BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Bibiana

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 2

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IN BRIEF

Saint Bibiana

Roman virgin and martyr of the 4th century, who died under Emperor Julian according to tradition.

Feast day	December 2
Born	c. 347 (according to tradition), Rome
Died	December 2, 362 or 363, Rome
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	people with epilepsy, people suffering from headaches, people with mental illness, victims of torture

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Bibiana for the Sick and for Families in Trial

Novena to Saint Bibiana

Church of Santa Bibiana, Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Bibiana

Saint Bibiana, also called Viviana or Vivian, is a virgin and martyr of Rome. According to her Passion, she was scourged to death under Emperor Julian, around 362-363, after the martyrdom of her father Flavian and her mother Dafrosa. In the 5th century Pope Simplicius dedicated a church to her on the Esquiline Hill, which keeps her relics. Her feast day is December 2.

Who was Saint Bibiana?

Bibiana is a Roman martyr whose existence is likely, but whose life cannot be traced through any precise historical source. What is certain is the antiquity of her cult: from the second half of the 5th century, a church in Rome was dedicated to her. The present Roman Martyrology is deliberately sober: it commemorates, in Rome, Saint Viviana, martyr, in whose name Pope Simplicius dedicated a church on the Esquiline. The detailed account of her martyrdom comes from a Passion composed around the 6th century, which belongs to edifying literature more than to history. It should therefore be read as a tradition that carries a message, without vouching for every detail.

Key dates in the life of Bibiana

- **c. 347**: Born in Rome into a Christian family, according to tradition.
- **361-363**: Reign of Emperor Julian, called the Apostate, who tries to restore paganism.
- **c. 362**: According to her Passion, her father Flavian, a former prefect of Rome, is exiled and dies; her mother Dafrosa is beheaded.
- **December 2, 362 or 363**: After the death of her sister Demetria, Bibiana dies under the scourge, tied to a pillar.
- **468**: Pope Simplicius dedicates a church in her name on the Esquiline.

- **1624**: Pope Urban VIII has her relics recognized and her church restored.
- **1624-1626**: The young Bernini creates the church's facade and the statue of the saint.

A family under persecution

According to her Passion, Bibiana was born in Rome to Christian parents, Flavian and Dafrosa. Under Julian, who wanted to restore paganism to its place in the Empire, the family was struck. Flavian, who had been prefect of Rome, was accused of having buried martyrs; he was branded, exiled and died far from Rome. Dafrosa and her two daughters, Bibiana and Demetria, were shut up in their house without food; then Dafrosa was beheaded and their property was confiscated.

The account insists on the way the two sisters lived this ordeal: in fasting and prayer, their house became a place of worship. Summoned before the magistrate, they refused to deny Christ. Demetria died in prison. Bibiana was handed over to a woman charged with corrupting her; she resisted every temptation.

Martyrdom at the pillar

Enraged, the prefect had her tied to a pillar and scourged. According to the Passion, she remained motionless, her eyes raised to heaven, until she died under the blows, on a December 2. Her body, left in the street, was taken up two days later by a priest named John, who buried her beside her mother and sister. The place of her burial, which became a small cemetery, soon drew popular devotion. A tradition places the family's house there, transformed into a church.

Devotion and art

In 468, Pope Simplicius dedicated a church to Bibiana on the Esquiline. By the 17th century, the building was in poor condition. In 1624, Pope Urban VIII had the relics of Bibiana, her sister and her mother sought and recognized, and placed them together under the high altar. He entrusted the young Bernini with the new facade, one of his first works of architecture, and a statue of the saint, placed at the far end of the church. A pillar presented as that of her martyrdom is kept near the entrance.

Bibiana is shown as a young girl, often leaning on a pillar and holding the martyr's palm. Popular tradition invokes her against epilepsy and headaches. Her cult spread beyond Rome: in Liège, Jean Del Cour carved busts of the saint inspired by Bernini around 1698, now in the city hall, and the church of Saint-Sulpice in Fougères, in Brittany, keeps a reliquary of Saint Viviana, with relics given by Pius IX in 1850.

What can we learn from Saint Bibiana?

Even if her Passion is late, the figure of Bibiana says something essential: a whole family stays faithful to Christ under persecution, and a young girl, alone, resists fear as well as seduction. Her gaze raised to heaven, as Bernini carved it, sums up her strength. You can pray to her for families in trial, for young people who must stand firm in their faith, and for the sick who suffer in body or mind.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Bibiana and the novena to Saint Bibiana.

Where to pray to Saint Bibiana

- **Church of Santa Bibiana** (Rome, Esquiline): her relics under the high altar, Bernini's statue and the pillar of her martyrdom.

- **Church of Saint-Sulpice in Fougères** (Brittany, France): a reliquary of Saint Viviana with relics given by Pius IX.
- **Liège** (Belgium): the busts of the saint by Jean Del Cour, in the city hall.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Bibiana for the Sick and for Families in Trial

Saint Bibiana, virgin and martyr of Rome, is said to have died under the scourge in the reign of Emperor Julian, after the martyrdom of her parents and sister. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to her families in trial, young people who must stand firm and the sick, especially those who suffer from headaches or epilepsy, for whom tradition invokes her.

Prayer to Saint Bibiana

Saint Bibiana,
young girl of Rome,
you saw your father and mother die for Christ
and your sister fade away in prison,
and you remained faithful.

Tied to the pillar,
you kept your eyes raised to heaven.
Teach me to look toward God
when suffering weighs me down,
and not to give in to fear or to the lure of evil.

Watch over families going through trials,
over young people who must defend their faith,
and over the sick who suffer in body and in mind.
Obtain for them strength, relief and peace.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Bibiana

- On her feast day, December 2, at the beginning of Advent.
- For someone suffering from migraines, epilepsy or mental illness.
- For a family tried by grief or persecution.
- For young people under pressure against their faith or their purity.
- For victims of torture and violence.

A short invocation

> *Saint Bibiana, faithful virgin and courageous martyr,*
> *pray for us and for all who suffer. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Bibiana from November 24 to December 2, and read the life of Saint Bibiana.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Bibiana

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the tradition of Saint Bibiana, virgin and martyr of Rome in the 4th century. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, December 2, begin on November 24. 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 Bibiana, pray for us." The episodes recounted come from her Passion, an ancient account that hands down a tradition rather than verified history.

Day 1: A Christian family

Bibiana grew up in Rome, in the family of Flavian and Dafrosa. There she received the faith. The family is the first school of the Gospel.

Prayer: Lord, bless our families. Make them places where we learn to love you.

Act of the day: Pray as a family, or for a member of your family.

Day 2: A time of trial

Under Emperor Julian, the Christian faith was threatened once again. Bibiana's family was denounced. They had to choose between safety and faithfulness.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be faithful when my faith costs me.

Act of the day: Pray for persecuted Christians.

Day 3: The father in exile

Flavian was accused of having buried martyrs. He was branded, exiled, and died far from his loved ones. He paid with his life for an act of charity toward the dead.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you exiles and those who suffer for having done good.

Act of the day: Pray for the forgotten dead, or visit a cemetery.

Day 4: The martyred mother

Dafrosa, Bibiana's mother, was beheaded. Her daughters were left alone. Tradition sees in her a mother who went before her children in the total gift of self.

Prayer: Lord, bless mothers who give their lives for their children, and comfort orphans.

Act of the day: Help a mother who is alone or tired.

Day 5: A house that became a church

Shut up without food, Bibiana and Demetria made their house a place of fasting and prayer. The ordeal became an offering.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to turn my difficulties into prayer.

Act of the day: Fast from a meal, or a pleasure, and pray instead.

Day 6: The sister who went first

Demetria died in prison. Bibiana lost her last companion. She stood alone before her judges.

Prayer: Lord, be present to those who find themselves alone in grief.

Act of the day: Call someone who is grieving.

Day 7: Resisting seduction

Bibiana was handed over to a woman charged with corrupting her. She gave in neither to promises nor to threats. Her purity was a form of freedom.

Prayer: Lord, keep my heart pure and free in the face of temptation.

Act of the day: Give up what draws you toward evil.

Day 8: Eyes raised to heaven

Tied to a pillar, Bibiana was scourged. Tradition describes her motionless, her gaze turned to heaven, like Christ in his Passion.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, scourged for us, be the strength of those who suffer in their bodies.

Act of the day: Pray for a sick person, especially someone living with chronic pain.

Day 9: A church for Bibiana

Her body was taken up by a priest and buried near her family. A century later, Pope Simplicius dedicated a church in her name. Since then, people have prayed there near her relics.

Prayer: Lord, may the witness of the martyrs strengthen my faith. Through the intercession of Saint Bibiana, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass in thanksgiving for the martyrs.

Closing prayer

Saint Bibiana,
virgin and martyr of Rome,
you held firm when everything collapsed around you,
and kept your eyes fixed on Christ.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Bring relief to those who suffer
and keep our families in the faith.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Church of Santa Bibiana, Rome

The church of Santa Bibiana stands in Rome, on the Esquiline Hill, not far from Termini station. Dedicated by Pope Simplicius in the 5th century, it keeps beneath its high altar the relics of Saint Bibiana, her sister Demetria and their mother Dafrosa. Restored in the 17th century, it was also one of Bernini's first projects.

A 5th-century church

According to tradition, the church stands on the site of the house of Bibiana's family, or near the place where the priest John buried the three martyrs. In 468, Pope Simplicius dedicated a church there in the saint's name; archaeology confirms the existence of a basilica of Saint Bibiana on this spot in late antiquity. The Roman Martyrology itself recalls this act of Pope Simplicius when it commemorates the saint.

By the early 17th century, the building was falling into ruin. In 1624, Pope Urban VIII had the relics of Bibiana, Demetria and Dafrosa recognized, and undertook a complete restoration. He entrusted it to the young Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who designed the new facade, one of his first works of architecture, and carved the statue of the saint.

What to see in the church

At the far end of the apse, Bernini's marble statue shows Bibiana leaning on a pillar, holding the palm of martyrdom, her face raised to heaven. Beneath the high altar, an ancient Roman alabaster basin holds the relics of the three saints. Near the entrance, a pillar protected by a grille is presented as the one to which Bibiana was tied to be scourged. The walls of the nave are decorated with 17th-century frescoes telling her life, notably by Pietro da Cortona.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Bibiana. Before her relics, entrust to her families in trial, young people and the sick, then say the prayer to Saint Bibiana. December 2, her feast day, is a special time to visit. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Bibiana

- **Church of Saint-Sulpice in Fougères** (Brittany, France): a reliquary of Saint Viviana, with relics given by Pius IX in 1850.
- **Liège City Hall** (Belgium): the busts of the saint carved by Jean Del Cour around 1698.

Practical information

The church is in the Esquiline district, a few minutes' walk from Termini station, alongside the railway tracks. It is a place of worship: modest dress and silence are requested. Opening hours and Mass times may vary: check with the parish before your visit.

Credits and sources

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