

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Eustace

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 20

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Eustace

Roman martyr of the 2nd century according to tradition, converted when Christ appeared between the antlers of a stag, traditional patron saint of hunters.

Feast day	September 20
Died	c. 118, Rome
Era	2nd century
Patron saint of	hunters

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Eustace for Families in Trial

Novena to Saint Eustace

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Eustace

Saint Eustace, called Eustathius in Greek texts, is a martyr whom tradition says died in Rome around 118, under Emperor Hadrian, together with his wife and two sons. His story, that of a Roman general converted when Christ appeared to him between the antlers of a stag, was one of the most popular tales of the Middle Ages. Historians strongly doubt that he existed, and his feast of September 20 was removed from the General Roman Calendar in 1969. He nevertheless remains the patron of many churches, including Saint-Eustache in Paris, and the traditional patron saint of hunters.

Who was Saint Eustace?

Everything we know about Saint Eustace comes from a single narrative, a *Life and Passion* written in Greek, probably in the East, and cited around 730 by Saint John Damascene as an already ancient text. Every version of his legend derives from it. No older or more reliable document attests his existence, and his cult appears only in the 7th century. The great Bollandist hagiographer Hippolyte Delehaye had little faith in his historical reality.

What follows is therefore a legend rather than a biography. It is worth knowing all the same, because for more than a thousand years Christians in East and West read it as a lesson in conversion, faith and patience.



Saint Eustace and the stag, Cretan icon of the 17th century.

Key dates around Saint Eustace

- **Early 2nd century**: According to tradition, conversion of Placidas under Trajan, then martyrdom under Hadrian, around 118.
- **7th century**: First evidence of his cult, notably in the rock-cut churches of Cappadocia.
- **Around 730**: John Damascene cites the Greek *Life and Passion*.
- **Late 8th century**: A Roman diaconia bears his name, in the time of Pope Leo III.
- **9th century**: Latin translation of the narrative, which spreads throughout the West.
- **Early 12th century**: Relics regarded as his arrive at the abbey of Saint-Denis.

- **Between 1216 and 1223**: A Paris parish in the Les Halles district is placed under his patronage.
- **1969**: His feast is removed from the General Roman Calendar because of the serious historical difficulties it presents.

The legend of the stag

According to the story, Placidas was a general of Emperor Trajan, a pagan but a just and charitable man. One day, while hunting, he pursued a stag larger and more beautiful than all the others. When he caught up with it, he saw a cross shining between its antlers, and the stag spoke to him in the name of Christ: it was the Lord himself who had come, in this form, to save him.

Placidas was converted together with his wife and two sons. Baptized that same night, he took the name Eustathius, which means "steadfast." His wife became Theopista, and his sons Agapius and Theopistus.

This episode had an immense afterlife. It reappears later in the life of Saint Meinulf and then, in the 15th century, in that of Saint Hubert, who eventually replaced Eustace as the patron of hunters, especially in Central Europe.

A new Job

The rest of the story puts the convert to a hard test. Eustathius loses his property and goes into exile with his family. His wife is carried off by the captain of a ship; his two sons, while crossing a river, are taken one by a lion, the other by a wolf. He believes them dead, but they are rescued and raised, without knowing it, in the same village.

Years later, recalled by Trajan to defend the empire, Eustathius finds his sons among his own soldiers, and then his wife. Under Hadrian, the reunited family refuses to sacrifice to the idols. Spared by a lion that lies down at their feet, they die shut inside a bronze bull heated white-hot.

Historians see in this narrative an edifying romance that borrows themes from the ancient Greek novel and from the folktale of "the man tried by fate." It also draws on the conversion of Saint Paul and on the story of Job, to offer a model of faith, obedience and patience in trials.

Why is Saint Eustace the patron saint of hunters?

His patronage comes directly from the legend: it was during a hunt that Christ found him. For centuries hunters in the West placed themselves under his protection, until the same story of the stag was attached to Saint Hubert, who became the better-known patron of hunters. Eustace was also counted among the Fourteen Holy Helpers, a group of saints invoked for swift help in need, and his story of loss and reunion made him a natural intercessor for families going through hardship.

A vast cult

Probably born in the East, the cult of Saint Eustace reached Constantinople, where he was celebrated on September 20, and then Rome, France and England. His legend inspired a host of medieval tales in verse and prose. English-speaking visitors can admire one of its most famous images in London: *The Vision of Saint Eustace* by the Italian painter Pisanello, in the National Gallery.



The Vision of Saint Eustace, by Pisanello (National Gallery, London).

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Eustace in art

- **The stag with a crucifix** between its antlers, the heart of his legend.
- **Soldier's or knight's dress**, often on horseback, recalling the Roman general Placidas.
- **Hunting dogs and a horn**, in scenes of the vision in the forest.
- **The bronze bull**, instrument of his martyrdom, sometimes with his wife and sons.
- **Two children carried off by a lion and a wolf**, in narrative cycles of his life.

Because the same scene of the stag is told of Saint Hubert, the two saints are easily confused. As a rule, Eustace appears as a Roman soldier, Hubert as a bishop or a Frankish nobleman.

What to remember about Saint Eustace

In 1969 the Catholic Church removed Saint Eustace from the General Roman Calendar, among the saints whose history presents serious difficulties. That decision takes nothing away from what his story carried for centuries: trust in God amid loss, the faithfulness of a family united in trial, and the conviction that Christ seeks us even in our everyday activities. The Orthodox Churches continue to celebrate him on September 20.

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



The church of Saint-Eustache in the Les Halles district of Paris.

Where to pray to Saint Eustace

- **Paris**: the church of Saint-Eustache at Les Halles, placed under his patronage in the early 13th century after relics arrived from Saint-Denis.

- **Rome**: the church of Sant'Eustachio, heir to the ancient diaconia that bore his name.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Eustace for Families in Trial

No ancient prayer to Saint Eustace has become a standard text, even though he was long invoked among the Fourteen Holy Helpers. Here is an original prayer by Saintspedia, inspired by his legend: the conversion of Placidas, the trials he endured, and the faithfulness of a family reunited.

Prayer to Saint Eustace

Saint Eustace, tradition tells that Christ came looking for you in the middle of a hunt, and that you recognized his voice. Teach me to hear him too, in the midst of my ordinary occupations.

You who, as the story says, lost everything, your wealth, your wife and your children, without losing your faith, support those who are going through ruin, exile or separation from their loved ones.

You who found your family again after years of trial, I entrust to you divided families, children separated from their parents, and all who wait for someone to come home, together with my own intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for me the steadfastness that your name signifies, and faithfulness to the very end. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Eustace was celebrated on September 20, both in Rome and among the Greeks. The feast was removed from the General Roman Calendar in 1969, but it is still kept by the Orthodox Churches and in churches that bear his name. You can pray to him at any time of year, and especially:

- when you have lost your job, your home or your security;
- when your family is divided or scattered;
- while waiting for news of someone far away;
- before a day of hunting or time spent in the forest, as hunters once did;
- when you need perseverance in a long trial.

A short invocation for families in trial

> *Lord, you watched over the family of Saint Eustace when they were scattered and brought them together again. Keep my family in your hand, heal what is broken among us, and gather us one day in your Kingdom. Amen.*

This invocation is also an original text by Saintspedia. For nine days of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Eustace, and read the story and legend of Saint Eustace.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Eustace

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the legend of Saint Eustace as it was told for centuries in East and West. It is not an official liturgical text. His feast was traditionally kept on September 20; to finish on the eve of that day, begin on September 11. Because his feast is no longer on the General Roman Calendar, you may also pray it at any time, especially in a period of loss or family hardship.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps turn the prayer into a concrete gesture.

You may open each day with this prayer: *Lord Jesus, you sought Placidas in the forest and made him Eustace, the steadfast one. Seek me too, wherever I am, and keep me faithful in joy and in trial. Amen.*

If you miss a day, simply continue where you stopped. What matters is not a perfect performance but nine days of trust and perseverance, in the spirit of the one whose name means steadfast.

Day 1: A just man before he knew Christ

The legend presents Placidas as a pagan general who was already just and generous to the poor. God does not wait for us to be perfect: he comes to meet the good that is already in us and leads it further.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for every good thing you have placed in my heart, even before I knew you well. Bring it to fullness.

Today: Do a discreet act of generosity toward someone in need.

Day 2: Christ in the forest

Christ appeared to Placidas in the middle of a hunt, during an ordinary activity. The Lord can make himself known in our work, our leisure and our most familiar routines, if we are willing to stop and look.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to recognize you in the ordinary moments of my day.

Today: Take a walk outdoors, in silence, and thank God for his creation.

Day 3: The cross between the antlers

The sign that stopped Placidas was a shining cross. The cross is not only a symbol of suffering: it is the sign of a love that goes to the end and that calls us by name.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Let your cross be my light and my strength.

Today: Make the sign of the cross slowly and attentively, morning and evening.

Day 4: A family converted together

Placidas did not keep his faith to himself: his wife and his two sons were baptized with him the same night. Faith grows when it is shared at home, in simple words and common prayer.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family. Let us grow in faith together and support one another on the way.

Today: Pray with a member of your family, even briefly, or pray for each of them by name.

Day 5: Steadfast

At baptism, Placidas received the name Eustathius, which means "steadfast." Steadfastness is not stubbornness. It is the quiet decision to keep trusting God day after day, even when feelings change.

Prayer: Lord, give me a steadfast heart that does not give up at the first difficulty.

Today: Keep a small commitment you have been neglecting.



The Vision of Saint Eustace, by Pisanello (National Gallery, London).

Day 6: Losing everything

Like Job, Eustace lost his property and his position and went into exile. Many people today know this kind of loss: unemployment, ruin, forced departure from their homeland. The legend tells us that God does not abandon those who have nothing left.

Prayer: Lord, be the strength of those who have lost their work, their home or their country.

Today: Support an organization that helps refugees or people in poverty.

Day 7: Separated from those we love

Eustace's wife was taken from him, and his two sons were carried off by wild animals. He believed them lost forever. Separation is one of the deepest wounds a person can carry, and Christ himself knew the pain of being abandoned.

Prayer: Lord, comfort families who are separated by distance, conflict, prison or war.

Today: Call or write to someone you have lost touch with.

Day 8: The joy of reunion

Years later, Eustace found his sons among his soldiers, and then his wife. The legend celebrates the joy of reunion as a foretaste of the great gathering that God prepares for his children.

Prayer: Lord, heal what is divided in my family, and give us the grace of reconciliation.

Today: Take a first step toward reconciliation with someone close to you.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Reunited, the family refused to deny Christ and, according to tradition, died together as martyrs. Their faithfulness reminds us that our final homeland is in God, where nothing and no one can separate us from his love.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the prayers of Saint Eustace and his family, keep me faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray for the persecuted Christians of today.

Closing prayer

Saint Eustace, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have carried. You whom Christ found in the forest, help me to recognize him on my path. You who lost everything and found it again in God, support all who are tried, and gather scattered families. Obtain for us steadfast faith and lasting peace. Amen.

To go further: the story and legend of Saint Eustace and the prayer to Saint Eustace.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Cretan School, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Eustace and the stag, Cretan icon of the 17th century.: Image: Cretan School, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Vision of Saint Eustace, by Pisanello (National Gallery, London).: Image: Pisanello, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The church of Saint-Eustache in the Les Halles district of Paris.: Image: Pline, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com