

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Flavia Domitilla

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 7

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IN BRIEF

Saint Flavia Domitilla

Christian woman of the imperial Flavian family, exiled under Domitian for her faith at the end of the first century.

Feast day	May 7, May 12 (Eastern Churches)
Born	1st century, Rome
Died	After 95
Canonized	Immemorial cult

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Flavia Domitilla for Persecuted Christians

Novena to Saint Flavia Domitilla

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Flavia Domitilla

Saint Flavia Domitilla was a Christian woman of the imperial Flavian family who, at the end of the first century, was exiled to an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea under the emperor Domitian because she had confessed Christ. Her name remains attached to one of the largest catacombs of Rome, the Catacombs of Domitilla. The Catholic Church celebrates her on May 7.

Who was Saint Flavia Domitilla?

Domitilla belonged to the very highest aristocracy of Rome. A granddaughter or great-granddaughter of the emperor Vespasian, she was related to the emperors Titus and Domitian. The ancient sources that speak of her are few and do not fully agree.

The pagan historian Cassius Dio mentions a Flavia Domitilla, wife of the consul Titus Flavius Clemens, who was accused of "atheism," a charge the authorities then brought against Christians as well as against those drawn to Judaism, and exiled to the island of Pandateria. The Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea, in the fourth century, speaks of a Flavia Domitilla, niece of that consul, banished to the island of Pontia (today Ponza) for bearing witness to Christ.

Historians still debate whether these accounts describe one woman or two relatives with the same name. What can be said with caution is that a Flavia Domitilla of the imperial family was exiled under Domitian, and that Christian tradition honored her very early as a confessor of the faith.

Key dates in the life of Saint Domitilla

- **Second half of the 1st century**: Born into the Flavian family, related to Vespasian, Titus and Domitian.

- **95**: The consul Titus Flavius Clemens is executed on Domitian's orders at the end of his consulship.
- **95**: According to Eusebius, in the fifteenth year of Domitian, Domitilla is banished to the island of Pontia because of her faith in Christ.
- **96**: Domitian is assassinated; one of the conspirators, Stephanus, was the steward of a Domitilla.
- **After 95**: She dies, at an unknown date.
- **4th century**: Saint Jerome reports that pilgrims visit the cells on Pontia where she is said to have lived her exile.

A Christian in the imperial family

The presence of Christians in the emperors' own circle, already at the end of the first century, shows how far the Gospel had spread through Roman society. Eusebius writes that under Domitian the teaching of the faith shone so brightly that even pagan historians recorded the persecution and the witness given to Christ.

He quotes a writer named Bruttius, according to whom a great many Christians suffered martyrdom under that reign, among them Flavia Domitilla, deported to Pontia because she had declared herself a Christian.

In the fourth century, Saint Jerome called her "the most illustrious woman of her age" and spoke of her "long martyrdom": not a bloody death, but an exile lived in faithfulness. Some historians nevertheless urge caution: Domitilla's Christianity is not explicitly attested before Eusebius, and others have suggested she may have been drawn to Judaism.

Jerome's expression is worth pondering. Domitilla did not die in the arena, as far as the sources tell us. Her witness took the form of a slow trial: the loss of rank, of home and of family, and a life spent far from Rome on a small island.

The Church has always honored this kind of faithfulness, which is lived day after day rather than in a single moment.

The Catacombs of Domitilla

On the Via Ardeatina, south of Rome, two inscriptions found on the site of the catacombs mention burial plots granted "by the generosity of Flavia Domitilla." Domitilla therefore seems to have given land for the burial of members of the Christian community and of others.

The site became one of the largest underground cemeteries of Rome, with about twelve kilometers (seven miles) of galleries. There the faithful venerate in particular the martyrs Nereus and Achilleus, as well as Saint Petronilla. Today the catacombs are among those that pilgrims to Rome can visit with a guide.

The legend of the virgin martyr

In the fifth or sixth century, a narrative called the *Acts of Saints Nereus and Achilleus* turned Domitilla into a young consecrated virgin, given the veil by Saint Clement of Rome, exiled to Pontia by her fiancé, then burned alive at Terracina with two companions.

Historians consider this text to have no historical value. It does, however, show the veneration that surrounded Domitilla in Rome, and it long shaped the way artists portrayed her.

Why is Saint Flavia Domitilla honored?

Saint Flavia Domitilla has no traditional patronage of a place or profession. She is honored as a confessor of the faith: a woman who preferred exile to abandoning Christ. Domitilla reminds us that, from the very beginning, Christian faith could cost a great deal, even to those in the highest ranks of society.

She also placed her property at the service of the dead and of the community, offering land where Christians could be buried with dignity. Believers can pray to her for Christians who are exiled or persecuted, for those who must choose between their social position and their faithfulness to Christ, and for all who use their wealth to serve others.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Domitilla in art

Following the legend, artists usually show Domitilla as a young Roman noblewoman, richly dressed, as befits a member of the imperial family. Peter Paul Rubens painted her between Saints Nereus and Achilleus, shown as Roman soldiers. In earlier panel paintings, such as one by Andrea di Bonaiuto in Florence, she stands beside other virgin martyrs like Saint Agnes.

Where to pray to Saint Flavia Domitilla

- **Rome**: the Catacombs of Domitilla on the Via Ardeatina, with the underground basilica of Saints Nereus and Achilleus.
- **Ponza**: the island of her exile, in the Pontine Islands off the coast of Italy.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Flavia Domitilla for Persecuted Christians

Saint Flavia Domitilla, a woman of the imperial family, chose exile rather than deny Christ, and she gave her land so that Christians could be buried with dignity. This prayer asks her help for persecuted Christians and for all who must choose between comfort and faithfulness. It is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Flavia Domitilla for Persecuted Christians

Saint Flavia Domitilla,
born among the powerful of Rome,
you preferred Christ to honors,
and exile to the denial of your faith.

Look with love on Christians who are persecuted today,
on those driven from their homes and their countries,
on those who lose their work, their rank or their family
because they bear the name of Jesus.

Obtain for them courage that does not give way,
peace in the midst of trial,
and the certainty that God never abandons his own.

You who gave your land to receive the dead,
teach me to use what I possess for the good of others,
and to honor the memory of those who have gone before us in faith.

When I am tempted to hide my faith to keep my place,
help me to remain faithful, gently and without fear.
I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

- On her feast day, **May 7**.
- For Christians persecuted for their faith around the world, and for refugees and exiles.
- When your faith costs you something at work, in society or in your family.
- Before a visit to the catacombs of Rome, or on a pilgrimage to the tombs of the martyrs.

- For the dead, especially those buried far from home or without anyone to remember them.

A prayer for the dead, in the spirit of the catacombs

The Christians who were buried in the Catacombs of Domitilla were laid to rest in the hope of the resurrection. You can join your prayer to theirs with this traditional prayer for the departed, in the public domain:

> *Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.*

To know her better, read the life of Saint Flavia Domitilla, or pray the novena to Saint Flavia Domitilla.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Flavia Domitilla

This novena to Saint Flavia Domitilla is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what the ancient sources tell us of her. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on her feast day, May 7, begin it on **April 29**. It is especially suited to prayer for persecuted Christians, for exiles and refugees, or for anyone whose faith is costing them dearly.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment and place your intention before God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day slowly, then pray an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. Carry out the small act suggested for the day. The sources about Domitilla are few, but they speak clearly of one thing: faithfulness to Christ at the cost of everything else. Let this be the thread of your nine days.

Day 1: Born among the powerful

Domitilla was born into the Flavian family, related to the emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian. She had wealth, rank and influence. Yet she discovered a greater treasure: Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Saint Domitilla, help me to see that no position or possession is worth more than the friendship of Christ. Amen.

Today: Thank God for a gift you have received, and ask how you might use it for him.

Day 2: The Gospel reaches Rome

By the end of the first century, the Gospel had reached even the emperor's own family. The faith spread quietly, from person to person, through every level of society.

Prayer: Lord, make me a humble witness of your Gospel in the place where I live and work. Amen.

Today: Pray for one person around you who does not know Christ.

Day 3: Accused of "atheism"

The authorities accused Christians of "atheism" because they refused to worship the gods of Rome. Fidelity to the one true God made them look strange, even dangerous, to the world around them.

Prayer: Saint Domitilla, give me the courage to be different when faithfulness to God requires it. Amen.

Today: Make the sign of the cross before a meal, even in a public place.

Day 4: A family struck by persecution

In 95, the consul Titus Flavius Clemens, a member of her family, was executed on Domitian's orders. Domitilla saw persecution strike those closest to her. Faith can divide families, but it can also unite them in suffering.

Prayer: Lord, comfort families that are torn apart by violence, and gather them one day in your peace. Amen.

Today: Pray for a family you know that is going through a hard time.

Day 5: The road to exile

Domitilla was banished to a small island because she had confessed Christ. She lost her home, her rank and the life she had known. She did not lose her faith.

Prayer: Saint Domitilla, watch over exiles and refugees, and over Christians forced to leave their homeland because of their faith. Amen.

Today: Learn about a country where Christians are persecuted, or support an organization that helps them.

Day 6: A long martyrdom

Saint Jerome spoke of her "long martyrdom." Her witness was not one dramatic moment but years of faithfulness far from home. Most of us are called to this kind of hidden, daily perseverance.

Prayer: Lord, give me the grace to be faithful in small things, day after day, when no one is watching. Amen.

Today: Persevere in a duty that you find tiring or dull, and offer it to God.

Day 7: A place for the dead

Inscriptions on the Via Ardeatina recall burial plots granted "by the generosity of Flavia Domitilla." She used her land so that the dead could rest with dignity. Caring for the dead is a work of mercy.

Prayer: Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen.

Today: Visit a cemetery, or pray for a deceased person whom no one remembers anymore.

Day 8: The communion of saints

In the catacombs that bear her name, Christians venerated the martyrs Nereus and Achilleus and Saint Petronilla. The faithful of Rome prayed near the tombs of their brothers and sisters in faith, sure that death does not break the bond of charity.

Prayer: Saint Domitilla, and all you martyrs of Rome, pray for us who are still on our journey. Amen.

Today: Ask the intercession of a saint you love, and thank God for the communion of saints.

Day 9: Choosing Christ above all

Domitilla's life can be summed up in a single choice: she preferred Christ to everything else. Her memory has been honored in Rome for nearly two thousand years, while the honors she gave up have long been forgotten.

Prayer: Saint Flavia Domitilla, obtain for me the grace to choose Christ in the decisions of my life, great and small. Amen.

Today: Make one concrete choice in favor of your faith, even if it costs you something.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Flavia Domitilla the strength to prefer exile to the denial of your name. Through her intercession, sustain Christians who suffer for their faith, welcome the dead into your light, and grant me a heart that is free and faithful. I entrust to you the intention of this novena: (name your intention). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

After these nine days, you might keep a place in your daily prayer for persecuted Christians, perhaps by praying a Hail Mary for them each evening. If your intention is granted, give thanks to God, and let the example of Saint Domitilla encourage you to remain faithful whatever it may cost.

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