius of Alexandria tells of these martyrdoms in his letter to Fabius of Antioch.

The riot in Alexandria

Alexandria was then one of the largest cities of the Empire, and its Christian community was numerous. According to Dionysius, a year before the edict of Decius, a soothsayer roused the pagan crowd against the Christians.

The rioters first seized an old man, Metras, who refused to blaspheme: they beat him, wounded his face and stoned him outside the city. Next they took a woman, Quinta, dragged her to the temple to make her worship the idols, and then stoned her as well. The houses of Christians were looted.

The martyrdom of Apollonia

Apollonia was the third victim. The rioters struck her in the face, broke her jaw and knocked out all her teeth. Then they lit a pyre outside the city and threatened to throw her into it unless she joined them in speaking impious words against Christ. Apollonia asked for a moment, as if to think. Then, Dionysius reports, she leapt into the fire of her own accord and was consumed.

This act has raised questions among Christians. The Church does not allow anyone to take their own life, even to escape torture. But Christian writers judged that in Apollonia's case it was not despair but an act of faithfulness, made under a special prompting of the Holy Spirit, so as not to risk denying Christ. The Church has always venerated her as a martyr.

Why is Saint Apollonia the patron saint of dentists?

Because of the suffering inflicted on her jaw and teeth, Apollonia has been invoked against toothache since the Middle Ages. Her devotion was very popular in the West: her statue can be found in countless churches and chapels, especially in Brittany, Belgium and Italy. She became the patron saint of dentists, and several dental associations still bear her name.

Relics, especially teeth, have been attributed to her in many places, though their authenticity cannot be verified. At Lézat-sur-Lèze, in the Ariège region of southern France, the church keeps a tooth venerated as hers, which is still presented to little children when their first teeth come in. In the Flemish Ardennes of Belgium, people eat a pastry called *geuteling* in her honor on February 9.

Metras, Quinta and Apollonia: companions in witness

Apollonia did not die alone. The letter of Dionysius places her beside Metras and Quinta, ordinary members of the Christian community of Alexandria whose names would otherwise have been lost. Their story reminds us that the early Church was carried by humble believers, old men and women included, who kept their faith in the middle of violence.

Dionysius wrote to a fellow bishop to tell what the Church of Alexandria had endured. Read today, his account of these three witnesses shows that the strength of the martyrs came from Christ and not from their own power.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Apollonia in art

Saint Apollonia is easy to recognize: she holds a pair of pincers or tongs gripping a tooth. She often also carries the palm of martyrdom. Painters such as Francisco de Zurbarán depicted her as a young woman in rich clothing, even

though Dionysius tells us she was elderly. Some medieval miniatures, like the one by Jean Fouquet, show the scene of her martyrdom itself, with executioners pulling out her teeth.

What can we learn from Saint Apollonia?

Apollonia was neither young nor powerful. She was an elderly consecrated woman caught up in a riot. Faced with the violence of the crowd, she did not deny Christ. Her example reminds us that faith can hold firm even when the body is broken.

By entrusting toothache to her, popular devotion has kept alive the memory of a very concrete martyr, close to the small and great sufferings of the body. We can pray to her for dentists, for the sick who are in pain, and for Christians who suffer violence because of their faith. To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Apollonia or the novena to Saint Apollonia.

Where to pray to Saint Apollonia

- **Lézat-sur-Lèze** (Ariège, France): the church that keeps a tooth venerated as her relic.
- The many chapels and churches where her statue stands, in Brittany, Belgium and Italy.
- Anywhere on February 9, her day in the Roman Martyrology, or before a visit to the dentist.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Apollonia for Toothache

There is no liturgical prayer proper to Saint Apollonia in the current Roman Missal, but popular piety has called on her against toothache for centuries. This page offers the account of her martyrdom by Saint Dionysius of Alexandria, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

The witness of Saint Dionysius of Alexandria

In a letter written around 251 and preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea, the bishop of Alexandria relates, in substance, that the rioters seized "the most admirable virgin Apollonia," already elderly, broke her jaw and knocked out her teeth, then threatened her with the pyre if she would not blaspheme. After a moment of recollection, she leapt into the fire herself.

Source: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book VI, chapter 41; summary by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Apollonia for toothache

Saint Apollonia, you kept the faith while your body was broken: pray for all who suffer in their flesh.

I entrust to you those who have toothache, children who are teething, the sick who are waiting for care, and those who are afraid of pain. Obtain for them relief and peace.

Bless dentists, dental assistants and all who care for the sick. Give them skill, patience and gentleness in their work.

You would not speak a single word against Christ: keep my lips from malice, lies and blasphemy. May my mouth serve to bless God and to speak well of others.

Pray for Christians who suffer violence because of their faith. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

The Roman Martyrology commemorates Saint Apollonia on February 9. You can call on her before a dental appointment, when you are in pain from a tooth, or when a baby is cutting teeth. Dentists and dental students may also pray to her before their work. Learn more about the life of Saint Apollonia, or pray the novena to Saint Apollonia.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Apollonia

This novena to Saint Apollonia is an original composition by Saintspedia. For nine days, it walks with the martyr of Alexandria, whose story we know from her bishop, Saint Dionysius. To end it on the eve of her day, begin on January 31 and finish on February 8, since she is commemorated on February 9. You can also pray it at any time of year for someone suffering from toothache or facing dental treatment, for dentists, or for persecuted Christians.

How to pray this novena

Each day, make 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. Close with the small act suggested for the day. The novena can be prayed alone, as a family, or by a dental team. If you miss a day, simply continue.

Day 1: A woman given to God

Apollonia was a consecrated virgin of the Church of Alexandria. Long before the riot, she had already given her life to God in prayer and service. Martyrdom did not come from nowhere: it was the fruit of a life already offered day after day.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, you belonged entirely to Christ long before your martyrdom. Help me to offer him my daily life, so that I may be faithful in great trials as in small things. Amen.

Today: Offer your day to God in a short prayer as soon as you wake.

Day 2: Faithful in old age

Saint Dionysius tells us that Apollonia was already advanced in years. Old age did not weaken her faith. The elderly often carry the memory and the prayer of the Church, even when they feel useless.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, I entrust to you the elderly, especially those who are alone or sick. May they know that their lives are precious to God and to the Church. Amen.

Today: Call or visit an elderly person.

Day 3: Courage in the face of the crowd

In 249 a riot broke out in Alexandria, stirred up by a soothsayer. The crowd attacked Metras, then Quinta, then Apollonia. It is hard to stand firm when everyone around us is shouting the opposite. Apollonia did not follow the crowd.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, you did not give in to the anger of the crowd. Give me the courage to remain faithful to Christ when others mock or reject the faith. Amen.

Today: Do not join in a conversation that mocks or harms someone.

Day 4: For those who suffer in their bodies

The rioters broke Apollonia's jaw and knocked out her teeth. That is why people in pain have turned to her for centuries. God is not indifferent to our physical suffering, and he invites us to bring it to him.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, you knew terrible pain in your body. I entrust to you all those who suffer, especially those with toothache or facial pain. Obtain for them relief, healing and peace. Amen.

Today: Offer a small discomfort of the day for someone who is suffering.

Day 5: For dentists and caregivers

Apollonia is the patron saint of dentists. Their work, often feared, relieves a great deal of suffering. Every caregiver can serve Christ through the skill and gentleness of their hands.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, bless dentists, dental assistants, hygienists and all who care for the sick. Give them skill, patience and kindness, and protect them in their work. Amen.

Today: Thank a caregiver, or pray for your own dentist or doctor.

Day 6: For children and the fearful

In some places, little children are presented to Saint Apollonia when their first teeth come in. Many children, and adults too, are afraid of pain and of medical care. Fear is not a sin, but it can be entrusted to God.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, watch over teething babies and over children who are afraid. Calm the fears of all who dread pain or treatment, and give them trust. Amen.

Today: Bless a child or reassure someone who is anxious.

Day 7: Guarding our words

The rioters demanded that Apollonia speak words against Christ. She refused. Our mouths can bless or curse, build up or wound. Apollonia invites us to watch over our words.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, you would not let a single word against Christ pass your lips. Keep my mouth from lies, gossip and harshness, and let it serve to praise God and encourage others. Amen.

Today: Go the whole day without speaking ill of anyone.

Day 8: For persecuted Christians

Apollonia was one of the first victims of a violence that would soon spread with the persecution of Decius. Today, in many countries, Christians are still attacked, driven out or killed because of their faith.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, martyr of Alexandria, I entrust to you the Christians persecuted today, especially in Egypt and the Middle East. Give them strength, and convert the hearts of their persecutors. Amen.

Today: Learn about the situation of a persecuted Christian community and pray for it.

Day 9: Burning with love

Apollonia died in the flames rather than deny Christ. The Church has always seen in her death not despair but a love stronger than fear. The fire that consumed her body is an image of the love that consumed her heart.

Prayer: Saint Apollonia, your love for Christ was stronger than fear and pain. Kindle in me the fire of that same love, so that nothing may separate me from him. Amen.

Today: Spend a few minutes before the Blessed Sacrament or a crucifix.

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you gave Saint Apollonia the strength to remain faithful to you in torture and fire. Through her intercession, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena (name your intention), if it is according to your will. Relieve those who suffer, bless those who care for them, and keep me faithful to you in every trial. Who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

Saint Apollonia, pray for us.

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