

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Fabian

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 20

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IN BRIEF

Saint Fabian

Layman elected bishop of Rome in 236, martyred in 250 under the emperor Decius.

Feast day	January 20
Died	January 20, 250, Rome
Era	3rd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Fabian, Pope and Martyr

Novena to Saint Fabian

Credits and sources

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LIFE

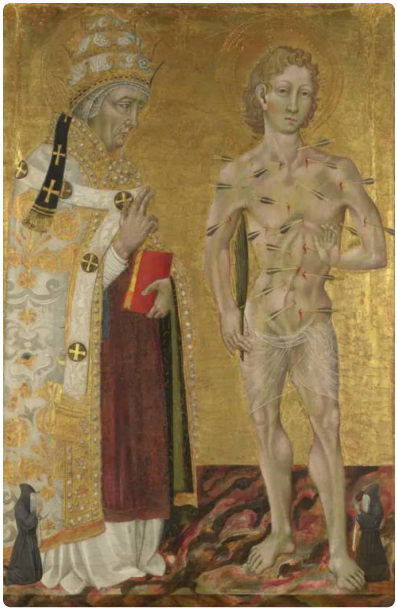
Saint Fabian

Saint Fabian was bishop of Rome, that is, pope, from 236 to 250. A simple layman when he was elected, he governed the Roman Church for fourteen years, organized it and looked after its cemeteries, before dying at the very beginning of the persecution of the emperor Decius. A martyr, he is celebrated on January 20, the same day as Saint Sebastian.

Who was Saint Fabian?

The sources about Fabian are few, but more solid than for many of the popes before him. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea speaks of him, Saint Cyprian of Carthage mentions his death in his letters, and his epitaph has been found. On the other hand, we know neither the date nor the place of his birth.

In 236, after the death of Pope Anterus, the Christians of Rome gathered to elect his successor. Fabian, who had come in from the countryside, was among them, without being a candidate. He left that assembly as bishop of Rome.



Saint Fabian, pope and martyr.

Key dates

- **January 10, 236**: Elected bishop of Rome.
- **236-249**: A period of relative peace for Christians.
- **Late 249**: The emperor Decius orders everyone to offer sacrifice to the gods.
- **January 20, 250**: Dies a martyr in Rome.
- **1850**: His epitaph is discovered in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus.

An election marked by a dove

Eusebius tells that during the assembly, a dove came down and settled on Fabian's head. The faithful saw in it a sign of the Holy Spirit, like the dove at the baptism of Jesus, and cried out that he was worthy. They placed him at once on the bishop's chair.

The story has the flavor of an edifying tradition, but it says something essential. The man chosen was neither a prominent cleric nor a person of influence. It was the community that recognized him, and it was God, the faithful believed, who had pointed him out.

A wise administrator in time of peace

Reorganizing the Church of Rome

At that time, the rivalries between the emperors who followed one another in Rome left Christians a breathing space. Fabian used it to reorganize a Church troubled by doctrinal conflicts and by the schism of Hippolytus. He divided the city into seven districts, each entrusted to a deacon, who looked after the poor and the practical life of the community.

Caring for the dead

Fabian watched over the catacombs, the underground cemeteries where Roman Christians buried their dead. He had his predecessor Pontian and Hippolytus buried there. Both had died in exile, condemned to the mines of Sardinia, and both had been reconciled through martyrdom. By bringing their bodies home, Fabian sealed the peace of a once divided Church.

An authority beyond Rome

His authority reached far beyond the city. Saint Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, praised his conduct. The theologian Origen wrote to him to justify his teaching.

A later tradition, reported by Saint Gregory of Tours, credits him with sending seven missionary bishops to Gaul, among them Denis to Paris and Saturninus to Toulouse. This is why he is sometimes called the "apostle of the Gauls."



The Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, where Fabian was buried.

The first martyr of the persecution of Decius

At the end of 249, the emperor Decius required every inhabitant of the Empire to offer a sacrifice to the gods, attested by a certificate called a *libellus*. For Christians, this was an act of apostasy, a denial of their faith. Many gave in; others hid; some chose to die.

Fabian was one of the first victims. He died on January 20, 250, perhaps executed, more probably as a result of his imprisonment. Christians buried him in the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, where his Greek epitaph was found in 1850.

After his death, the see of Rome remained vacant for more than a year, until the election of Cornelius. In one of his letters, Saint Cyprian praised the way Fabian had ended his life, as an example for a Church shaken by the persecution.

Why is Saint Fabian celebrated with Saint Sebastian?

Fabian has no great traditional patronage of his own. He is celebrated on January 20, the anniversary of his death, the same day as Saint Sebastian, a Roman martyr of the end of the third century. Both were buried along the Appian Way, and the Church has long joined their memory on the same day: a pope and a soldier, two witnesses of faith in the capital of the Empire.

Fabian is a good intercessor for those who are called unexpectedly to a responsibility, for those who govern communities, parishes or dioceses, and for Christians facing pressure to deny their faith.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Fabian in art

- **Papal dress**: he is shown as a pope, often with the tiara or the vestments of a bishop.
- **The palm**: the palm of martyrdom recalls his death under Decius.
- **The dove**: a dove near his head recalls the story of his election.
- **With Saint Sebastian**: in many altarpieces, he appears beside Sebastian, the soldier pierced with arrows.

What can we learn from him?

Fabian shows that an ordinary Christian, called without warning, can become a wise and steady pastor. He used the time of peace to build, to organize and to heal divisions, and he remained faithful when persecution came. His life reminds us that holiness is often made of patient, practical service, until the day when faithfulness asks for everything.

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



The Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way.

Where to pray to Saint Fabian

- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way, and its Crypt of the Popes, where he was buried and where his epitaph can be seen.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Fabian, Pope and Martyr

No ancient prayer to Saint Fabian has come into common use in English. Here is an original prayer, inspired by his life: a layman chosen without warning to lead the Church of Rome, a patient builder in time of peace, and a faithful martyr when persecution came.

Prayer to Saint Fabian

Saint Fabian, you came to the assembly of the faithful as a simple layman, and God chose you to be the shepherd of his Church in Rome. Teach me to welcome the calls of God, even when they take me by surprise.

You used the years of peace to build, to organize, to care for the poor and the dead, and to reconcile those who were divided. Help me to use well the time that is given to me, and to serve faithfully in small and practical things.

When persecution came, you did not deny Christ, and you gave your life for him. Obtain for me the courage to remain faithful when my faith is tested.

Pray for the Pope, for bishops and for all who carry responsibility in the Church, that they may be wise, humble and steadfast.

I entrust to you my own intention: (name it in silence).

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

- **On his feast day**, January 20, which he shares with Saint Sebastian.
- **When you receive an unexpected responsibility**, at work, in your parish or in your family.
- **For the Pope and the bishops**, especially at the time of an election or an appointment.
- **For a divided community**, asking for the gift of reconciliation.
- **For Christians under pressure** to deny or hide their faith.

A short invocation

> *Saint Fabian, faithful shepherd and martyr of Christ, pray for us.*

You can add this invocation after an Our Father and a Hail Mary. To go further, read the life of Saint Fabian or pray the novena to Saint Fabian.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Fabian

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what the ancient sources tell of Saint Fabian, pope and martyr. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, January 20, begin on January 12. You can also pray it at any time of year: when you face a new responsibility, for the leaders of the Church, or for Christians who suffer for their faith.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before 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 ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow Fabian's path: from the assembly where he was chosen to the catacomb where he was laid to rest.



The Crypt of the Popes, where Saint Fabian was buried.

Day 1: An ordinary Christian

Fabian came in from the countryside to join the assembly that would elect a new bishop of Rome. He was not a candidate, and no one expected him to be chosen. God often looks where we do not think to look.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, you were a simple layman when God called you. Help me to believe that my ordinary life matters to God and can serve his plan. Amen.

Today: Thank God for one ordinary task of your day, and do it with care.

Day 2: The sign of the dove

According to Eusebius, a dove came to rest on Fabian's head, and the faithful saw in it a sign of the Holy Spirit. Whatever we make of the story, it reminds us that the Spirit guides the Church and that we can ask for his light.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, chosen by the sign of the Spirit, help me to listen to the Holy Spirit in my decisions and to follow his gentle guidance. Amen.

Today: Before an important decision, pray "Come, Holy Spirit" and wait a moment in silence.

Day 3: Saying yes to the unexpected

Fabian accepted a heavy charge that he had not sought. He could have refused; he trusted. Many of us are asked, one day, to take on a responsibility that seems too big for us.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, you said yes to a call that surprised you. Give me the trust to accept what God asks of me, and the humility to rely on his grace. Amen.

Today: Accept a service someone asks of you without looking for excuses.

Day 4: Building in time of peace

The quarrels among the emperors left the Church a breathing space. Fabian did not waste it: he organized, he strengthened, he prepared. Times of peace are times to build what will hold in times of storm.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, you used the years of peace to strengthen the Church. Help me to use my calm days to deepen my faith and prepare for trials. Amen.

Today: Set aside ten minutes to read a Gospel passage slowly.

Day 5: Seven deacons for the city

Fabian divided Rome into seven districts, each entrusted to a deacon. Charity needs organization, so that no one is forgotten. Holiness also takes the form of good order and faithful service.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, you made sure that every part of the city was cared for. Pray for deacons and for all who serve the poor, and make me attentive to those near me who are in need. Amen.

Today: Do something concrete for a person in need in your neighborhood.

Day 6: Reconciled in death

Fabian brought back to Rome the bodies of Pope Pontian and of Hippolytus, once divided and both dead in exile. By burying them together, he showed that martyrdom had reconciled them. Unity is worth the effort of healing old wounds.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, you sealed the peace of a divided Church. Help me to take the first step toward reconciliation, in my family and in my community. Amen.

Today: Make a gesture of peace toward someone with whom you are at odds.

Day 7: Caring for the dead

Fabian watched over the catacombs, where Christians laid their dead in hope of the resurrection. Caring for the dead and praying for them is a work of mercy and a profession of faith.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, guardian of the Christian cemeteries of Rome, I entrust to you my loved ones who have died. May they rest in the peace of Christ. Amen.

Today: Pray for your deceased relatives by name, or visit a cemetery.

Day 8: Faithful under persecution

When Decius demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods, many Christians gave in. Fabian refused, and he was among the first to die. His faithfulness strengthened a frightened Church.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, martyr under Decius, pray for all who are persecuted for their faith today. Give me the courage not to hide that I belong to Christ. Amen.

Today: Pray for a country where Christians are persecuted.

Day 9: A shepherd for the Church

Fabian was laid to rest in the Crypt of the Popes, among the shepherds of the Church of Rome. His life of service and his death as a witness still speak to those who lead God's people today.

Prayer: Saint Fabian, pope and martyr, pray for the Pope, for our bishop and for our priests. May they be wise, humble and faithful, as you were. Amen.

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

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you chose Saint Fabian, a simple layman, to be the shepherd of your Church in Rome, and you gave him the grace to remain faithful unto death. Through his intercession, help us to answer your call with trust, to serve with patience in times of peace, and to stand firm when our faith is tested. Grant to your Church shepherds after your own heart, and hear the intention I have carried during these nine days, if it is according to your will. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Saint Fabian, pray for us.

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