

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Expeditus

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: April 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Expeditus

Martyr of Melitene according to the oldest martyrology, invoked for urgent causes and much loved on La Réunion.

Feast day	April 19
Died	c. 303, Melitene, Roman Armenia (according to the Hieronymian Martyrology)
Canonized	never canonized: listed in an ancient martyrology, his historical existence is very uncertain
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	urgent causes, students, merchants

In this booklet

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The Oratories of Saint Expeditus on Réunion Island

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Expeditus

Saint Expeditus (also called Saint Expedite) is an early Christian martyr listed at Melitene, in Roman Armenia, in the oldest martyrology of the Church. Almost nothing is known about him, and historians even debate whether he existed at all. Yet his name, which suggests speed, has made him one of the most popular saints of folk devotion, invoked for urgent causes. Nowhere is he more present than on the French island of La Réunion, in the Indian Ocean, where countless little red shrines line the roads. His feast is kept on April 19.

Who was Saint Expeditus?

Everything history knows about Saint Expeditus fits in a single line. The so-called Hieronymian Martyrology, compiled in the 5th century from older lists, records on April 19, at Melitene (today Malatya, in Turkey), a group of martyrs: Hermogenes, Caius, Expeditus, Aristonicus, Rufus and Galatas. They are thought to have died in the great persecution of Diocletian, around 303. Melitene was home of the Twelfth Legion, which led tradition to make Expeditus a soldier.

No ancient account of his martyrdom, no relic and no early shrine has come down to us. Some scholars even think the name arose from a copyist's error in the lists of martyrs. That is why caution is needed. Saint Expeditus was never canonized (the martyrs of the first centuries were not; their cult came from the memory of the local Churches), he does not appear in the Roman calendar, and, according to the art historian Louis Réau, Pope Pius X had his name removed from the martyrology in the early 20th century. His cult is tolerated as a popular devotion, on condition that it leads people to God.



Saint Expeditus, painting by an artist from Palermo (19th century, Wellcome Collection, London).

Key dates

- **c. 303**: According to the martyrology, martyrdom of Expeditus and his companions at Melitene, under Diocletian.
- **5th century**: His name is entered in the Hieronymian Martyrology on April 19.
- **17th-18th centuries**: His cult spreads in Germany and Central Europe, then in Sicily.
- **1781**: He is proclaimed secondary patron of Acireale, in Sicily.
- **Late 19th century**: The devotion reaches France, especially Paris, where he becomes the saint of pressing business.
- **Early 20th century**: According to Louis Réau, Pius X has his name removed from the martyrology and asks, without success, that his images be taken down.

- **1930s**: A first statue is placed on La Réunion, in the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Délivrance in Saint-Denis.
- **Second half of the 20th century**: Red wayside shrines multiply in the uplands of the island; the cult also spreads to Brazil, Argentina and Chile.

The legend of the crow: "Cras" and "Hodie"

Tradition gave Saint Expeditus a telling story. When he decided to become a Christian, the devil is said to have appeared to him as a crow, cawing "Cras! Cras!", Latin for "tomorrow". It urged him to put off his conversion. Expeditus crushed it under his foot, answering "Hodie!", "today!".

This little story almost certainly has no historical basis, but it carries a real spiritual lesson: do not put off until tomorrow the good you can do, or your return to God. The Latin word *expeditus* first meant a lightly equipped soldier, ready to march; it later came to mean prompt, quick, efficient. Hence the idea that Expeditus "expedites" urgent matters. Another widespread legend, just as unverifiable, tells of nuns who received relics in a crate marked *spedito* ("shipped") and took it for the name of a saint. It was already told in Germany in 1910.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Expeditus in art

Statues and pictures of Saint Expeditus almost always follow the same model:

- a young **Roman soldier**, with breastplate, cloak and sometimes a helmet;
- in his right hand, a **cross** bearing the word *Hodie* ("today");
- in his left hand, the **palm** of the martyrs;
- under his foot, a **crow** with a banner reading *Cras* ("tomorrow").

On La Réunion, the statue is often small, made of painted plaster, and the shrine that houses it is painted bright red.



Statue of Saint Expeditus in the church of Saint-François-de-Sales, Nîmes, France.

Why is Saint Expeditus the patron saint of urgent causes?

His patronage comes from his name, not his story: because *expeditus* came to mean "quick", people turned to him when time was short. Students and merchants also invoke him. The crow legend adds a deeper meaning: he is the saint of "today".

Saint Expeditus on La Réunion

On La Réunion, Saint Expeditus is part of the landscape. His cult arrived in the 1930s, when the island's first statue was placed in the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Délivrance in Saint-Denis; from there the devotion spread. Another statue is venerated at Saint-Leu, in the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-

Salette. Soon the faithful were building small roadside shrines, mostly in the uplands, each sheltering a statuette of the saint. They are painted bright red, a color linked to the blood of the martyr.

People leave red candles, red flowers (anthuriums, gladioli), sometimes fruit, water or ribbons, and ex-votos to give thanks for a grace received: a job found, an exam passed, a driving test, a case won, a sick person healed. Historians such as Prosper Ève see it as a cult of cultural mixing, where Catholic tradition meets practices from India and Madagascar, much like Réunion society itself.



A shrine of Saint Expeditus at Petit Serré, in the uplands of La Réunion.

The devotion has sometimes been twisted into requests for revenge or harm against others, or into bargaining. Statues are even found beheaded, overturned or "punished" by disappointed people. The Church on La Réunion has

repeatedly reminded the faithful that a saint cannot be given orders and that one never prays for harm to anyone. It does not forbid the devotion: it invites people to purify it, going through the saint toward God, openly.

What the Church says: praying to Saint Expeditus rightly

A Catholic may ask the intercession of Saint Expeditus, as of any believer who has gone before us in faith. A few guidelines help keep prayer from turning into magic:

- **We pray to God, with the saint.** The saint does not grant anything by himself: he prays with us and for us.
- **We ask for what is good.** A prayer that wishes harm on someone is not a Christian prayer.
- **We do not bargain.** A candle or an ex-voto is a sign of trust and thanksgiving, not a payment.
- **We accept God's answer.** Praying for an urgent cause also means asking for peace if the answer is slow or not what we hoped.

To pray in this spirit, Saintspedia offers a prayer to Saint Expeditus for an urgent cause and a nine-day novena to Saint Expeditus, which can be prayed from April 10 to 18 to end on the eve of his feast.

Saint Expeditus around the world

La Réunion is not an isolated case. In Germany and Austria, statues of Saint Expeditus stand in many Baroque churches. In Sicily, Acireale made him one of its patrons. In Brazil he has become very popular since the 1990s and is patron of the military police of the State of São Paulo. In Buenos Aires, on April 19, thousands of people crowd into the parish of Our Lady of Balvanera.

In Spain, small fried pastries, the *huesos de san Expedito*, keep his memory alive. In the United States, his statue in the Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel in New Orleans is well known to visitors.

His crow legend echoes a very Gospel-like call: "Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). He can be prayed to for a matter that is pressing, and above all to learn not to put off conversion, reconciliation or service to others.

Where to pray to Saint Expeditus

- **La Réunion**: the red wayside shrines of the uplands, and the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Délivrance in Saint-Denis, where the island's first statue was placed.
- **Saint-Leu** (La Réunion): the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, which houses a statue of the saint.
- **Nîmes** (France): the church of Saint-François-de-Sales.
- **Acireale** (Sicily, Italy): the town that has had him as secondary patron since 1781.
- **Buenos Aires** (Argentina): the parish of Our Lady of Balvanera, center of his great feast on April 19.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Expeditus for an Urgent Cause

Saint Expeditus left no writings, and the Church has no official prayer in his honor. The prayers printed on holy cards and leaflets are texts of popular devotion, of very uneven quality and origin. Below is an original prayer by Saintspedia, in English and then in Réunion Creole, written to ask the saint's help in an urgent cause while staying faithful to the faith of the Church.

Prayer to Saint Expeditus for an urgent cause

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Saint Expeditus, you who answered "today" when temptation whispered "tomorrow",

pray for me to God, now that time is pressing on me.

I entrust to you my intention: (name your intention here).

If it is the Lord's will, obtain for me swift help;

and if the answer is slow, obtain for me patience and peace.

Keep me from asking anything against anyone:

let my prayer seek only what is good, for me and for others.

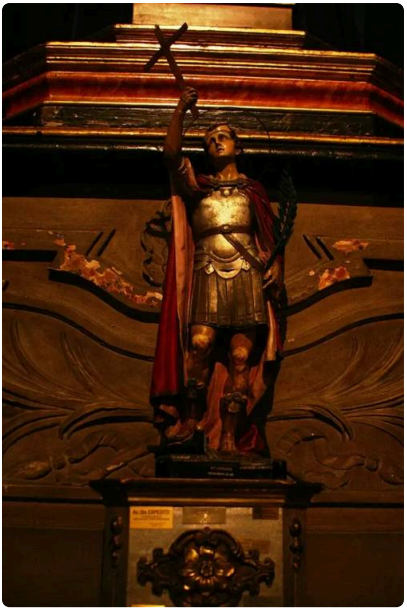
Teach me not to put off until tomorrow what I can do today,

to return to God without delay, to forgive without delay, to help without delay.

And when grace comes, remind me to say thank you.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It is customary to end with an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be.



Saint Expeditus, statue in the church of Conceição Velha, Lisbon.

The same prayer in Réunion Creole

On La Réunion, where the saint is especially loved, many people pray in Creole. Spellings of Réunion Creole vary from one writer to another; this version follows a spelling close to pronunciation.

Sin Expédit, ou la di « zordi » kan lo diab té i di aou « domin »,

pri pou moin kot Bondié, astèr ké lo tan i pres amoin.

Mi done aou mon domann : (di isi sak ou i domann).

Si Bondié i vé, fé ké lo sékour i ariv vit ;

é si la répons i tard, done amoin la pasians é la pé.

Anpèsh amoin domann in n'afèr kont in moun :

ké mon lapriyèr i rod zis lo bien, pou moin é pou lé zot.

Aprann amoin pa ranvoy pou domin sak mi pé fé zordi,

artourn kot Bondié san tardé, pardon san tardé, èd san tardé.

É kan la gras va ariv, fé pans amoin di mèrsi.

Par Zézi-Kri, nout Segnèr. Amèn.

When to pray this prayer

There is no required ritual. You can say this prayer at home, in church or before a statue of the saint, whenever a situation presses: an exam, a job interview, a court date, a medical result, a decision that cannot wait. On La Réunion many people light a red candle, the color of martyrdom, and lay red flowers. These gestures are beautiful as long as they remain signs of trust, not a way of "paying" the saint. You can also have a Mass offered for your intention, or pray the novena to Saint Expeditus over nine days.

When the grace you asked for is granted, tradition invites you to give thanks: a prayer of thanksgiving, an ex-voto, a gift to the poor or to your parish. If it does not come, the answer is not to "punish" the statue, as sometimes happens, but to keep trusting God, who knows better than we do what we need.

A word of Scripture to go with this prayer

> *"Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."*

Source: Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, 6:2.

To learn about the saint's history, his legend and his place in life on La Réunion, read the life of Saint Expeditus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Expeditus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the legend of Saint Expeditus, who refused to put off his conversion until "tomorrow". It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on April 19, begin on April 10; it ends on April 18. You can also pray it at any time of year, whenever a situation presses.

A word of honesty: almost nothing is known for certain about Saint Expeditus, and the Church treats his cult with caution. This novena therefore focuses on what the devotion can teach every Christian: trust in God, prayer that seeks only the good, and the courage not to delay.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. On La Réunion many people light a red candle during the novena: it is a beautiful sign, as long as it is understood as a prayer keeping watch, not a price to be paid. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.



A shrine of Saint Expeditus on the Route des Plaines, La Réunion.

Day 1: Today

The legend says that Expeditus crushed the crow crying "tomorrow" and answered "today". God does not speak to us in a future that keeps being pushed back: he meets us now, in the very situation we are living.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Expeditus, help me to seek you today, without waiting until everything is settled.

Today: Do one thing you have been putting off for a long time.

Day 2: Naming the urgency

There is no shame in crying out to God when life is pressing on us. The psalms are full of such calls: "O Lord, make haste to help me!" (Psalm 70:1). Naming our distress is already placing it in his hands.

Prayer: Lord, here is what worries me and presses on me. I tell you simply, with Saint Expeditus praying beside me.

Today: Write your intention on a piece of paper and keep it with you during the novena.

Day 3: Trusting

Trust is not the certainty of getting what we want. It is the certainty of being loved and heard. Jesus promises it: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8).

Prayer: Lord, I do not know how you will answer, but I know you are listening to me. Increase my trust.

Today: Take five minutes of silence, asking for nothing, simply to be in God's presence.

Day 4: Asking only for good

A Christian prayer never turns against anyone. Even when we have been hurt, we ask for justice and peace, never for another person's misfortune. This is how devotion to Saint Expeditus stays full of light.

Prayer: Lord, purify my request. If I hold anger against someone, turn it into a desire for peace.

Today: Pray by name for someone you are in conflict with.

Day 5: The courage of the soldier

Tradition makes Expeditus a soldier who chose Christ at the cost of his life. His courage was not that of violence but of faithfulness. We too sometimes have to stand firm in our choices.

Prayer: Lord, give me the strength to stay faithful to what is right, even when it is hard.

Today: Keep a commitment you had been tempted to abandon.

Day 6: Turning back to God without delay

The crow's "tomorrow" is also the temptation to keep postponing forgiveness, reconciliation, confession. Saint Expeditus reminds us that the acceptable time is now (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Prayer: Lord, show me what I need to change in my life, and help me begin today.

Today: Take one step toward reconciliation: a message, a call, an apology.

Day 7: Helping quickly those who wait

If we ask God for swift help, we can in turn be swift for others. Around us are people whose need cannot wait: a visit, a meal, a helping hand.

Prayer: Lord, make me a quick answer for someone who is calling on you.

Today: Do without delay a favor someone has asked of you.

Day 8: Accepting God's answer

Sometimes the answer does not come as we hoped. Jesus himself prayed: "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). This is not resignation but trusting surrender.

Prayer: Lord, if what I ask is not good for me, give me something better, and give me the peace to receive it.

Today: In prayer, hand over to God what you cannot control.

Day 9: Giving thanks

The ex-votos in the shrines of La Réunion all say "thank you". Gratitude is the summit of prayer: it recognizes that every good thing comes from God. We can give thanks in advance, and we must not forget to give thanks when grace has come.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for what you have already done in my life, and for what you will still do. Saint Expeditus, pray for us.

Today: Make a gift, however modest, to the poor or to your parish, as a sign of gratitude.

Closing prayer

> *Lord our God, you call us today and not tomorrow. Through the intercession of Saint Expeditus, receive the intention I have carried for these nine days. Grant what is good for me and for those I love, give me patience if the answer is slow, and keep my heart free of all ill will. May I never put off loving you and serving my neighbor. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also end each day with the prayer to Saint Expeditus for an urgent cause. To learn more about the saint, his legend and his place on La Réunion, read his full life.

PILGRIMAGE

The Oratories of Saint Expeditus on Réunion Island

There is no single shrine of Saint Expeditus on Réunion, but hundreds of places of prayer: small oratories painted red, planted by the roadside, at a bend in the Hauts, at the start of a trail or at the back of a garden. Together with a few churches that house his statues, they form the most astonishing landscape of devotion to Saint Expeditus in the world.

Saint-Denis, cradle of the cult on Réunion

The cult of Saint Expeditus spread across the island from the Church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Délivrance in Saint-Denis, which in the 1930s received the first statue of the saint installed on Réunion. This church in the Délivrance district remains a place where people come to pray to the saint within parish life. Another statue is honored in Saint-Leu, in the Church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, itself the site of a major Marian pilgrimage every September.

The red oratories of the Hauts

Very quickly, the devotion spread beyond the churches. Families, neighborhoods and grateful workers built small oratories, generally just big enough to shelter a statuette of a Roman legionary a few inches tall. They are always painted red, the color of the martyr's blood. Some are larger and hold several statues, as at Trois-Mares, in Le Tampon. They are found along nearly every road on the island, especially in the Hauts of the south and east: on the Route des Plaines, around Le Tampon and Saint-Pierre, at Petit Serré, or on the trail that descends toward Grand Bassin.



An oratory of Saint Expeditus on the Grand Bassin trail, in Le Tampon.

How they are kept says a great deal about the vitality of the cult: fresh paint, newly lit red candles, red flowers, ex-votos, plaques of thanks. Many of the faithful stop there discreetly, sometimes without telling their families, because this devotion was long looked down upon.



The chapel of Saint Expeditus at Le Serré, in the Hauts of Réunion.



Saint Expeditus honored alongside Saint Rita, in the Chapel of Saint Rita at the Pont Suspendu, in Saint-Benoît.

A meeting place between traditions

The oratories of Saint Expeditus are visited by Catholics, but also by Réunionese people of other traditions, notably of Tamil or Malagasy origin. Historians see in it a cult of cultural blending, typical of the island. The Catholic Church on Réunion accompanies this devotion with caution: it respects it as an expression of popular faith, reminds people that one prays to God with the saint, and condemns practices that turn into sorcery or revenge, such as requests for harm against others or beheaded statues.

Visiting and praying at the oratories

- **Respect the places**: an oratory is a place of prayer, often private or maintained by a family. Do not touch the offerings, and avoid photographing people who are praying.

- **Pray simply**: a red candle, a flower, a few minutes of silence and the prayer to Saint Expeditus are enough.
- **Think about safety**: many oratories are on narrow mountain roads; park off to the side and do not leave a lit candle near dry vegetation.
- **Go to church too**: Mass at Notre-Dame-de-la-Délivrance or in your own parish gives the devotion its proper place.
- **April 19**: on the feast day of Saint Expeditus, many of the faithful visit the oratories, repaint them or decorate them with flowers.

Saint Expeditus elsewhere in the world

Outside Réunion, you can pray to Saint Expeditus in Nîmes (Church of Saint-François-de-Sales), in Acireale in Sicily, where he is a secondary patron, or in Buenos Aires, where the parish of Nuestra Señora de Balvanera welcomes an immense crowd every April 19. For his history, his legend and what the Church says about him, read the profile of Saint Expeditus, and to accompany you over time, the novena to Saint Expeditus.

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