

BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Pope Saint Callistus I

*Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage*

Feast day: October 14

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IN BRIEF

## Pope Saint Callistus I

*Former slave who became bishop of Rome from 217 to 222, defender of forgiveness for sinners, honored as a martyr.*

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| **Feast day** | October 14 |
| **Born** | 2nd century, Rome, Italy (according to the Liber Pontificalis) |
| **Died** | 222, Rome, Italy |
| **Canonized** | Immemorial cult |
| **Era** | 3rd century |

## In this booklet


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Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Relics of Saint Callistus in Rome

Credits and sources



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LIFE

# Pope Saint Callistus I

Pope Saint Callistus I is one of the most appealing bishops of Rome of the early centuries. A former slave once condemned to the mines of Sardinia, he became deacon to Pope Zephyrinus, organized the great Christian cemetery on the Appian Way that still bears his name, then led the Church of Rome from 217 to 222. Opposed by some rigorists, he defended the principle that the Church can forgive repentant sinners. He died in 222, is honored as a martyr, and is celebrated on October 14.

## Who was Saint Callistus?

We know Callistus (also spelled Calixtus or Callixtus) mainly through two very different sources. The first is hostile: a treatise attributed to his opponent Hippolytus of Rome, called the *Refutation of All Heresies* or *Philosophumena*, which tells of his youth without kindness. The second is the tradition of the Roman Church, which has always counted him among its bishops and martyrs.

The *Liber Pontificalis*, compiled much later, says he was a Roman, the son of a certain Domitius. Historians read these texts with caution, but they agree on the essentials: Callistus was a man who came from very low beginnings and knew failure and prison before being called to serve the Church.

According to Hippolytus, Callistus was first the slave of a Christian named Carpophorus, a member of the imperial household, who entrusted him with a bank. The business failed, the deposits were lost, and Callistus tried to flee. Recaptured, then caught up in a brawl with Jews on a Sabbath, he was condemned to the mines of Sardinia, one of the harshest punishments in the empire. He was freed around 190, with other confessors of the faith, thanks to an appeal to the emperor Commodus.

## Key dates in the life of Saint Callistus

- **Second half of the 2nd century**: Born, probably in Rome; a slave in the household of Carpophorus.
- **Around 186-189**: Condemned to the mines of Sardinia.
- **Around 190**: Freed with other deported Christians, he then lives at Antium (Anzio) on an allowance from Bishop Victor.
- **Around 199**: The new pope, Zephyrinus, calls him back to Rome and makes him his deacon.
- **Early 3rd century**: Put in charge of the cemetery on the Appian Way, the future Catacomb of Saint Callistus.
- **217**: Elected bishop of Rome on the death of Zephyrinus.
- **Around 217-222**: Conflict with Hippolytus, who breaks away from him.
- **222**: Dies in Rome, perhaps during a riot; buried in the cemetery of Calepodius on the Via Aurelia.
- **9th century**: His relics are moved to the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

## The deacon of the catacombs

Called back to Rome by Zephyrinus, Callistus became his closest collaborator. The pope entrusted him with running a cemetery along the Appian Way. Until then, the Christians of Rome were often buried on private land lent by wealthy families. With Callistus, the community had a burial ground of its own, where poor and rich lay side by side.

Galleries were dug on several levels, and a chamber was prepared where the bishops of Rome of the 3rd century would be laid to rest: the Crypt of the Popes.

This cemetery is still called the Catacomb of Saint Callistus. Paradoxically, Callistus himself is not buried there: he was laid to rest elsewhere, on the Via Aurelia. But his name remains tied to this place, which for centuries kept the memory of the Roman martyrs and today welcomes pilgrims from all over the world.

## A pope of mercy

Elected bishop of Rome in 217, Callistus faced two great debates. The first concerned how to speak of the Trinity: he condemned Sabellius, who confused the Father and the Son, but Hippolytus accused him of not doing so clearly enough.

The second, more pastoral, concerned forgiveness. Callistus admitted to penance and reconciliation Christians guilty of serious sins, notably in married life, and refused to exclude forever from the Church those who repented. He also recognized the validity of certain marriages between freeborn women and men of servile status, which Roman law did not accept.

For Hippolytus and his followers, these decisions were laxity. They broke away from Callistus, and Hippolytus had himself recognized as bishop by a small group: he is often considered the first antipope. Callistus is said to have replied by citing the parable of the wheat and the weeds, and Noah's ark, which held both clean and unclean animals. For him, the Church is not a community of the perfect but of sinners whom God wants to save.

History, in fact, reconciled the two men. Hippolytus, later exiled to Sardinia with Pope Pontian, died there, reconciled with the Church according to tradition, and is venerated as a saint.



*The church of San Callisto in Trastevere, where tradition places the martyrdom of Saint Callistus.*

## Martyrdom and memory

The circumstances of his death in 222 remain uncertain. The reign of Emperor Severus Alexander saw no general persecution, but a popular riot against the Christians is possible. A late *Passion* tells that he was thrown into a well in Trastevere; this account belongs to legend, but the small church of San Callisto, next to Santa Maria in Trastevere, keeps a well that tradition links to his martyrdom.

The oldest Roman calendars, including the 4th-century *Depositio Martyrum*, record his name on October 14, at the cemetery of Calepodius on the Via Aurelia. In the 9th century his relics were moved to the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, which the *Liber Pontificalis* links to a foundation by Callistus himself.

## Who prays to Saint Callistus, and why?

Saint Callistus reminds us that God can make a shepherd out of a fallen man. Slave, bankrupt, convict, he knew shame before serving the Church, and perhaps that is why he understood sinners so well. He is a witness to mercy, to pastoral patience and to the care owed to the dead, whom he wanted to bury with dignity, whatever their station in life.

He is invoked by those who feel trapped by their past, for prisoners, and for the departed. To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Callistus I or follow the novena to Saint Callistus I, from October 5 to 13, the eve of his feast.

## Symbols and how to recognize Saint Callistus in art

- **Papal vestments**: in the series of papal portraits, he is shown as a pontiff, in imaginary likenesses.
- **A well**: a reminder of the legend of his martyrdom in Trastevere.
- **A place among the saints**: he appears in the 12th-century apse mosaic of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

## Where to pray to Saint Callistus

- **Rome, Trastevere**: the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, which holds his relics.
- **Rome, Trastevere**: the nearby church of San Callisto, linked by tradition to his martyrdom.
- **Rome, Appian Way**: the Catacomb of Saint Callistus and its Crypt of the Popes.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Callistus I for Mercy

No prayer composed by Saint Callistus I has come down to us, and none of his writings has survived. This page therefore offers a word from the Gospel that sheds light on the way he led the Church, then an original prayer inspired by his life.

## The parable of the wheat and the weeds

According to his opponent Hippolytus, Callistus justified his mercy toward repentant sinners with the parable of the wheat and the weeds: it is not for human beings to uproot before the time what God alone will judge. Here are the words of the master in the parable, in the Douay-Rheims translation (public domain):

> *"Suffer both to grow until the harvest, and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers: Gather up first the cockle, and bind it into bundles to burn, but the wheat gather ye into my barn."*

Source: Gospel of Saint Matthew 13:30. The argument is reported, critically, in the *Refutation of All Heresies* (book IX, 12), attributed to Hippolytus of Rome.



*Saint Callistus I, pope and martyr.*

## Prayer to Saint Callistus I for mercy

Saint Callistus, you knew slavery, failure and prison before being called to serve the Church: pray for all who feel imprisoned by their past.

You refused to close the door on repentant sinners: obtain for me the grace to believe in God's forgiveness, for myself and for others. Keep me from judging too quickly, and teach me the patience of the sower.

You watched over the tombs of the Christians of Rome: I entrust to you my departed, and all who have died with no one to pray for them. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Faithful shepherd even to martyrdom, help the Church of today to be both firm in faith and generous in mercy. Amen.

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

## When to pray this prayer

Saint Callistus is celebrated on October 14, the day on which the oldest calendars of the Church of Rome remembered him. You can pray to him to receive the grace of forgiveness, before going to confession, for people in prison or for the departed. His feast falls a few weeks before All Souls' Day, a fitting time to remember the dead he cared for.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Callistus I, and discover the life of Saint Callistus.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Callistus I

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Callistus I as reported by the ancient sources. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on October 5; it ends on October 13. It can also be prayed at any time of the year, for someone who struggles to believe they can be forgiven.

## How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The suggested act helps you carry the prayer into your day. This novena is especially suited to praying for prisoners, for the departed, and for anyone weighed down by shame.



*Saint Callistus I, church window or statue.*

## Day 1: From very low beginnings

Callistus was born a slave. He had neither a famous name nor a fortune. God does not choose his servants according to the rank the world gives them, and he can raise up anyone to serve his people.

**Prayer:** Lord, you look upon the lowly. Teach me never to look down on anyone because of their station in life.

**Today:** Greet with real attention someone you usually overlook.

## Day 2: Failure

The bank his master had entrusted to him failed, and Callistus ran away. His life began with failure, but he would not remain its prisoner. Many of us carry the memory of a mistake that still makes us blush. Callistus shows that such a memory does not have to define us: God can write a new chapter.

**Prayer:** God of mercy, I give you my failures. Make them a path toward you rather than a weight that crushes me.

**Today:** Name before God a past failure and entrust it to him.

## Day 3: The mines of Sardinia

Condemned to the mines, Callistus shared the lot of Christians deported for their faith. In the darkness, he discovered the brotherhood of the confessors, those who suffered for Christ without denying him.

**Prayer:** Lord, remember those in prison or forced labor, and all Christians persecuted today.

**Today:** Pray for prisoners, or support a prison ministry.

## Day 4: Freedom

Around 190 Callistus was freed with the other deportees. He did not return to Rome as a hero, but lived quietly at Antium, waiting. God was preparing him in silence for what was to come.

**Prayer:** Lord, give me patience in times of waiting, when nothing seems to move forward.

**Today:** Accept without complaint a delay or a wait during the day.

## Day 5: The call of Zephyrinus

Pope Zephyrinus called Callistus back and trusted him. That trust, given to a man with a heavy past, changed his life. Zephyrinus saw in him not only what he had done but what he could become, and Callistus repaid that confidence with years of faithful service.

**Prayer:** Thank you, Lord, for those who have trusted me. Teach me to give others a second chance as well.

**Today:** Trust someone who has disappointed you, in some small matter.

## Day 6: Caring for the dead

As deacon, Callistus organized the cemetery on the Appian Way, where poor and rich rested together awaiting the resurrection. No one was to be buried without dignity.

**Prayer:** Lord, welcome our departed into your light, especially those no one mourns.

**Today:** Pray for a forgotten soul, or visit a grave and say a prayer there.




*The Crypt of the Popes, in the Catacomb of Saint Callistus.*

## Day 7: Forgiveness granted

As bishop of Rome, Callistus welcomed to penance sinners whom others wanted to exclude forever. He believed that God's mercy is greater than our sins. For him the Church was like Noah's ark, where there was room for all who sought shelter, and not a club reserved for the perfect.

**Prayer:** Father, you do not desire the death of the sinner, but that he turn back and live: grant me to receive your forgiveness.

**Today:** Prepare for confession or make an examination of conscience.

## Day 8: Bearing opposition

Callistus was harshly criticized by Hippolytus and his followers. He did not give way on what mattered, and history would eventually reconcile the two sides. Today Callistus and Hippolytus are both venerated as saints, a sign that

God can heal even the deepest divisions among believers.

**Prayer:** Lord, keep me from bitterness in the face of criticism, and make me a peacemaker in the Church.

**Today:** Pray for someone with whom you disagree.

## Day 9: Faithful to the end

In 222 Callistus died in Rome, and he has been honored ever since as a martyr. The shepherd gave his life for the flock he had served. The former slave, once lost and ashamed, finished his course as a witness to Christ.

**Prayer:** Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Callistus, grant me to be faithful to the end. Amen.

**Today:** Pray for the pope and for the bishops of the whole Church.

## Closing prayer

Saint Callistus, you were lifted up by God's mercy and offered it in turn: I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for those who are ashamed of their past, for prisoners and for the departed. Obtain for us a generous heart and a solid faith, so that we may never despair of God's forgiveness nor refuse it to others. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Callistus I and the prayer to Saint Callistus I.

PILGRIMAGE

# Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, Relics of Saint Callistus in Rome

The Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, on the right bank of the Tiber in Rome, is one of the oldest churches in the city dedicated to the Virgin. It houses the relics of Saint Callistus I, pope from 217 to 222, to whom tradition attributes the founding of the first Christian place of worship on this spot.

## A foundation attributed to Saint Callistus

The *Liber Pontificalis* reports that Callistus established a meeting place for Christians in the Trastevere district, then populated by craftsmen, sailors and foreigners. In the 4th century, Pope Julius I had a basilica built there. The present building was largely rebuilt in the 12th century under Pope Innocent II, with its Romanesque bell tower and its mosaic-decorated facade.



*The Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere and its piazza, in Rome.*

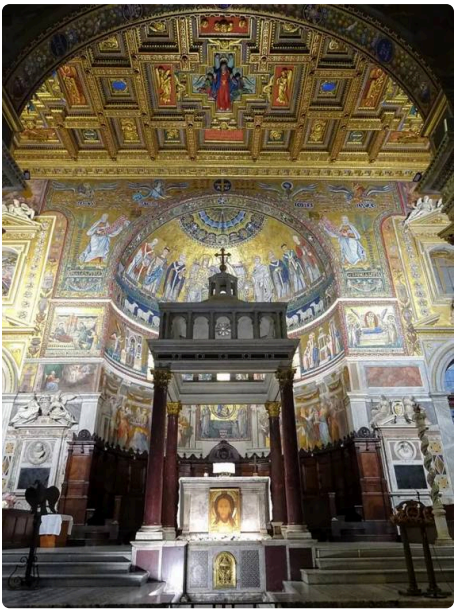
## The relics of Saint Callistus

After his death, Callistus was buried in the Cemetery of Calepodius, on the Via Aurelia. In the 9th century, his relics were transferred to the basilica along with those of other Roman saints and placed beneath the high altar. In the great apse mosaic, made in the 12th century, Saint Callistus appears among the saints surrounding Christ and the crowned Virgin. Lower down, the mosaics by Pietro Cavallini, from the late 13th century, tell the life of Mary.

## Praying at Santa Maria in Trastevere

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Callistus. On site, a time of silence before the high altar is a good moment to entrust an intention, for example for someone who needs forgiveness or a second chance. The prayer to

Saint Callistus I can accompany this moment. In the evening, the Community of Sant'Egidio, linked to the basilica, often celebrates a prayer there that is open to all. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



*The nave and apse of Santa Maria in Trastevere.*

## Other places associated with Saint Callistus

- **Church of San Callisto**, a few steps from the basilica: tradition places here the well into which Callistus is said to have been thrown.
- **Catacomb of Saint Callixtus**, on the ancient Appian Way: the cemetery he administered as a deacon, with the Crypt of the Popes.
- **Catacomb of Calepodius**, on the Via Aurelia: the site of his first burial, which is not open to regular visits.

## Practical information

The basilica stands on Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere, in the heart of the neighborhood, reachable on foot from the historic center or by tram. Visits are suspended during services, and proper dress is required. The Catacomb of Saint Callixtus is visited with a guide. Check the times of Masses and visits before you come, especially around October 14, the feast of Saint Callistus.

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