

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Damasus I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 11

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IN BRIEF

Saint Damasus I

Bishop of Rome from 366 to 384, who organized the veneration of the martyrs in the catacombs and encouraged Saint Jerome's Latin Bible.

Feast day	December 11
Born	c. 305
Died	December 11, 384, Rome, Italy
Era	4th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Damasus for the Memory of the Martyrs

Novena to Saint Damasus I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Damasus I

Saint Damasus I was bishop of Rome from 366 to 384, at the time when the Roman Empire was becoming Christian. His pontificate began amid the violence of a disputed election, yet he left a lasting legacy: the affirmation of the "Apostolic See," the impetus he gave to Saint Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible and, above all, the organization of the veneration of the martyrs in the catacombs, which he adorned with his engraved poems. His feast day is December 11.

Who was Saint Damasus I?

According to Saint Jerome, he died "almost eighty years old," which places his birth around 305. The *Liber Pontificalis* (Book of the Popes) gives him a Spanish origin, but he was more probably a Roman. He grew up in a family of clergy. His father, Antonius, served the Church of Rome as a notary, lector and then deacon, before becoming a priest. After his father's death, his mother Laurentia joined the order of consecrated widows, and his sister Irene made a vow of virginity.

Damasus himself turned the family house into a place of worship. As deacon of Pope Liberius, he went with him at the start of his exile in 355, ordered by Emperor Constantius II, who favored Arianism, and then returned to Rome.

Key dates in the life of Saint Damasus

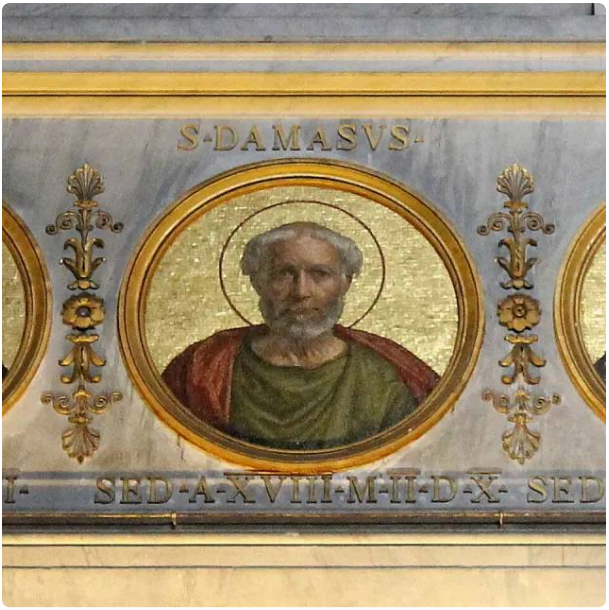
- **c. 305**: Born, probably in Rome.
- **355**: Follows Pope Liberius at the start of his exile.
- **October 1, 366**: Consecrated bishop of Rome at the Lateran, after an election disputed with Ursinus.
- **371**: A Roman synod condemns the Arian-leaning formula of Rimini.

- **377**: The *Tome of Damasus*, a series of doctrinal condemnations sent to the East.
- **380**: The Edict of Thessalonica of Emperor Theodosius names "the pontiff Damasus" as a standard of the faith.
- **382**: Council of Rome; Jerome enters his service.
- **December 11, 384**: Dies in Rome.

An election stained with blood

When Liberius died on September 24, 366, the Christian community of Rome split. One group elected the deacon Ursinus, while a larger faction chose Damasus. The clashes that followed were extremely violent. Supporters of Damasus, hired thugs according to his opponents, attacked those of Ursinus, and the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus reports that more than a hundred bodies were found in a basilica. Damasus was consecrated at the Lateran on October 1, and the prefect of the city sent his rival into exile.

This beginning cast a long shadow over his authority. His enemies pursued him in the courts until 380, without success. Honesty requires us to say it: the holiness the Church recognizes in Damasus does not make him a man without faults, but a pastor who, despite everything, deeply served the faith of his people.



Saint Damasus, portrait from the series of popes.

The Apostolic See and the Latin Bible

Damasus grounded the primacy of Rome in Christ's promise to Peter. He held at least five synods in ten years and organized a true papal chancery. In 378 he obtained recognition of the Roman Church as a court of appeal for the bishops of the West.

Unbending during the Arian crisis, he understood the bishops of the East poorly and drew criticism from Saint Basil the Great. Yet it was by naming "the pontiff Damasus" that Emperor Theodosius defined orthodox faith in 380.

His most fruitful decision was perhaps to take into his service, from 382, a scholar who had come from the East: Jerome. Concerned by the many differing Latin versions of the Bible, Damasus encouraged the work of revision

that would lead to the Vulgate, the Latin Bible of the Western Church for more than a thousand years. Every Catholic who has heard Scripture read in the liturgy owes something to this partnership between a pope and a scholar.

The poet of the martyrs

Above all, Damasus was the man who organized the veneration of the martyrs of Rome. In the catacombs he had staircases and galleries built, tombs embellished and forgotten graves rediscovered. He himself composed some sixty epigrams in Latin verse, carved in beautiful capital letters by the calligrapher Furius Dionysius Filocalus. These inscriptions celebrate the martyrs as the heroes of ancient Rome: Agnes, Lawrence, Tarcisius, Pope Sixtus II and many others. Several can still be seen today.

In Rome itself he is credited with founding the church of Saint Lawrence, known ever since as San Lorenzo in Damaso. He was buried with his mother and sister in a basilica outside the city walls that has not been identified with certainty.

What can we learn from his holiness?

Damasus gave the Christians of Rome a memory and a sense of pride: that of being heirs of the apostles Peter and Paul and of the martyrs whose tombs surrounded the city. By carving their memory in stone, he made the catacombs places of pilgrimage and handed down to later centuries a love for the veneration of the saints. His life also shows that God can work through people whose path was far from perfect.

Is Saint Damasus a patron saint?

Saint Damasus has no widely established official patronage. Because of his work in the catacombs, he is sometimes associated with archaeologists. He can be prayed to for the Church of Rome, for researchers and archaeologists, for

translators of the Bible, and for all who keep alive the memory of the witnesses of the faith.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Damasus and the novena to Saint Damasus.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Damasus in art

- **Papal vestments**, as in the medallion portraits of the popes at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.
- **A book**, recalling his support for Saint Jerome and the Latin Bible.
- **A marble inscription or catacomb setting**, evoking his poems for the martyrs.

Where to pray to Saint Damasus

- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way, and its Crypt of the Popes, where one of his inscriptions survives.
- **Rome**: the basilica of San Lorenzo in Damaso, near the Campo de' Fiori, which bears his name.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Damasus for the Memory of the Martyrs

Saint Damasus left no liturgical prayer bearing his name, but he wrote many poems carved in the catacombs of Rome. Two of them, full of humility, can nourish our prayer. You will find them below with their source, followed by an original prayer to Saint Damasus.

Two verses of Damasus to meditate on

> *"Here, I confess, I, Damasus, would have wished to lay my body to rest; but I feared to disturb the holy ashes of the righteous."*

Source: epigram of Damasus for the Crypt of the Popes, Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, Rome (4th century). In Latin: "*Hic fateor Damasus volui mea condere membra, sed cineres timui sanctos vexare piorum*." Translation by Saintspedia.

> *"He who, walking on the sea, calmed its bitter waves [...], I believe that he will also raise Damasus up after his ashes."*

Source: epitaph composed by Damasus for his own tomb (4th century), whose last line reads: "*post cineres Damasum faciet quia surgere credo*." Abridged translation by Saintspedia.



Saint Damasus at prayer.

Prayer to Saint Damasus

Saint Damasus, you searched the catacombs for the forgotten tombs of the martyrs. Teach me to keep alive the memory of those who handed on the faith to us.

Out of humility, you chose not to rest among the saints you had honored. Help me not to seek the first place, but to serve with simplicity.

You encouraged Saint Jerome to give the Church a faithful Bible. Obtain for me a love for the Word of God and the desire to read it every day.

You knew division and accusation. Pray for the unity of the Church and for those who suffer from slander. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

With you, I believe that Christ, victorious over death, will raise us all to life. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Damasus is celebrated on December 11, the day of his death in 384. His memorial is in the General Roman Calendar. You can also pray to him:

- on a visit to the catacombs of Rome or to the tomb of a saint;
- when you begin reading or studying the Bible;
- for the pope and the unity of the Church;
- when you are the target of criticism or slander;
- for your deceased loved ones, in the hope of the resurrection.

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Damasus I

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and the poems of Saint Damasus I. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on December 11, begin on December 2; it then ends on December 10, in the heart of Advent. You can also pray it at any time of the year, for example before a pilgrimage to Rome or when you begin a serious reading of Scripture.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life.

Day 1: A family of faith

Damasus grew up in a family that served the Church: his father was a notary, lector, deacon and then priest; his mother and sister consecrated their lives to God. The faith is first received at home, through the example of those who love us.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family and all the families of your Church. Make our homes places where faith is lived and passed on.

Today: Thank God by name for someone in your family who taught you to pray.

Day 2: Faithful in exile

As a young deacon, Damasus went with Pope Liberius when the emperor sent him into exile. Faithfulness is proved when it costs something. To stand beside those who suffer for the truth is already a witness.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to stand beside those who are rejected for their faith or for justice.

Today: Pray for a bishop or priest who is persecuted or imprisoned.

Day 3: The wounds of division

Damasus's election was marked by violence and by a schism that tore the Roman community apart. The Church is holy, but it is made of sinners. Damasus's story invites us to humility and to repentance for all that wounds unity.

Prayer: Lord, heal the divisions in your Church, in my parish and in my family, and forgive the violence of our words and deeds.

Today: Ask forgiveness for a harsh word, or pray for someone with whom you are in conflict.

Day 4: Bearing false accusations

For years his enemies dragged Damasus before the courts. Whatever his faults, he knew what it is to be accused and judged. Christ himself was falsely accused, and he is close to all who suffer slander.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were falsely accused. Comfort those who suffer from slander, and keep me from judging others rashly.

Today: Refuse to repeat gossip, and say something good about someone who is criticized.

Day 5: The rock of Peter

Damasus based the role of the Church of Rome on Christ's words to Peter: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church." He wanted the bishops to remain united around the Apostolic See.

Prayer: Lord, protect the pope, successor of Peter. Keep him faithful and strong, and keep us united with him.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary for the pope.

Day 6: Love for the Word of God

Concerned by the many Latin versions of the Bible, Damasus asked Saint Jerome to revise them. The result, the Vulgate, nourished the faith of the West for more than a thousand years. The Word of God deserves our care and our attention.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me a hunger for the Word of God, and bless all who translate and teach the Scriptures.

Today: Read one of the readings of today's Mass slowly.

Day 7: Remembering the martyrs

Damasus searched for the forgotten tombs of the martyrs and wrote poems in their honor. He did not want their witness to be lost. We, too, are heirs of those who gave their lives for Christ.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the martyrs of yesterday and today. Give me some of their courage.

Today: Learn the story of a martyr you do not yet know.

Day 8: The humility of the last place

Damasus wrote that he would have liked to be buried near the saints, but feared to disturb their holy ashes. He chose to rest elsewhere. True greatness knows how to step aside.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the desire to be first, and teach me to rejoice in the good done by others.

Today: Give up your place, your turn or your opinion for someone else.

Day 9: Hope in the resurrection

In the epitaph he wrote for himself, Damasus professed his faith that Christ, who walked on the sea, would raise him up after his ashes. His whole life ends in this act of hope.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Damasus, strengthen my hope in the resurrection. Amen.

Today: Pray for your deceased loved ones, or visit a cemetery.

Closing prayer

Saint Damasus, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. Pray for the pope and for the unity of the Church, for all who study and translate the Scriptures, and for those who keep the memory of the martyrs. Obtain for us humility, love for the Word of God and a firm hope in eternal life. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be.

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

Credits and sources

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