

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Cornelius

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 16

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IN BRIEF

Saint Cornelius

Bishop of Rome from 251 to 253, defender of forgiveness for the lapsed, who died in exile.

Feast day	September 16
Died	June 253, Centumcellae (Civitavecchia), Italy
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	cattle, small children

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Cornelius

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Cornelius

Saint Cornelius was Bishop of Rome from 251 to 253, in the aftermath of the terrible persecution of the emperor Decius. Elected instead of the priest Novatian, he defended forgiveness for Christians who had denied their faith out of fear and wished to return to the Church. He died in exile at Centumcellae, today Civitavecchia, and is honored as a martyr. The Church celebrates him on September 16 together with his ally and friend Saint Cyprian of Carthage.

Who was Saint Cornelius?

Almost nothing is known about Cornelius before his election. He was a priest of the Church of Rome, probably a Roman by birth, as his name suggests: it belonged to one of the great families of the city. What we know of him comes mainly from the letters of Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, and from fragments of his own letters preserved by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century. These sources, rare for that period, allow us to follow the two years of his pontificate fairly closely.

Key dates in the life of Cornelius

- **January 20, 250**: Pope Fabian is martyred during the persecution of Decius; the see of Rome remains vacant for more than a year.
- **March 251**: Cornelius is elected Bishop of Rome.
- **251**: Novatian has himself ordained bishop by three Italian bishops; the Novatian schism begins.
- **Fall 251**: A Roman synod approves Cornelius and excommunicates Novatian.

- **Late 252**: Exiled to Centumcellae on the orders of the emperor Trebonianus Gallus.
- **June 253**: Dies in exile; his body is brought back to Rome, to the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus.

What to do with those who had denied the faith?

The persecution of Decius, in 250, required every inhabitant of the Empire to offer sacrifice to the gods. Many Christians gave in, out of fear or calculation: they were called the *lapsi*, "those who have fallen." When the persecution eased, many of them asked to come back to the Church.

Two attitudes clashed. Some, gathered around the priest Novatian, a respected theologian and brilliant writer, refused any reconciliation: whoever had denied the faith could not be taken back by the Church. Others held that, after serious penance, forgiveness should be granted.

After more than a year with no bishop, the election of March 251 came as a surprise: it was not Novatian who was chosen but Cornelius, a supporter of mercy. Novatian then had himself ordained bishop by three Italian bishops, causing a schism. Almost all the Churches nevertheless recognized Cornelius, and a synod held in Rome in the fall of 251 excommunicated Novatian, with the support of Cyprian of Carthage and Dionysius of Alexandria.



The crypt of Saint Cornelius in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, Rome.

A glimpse of the Church of Rome in the third century

In a letter to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch, who leaned toward severity, Cornelius defended his position. A passage of this letter, preserved by Eusebius, gives a precious picture of the Roman Church of his time. He lists the priests, deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, exorcists, lectors and doorkeepers, as well as more than fifteen hundred widows and poor people supported by the community. It is one of the oldest testimonies to the organization of a large Christian Church.

Exile and death

At the end of 252, a new wave of hostility struck Christians under the emperor Trebonianus Gallus. Cornelius was exiled to Centumcellae, the port of Civitavecchia, north of Rome. He died there in June 253, probably from the

hardships of exile rather than by execution. The Church has nevertheless always honored him as a martyr, because he died for his faithfulness to Christ.

His body was brought back to Rome and laid in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, where his tomb can still be seen, with a Latin inscription that calls him a martyr.



Saint Cornelius with the horn, his traditional emblem.

Why is Saint Cornelius the patron saint of cattle?

The name of Cornelius appears in Eucharistic Prayer I, the Roman Canon, next to that of Cyprian, so it is spoken at many Masses around the world. Over the centuries his cult also took root in the countryside of northern Europe, in an unexpected way.

Through a play on his name (*cornu* means "horn" in Latin), he was given a hunting horn as his emblem and linked to horned animals. In Belgium he is invoked for the health of cattle and poultry; in northern France he is the protector of small children. In Brittany, a legend confused him with Saint Cornély, honored at Carnac, whose name was turned into the French form Corneille.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Cornelius in art

Cornelius is shown as a pope, wearing the papal tiara and often holding a cross, and above all with a horn, sometimes a hunting horn, his traditional emblem. He is frequently painted together with Saint Cyprian, dressed as a bishop, since the two are celebrated on the same day.

What his holiness teaches

Cornelius is the pope of mercy in a wounded Church. Against those who wanted a Church reserved for heroes, he defended the right of the weak to return after their fall, without denying the seriousness of the sin. He paid for his faithfulness with exile. Catholics pray to him for those who have abandoned the faith and would like to find it again, for the unity of the Church, and for pastors who must hold truth and forgiveness together.

Where to pray to Saint Cornelius

- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way, where his crypt is found.
- **Carnac** (Brittany, France): the Church of Saint-Cornély, where local tradition links Saint Cornély with Saint Cornelius.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Cornelius and the novena to Saint Cornelius.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Cornelius for Those Who Have Drifted Away

Saint Cornelius has been invoked for centuries, in Rome as well as in the countryside of northern Europe. His name is spoken at every Mass celebrated with Eucharistic Prayer I, the Roman Canon, next to that of Saint Cyprian. Here is an original prayer inspired by his struggle for mercy, for those who have drifted away from the faith.



Saint Cornelius, pope and martyr.

Prayer to Saint Cornelius for those who have drifted away

Saint Cornelius, shepherd of the Church of Rome in a time of persecution, you opened the door of return to those who had denied the faith out of fear: pray for all who have drifted away from the faith.

Obtain for them the courage to come back, and for us the grace to welcome them without harshness or contempt.

You defended the unity of the Church against schism: keep Christians in communion, despite their disagreements and their wounds.

You accepted exile rather than give up your mission: support those who suffer for their faith and those who live far from home. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Country people have taken you as their protector: watch over families, over little children, and over those who work the land and care for animals. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Pray it for a son, a daughter, a spouse or a friend who has left the Church, especially when you do not know what else to say or do. It also suits a parish or a family divided by conflict, and anyone who has fallen and is afraid that there is no way back: Cornelius reminds us that the door of mercy is open.

Farmers and families in the countryside may also turn to him for their animals and their children, as their ancestors did in Belgium and northern France.

Saint Cornelius is celebrated on September 16 together with Saint Cyprian of Carthage, his ally in the defense of forgiveness; some older calendars kept his feast on September 14. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Cornelius, and read the life of Saint Cornelius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Cornelius

This novena to Saint Cornelius is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by his life and his defense of mercy. It is not an official liturgical text. Begin it on September 7 so that it ends on September 15, the eve of his feast on September 16. You can also pray it at any time of year, especially for someone who has drifted away from the faith or for a divided community.

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, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

The nine days follow the short pontificate of Cornelius, from the persecution of Decius to his death in exile, and the long memory the Church has kept of him.

Day 1: A Church shaken by persecution

In 250 the emperor Decius ordered everyone to sacrifice to the gods. Pope Fabian was martyred, and the Church of Rome went more than a year without a bishop. Cornelius was called to lead a frightened and wounded community.

Prayer: Lord, support your Church in times of trial, and give her shepherds after your own heart.

Today: Pray for the pope and for your bishop by name.

Day 2: Those who fell

Many Christians gave in during the persecution. Some sacrificed out of fear, others obtained false certificates. Afterward, many were filled with shame and wanted to come back. Each of us knows moments of weakness, when fear or comfort wins out over faithfulness. The question is not whether we fall, but whether we let ourselves be lifted up.

Prayer: Lord, look with mercy on my own failures, and lift me up when I fall.

Today: Make a careful examination of conscience, or plan to go to confession.

Day 3: The choice of mercy

Against those who wanted to close the door forever, Cornelius held that, after sincere penance, the fallen could be forgiven and welcomed back. Mercy does not deny sin; it believes in conversion.

Prayer: Lord, make me merciful as you are merciful.

Today: Forgive someone in your heart, and if possible tell them so.

Day 4: Those who have left

Many people today have drifted away from the Church, sometimes after a wound, sometimes slowly, without noticing. Cornelius reminds us that the door is still open and that they are awaited.

Prayer: Lord, call back to you those I love who have drifted away from the faith.

Today: Pray by name for someone who has left the Church, and show them kindness without preaching.

Day 5: Wounded unity

Novatian, a gifted theologian, refused the election of Cornelius and set himself up as a rival bishop. The Church was divided. Cornelius, supported by Cyprian and Dionysius, worked patiently for unity.

Prayer: Lord, heal the divisions in your Church, in my parish and in my family.

Today: Speak well of someone with whom you disagree.

Day 6: The friendship of Cyprian

From Carthage, Bishop Cyprian supported Cornelius by letter and in council. The two men are celebrated together. No one should carry a heavy burden alone; friends in faith strengthen each other.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the friends who support me in faith; let me support them in turn.

Today: Write a few words of encouragement to someone who carries responsibility.

Day 7: Caring for the poor

Cornelius tells us that the Church of Rome supported more than fifteen hundred widows and poor people. Even in a time of persecution, the community did not forget charity.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes and my hands to the poor around me.

Today: Give something to a parish or charity that helps people in need.

Day 8: Exile

Sent away to Centumcellae, Cornelius died far from his flock in June 253. The Church honors him as a martyr because he gave his life in faithfulness to Christ. Exile, loneliness and distance can also be offered, united to Christ who was rejected by his own.

Prayer: Lord, comfort those who live in exile, far from home, or cut off from those they love.

Today: Reach out to a migrant, a refugee or someone who lives alone.

Day 9: A name remembered at the altar

The name of Cornelius is still spoken in the Roman Canon, and simple people in the countryside have entrusted him with their children and animals for centuries. Faithfulness bears fruit long after us, often in ways we could never have imagined.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Cornelius, keep me faithful and merciful. Amen.

Today: Listen for his name the next time the Roman Canon is prayed at Mass, and offer a prayer for the whole Church.

Closing prayer

Saint Cornelius, pope and martyr, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have carried in my heart. Pray for those who have drifted away from the faith, for the unity of the Church, for families and little children, and for all who care for the land and its animals. Obtain for us a heart that is faithful in trials and merciful toward those who fall. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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