

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Januarius (San Gennaro), Bishop and Martyr

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Januarius (San Gennaro), Bishop and Martyr

Bishop of Benevento martyred near Pozzuoli around 305, patron saint of Naples, famous for the liquefaction of his blood.

Feast day	September 19
Born	Third century, Campania (Naples or Benevento, according to different traditions)
Died	c. 305, Pozzuoli, near Naples, Italy
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	Naples

In this booklet

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Naples Cathedral and the Treasury Chapel of Saint Januarius

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Januarius (San Gennaro), Bishop and Martyr

Saint Januarius, San Gennaro in Italian, was a Bishop of Benevento who died a martyr near Pozzuoli, on the Bay of Naples, during the Great Persecution of Diocletian, around 305. The patron saint of Naples, he is one of the most popular saints of southern Italy. His fame also rests on a phenomenon observed since the fourteenth century: the liquefaction of the blood kept in glass vials in Naples Cathedral. He is celebrated on September 19.

Who was Saint Januarius?

Little is known for certain about the life of Januarius. The accounts of his martyrdom, called "Acts," were written several centuries after the events and mix ancient memories with legendary elements. What is certain is the antiquity of his cult: from the fifth century his remains were venerated in Naples, and the catacombs that bear his name preserve one of the oldest known portraits of the saint, painted in fresco.

According to tradition, Januarius was Bishop of Benevento, a town in inland Campania, at the beginning of the fourth century. Local traditions disagree about his birthplace: both Naples and Benevento claim him. He is associated with a group of martyrs from the region, including the deacon Sossius of Misenum, the deacon Festus and the lector Desiderius, as well as Proculus, a deacon of Pozzuoli, and two laymen, Eutyches and Acutius.

Key dates in the life of Saint Januarius

- **Late third century**: Born in Campania, according to tradition.
- **Early fourth century**: Bishop of Benevento.

- **303**: Beginning of the Great Persecution under Diocletian.
- **c. 305**: Martyred near the Solfatara, at Pozzuoli, with his companions.
- **Fifth century**: His remains are placed in the catacombs of Naples, at Capodimonte.
- **831**: The Lombard prince of Benevento has his relics carried off to his own city.
- **Twelfth century**: The relics are placed for safekeeping in the Abbey of Montevergine.
- **August 17, 1389**: First known written mention of the liquefaction of the blood, in a Neapolitan chronicle.
- **1497**: Solemn return of the relics to Naples Cathedral.
- **1527**: During a plague epidemic, Naples vows to build a chapel in his honor.
- **1631**: Eruption of Vesuvius; the procession with his relics establishes the tradition of his protection against the volcano.

The martyrdom at Pozzuoli

The traditional account says that Januarius learned of the arrest of Sossius, deacon of Misenum, and went to visit him in prison with his companions. Arrested in turn, they were brought before the governor of Campania. Condemned to be thrown to wild beasts in the amphitheater of Pozzuoli, they were reportedly spared by the animals. They were finally beheaded near the Solfatara, the volcanic crater that overlooks the town.

The legendary element is clear in these details, which are found in other martyrdom accounts too. But the heart of the testimony is solid: a bishop and several clerics of Campania gave their lives for Christ in the time of Diocletian, and the memory of their death was kept by the neighboring Churches. Today a small sanctuary at the Solfatara keeps the stone on which, according to tradition, Januarius was beheaded.



Saint Januarius in a fresco in the Catacombs of San Gennaro, Naples (5th century).

The long journey of the relics

The story of the relics of Januarius is eventful. In the fifth century, the Bishop of Naples had them moved to the catacombs of Capodimonte, which became a place of pilgrimage and took the saint's name. In 831, Prince Sico of Benevento, at war with Naples, seized them and carried them off to his capital. In the twelfth century they were placed in the Abbey of Montevergine, in the mountains near Avellino, where they were forgotten and later rediscovered.

In 1497, Cardinal Oliviero Carafa obtained their return to Naples. Under the choir of the cathedral he built a Renaissance crypt, the *Succorpo*, where the saint's bones still rest.

The blood of Saint Januarius

In the Chapel of the Treasure of Naples Cathedral, two glass vials are kept containing a dark substance venerated as the martyr's blood. Several times a year, especially on the Saturday before the first Sunday of May, on September 19 and on December 16, the archbishop shows the reliquary to the faithful. Sometimes the solid substance becomes liquid: the crowd greets it with joy, and Neapolitans see a failure to liquefy as a bad omen.

The Church has never defined this phenomenon as a miracle in the strict sense, and it has been studied by scientists without a definitive explanation. The Church allows it to be venerated as a sign that invites prayer and remembrance of the martyrs. For Neapolitans, "San Gennaro" is above all a close protector, invoked in epidemics and during eruptions of Vesuvius.



The Chapel of the Treasure of San Gennaro, Naples Cathedral (17th century).

Why is Saint Januarius the patron saint of Naples?

Since the fifth century, Naples has kept and venerated his remains, and for centuries the city has turned to him in its hardest hours: plague, war, the eruptions of Vesuvius. In 1527, during an epidemic, the city vowed to build him a chapel, and the great procession of 1631 sealed his role as protector against the volcano. The bond is so strong that the whole city follows the news of the liquefaction of his blood.

Neapolitan emigrants carried this devotion across the world. In New York, the Feast of San Gennaro in Little Italy has been held every September for generations, with a procession and a great street festival.

More deeply, Saint Januarius is a pastor who did not run away: according to tradition, he was arrested while visiting a brother in prison. His example reminds us that faithfulness to Christ includes solidarity with those who suffer for their faith. To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Januarius, or follow the novena to Saint Januarius, from September 10 to 18, the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Januarius in art

- **Bishop's vestments**: miter, crosier and red vestments of a martyr.
- **Two vials of blood**: often shown on a book he holds, recalling the relic of Naples.
- **Vesuvius**: in many paintings he stretches out his hand to stop the eruption over the city.
- **The furnace**: according to one tradition he came out of a fiery furnace unharmed, a scene painted by José de Ribera in the Chapel of the Treasure.

Where to pray to Saint Januarius

- **Naples**: the cathedral and the Chapel of the Treasure of San Gennaro, with the crypt of his relics.

- **Naples**: the Catacombs of San Gennaro, at Capodimonte, his first burial place.
- **Pozzuoli**: the Sanctuary of San Gennaro alla Solfatara, on the traditional site of his martyrdom.
- **Benevento**: the cathedral of the city where he was bishop.
- **New York**: the Church of the Most Precious Blood in Little Italy, center of the annual San Gennaro festival.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Januarius, Patron of Naples

No prayer written by Saint Januarius has come down to us, and the accounts of his martyrdom were written long after his death. In Naples, popular devotion to San Gennaro is expressed above all through invocations, processions and the veneration of his relics. This page offers an original prayer to Saint Januarius, inspired by what tradition tells of him, along with a few guidelines for praying to him.

A bishop who visited prisoners

According to tradition, Januarius was arrested while visiting the deacon Sossius, who had been imprisoned for his faith. This act echoes the words of Christ: "I was in prison and you came to me" (Matthew 25:36). To pray to Saint Januarius is also to pray for all who are persecuted for their faith today.

When the blood liquefies, the crowd in Naples Cathedral sings the *Te Deum*, the ancient Latin hymn of thanksgiving, and the faithful call on the saint simply: "San Gennaro, prega per noi," "Saint Januarius, pray for us."



Saint Januarius Emerging Unharmed from the Furnace, by José de Ribera (1646), Naples Cathedral.

Prayer to Saint Januarius, patron of Naples

Saint Januarius, bishop and martyr, you who kept the faith in a time of persecution, pray for me and for all who suffer because of the name of Jesus.

You who were not afraid to visit a brother in prison, give me the courage to stay close to those who are alone, sick or rejected, even when it costs me.

You whom the people of Naples call upon in epidemics and under the threat of Vesuvius, I entrust to you my family, my city and all who live in fear. Obtain for us peace of heart and trust in God in the midst of trials.

I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). May your blood, shed for Christ, remind me that love is stronger than death. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Januarius is celebrated on September 19, the traditional anniversary of his martyrdom. In Naples he is also honored on the Saturday before the first Sunday of May, in memory of the return of his relics, and on December 16, in memory of the eruption of Vesuvius in 1631. You can pray to him in times of danger or epidemic, for persecuted Christians, or for someone in prison. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Januarius, and read the life of Saint Januarius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Januarius

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition of Saint Januarius, Bishop of Benevento and martyr. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on September 19, begin on September 10; it ends on September 18. It can also be prayed at any time of year, in a time of danger or for a special intention.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The suggested act carries the prayer into your day.

As you pray, remember that Januarius did not give his life alone. Tradition joins to him the deacons Sossius, Festus and Proculus, the lector Desiderius, and two laymen, Eutyches and Acutius. This novena can therefore be prayed with all of them, and for all who today bear witness to Christ at the risk of their lives.

Day 1: A shepherd for his people

Januarius was first of all a bishop, responsible for a local Church. He prayed, taught and watched over his flock. Holiness begins with faithfulness to the mission we have received, in the place where God has put us.

Prayer: Lord, bless the shepherds of your Church. Give them the strength and gentleness of Saint Januarius.

Today: Pray for your bishop and for the priests of your parish.

Day 2: Visiting a brother in prison

According to tradition, Januarius was arrested while visiting the deacon Sossius. He did not leave alone the one who was suffering for his faith, even though he knew the risk.

Prayer: Lord, teach me not to turn my eyes away from those who are locked up, forgotten or persecuted.

Today: Pray for prisoners, or support a prison ministry.

Day 3: Persecuted Christians

The persecution of Diocletian was the most violent in the Roman Empire. Even today, Christians risk their lives for their faith in many countries. The blood of the martyrs still flows in our own time.

Prayer: Lord, sustain those who are persecuted because of your name. Give them courage, and convert the hearts of their persecutors.

Today: Learn about the situation of Christians in a country where they are under threat.

Day 4: Do not be afraid

The story of the wild beasts that spared the martyrs says, in its own way, that fear does not have the last word. Whoever entrusts himself to God remains free, whatever happens.

Prayer: Lord, you know my fears. Take them into your hand, and give me your peace.

Today: Name one specific fear before God and entrust it to Him.

Day 5: Dying together

Januarius did not die alone: deacons, a lector and lay people went with him. Faith is lived in community, even in times of trial. No one walks to God alone.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for the brothers and sisters who walk with me. Keep us united in faith.

Today: Check in on a member of your parish or community.

Day 6: The blood of the martyrs

The blood venerated in Naples recalls the price of witness. The martyrs loved Christ more than their own lives. Their sacrifice points to the one Sacrifice of the cross.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you who shed your blood for us, make me faithful in small trials as in great ones.

Today: Meditate on one of the Gospel accounts of the Passion of Christ.

Day 7: A protector in times of trial

Plague, war, eruptions of Vesuvius: Neapolitans have always entrusted their misfortunes to Saint Januarius. Prayer of intercession is an act of trust in God's care. When we turn to a saint, we do not replace God; we ask a friend of God to pray with us and for us.

Prayer: Saint Januarius, I entrust to you those who live under threat, in sickness or in disaster. Pray for them.

Today: Make a donation to a charity that helps victims of disaster.

Day 8: A faith of the people

Neapolitan devotion to San Gennaro is joyful, noisy and familiar, and it has traveled with emigrants as far as the streets of New York. It reminds us that the saints are close friends, not distant figures.

Prayer: Lord, give me a simple and trusting faith, one that dares to speak to you as to a friend.

Today: Light a candle in a church and entrust an intention to God.

Day 9: Love stronger than death

The martyrs do not seek death: they choose not to deny love. Their victory is the victory of the Resurrection, and it is offered to us too. In our everyday lives, faithfulness often looks less dramatic: patience, honesty, forgiveness. It is the same love that the martyrs lived.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Januarius and his companions, increase in me faith, hope and charity. Amen.

Today: Write down three blessings you have received during these nine days and give thanks for them.

Closing prayer

Saint Januarius, bishop and martyr, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Protect those who are dear to me, sustain persecuted Christians and obtain for us the grace to remain faithful to Christ to the very end. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Januarius and the prayer to Saint Januarius.

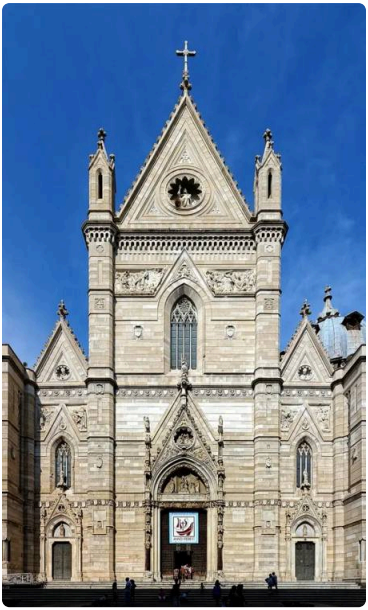
PILGRIMAGE

Naples Cathedral and the Treasury Chapel of Saint Januarius

Naples Cathedral, dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, is the heart of the devotion to Saint Januarius. It houses the Treasury Chapel, where the vials of his blood are kept, and, beneath the choir, the crypt where his bones rest. It is the chief place of pilgrimage dedicated to the patron of Naples.

A Gothic cathedral in the heart of Naples

The present cathedral was built in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, under the Angevin kings of Naples, on the site of older churches. It incorporates the early Christian basilica of Santa Restituta and a baptistery from the 4th or 5th century, among the oldest in the West. Its Neo-Gothic facade dates from the late 19th century.



Naples Cathedral, on Via Duomo.

The Treasury Chapel of Saint Januarius

In 1527, as the plague struck the city, the Neapolitans vowed to build a new chapel for their patron. The work, begun in the early 17th century, resulted in one of the richest Baroque chapels in Italy, opening off the right aisle of the cathedral. It is decorated with frescoes by Domenichino, a dome painted by Giovanni Lanfranco and canvases by several masters, including José de Ribera. It belongs to the city of Naples, which administers it through a lay institution, the Deputation of the Chapel.

The vials of blood and the saint's reliquary bust are kept here. The Treasury Museum, adjoining the cathedral, displays the gold and silver pieces given over the centuries by sovereigns and the people of Naples.

The Succorpo, crypt of the relics

Beneath the cathedral's choir, the crypt of the *Succorpo*, built in the late 15th century at the request of Cardinal Oliviero Carafa after the return of the relics from Montevergine, houses the bones of Saint Januarius. This Renaissance marble chapel is a quieter place of prayer than the Treasury Chapel.



The Treasury Chapel of Saint Januarius, inside Naples Cathedral.

Praying near Saint Januarius

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Januarius. On site, a time of silence in the Succorpo, then in the Treasury Chapel, is a good moment to entrust an intention, especially for persecuted Christians and for those who live in fear. The prayer to Saint Januarius can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places associated with Saint Januarius

- **Naples**: the Catacombs of San Gennaro, in Capodimonte, his first burial place, with early Christian frescoes.
- **Pozzuoli**: the Sanctuary of San Gennaro alla Solfatara, where tradition places his martyrdom and where the stone of his beheading is venerated.
- **Pozzuoli**: the Roman amphitheater, where, according to the traditional account, Januarius and his companions were exposed to wild beasts.
- **Montevergine**: the Benedictine abbey where his relics were kept for several centuries.
- **Benevento**: the cathedral of the city of which he was bishop.

Practical information

The cathedral is in the historic center of Naples, on Via Duomo, reachable on foot from the central station or by metro. The displays of the blood take place on the Saturday before the first Sunday of May, on September 19 and on December 16; they draw considerable crowds, so arrive early. Check the times of Masses and of the chapel and the Treasury Museum with the cathedral before you come.

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