

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Pope Saint Dionysius

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 26

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IN BRIEF

Pope Saint Dionysius

Bishop of Rome from 259 to 268 who rebuilt the Roman Church after the persecution of Valerian.

Feast day	December 26
Died	December 26, 268, Rome
Era	3rd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Pope Saint Dionysius after Times of Crisis

Novena to Pope Saint Dionysius

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Pope Saint Dionysius

Saint Dionysius was bishop of Rome from 259 to 268, in the aftermath of one of the harshest persecutions the early Church ever endured. Elected after the see of Rome had been vacant for a year, he rebuilt a wounded community, supported distant Churches and intervened in the great debates on the Trinity. He did not die a martyr. The Roman Martyrology celebrates him on December 26.

He should not be confused with his contemporary and correspondent, Saint Dionysius of Alexandria, nor with Saint Denis, the first bishop of Paris, whose name is the same in French.

Who was Pope Saint Dionysius?

Little is known of his origins. One tradition has him born in Magna Graecia, the Greek-speaking south of Italy, but nothing allows us to state this with certainty.

He first appears as a priest of the Church of Rome under Pope Stephen I (254-257), when the controversy over baptism given by heretics broke out. His namesake, Saint Dionysius of Alexandria, wrote to him on this subject, and the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who reports this correspondence, describes him as a learned man.

Key dates

- **254-257**: Priest of the Church of Rome under Pope Stephen I.
- **August 6, 258**: Martyrdom of Pope Sixtus II during the persecution of Valerian; the see remains vacant for nearly a year.
- **July 22, 259**: Dionysius is elected bishop of Rome.

- **260**: Emperor Gallienus issues an edict of toleration restoring to Christians their places of worship and their cemeteries.
- **c. 262**: A council in Rome condemns the modalism of Sabellius.
- **December 26, 268**: Death in Rome; burial in the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacombs of Saint Callixtus.

Rebuilding a wounded Church

The persecution of Valerian had struck at the head of the Roman Church: Sixtus II and several deacons were executed in 258. When Dionysius was elected in July 259, the pressure was beginning to ease.

The following year, Gallienus, now sole emperor, sent the bishops an edict returning their property to the Christian communities. This opened a period of about forty years that historians call the "little peace of the Church."

Dionysius used this respite to reorganize a community in disarray. The sources credit him with strengthening the role of priests in the government of the local Church.

The debate with Alexandria

The most significant event of his pontificate concerns faith in the Trinity. Christians in Alexandria accused their bishop, Dionysius of Alexandria, of separating the Father and the Son too sharply.

The pope gathered a council in Rome around 262 and wrote a letter that rejected two opposite errors. On one side was the modalism of Sabellius, which saw in the Father, the Son and the Spirit only three ways of being of a single God. On the other was any way of thinking that would divide God into three divinities. The bishop of Alexandria explained and justified himself to Rome.

The episode shows that, as early as the third century, Christians turned to the bishop of Rome to settle questions of doctrine.

A shepherd who cared for distant Churches

Around the same time, Gothic raids devastated Cappadocia, in Asia Minor. Dionysius wrote to the Church of Caesarea to comfort it and sent money to ransom the Christians who had been carried off into captivity.

The Roman Martyrology keeps this memory: it praises a pope who comforted Christians in their distress by his letters and his presence, ransomed captives and taught the basics of the faith to those who did not know them.

What does his holiness teach us?

Dionysius left neither an account of martyrdom nor a famous miracle. His holiness is that of a rebuilder: gathering people after the storm, watching over the right expression of the faith without crushing persons, sharing the goods of the Church with those who had lost everything. For Christians today, he remains a model of patience and practical charity after times of crisis.

His nine years as bishop also show how the early popes worked: through letters, councils and gifts sent to faraway communities. Unity was not imposed from a distance; it was built by listening, explaining the faith clearly and sharing in the sufferings of other Churches. That is a lesson every pastor, and every Christian community, can take to heart.

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

Why is Saint Dionysius invoked for captives and for the Church after crisis?

Pope Saint Dionysius has no official patronage. Yet two features of his life make him a natural intercessor. First, he sent help from Rome to ransom Christians taken captive in Cappadocia, so he can be invoked for prisoners, hostages and

persecuted Christians. Second, he rebuilt the Church of Rome after a persecution that had killed its bishop, so he speaks to parishes, dioceses and communities that must start again after a crisis, a scandal or a time of division.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Dionysius in art

No portrait of Dionysius from his own time has survived. He is known mainly through the imaginary portrait in the series of papal medallions in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome, where he appears facing forward, bearded and wearing a tiara, on a gold background. As with the other early popes, only his name and the papal attributes identify him.



The church of San Silvestro in Capite, in Rome.

Where to pray to Saint Dionysius

- **Rome, Appian Way**: the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacombs of Saint Callixtus, where he was buried, although his tombstone has never been

found.

- **Rome, historic center**: the church of San Silvestro in Capite, where his relics are said to have been placed in 1601.

PRAYER

Prayer to Pope Saint Dionysius after Times of Crisis

Pope Saint Dionysius left no prayer of his own, and no traditional prayer in his honor has come into common use. Saintspedia offers here an original prayer drawn from what we know of his life: the rebuilding of the Church of Rome after the persecution of Valerian, his care for the right expression of faith in the Trinity and the help he sent to ransom captives in Cappadocia.

Prayer to Pope Saint Dionysius after times of crisis

Saint Dionysius, bishop of Rome, you took up the care of a Church wounded by persecution and gathered a scattered flock: pray for communities that must begin again after a time of trial.

You watched over the true faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, without crushing those who were searching: help me to love the truth and to speak it with patience and charity.

You sent help to ransom Christians taken captive far from Rome: pray for prisoners, hostages and all persecuted Christians, and make me generous toward those who have lost everything.

You comforted the afflicted by your letters and your presence: teach me to console those who suffer, and receive the intention I entrust to you: (name it in silence).

Obtain for the Church peace, unity and faithful shepherds. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Pope Saint Dionysius is celebrated on December 26 in the Roman Martyrology, the day of his death in 268 (a day the liturgy also gives to Saint Stephen, the first martyr). This prayer is also fitting:

- for a parish, a diocese or a family that is trying to rebuild after a crisis or a division;
- for Christians who are persecuted, imprisoned or held hostage;
- for the pope and the bishops, that they may guard the faith and serve unity;
- before studying or teaching the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Glory to the Holy Trinity

Since Saint Dionysius defended faith in the one God in three Persons, you can end your prayer with the ancient doxology of the Church:

> *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.*

To get to know him better, read the life of Pope Saint Dionysius, or pray the novena to Pope Saint Dionysius.

NOVENA

Novena to Pope Saint Dionysius

This novena to Pope Saint Dionysius is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the bishop of Rome who rebuilt a Church wounded by persecution, defended faith in the Holy Trinity and sent help to ransom captives. To end on his feast day, December 26, begin it on December 18, so that it accompanies the last days of Advent and Christmas. You can also pray it at any time, especially for communities that must start again after a crisis and for persecuted Christians.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed. If you miss a day, simply take it up again the next day.

Day 1: A servant before being a shepherd

Before becoming pope, Dionysius was a priest of the Church of Rome under Pope Stephen I. He served for years in the shadow of others. Eusebius of Caesarea describes him as a learned man, but his learning was placed at the service of the Church.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, teach me to serve faithfully where I am, without seeking the first place. Amen.

Today: Do a hidden service for your parish or your family.

Day 2: After the storm

In 258, Pope Sixtus II and several deacons were put to death in the persecution of Valerian. For almost a year, the Church of Rome had no bishop. Dionysius was elected in a Church in mourning.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, pray for Christians who are persecuted today, and for Churches deprived of their shepherds. Amen.

Today: Pray for a country where Christians are persecuted.

Day 3: Accepting a heavy task

Taking charge of a wounded community after a year without a bishop required courage. Dionysius accepted. Sometimes God asks us to take on responsibilities that seem too great for us.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, give me courage when I must take on a task that frightens me. Amen.

Today: Take one concrete step in a responsibility you have been putting off.

Day 4: A time of peace

In 260, Emperor Gallienus restored to Christians their places of worship and their cemeteries. The "little peace of the Church" began. Dionysius used this time not to rest, but to rebuild.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, help me to use times of peace to grow, to rebuild and to strengthen what is fragile. Amen.

Today: Thank God for a time of peace in your life.

Day 5: Putting things in order

Dionysius reorganized a community in disarray and gave priests a stronger role in the life of the local Church. Holiness also passes through patient, careful work behind the scenes: meetings, letters, decisions and countless small tasks that no one remembers, but that allow a community to live and to pray.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, pray for priests and for all who serve in the government of the Church. Amen.

Today: Pray for the priests of your parish by name.

Day 6: One God in three Persons

Around 262, Dionysius gathered a council in Rome and wrote a letter on faith in the Trinity. He rejected both the error that made Father, Son and Spirit mere ways of being of one God, and the error that would divide God into three gods.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, increase my faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and help me to adore the mystery of God. Amen.

Today: Make the Sign of the Cross slowly and attentively several times today.

Day 7: Truth and charity

When his namesake, the bishop of Alexandria, was accused of error, the pope asked for explanations, and Dionysius of Alexandria justified himself. The truth was guarded without breaking communion between the two Churches.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, teach me to speak the truth with charity and to listen before I judge. Amen.

Today: Seek to understand someone with whom you disagree.

Day 8: Ransoming captives

When Gothic raids devastated Cappadocia, Dionysius wrote to the Church of Caesarea to comfort it and sent money to ransom Christians taken captive. Distance did not stop his charity. Christians in a faraway province were his brothers and sisters, and their suffering was his own.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, pray for prisoners, hostages and refugees, and make me generous toward those far away. Amen.

Today: Give to a work that helps persecuted Christians or refugees.

Day 9: Comforting by word and presence

The Roman Martyrology remembers a pope who comforted Christians in their distress by his letters and his presence, ransomed captives and taught the basics of the faith. He died on December 26, 268, after nine years of patient service.

Prayer: Saint Dionysius, present to God the intention I have carried through this novena, and make me a consoler of those who suffer. Amen.

Today: Write to or visit someone who is going through a hard time.

Closing prayer

> *Lord our God, you gave Saint Dionysius to your Church to gather it after persecution, to guard the true faith in the Holy Trinity and to comfort the afflicted. Through his intercession, heal the wounds of our communities, keep us in the truth and in charity, and make us attentive to all who suffer, near and far. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Read more in the life of Pope Saint Dionysius, or say the prayer to Pope Saint Dionysius.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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