

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Balbina of Rome

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: March 31

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IN BRIEF

Saint Balbina of Rome

Christian woman of 2nd-century Rome, honored by the basilica of Santa Balbina on the Aventine.

Feast day	March 31
Born	2nd century, Rome
Died	c. 130 (according to tradition), Rome
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial veneration)
Era	2nd century
Patron saint of	invoked against scrofula and diseases of the neck

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Balbina for the Sick and for Prisoners

Novena to Saint Balbina

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Balbina of Rome

Saint Balbina was a Christian woman of Rome whose name has been attached since antiquity to a basilica on the Aventine Hill and to a cemetery on the Via Ardeatina. A later tradition makes her the daughter of the tribune Quirinus, healed by touching the chains of Pope Saint Alexander and martyred in the 2nd century. The Roman Martyrology commemorates her on March 31.

Who was Saint Balbina?

Balbina is one of those saints of ancient Rome whose name is well attested but whose life largely escapes us. The current Roman Martyrology speaks of her with great restraint: it commemorates "Saint Balbina, whose venerable name the basilica founded on the Aventine bears." It does not call her a martyr and gives no details about her life.

What is told about her comes from a legendary *Passion* of Pope Alexander, written around the 5th or 6th century, and from the medieval martyrologies that repeated it, such as that of Usuard in the 9th century.

Several historians think that Balbina may originally have been a wealthy Roman woman who gave her name, or her property, to a church and a cemetery, and that the devotion of later centuries made her a martyr. This was not unusual in early Christian Rome, where many churches bore the name of their founder or owner.



The basilica of Santa Balbina on the Aventine, Rome.

Key dates

- **2nd century**: The period in which tradition places her life, in Rome.
- **Around 130**: The date of her death according to tradition, during the persecution under Emperor Hadrian.
- **4th century**: A cemetery bearing her name exists between the Appian Way and the Via Ardeatina; Pope Saint Mark is buried there in 336.
- **595**: The title of Saint Balbina is mentioned at a Roman synod under Saint Gregory the Great.
- **9th century**: Usuard records her memory in his martyrology.

The traditional story

According to the *Passion* of Pope Alexander, under Emperor Hadrian, Pope Saint Alexander I was arrested and placed in the custody of a military tribune named Quirinus, who held him prisoner in his own house. The tribune's

daughter, Balbina, suffered from an illness that disfigured her neck, which tradition identified as scrofula. She was healed by kissing the chains of the imprisoned pope.

Deeply moved, Quirinus was converted along with his daughter. They were baptized, then arrested in their turn: Quirinus was put to death, and Balbina, according to the story, was martyred soon afterward. She was buried on the Appian Way, near her father.

This story, which links Balbina with the chains of an imprisoned apostle, probably helped connect her cult with that of the chains of Saint Peter, venerated in Rome in the basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli (Saint Peter in Chains). These elements belong to hagiographic tradition and cannot be verified.

The basilica of Santa Balbina

On the slopes of the Aventine, near the Baths of Caracalla, stands the basilica of Santa Balbina, one of the oldest titular churches of Rome, attested at the end of the 6th century. It was probably built inside a large hall of a late antique Roman house.

The early "titular" churches of Rome, or *tituli*, were the first parish churches of the city. Many grew out of houses where Christians gathered, and they often kept the name of the person who owned or gave the building. This is why historians wonder whether the Balbina of the Aventine was first of all a generous benefactor of the Roman community.

Restored in the 20th century in a spirit of return to its original simplicity, it has a vast single nave, fragments of medieval frescoes, an ancient bishop's chair and the 13th-century carved tomb of a prelate. It is the titular church of a cardinal, and one of the station churches of the Roman Lenten pilgrimage.

Devotion through the centuries

Balbina does not appear in the Hieronymian Martyrology, the oldest great collection of saints, which calls for caution about her martyrdom. Yet her cult has continued in Rome to this day. Her basilica on the Aventine and her statue above Saint Peter's Square keep her name before the eyes of pilgrims.

Why is Saint Balbina invoked against diseases of the neck?

Because of the healing told in her story, Balbina was formerly invoked against scrofula and other diseases of the neck. Scrofula, a tuberculous swelling of the glands of the neck, was a common and feared illness in earlier centuries. Christians who suffered from it turned to the young Roman woman whom tradition said had been cured by touching the chains of a prisoner for Christ.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Balbina in art

- She is shown as a young woman holding a chain, recalling the chains of Pope Alexander or of Saint Peter.
- She sometimes carries a cross or a lily.
- A statue of her stands among the saints crowning Bernini's colonnade in Saint Peter's Square.

What can we learn from Saint Balbina?

Even though her story is little known, Balbina recalls the role of women in the Church of Rome in the first centuries, often as benefactors and protectors of Christian communities. The story of her healing through the chains of a prisoner also expresses a truth of faith: those who suffer for Christ become a source of grace for others. You can pray to her for the sick, for prisoners and for those who visit them.

Where to pray to Saint Balbina

- **Rome**: the basilica of Santa Balbina on the Aventine, near the Baths of Caracalla.
- **Rome**: the basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli, linked by tradition to the story of the chains.
- **Rome**: Saint Peter's Square, where her statue stands on the colonnade.

To pray with her, use the Prayer to Saint Balbina or the Novena to Saint Balbina.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Balbina for the Sick and for Prisoners

Saint Balbina is a Christian woman of ancient Rome, honored by the basilica that bears her name on the Aventine Hill. According to tradition, she was healed of a disease of the neck by kissing the chains of the imprisoned Pope Saint Alexander, and she was invoked for centuries by the sick. This prayer, for the sick, for prisoners and for those who visit them, is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Balbina for the Sick and for Prisoners

Saint Balbina, daughter of Rome,
your name has been honored on the Aventine since the first centuries,
and Christians have long turned to you in their illnesses.

The tradition of the Church tells that you were healed
by the chains of a prisoner who suffered for Christ.
Pray for all who are sick in body,
especially those whose illness is painful or disfiguring,
and those who feel ashamed or alone in their suffering.
May they find care, respect and peace.

Pray also for prisoners,
for those held unjustly and for those who have done wrong,
and for all who visit them and bring them hope.
May no one be beyond the reach of God's mercy.

Help me to see Christ in those who suffer,
and to be generous, like the women of the early Church
who opened their homes and gave their goods to the community.
I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

A short invocation

Saint Balbina, pray for the sick and for prisoners, and obtain for us a heart that is close to all who suffer. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

- On her feast day, March 31, which often falls during Lent or Holy Week.
- For someone suffering from an illness of the neck or throat, or any illness that changes how a person looks.
- For a person in prison, or before visiting someone in prison.
- For volunteers and chaplains who serve the sick and prisoners.
- When visiting Rome, at the basilica of Santa Balbina on the Aventine.

For nine days of prayer, follow the Novena to Saint Balbina, and read the life of Saint Balbina.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Balbina

This novena to Saint Balbina is an original composition by Saintspedia. Little is known for certain about her life: her name is honored by an ancient basilica on the Aventine in Rome, and a later tradition tells of her healing and her martyrdom. This novena draws on both, the solid memory of the Roman Church and the spiritual meaning of the traditional story. To end on her feast day, March 31, begin on March 23. You can also pray it at any time for someone who is sick or in prison.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a few quiet minutes. Read the meditation, pray the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. Finish with the small act suggested, which helps carry the prayer into your day. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

Day 1: A name remembered

We know little about Balbina, but her name has been honored in Rome for more than fourteen centuries. God remembers each person, even those whom history barely notices.

Prayer: Lord, you know each of us by name. Through the prayers of Saint Balbina, help me to trust that my life is precious in your eyes. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who feels forgotten or invisible.

Day 2: Generous women of the early Church

Historians think Balbina may have been a Roman woman who gave her name or her property to a church and a cemetery. The first Christian communities owed much to women who opened their homes and shared their goods.

Prayer: Saint Balbina, teach me generosity, and bless all who support the Church and its works with their time and resources. Amen.

Today: Give a gift of time or money to your parish or a charity.

Day 3: A house that held a prisoner

The tradition tells that the tribune Quirinus held Pope Alexander prisoner in his own house. Into that home, through a prisoner in chains, came the light of Christ.

Prayer: Lord, enter my home as you entered the house of Quirinus. Through the intercession of Saint Balbina, make my family open to your grace. Amen.

Today: Pray together with your household, even briefly.

Day 4: An illness carried in hiding

According to the story, Balbina suffered from a disease that disfigured her neck. Some illnesses weigh not only on the body but on how a person feels seen by others.

Prayer: Saint Balbina, pray for all who suffer from a visible or disfiguring illness, and for those who feel ashamed of their bodies. Lord, give them peace and dignity. Amen.

Today: Look at someone who suffers with kindness, and offer a word of respect or encouragement.

Day 5: Healed by the chains

The tradition tells that Balbina was healed by kissing the chains of the imprisoned pope. Those who suffer for Christ become, for others, a source of grace.

Prayer: Lord, through the prayers of Saint Balbina, heal the sick who call on you, and let my own sufferings, united to yours, bear fruit for others. Amen.

Today: Offer a small difficulty of the day for someone who is ill.

Day 6: A family converted

Moved by his daughter's healing, Quirinus came to believe, and father and daughter were baptized together. One grace received can open a whole family to faith.

Prayer: Saint Balbina, pray for families where some members are far from God. Lord, touch their hearts. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for a family member who does not share your faith.

Day 7: Remembering prisoners

Balbina's story begins in a place of captivity. Christ asked us to visit those in prison, and promised that what we do for them, we do for him.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Balbina, comfort prisoners and their families, and strengthen chaplains and volunteers who visit them. Amen.

Today: Pray for prisoners, or learn about a prison ministry near you.

Day 8: Faithful to the end

The tradition says that Balbina, after her father's death, gave her own life for Christ. Whether or not every detail is historical, the Church of Rome kept her memory as that of a faithful witness.

Prayer: Saint Balbina, obtain for me the grace to remain faithful to Christ in small trials and in great ones. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians who are persecuted for their faith today.

Day 9: A church on the Aventine

The basilica of Santa Balbina still stands on the Aventine, simple and bare, a station church of the Roman Lent. A life given to God leaves a place where others can pray.

Prayer: Saint Balbina, at the end of this novena, I entrust my intention to you. Pray for me, and for all who come to God in their need. Amen.

Today: Visit a church and spend a few minutes in silent prayer.

Closing prayer

Saint Balbina, daughter of the Church of Rome,
your name has been honored since the early centuries,
and the faithful have long asked your help in sickness.
I place in your hands the intention of these nine days.
Pray for the sick, especially those who suffer in hiding,
for prisoners and those who visit them,
and for all families who are seeking God.
Obtain for me a generous and faithful heart.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Read more on the page Saint Balbina, or pray the Prayer to Saint Balbina.

CREDITS

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