

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Cecilia, Virgin and Martyr of Rome

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: November 22

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IN BRIEF

Saint Cecilia, Virgin and Martyr of Rome

Roman virgin and martyr of the early centuries, named in the Roman Canon, patron saint of musicians.

Feast day	November 22
Born	2nd or 3rd century, Rome
Died	2nd or 3rd century, Rome
Canonized	pre-congregation saint (immemorial cult)
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	musicians, singers, sacred music

In this booklet

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Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere in Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Cecilia, Virgin and Martyr of Rome

Saint Cecilia is a virgin and martyr of Rome from the first centuries of the Church, one of the most venerated women saints of Christian antiquity. Her name appears in the Roman Canon, the First Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass, alongside Agnes, Lucy and Agatha. Her life is known mainly through a later account mixed with legend, but her cult is attested in Rome from ancient times. Patron saint of musicians, she is celebrated on November 22.

Who was Saint Cecilia?

What we know for certain about Cecilia is slight: a Christian woman of Rome who died for her faith and whose memory the Church of the city kept with great devotion. A church bearing her name existed in Trastevere by the fifth century, and her tomb was venerated in the Catacomb of Callixtus on the Appian Way, right next to the crypt of the third-century popes. The date of her martyrdom is unknown: ancient authors hesitate between the late second and the third century.

The account of her life, the *Passion of Saint Cecilia*, was written toward the end of the fifth century. It is an edifying text rather than a historical document, yet it has shaped all devotion to the saint. It tells the story of a young Christian noblewoman, consecrated to God in her heart and married against her will to a young pagan named Valerian.

Key dates in the life of Saint Cecilia

- **2nd or 3rd century**: Martyred in Rome, according to tradition.
- **Late 5th century**: The *Passion of Saint Cecilia* is written.

- **5th century**: A church is dedicated to her in Trastevere.
- **c. 821**: Pope Paschal I finds her body in the Catacomb of Callixtus and moves it to Trastevere.
- **1585**: A congregation of musicians under her patronage is founded in Rome, the origin of today's National Academy of Saint Cecilia.
- **1599**: During building work, Cardinal Paolo Emilio Sfondrati opens her tomb; the body is described as intact.
- **1600**: Stefano Maderno carves the statue of the saint lying on her side.

The Passion of Saint Cecilia

According to this account, on her wedding night Cecilia told Valerian that an angel watched over her and asked him to respect her virginity. Valerian asked to see the angel. Cecilia sent him along the Appian Way to find Bishop Urban, who instructed and baptized him. When he returned, Valerian saw the angel, who placed crowns of roses and lilies on their heads. His brother Tiburtius was converted in turn.

The two brothers buried the martyrs, which led to their arrest: they were executed, along with an officer named Maximus, who had been converted by their courage. Cecilia, accused in her turn, was condemned to be suffocated in the bathhouse of her home, heated to the extreme. She came out unharmed. The executioner then struck her neck three times without managing to behead her; she lived three more days, went on encouraging the faithful and left her house to the Church. Tradition sees this house as the origin of the church in Trastevere.

Why is Saint Cecilia the patron saint of musicians?

The link between Cecilia and music comes from a sentence in her *Passion*, taken up in an antiphon of the Divine Office: "While the instruments played, Cecilia sang in her heart to the Lord alone." The text describes her wedding

feast: the music of the celebration rings out while the young woman prays within. Over the centuries the image was reversed, and Cecilia came to be shown playing the organ, the viol or the lute herself.

From the late Middle Ages, musicians and confraternities placed themselves under her protection. Raphael, Guido Reni, Poussin and Carlo Dolci painted her surrounded by instruments; Purcell, Handel and Gounod composed in her honor, and in the English-speaking world odes for Saint Cecilia's Day became a tradition. Today many choirs, music schools and musical societies still bear her name and celebrate her feast in November. She is the patron of musicians, singers and sacred music.

The tomb in Trastevere

In the ninth century, Pope Paschal I, who had searched in vain for Cecilia's body, reported finding it in the Catacomb of Callixtus after a vision. He moved it to the church in Trastevere, which he had rebuilt and decorated with a mosaic in which he himself appears, presented to Christ by the saint. In 1599, during building work, the coffin was opened: the body, it is said, appeared intact, lying on its side. The young sculptor Stefano Maderno made from it a white marble statue, placed beneath the altar, which shows the saint with her head turned away and her neck marked by the sword.



Saint Cecilia by Stefano Maderno (1600), Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere.

What can we learn from her holiness?

Saint Cecilia is a witness to an inner faith that holds firm amid the noise of the world. The legend shows her faithful to God in the secret of her heart, and able to draw others to Christ through her gentleness and conviction. For musicians, she is a reminder that the most beautiful song is the one that rises from the heart to God.

To pray with her, you can use the prayer to Saint Cecilia, or follow the novena to Saint Cecilia from November 13 to 21, so that it ends on the eve of her feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Cecilia in art

- **The organ**: often a small portable organ, the most common sign of her patronage of music.

- **Other instruments**: viol, lute or harp, in Renaissance and Baroque painting.
- **A crown of roses and lilies**: recalling the crowns brought by the angel in her *Passion*.
- **Angels**: listening to her or singing with her.
- **The martyr's palm and the sword**: signs of her martyrdom and the wounds on her neck.

Where to pray to Saint Cecilia

- **Rome**: the Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, which holds her tomb.
- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Callixtus on the Appian Way, with the crypt of her first burial.
- **Albi** (France): the Cathedral of Sainte-Cécile, an immense brick building of southern French Gothic.
- **Bologna** (Italy): the Pinacoteca Nazionale, where Raphael's *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia* can be seen.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Cecilia, Patron Saint of Musicians

No prayer written by Saint Cecilia has come down to us. But a very old Latin antiphon, taken from the account of her *Passion* and sung in the office of her feast, sums up who she is: it is the source of her patronage of musicians. This page gives the text and its translation, followed by an original prayer to Saint Cecilia.

The antiphon Cantantibus organis

This liturgical text, drawn from the *Passion of Saint Cecilia* (late fifth century), is in the public domain. Translated from the Latin by Saintspedia.

> *Cantantibus organis, Caecilia virgo in corde suo soli Domino decantabat, dicens: Fiat, Domine, cor meum et corpus meum immaculatum, ut non confundar.*
>
> *While the instruments played, the virgin Cecilia sang in her heart to the Lord alone, saying: Lord, let my heart and my body remain spotless, that I may not be put to shame.*

Source: antiphon of the office of Saint Cecilia (November 22), from the *Passion of Saint Cecilia*. The last sentence echoes Psalm 118 (119), verse 80.

The Latin word *organa* here means the musical instruments of the wedding feast, not a church organ. Cecilia does not play: she prays in silence in the midst of the music. Tradition has nonetheless made her the patron of all who sing and play for God.

Prayer to Saint Cecilia for musicians and singers

Saint Cecilia, you who sang to God in the secret of your heart amid the noise of the feast, teach me to keep an inner space for prayer in the middle of my busy days.

You who led Valerian and Tiburtius to Christ through your gentleness and conviction, help me to bear witness to my faith with tact and courage.

I entrust to you musicians, singers, organists and choirs, especially those who serve the liturgy. May their art lift hearts to God, and may they find in music a path of peace and beauty.

I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). You who remained faithful even to martyrdom, obtain for me a pure heart and a life that is a song of praise. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Cecilia's feast is on November 22. On that day, or the nearest Sunday, many choirs, bands and music schools celebrate her with a Mass or a concert. You can also pray to her before a rehearsal, a performance, an audition or a music exam. For a longer time of prayer, you can follow the novena to Saint Cecilia, and read more about the life of Saint Cecilia.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Cecilia

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition about Saint Cecilia and by the antiphon *Cantantibus organis*. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast on November 22, begin on November 13; it ends on November 21. It is meant for musicians and singers, but also for anyone who wants to keep a heart turned toward God amid the noise of daily life.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. If you are a musician, you can sing or play a short piece as an offering. The small act suggested for each day carries the prayer into daily life. A choir or a music group can also pray this novena together before rehearsals.

Day 1: Singing in the heart

Amid the music of the wedding feast, Cecilia prayed in silence. The truest prayer is often born deep in the heart, without a sound. No noise around us, however loud, can prevent us from turning inwardly to God.

Prayer: Lord, create in me a space of silence where I can speak to you and listen to you.

Today: Take five minutes of complete silence at a noisy moment of the day.

Day 2: An undivided heart

"Let my heart and my body remain spotless." Cecilia wanted to belong to God entirely. Purity of heart is the unity of the whole person turned toward God, without double life or hidden corner.

Prayer: Lord, unite my heart. Free me from whatever divides me and draws me away from you.

Today: Give up, for the day, a habit that scatters your attention.

Day 3: Daring to speak of our faith

On her wedding night, Cecilia dared to tell Valerian what she carried within her. Faith is also shared through trust and words. Speaking of God to those closest to us is often the hardest and the most necessary.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the right words to speak of you to those I love.

Today: Share with someone close to you what nourishes your faith.

Day 4: The guardian angel

The legend tells that an angel watched over Cecilia. Christian tradition believes that God entrusts each of us to the care of an angel. We are never alone on the road. The angel did not take away Cecilia's trials, but he kept her company in them and pointed her toward God.

Prayer: My guardian angel, watch over me and lead me on the way of God.

Today: Pray to your guardian angel and to the guardian angel of someone in difficulty.

Day 5: Leading others to Christ

Valerian, then Tiburtius, then the officer Maximus: around Cecilia, faith passed from one person to the next. Holiness is contagious, and a single faithful life can light many others.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those who do not yet know you. Make me a sign of your love for them.

Today: Invite someone to Mass, a concert of sacred music or a time of prayer.

Day 6: Music, a path to God

For centuries, musicians have called on Cecilia. The beauty of music can open the heart to God and carry the prayer of a whole congregation. Every choir, every organist, every cantor serves this mystery.

Prayer: Lord, bless musicians, singers and organists. May their art give you glory and comfort those who listen.

Today: Listen attentively to a piece of sacred music.

Day 7: Standing firm in trial

Condemned, Cecilia did not deny her faith. The account of her martyrdom says she came out of the ordeal of heat unharmed. God gives strength when it is needed, not before. Whatever part legend has played in the story, the heart of it is true: Cecilia preferred to lose her life rather than lose Christ, and countless Christians since have drawn courage from her example.

Prayer: Lord, when trials come, give me the faithfulness of Saint Cecilia.

Today: Pray for Christians who are persecuted today.

Day 8: Giving her house

According to tradition, the dying Cecilia left her house to the Church so that it might become a place of prayer. What we own can serve the community. Generosity turns our goods into blessings for others. Sixteen centuries later, people still pray in the church that tradition says grew from her home.

Prayer: Lord, teach me generosity. May my home be open and welcoming.

Today: Welcome someone into your home, or offer a service to your parish.

Day 9: A life that becomes praise

Cecilia left neither writings nor songs, yet her life became a hymn. Every life given to God is praise. Long after her death, her witness still makes music rise toward heaven.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Cecilia, make my life a song of praise to your glory. Amen.

Today: Sing or listen to the *Magnificat*.

Closing prayer

Saint Cecilia, virgin and martyr, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Keep my heart turned toward God amid the noise of the world, and protect musicians and all who serve the beauty of the liturgy. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Cecilia and pray the antiphon *Cantantibus organis*.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere in Rome

The Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, in Rome, stands according to tradition on the site of the saint's house. It has housed her tomb since the 9th century, along with the famous statue by Stefano Maderno. It is the chief place of pilgrimage dedicated to Saint Cecilia, in a working-class neighborhood on the right bank of the Tiber.

A church on Cecilia's house

A titulus, that is, a parish church of Rome, bearing Cecilia's name is attested in Trastevere as early as the late 5th century. Tradition sees in it the house that the saint bequeathed to the Church. Excavations under the church have uncovered Roman buildings, including a house and craft workshops, which can be visited in the underground areas. The present church was rebuilt in the 9th century by Pope Paschal I, then transformed in the Baroque period.



The Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, seen from the entrance courtyard.

The mosaic and Maderno's statue

The apse is adorned with a 9th-century mosaic: Christ blesses, surrounded by saints, among them Cecilia, who rests her hand on the shoulder of Pope Paschal I, recognizable by his square halo, a sign that he was still alive when the work was made. Beneath the high altar, topped by a Gothic ciborium by Arnolfo di Cambio, lies Stefano Maderno's marble statue (1600). It shows the saint lying on her side, her face turned away, just as her body was said to have been seen when the tomb was opened in 1599. In the neighboring convent, a fresco of the Last Judgment by Pietro Cavallini, from the late 13th century, is one of the masterpieces of medieval Roman painting.



The high altar of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere and the statue of the saint.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Cecilia

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Cecilia. On site, a time of silence before Maderno's statue is a good moment to entrust an intention, especially for musicians and for those seeking inner peace. The prayer to Saint Cecilia and the antiphon "Cantantibus organis" can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places associated with Saint Cecilia

- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Callixtus, on the Appian Way, where the crypt of her first burial is found, next to the Crypt of the Popes; a copy of Maderno's statue has been placed there.
- **Albi** (Tarn): the Cathedral of Sainte-Cécile, a masterpiece of southern French brick Gothic, with its famous painted Last Judgment.

- **Bologna**: the Pinacoteca Nazionale, which holds Raphael's *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*.

Practical information

The basilica is in the Trastevere district, near the Tiber, and can be reached on foot or by tram from central Rome. A community of Benedictine nuns lives in the adjoining convent. Access to the underground excavations and to Cavallini's fresco follows its own schedule; ask on site before your visit. On November 22, the saint's feast is celebrated there with solemnity.

Credits and sources

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