

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Celestine I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: July 27

IN BRIEF

Saint Celestine I

Pope from 422 to 432 who had Nestorius condemned and defended the title of Mary, Mother of God.

Feast day	July 27, April 6
Born	Rome
Died	432, Rome
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Celestine I for Faithfulness to the Faith

Novena to Saint Celestine I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Celestine I

Saint Celestine I was Bishop of Rome from 422 to 432, at a time when the Western Roman Empire was faltering under barbarian invasions and the Church was debating decisive questions about Christ and about grace. A friend of Saint Augustine, he had Nestorius condemned, sent his legates to the Council of Ephesus and took part in the beginnings of the mission to Ireland. The Roman Martyrology commemorates him on July 27, the day of his death and burial in the Catacomb of Priscilla; the former Roman calendar celebrated him on April 6.

Who was Saint Celestine I?

Celestine was born in Rome, on an unknown date. All we know is that his father was named Priscus. One tradition says he spent some time in Milan with Saint Ambrose, but this is not certain. The first sure trace of him appears in 416, when a papal document mentions him as "Celestine the deacon." Two years later, Saint Augustine wrote him a very respectful letter, a sign of the esteem he already enjoyed among the Roman clergy.

When Pope Boniface I died in 422, Celestine was elected without opposition, although the previous election had been contested. Augustine wrote to him again shortly afterward to ask for his help in an African case. The two men seem to have been bound by a lasting friendship.

Key dates

- **416**: First mention of Celestine, then a deacon of the Church of Rome.
- **418**: Saint Augustine writes to Celestine.
- **September 422**: Elected Bishop of Rome.

- **428**: Letters to the bishops of southern Gaul on discipline and the choice of bishops.
- **429**: Supports the mission of Saint Germanus of Auxerre and Saint Lupus of Troyes to Britain against Pelagianism.
- **August 430**: A Roman synod condemns the teaching of Nestorius.
- **431**: Sends legates to the Council of Ephesus; consecrates Palladius as bishop for the Christians of Ireland.
- **432**: Dies in Rome, traditionally on July 27; buried in the Catacomb of Priscilla.
- **820**: His body is moved to the Basilica of Santa Prassede in Rome.

A pope who guarded discipline

Celestine was an energetic bishop, attached to the ancient rules of the Church. He wrote to the bishops of Illyricum asking them to remain united with the Bishop of Thessalonica, his representative in the region. He asked the bishops of Vienne and Narbonne to respect the canons and never to refuse reconciliation to a dying person who sincerely asked for it. He reminded the bishops of Apulia and Calabria that a layman should not be raised to the episcopate simply under popular pressure: the people must be taught, not followed.

In 428 he rebuked certain clergy in Gaul for adopting a special dress in the manner of monks. In his view, the clergy should stand out from the people by their learning, their conduct and the purity of their hearts, not by their clothing. One of his letters also contains one of the oldest known mentions of the bishop's crosier.

In Rome he acted firmly against the Novatianists, who refused forgiveness to Christians who had lapsed during the persecutions. The historian Socrates Scholasticus reports that he took their churches from them. With the support

of Empress Galla Placidia, regent for her son Valentinian III, he also had Caelestius, the chief disciple of Pelagius, expelled from Italy.

Against Nestorius: Mary, Mother of God

The last years of his pontificate were dominated by the Nestorius affair. Nestorius, who became Bishop of Constantinople in 428, refused to give Mary the title "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*) and would call her only "Mother of Christ." Celestine asked Cyril of Alexandria to investigate. On the basis of Cyril's report, he gathered a synod in Rome in August 430, condemned the teaching of Nestorius and gave him ten days to recant, entrusting Cyril with carrying out the sentence.

Emperor Theodosius II then called a council at Ephesus, which opened in June 431. Celestine sent three legates, the bishops Arcadius and Projectus and the priest Philip, while reserving the final judgment to himself. The council confirmed the condemnation of Nestorius and proclaimed Mary the Mother of God. This title, defended with Celestine's support, has been at the heart of the Church's faith ever since.



The Council of Ephesus, held in 431.

Augustine, Gaul and Ireland

After Augustine's death in 430, monks in Provence challenged his teaching on grace. Celestine then wrote to the bishops of Gaul to defend the memory and doctrine of his friend, and he reproached them for their silence in the face of novelties. The "Chapters of Celestine" on grace, long attached to this letter, are now attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine.

His name is also linked to the beginnings of Irish Christianity. In 431 he consecrated his deacon Palladius as bishop for the Christians of Ireland. Tradition connects the departure of Saint Patrick for the island with the end of his pontificate, but historians remain cautious about this link. Celestine also restored the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, damaged in the sack of Rome in 410, and it was during his pontificate that the Basilica of Santa Sabina was built on the Aventine.

Why pray to Saint Celestine I?

Celestine has no traditional patronage, and he left neither a spiritual work nor stories of miracles. His holiness is that of a faithful shepherd who watched over the faith handed down and the unity of the Church in troubled times. He was firm on doctrine while defending the forgiveness offered to repentant sinners. Christians of the East, who venerate him for his role against Nestorius, celebrate him on April 8. He can be prayed to for bishops, for faithfulness to the faith, for devotion to Mary, Mother of God, and for those who must speak out instead of keeping silent.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Celestine I in art

Images of Celestine are rare and were all made long after his time. He is usually shown as a pope, with the tiara and papal vestments, sometimes holding a cross or a book. He may also appear among the bishops of the Council of Ephesus, or in the series of papal portraits in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Celestine I and the novena to Saint Celestine I, prayed from July 18 to 26.



The Basilica of Santa Prassede, where the body of Celestine I was moved in 820.

Where to pray to Saint Celestine I

- **Rome**: the Basilica of Santa Prassede, where his body was moved in 820, and the Catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria, his first burial place.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Santa Sabina on the Aventine and Santa Maria in Trastevere, both linked to his pontificate.
- **Near Mantua**: the church of Campitello keeps relics attributed to him; devotion to him is ancient in Lombardy and Emilia.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Celestine I for Faithfulness to the Faith

No traditional prayer to Saint Celestine I has remained in use, but his letters, partly preserved, contain striking words about the role of pastors. Below you will find two of his sayings, with their sources, followed by an original prayer for faithfulness to the faith.

Two sayings of Celestine I to meditate on

> *"We should be distinguished from the people by our learning, not by our dress; by our conduct, not by our clothing; by purity of mind, not by care for our appearance."*

Source: letter of Celestine I to the bishops of the provinces of Vienne and Narbonne, 428 (free translation from the Latin).

> *"We are rightly to blame if we encourage error by our silence."*

Source: letter of Celestine I to the bishops of Gaul, 431, quoted by Saint Vincent of Lérins in his *Commonitorium* (434), free translation.

Prayer to Saint Celestine I for faithfulness to the faith

Saint Celestine, shepherd of the Church of Rome, you who defended the name of Mary, Mother of God, help us to recognize in Jesus the eternal Son of the Father, who truly became one of us.

You who would not keep silent in the face of error, give us the courage to speak a just word, at the right time and without harshness.

You who asked that forgiveness never be refused to anyone who seeks it at the hour of death, make us merciful toward those who return to God.

Pray for bishops and priests: may they be distinguished by their faith, their conduct and the purity of their hearts. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for us the grace to keep faithfully the faith received from the apostles and to hand it on with joy. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Celestine I is commemorated in the Roman Martyrology on July 27, the day his body was laid in the Catacomb of Priscilla; the former Roman calendar celebrated him on April 6. You can also pray to him as the great feasts of the Mother of God approach, such as January 1, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God. This prayer suits:

- prayer for the pope, bishops and priests;
- times when you must speak the truth and are tempted to stay silent;
- a desire to grow in understanding of the faith and in love for Mary;
- prayer for a loved one who is dying and needs reconciliation with God.

A traditional Marian prayer

The Council of Ephesus, which Celestine supported, proclaimed Mary *Theotokos*, Mother of God. One of the oldest known Marian prayers, the *Sub tuum praesidium*, already used this title:

> *We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.*

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Celestine I

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and letters of Saint Celestine I, pope from 422 to 432. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his commemoration, begin it on July 18 and pray the last day on July 26, so that you reach July 27 with him. Because Celestine defended the title of Mary as Mother of God, this novena can also be prayed from December 23 to 31, ending on the eve of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into your daily life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: "Lord, through the intercession of Saint Celestine, faithful shepherd of your Church, I place before you this intention. Keep me in the true faith, and make me a witness of your truth and mercy. Amen."

Celestine lived in a troubled age: the Western Empire was collapsing, Rome had been sacked, and the Church was divided over questions about Christ and grace. Each day of this novena takes up one aspect of his ministry as a shepherd, so that his faithfulness may strengthen ours in our own uncertain times.

Day 1: A deacon of the Church of Rome

The first sure trace of Celestine shows him as a deacon, a servant of the Church. Before he governed, he served.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve before I seek to lead. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Offer a practical service in your parish or your home.

Day 2: A faithful friendship

Saint Augustine wrote to Celestine with respect and trust, and Celestine defended Augustine's memory after his death. Holy friendships help us grow toward God.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the friends who lead me to you. Make me a faithful friend in return. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Write to a friend who has helped you in your faith.

Day 3: Teaching, not following

Celestine reminded bishops that the people must be taught, not followed. True leadership does not flatter, but guides toward the truth.

Prayer: Lord, give your Church pastors who teach with courage and love. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Pray by name for your bishop and your parish priest.

Day 4: Holiness of heart, not appearance

He asked the clergy to stand out by their learning, conduct and purity of heart, not by their dress. What matters is within.

Prayer: Lord, free me from caring about appearances, and purify my heart. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Do one good deed in secret, known only to God.

Day 5: Mercy for the dying

Celestine insisted that reconciliation must never be refused to a dying person who sincerely asks for it. God's mercy is offered until the last breath.

Prayer: Lord, have mercy on all who will die today, and let none of them be deprived of your forgiveness. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Pray for the dying, or visit someone who is gravely ill.

Day 6: Forgiveness for those who fell

He opposed those who refused forgiveness to Christians who had fallen during persecution. The Church is a home for repentant sinners.

Prayer: Lord, make me merciful toward those who have fallen and want to return. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Welcome warmly someone who is coming back to the faith or to the community.

Day 7: Mary, Mother of God

When Nestorius refused to call Mary "Mother of God," Celestine defended this title, which the Council of Ephesus proclaimed in 431. To honor Mary as Mother of God is to confess that her Son is truly God.

Prayer: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Pray a decade of the rosary, or the *Sub tuum praesidium*.

Day 8: Not keeping silent

"We are rightly to blame if we encourage error by our silence," Celestine wrote. Sometimes love requires us to speak.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the courage to speak the truth with gentleness when silence would be cowardice. Saint Celestine, pray for us.

Today: Say a true and kind word that you have been putting off.

Day 9: Sending missionaries

In 431 he sent Palladius to the Christians of Ireland, and tradition links Saint Patrick's mission to his pontificate. The faith is meant to be shared.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Celestine, send workers into your harvest, and make me a witness of your Gospel. Amen.

Today: Support a missionary or pray for the missions.

Closing prayer

Saint Celestine, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for the pope and the bishops, for all who teach the faith and for all who are far from God. Obtain for us the grace to remain faithful to the faith of the apostles, to honor Mary as Mother of God, and to show mercy to every sinner who returns. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Celestine I and pray the prayer to Saint Celestine I.

Credits and sources

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