

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Hyginus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 11

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IN BRIEF

Saint Hyginus

Bishop of Rome around 138-142, of Greek origin, at the time of the rise of Gnosticism.

Feast day	January 11
Died	Rome
Era	2nd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Hyginus for Godparents and Faithfulness

Novena to Saint Hyginus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Hyginus

Saint Hyginus was, according to the traditional list, the ninth bishop of Rome, from about 138 to 142. Greek by origin, perhaps from Athens, he led the Church of the capital at the very moment when Gnostic teachers such as Valentinus and Cerdo were spreading their doctrines there. Tradition credits him with organizing the ranks of the clergy and with the custom of godparents at baptism. He is listed in the Roman Martyrology on January 11.

Who was Saint Hyginus?

Very little is known about him, and the sources do not even agree on his place in the list of popes. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who begins the list of the bishops of Rome with Saint Peter, counts him as the ninth; Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, who starts it with Saint Linus, places him eighth. The *Liber Pontificalis*, written much later, says he was a Greek and a former philosopher, and has him come from Athens. Copyists passed on his name in various forms: Hyginus, Yginus, Egenus.

He succeeded Saint Telesphorus, who, according to Irenaeus, died a martyr. Eusebius places the beginning of his time as bishop in the first year of the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius, that is, in 138, and gives him four years in office; the Roman list known as the Liberian Catalogue speaks of twelve years. None of these figures is certain.



Saint Hyginus in the gallery of popes at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Key dates

- **138**: Beginning of his time as bishop according to Eusebius, in the first year of the reign of Antoninus Pius.
- **Around 138-140**: Arrival in Rome of the Gnostic teacher Valentinus, according to Irenaeus.
- **Around 140-142**: Death in Rome; Saint Pius I succeeds him.
- **1969**: His feast is removed from the universal calendar for lack of reliable information about his death; he remains listed in the Roman Martyrology.

Rome, a crossroads of doctrines

In the middle of the second century, the Church of Rome drew Christians from the whole Empire, and with them teachers of every tendency. Irenaeus, confirmed by Eusebius, reports that it was under Hyginus that Valentinus, one

of the most brilliant Gnostic thinkers, arrived in Rome, where he stayed until the time of Anicetus. Gnosticism promised salvation through a secret knowledge reserved for a few initiates.

At the same time, another Gnostic teacher, Cerdo, lived in Rome; he would later inspire Marcion. According to Irenaeus, Cerdo acknowledged his errors and was received back into the Church, then began teaching in secret again and was finally excluded. This account shows a community trying both to welcome repentance and to protect the faith received from the apostles.

In a letter quoted by Eusebius, Irenaeus also recalls that the bishops of Rome of this period, Hyginus included, celebrated Easter on Sunday, yet remained in communion with the Christians of Asia who kept it on the fourteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan. Unity did not require uniformity in every custom.

What tradition attributes to him

The ranks of the clergy

The *Liber Pontificalis* writes that he "organized the clergy and distributed the ranks." Some have seen in this the institution of the minor orders, or a clearer division of roles between priests and deacons, though no early document allows us to verify it.

Godparents and the consecration of churches

A later tradition also credits him with the custom of godparents at baptism, who stand beside the newly baptized and help them grow in the faith, and with the consecration of churches. The decretals that circulated under his name in the Middle Ages are forgeries, so these attributions should be taken as tradition rather than history.

Martyr or not?

Tradition long counted him among the martyr popes, but no early source says so: the *Liber Pontificalis*, usually quick to mention martyrdom, says nothing of it. According to the same collection, he was buried near the tomb of Saint Peter, on Vatican Hill.

Why is Saint Hyginus remembered today?

Saint Hyginus is not the official patron saint of any cause or place. He belongs to those early bishops of Rome of whom we mainly know the setting. He kept watch over a community exposed to attractive doctrines, without breaking with those who prayed differently. What tradition remembers of him, giving order to the clergy and accompanying the baptized, says well what was then expected of a shepherd: to give structure and to hand on the faith. Because of the tradition linking him to godparents, he is a fitting intercessor for anyone asked to be a godfather or godmother.

The role of a godparent is not only a family honor. In the Catholic Church, a godparent promises to help the newly baptized live as a disciple of Christ, by prayer, example and friendship. Asking the help of Saint Hyginus on the day of a baptism, or on its anniversary, is a simple way to take that promise seriously.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Hyginus in art

No authentic portrait of Hyginus exists. Like the other early popes, he appears in the series of mosaic medallions of the popes at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome, dressed as a pope. Later paintings also show him in papal vestments. When he is honored as a martyr, according to the old tradition, he may hold the palm.



The Vatican necropolis, near the tomb of Saint Peter.

Where to pray to Saint Hyginus

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Hyginus was buried near the tomb of Saint Peter on Vatican Hill. Pilgrims can pray to him in Saint Peter's Basilica, and those who visit the excavations of the Vatican necropolis beneath it walk among the graves of the first Christians of Rome. You can also honor him on January 11 by praying for your godparents and godchildren.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Hyginus for Godparents and Faithfulness

Saint Hyginus, bishop of Rome around 138 to 142, guided his Church at a time when Gnostic teachers offered a secret knowledge to a chosen few. Tradition credits him with giving order to the clergy and with the custom of godparents at baptism. This prayer asks his help to remain faithful to the faith of the apostles and to accompany others on the path of baptism. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Hyginus for Godparents and Faithfulness

Saint Hyginus, shepherd of the Church of Rome,
you kept watch over your flock
when new teachers promised a hidden knowledge to a few.
Help me to hold fast to the faith received from the apostles,
offered openly to all, rich and poor, learned and simple.

Tradition remembers you as the friend of godparents.
I entrust to you my godparents and my godchildren,
and all who have promised to help a child or an adult
grow in the life of baptism.
Give them faithfulness to their promise,
patience in their example and love in their prayer.

You gave order to the service of the Church:
pray for our bishops, priests and deacons,
and for all who serve their parish with humility.
Keep us in communion with one another,
even when our customs differ,
so that the Church may be one in Christ.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

- On January 11, the day Saint Hyginus is listed in the Roman Martyrology.
- When you are asked to be a godfather or godmother, or on the day of the baptism.
- On the anniversary of your own baptism or of your godchild's baptism.
- When you feel drawn by teachings that seem attractive but lead away from the faith of the Church.

- For the clergy of your diocese and for vocations to the priesthood and diaconate.

A short prayer for a godchild

> *Lord, you have given me a godchild to accompany in the faith. Through the prayers of Saint Hyginus, help me to be a true witness of your love, and keep N. close to you all the days of his (her) life. Amen.*

This short prayer is also an original text by Saintspedia. To learn more, read the life of Saint Hyginus or pray the novena to Saint Hyginus, from January 3 to January 11.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Hyginus

This novena to Saint Hyginus is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the bishop of Rome of Greek origin who guided the Church around 138 to 142, when Gnostic teachers were spreading their doctrines in the city, and whom tradition links to the ordering of the clergy and to godparents at baptism. To end on January 11, the day he is listed in the Roman Martyrology, begin it on January 3. You can also pray it at any time, for example before a baptism.

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 proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: A Greek in Rome

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Hyginus was a Greek, perhaps from Athens, and a former philosopher. He put his love of wisdom at the service of Christ, the true Wisdom of God.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, help me to seek the truth with my whole mind, and to find it in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today: Take ten minutes to read and reflect on the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

Day 2: Known to God alone

The sources hardly agree on his dates or even on his place in the list of popes. His life is hidden, but it was not lost. God keeps what history forgets.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, teach me to serve without needing recognition, trusting that God sees in secret. Amen.

Today: Do one kind deed without telling anyone.

Day 3: A faith offered to all

The Gnostics promised salvation through a secret knowledge for a few initiates. The Church proclaimed a Gospel offered openly to all, rich and poor, learned and simple.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, keep me humble before the mystery of God, and help me to share the Gospel with everyone. Amen.

Today: Pray the Apostles' Creed slowly, thanking God for the faith of the Church.

Day 4: Discernment

Valentinus, a brilliant teacher, arrived in Rome under Hyginus. His ideas were attractive, but they led away from the faith of the apostles. Not everything that is brilliant is true.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, give me the gift of discernment, so that I may recognize what leads to God and what leads away from him. Amen.

Today: Ask the Holy Spirit for light before a decision you have to make.

Day 5: Welcoming repentance

Cerdo acknowledged his errors and was received back into the Church. The community knew how to forgive, while also protecting the faith when he returned to his secret teaching.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, help me to welcome those who return, and to forgive without naivety and without hardness. Amen.

Today: Consider going to the sacrament of Reconciliation this week.

Day 6: Unity without uniformity

Rome celebrated Easter on Sunday; the Christians of Asia kept it on the fourteenth of Nisan. Yet Hyginus and the bishops of his time remained in communion with them. Unity in faith can bear differences in custom.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, pray for the unity of Christians, and help me to respect those who pray differently from me. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians of another rite or another Church.

Day 7: Giving order to service

Tradition says that Hyginus "organized the clergy and distributed the ranks." In the Church, each one has a place and a service, and all build up the one Body of Christ.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, pray for our bishops, priests and deacons, and help me to find my own place of service in the Church. Amen.

Today: Pray for your parish priest by name, or offer him a word of thanks.

Day 8: Godparents

A later tradition credits Hyginus with the custom of godparents at baptism. A godparent promises to accompany the baptized by prayer, example and friendship, for a whole life.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, bless my godparents and my godchildren, and help me to be faithful to the promises of baptism. Amen.

Today: Contact your godparent or your godchild, or pray for them if they have died.

Day 9: Near the tomb of Peter

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Hyginus was buried near the tomb of Saint Peter, on Vatican Hill. He rests close to the apostle whose faith he guarded and handed on.

Prayer: Saint Hyginus, keep me in communion with the Church founded on the apostles, and pray for the pope, the successor of Peter. Amen.

Today: Give thanks for your baptism, and if you can, find out its date and celebrate it.

Closing prayer

Lord God, you gave your Church in Saint Hyginus a shepherd who kept the faith of the apostles in a time of confusion. Through his prayers, keep us faithful to the truth, bless all godparents and godchildren, give your Church humble and generous ministers, and gather all Christians in unity. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

If you pray this novena before a baptism, you can end it on the day of the celebration itself, and offer the last day for the newly baptized, the parents and the godparents. You may also continue to pray the prayer to Saint Hyginus

each year on the anniversary of the baptism.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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