

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Fabiola

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 27

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IN BRIEF

Saint Fabiola

Roman noblewoman of the fourth century, penitent and founder of a hospital in Rome, patron saint of nurses and divorced people.

Feast day	December 27
Born	Rome, Italy
Died	c. 399-400, Rome, Italy
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	nurses, divorced people, victims of domestic abuse

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Fabiola

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Fabiola

Saint Fabiola was a Roman noblewoman of the late fourth century. Born into the illustrious family of the Fabii, unhappy in her first marriage, she remarried and was later widowed. Returning to a deep faith, she did public penance and devoted her fortune to the poor, founding in Rome a hospital, one of the first in the Christian West. Saint Jerome, who knew her, wrote her praise. She died around 399 or 400 and is celebrated on December 27. Today she is invoked by nurses, by divorced people and by victims of domestic abuse.

Who was Saint Fabiola?

Fabiola belonged to the Roman aristocracy, in a city where Christianity was then winning over the great families. We know her mainly through a long letter that Saint Jerome wrote after her death to his friend Oceanus, to honor her memory. In it he tells her story frankly, without hiding her faults, the better to show the greatness of her conversion.

Married young to a violent and dissolute man, Fabiola eventually left him and obtained a divorce under Roman law. She then remarried while her first husband was still alive, which the Church did not accept. After the death of her second husband, she realized how serious this situation was in the light of the Gospel, and she decided to change her life.

Jerome does not excuse her, but he does not condemn her either. He describes a young woman trapped in a marriage she could not bear, who made a choice that the law of Rome allowed but the Church did not. What interests him is what she did next.

Key dates

- **Fourth century**: Born in Rome, into the family of the Fabii.

- **After she is widowed**: Public penance in Rome, then foundation of a hospital for the sick.
- **Around 395**: Stays in Bethlehem with Saint Jerome and Saint Paula.
- **After her return to Rome**: Founds, with Pammachius, a hospice for pilgrims at Portus, near Ostia.
- **Around 399-400**: Dies in Rome.

A public penance

Saint Jerome relates that on the eve of Easter, Fabiola presented herself before the Lateran Basilica, dressed in the sackcloth of penitents, among the bishop, the priests and the people of Rome, to confess her fault publicly. This step, deeply humiliating for a woman of her rank, struck the whole city. Reconciled with the Church, she did not simply regret the past: she put her whole fortune at the service of the poor.

In the early Church, public penance was a long and demanding path for those who had committed serious sins. That a woman of one of Rome's great families should accept it openly, in front of everyone, showed the sincerity of her conversion. For Jerome, this humility was the root of everything that followed.

Fabiola's hospital

Fabiola founded a hospital in Rome, which Jerome calls by a Greek word, *nosokomeion*, "house of the sick." She gathered there the sick who had been left in the streets and cared for them herself. Jerome describes with admiration this great lady who washed wounds and fed with her own hands the sick whom others did not dare to look at. It was one of the first foundations of its kind in the Christian West.

This is why Fabiola is often remembered as a pioneer of Christian nursing. Long before religious orders devoted to the sick, she showed that caring for the body of a suffering person can be a work of faith and of love.

In Bethlehem, then back in Rome

Around 395, Fabiola left for the Holy Land. In Bethlehem, she stayed with Saint Jerome and Saint Paula, who had founded monasteries there. Eager to learn, she questioned Jerome about the Scriptures, and several of his letters answer her questions. The threat of an invasion by the Huns in the East led her to return to Rome.

Back in her city, she continued her works. With Pammachius, a friend of Jerome, she founded at Portus, near Ostia, a hospice to welcome pilgrims and travelers. She died around 399 or 400. According to Jerome, all of Rome crowded to her funeral.

Why is Saint Fabiola the patron saint of nurses, divorced people and abuse victims?

Saint Fabiola shows that a wounded life can become a life given. She acknowledged her faults with humility, then turned her wealth into care for the most abandoned. Because she founded one of the first Christian hospitals and nursed the sick with her own hands, she is invoked by nurses and caregivers. Because she endured a violent marriage, then divorce and remarriage, she is close to those who suffer in their married life: people who are separated or divorced, and victims of domestic violence. She reminds them that no one is beyond the mercy of God, and that the Church is a place where wounded people can find healing.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Fabiola in art

Fabiola has few traditional attributes. The most famous image linked to her name is the portrait painted by the French artist Jean-Jacques Henner in 1885: a young woman seen in profile, wearing a red veil. This image was widely copied. She may also be shown caring for the sick, or as a penitent in simple clothing.

English readers may also know the name from *Fabiola, or the Church of the Catacombs* (1854), the popular novel by Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman. Its heroine, however, is a fictional character set in an earlier age of persecution, not the historical saint.

Where to pray to Saint Fabiola

No known shrine keeps her relics. You can pray to her in a hospital chapel, beside the sick, or by reading the eulogy that Saint Jerome wrote for her. In Rome, the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, where she did penance, recalls the most striking moment of her life.

To pray with her, use the prayer to Saint Fabiola or the novena to Saint Fabiola, from December 19 to 27.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Fabiola for Wounded Hearts

Saint Fabiola, a Roman noblewoman of the fourth century, knew a violent marriage, divorce and remarriage before doing penance and giving herself entirely to the sick. Saintspedia offers here an original prayer, inspired by her conversion and her charity. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

A wounded life that became a life given

According to Saint Jerome, who knew her, Fabiola did public penance before the Lateran Basilica, then founded in Rome a hospital where she herself cared for the abandoned sick. She is often invoked by caregivers, by divorced people, and by those who have suffered violence in their marriage or relationship.

Prayer to Saint Fabiola for Wounded Hearts

Saint Fabiola, you knew the suffering of a broken home:
pray for all who live with violence, fear or humiliation in their marriage or relationship.
Obtain for them protection, courage
and trustworthy people to help them.

You knew how to acknowledge your faults with humility:
help me to look at my life in truth,
without ever despairing of God's mercy.

You cared with your own hands for the sick whom no one wanted to touch:
bless nurses, doctors, caregivers
and all who tend wounded bodies and hearts.

Pray for people who are separated and divorced,
that they may find welcome and peace in the Church.
I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession,
may my wounds become a path of compassion for others. Amen.

This original text by Saintspedia may be freely used for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Fabiola is celebrated on December 27, in the days of the Christmas octave. You can pray to her:

- before a shift at a hospital, clinic or care home;
- for someone who is a victim of domestic violence, or for yourself if you are;
- for a couple in crisis, or after a separation or divorce;

- when the weight of past mistakes makes it hard to believe in God's forgiveness.

If you or someone you know is in danger at home, prayer does not replace concrete help: contact the emergency services or a local domestic violence helpline, and speak to a person you trust.

A short prayer for caregivers

> *Saint Fabiola, servant of the sick,*
> *make my hands gentle and my heart patient*
> *with those I care for today.*
> *May I see Christ in each of them. Amen.*

Learn more about the life of Saint Fabiola or pray the novena to Saint Fabiola, from December 19 to 27.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Fabiola

This novena to Saint Fabiola is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the Roman noblewoman who suffered in a violent marriage, did public penance, founded one of the first Christian hospitals in the West, studied Scripture with Saint Jerome in Bethlehem and died around 400, mourned by all of Rome. To finish on December 27, her feast day, begin it on December 19: the novena then accompanies the last days of Advent and the first days of Christmas. It can be prayed at any time, especially for a difficult marriage, for victims of domestic violence, for divorced people or for those who care for the sick.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act suggested for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: God is not counting, he is welcoming.

Day 1: A daughter of Rome

Fabiola was born into one of Rome's great families, the Fabii. She had wealth, rank and education. All of this would one day be placed at the service of the poorest.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, help me to see everything I have as a gift to share. Amen.

Today: Name three gifts you have received, and thank God for them.

Day 2: A violent marriage

Married young to a violent and dissolute man, Fabiola knew fear and humiliation at home. Many people today live the same suffering, often in silence.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, protect all who suffer violence in their homes. Give them courage and send them people who can help. Amen.

Today: Find out the number of a domestic violence helpline in your area, so you can share it if someone ever needs it.

Day 3: Wrong choices

Fabiola left her husband, obtained a divorce under Roman law and remarried while he was still alive, which the Church did not accept. Saint Jerome tells it plainly, without hiding her faults.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, help me to look at my own choices in truth, without excuses and without despair. Amen.

Today: Take a few minutes for an honest examination of conscience.

Day 4: Conversion

After the death of her second husband, Fabiola understood how far her life was from the Gospel, and she decided to change. It is never too late to return to God.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, give me the grace of a true conversion of heart. Amen.

Today: If you can, plan to go to confession during these days.

Day 5: Penance before all

On the eve of Easter, Fabiola stood in sackcloth before the Lateran Basilica, in front of the bishop, the clergy and the people of Rome, to confess her fault. Her humility struck the whole city.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, free me from pride and from fear of what others think. Help me to ask forgiveness when I have done wrong. Amen.

Today: Ask forgiveness of someone you have hurt.

Day 6: The house of the sick

Fabiola founded a hospital in Rome and gathered there the sick abandoned in the streets. She washed their wounds and fed them with her own hands.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, bless nurses, doctors and all caregivers. Give them strength, gentleness and patience. Amen.

Today: Thank a nurse or caregiver, or visit someone who is sick.

Day 7: Hungry for the Word

In Bethlehem, Fabiola stayed with Saint Jerome and Saint Paula. She questioned Jerome eagerly about Scripture, and he answered her in his letters.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, give me a love for the Word of God and the desire to understand it better. Amen.

Today: Read the Gospel of the day slowly, or the account of Christ's birth in Luke 2.

Day 8: Welcoming the traveler

Back in Rome, Fabiola founded with Pammachius a hospice at Portus, near Ostia, to welcome pilgrims and travelers. In these Christmas days, we remember that the Holy Family found no room at the inn.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, open my heart and my home to those who are far from home, migrants, travelers and the lonely. Amen.

Today: Invite someone who is alone to share a meal or a moment with you.

Day 9: Mourned by all of Rome

Fabiola died around 399 or 400. According to Jerome, all of Rome crowded to her funeral. The woman once known for her failures was now known for her love.

Prayer: Saint Fabiola, may my wounds become a source of compassion for others, and may my life end in God's love. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who has died, and for people who are separated or divorced in your community.

Closing prayer

On the last day, December 27, you may end the novena before a Nativity scene. The Child of Bethlehem, where Fabiola once stayed, came not for the healthy but for the sick, not for the righteous but for sinners. Entrust to him, through her prayers, the wounds of your own story and those of the people you love.

> *Lord God, rich in mercy,*
> *you led Saint Fabiola from the wounds of her life*
> *to the joy of serving you in the sick and the poor.*
> *Through her prayers, heal wounded hearts,*
> *protect those who live in fear,*
> *and strengthen all who care for the suffering.*
> *Hear the intentions I have entrusted to you during this novena.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Learn more about the life of Saint Fabiola or pray the prayer to Saint Fabiola.

CREDITS

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