

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Marcellina

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: July 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Marcellina

Consecrated virgin, elder sister of Saint Ambrose of Milan.

Feast day	July 17
Born	c. 330, Rome or Trier
Died	c. 398, Milan, Italy (probably)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	Marcelline Sisters (Sisters of Saint Marcellina)

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Marcellina

Saint Marcellina was the elder sister of Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, and of Saint Satyrus. Born around 330 into a noble Roman family, she received the veil of consecrated virgins from Pope Liberius in Rome around 353, and spent her life in prayer and self-denial. She was her brother's adviser and confidante, and Ambrose dedicated his treatise *On Virgins* to her. She died around 398, shortly after him, and rests in the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan. Her feast day is July 17.

Who was Saint Marcellina?

Marcellina belonged to a Christian family of the Roman aristocracy. Her father, Aurelius Ambrosius, was a high imperial official, most likely praetorian prefect of the Gauls, with his residence at Trier. For this reason some authors say she was born in Trier, like her brother Ambrose. Most historians today think she was born in Rome, before her father left for Gaul. After his death, her mother returned to Rome with the children.

We know Marcellina almost entirely through the writings of Ambrose: the treatise *On Virgins*, written for her in 377, the funeral oration for their brother Satyrus, and three letters he addressed to her. In these pages she appears as a woman of deep faith, austere and well educated, whom her brother consulted and to whom he described the great events of his time as bishop.



Saint Marcellina, Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan.

Key dates in the life of Saint Marcellina

- **c. 330**: Born in Rome according to most historians, or in Trier according to others.
- **c. 353**: On Christmas Day, according to Ambrose, she receives the veil of consecrated virgins from Pope Liberius in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.
- **350s-370s**: She lives a life of prayer and penance in the family home in Rome, with a companion.
- **374**: Her brother Ambrose, then governor in Milan, is elected bishop of the city.
- **377**: Ambrose dedicates his three books *On Virgins* to her.
- **c. 378**: Death of her brother Satyrus in Milan.
- **386**: Ambrose writes to tell her how the Catholics of Milan resisted the Arian empress Justina, and then of the discovery of the relics of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius.

- **April 4, 397**: Death of Saint Ambrose.
- **c. 398**: Death of Marcellina; she is buried in the basilica where her brother lies.

The veil from Pope Liberius

In the 4th century, consecrated virginity was a highly respected way of life in the Church, even before the great women's monasteries developed in the West. Consecrated virgins often lived in their own families, after being consecrated by the bishop in a solemn celebration. Marcellina received the veil in Rome from Pope Liberius, on the feast of the Nativity of the Lord, in Saint Peter's Basilica.

In the third book of *On Virgins*, Ambrose reproduces, in his own reworked form, the sermon the pope preached on that occasion. Liberius invites the young woman to love Christ as her Bridegroom, to keep sobriety and silence, and to pray often. Ambrose also reminds his sister of the austere life she leads: long fasts, vigils and constant reading of Scripture. He even advises her to moderate her penances as she grows older.

A life hidden in God

Marcellina founded no community and wrote no books. Her vocation was lived quietly at home, in a great city, through prayer, fasting and the Word of God. That hidden life made her a model for the many women who, in the early Church, gave themselves to Christ without leaving the world around them.

Confidante of Saint Ambrose

After his election as bishop of Milan in 374, Ambrose remained very close to his sister. Marcellina lived in Rome but made visits to Milan, and he wrote to her at the decisive moments of his ministry.

In 386 he told her how, during Holy Week, he refused to hand over a Milan basilica to the Arians, despite the soldiers sent by the imperial court, and how the people, shut in the church with him, sang hymns and psalms. A few weeks later he announced to her the discovery of the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius. Later still, he told her about his dispute with Emperor Theodosius. These letters show the complete trust that united brother and sister.

The family also knew grief. Around 378 their brother Satyrus, who looked after the family's affairs, died in Milan. Ambrose delivered his funeral oration, in which he spoke of the affection binding the three children together and of Marcellina's presence at his side.

Death and veneration

Marcellina outlived her brother only briefly; Ambrose died on April 4, 397. She was buried in Milan in the basilica now called Sant'Ambrogio, where Ambrose, Gervasius and Protasius also rest. Her tomb is still venerated there. The Church of Milan celebrates her on July 17.

In 1838 the Milanese priest Luigi Biraghi, beatified in 2006, founded with Marina Videmari the congregation of the Sisters of Saint Marcellina, known as the Marcelline Sisters, devoted to the education of girls. The congregation is now present in several countries.



The tomb of Saint Marcellina, Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, Milan.

Why is Saint Marcellina the patron of the Marcelline Sisters?

When Luigi Biraghi and Marina Videmari founded a congregation of women dedicated to educating girls, they placed it under the name of Marcellina. She embodied what they wanted to hand on: a woman consecrated to Christ, formed by Scripture and prayer, cultured, and a support to the Church's pastors. The sisters celebrate her on July 17 in their houses and schools.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Marcellina in art

Marcellina is usually shown as a consecrated virgin, wearing a veil, often holding a book that recalls her life of reading Scripture and the treatise her brother wrote for her. In Milan she is sometimes represented near Saint Ambrose, as part of the family of saints honored in his basilica.

What can we learn from Saint Marcellina?

Marcellina lived a hidden life, yet she supported one of the greatest bishops in the history of the Church. She reminds us of the strength of family bonds lived in faith, and of the fruitfulness of a life given to prayer. You can pray to her for consecrated virgins and women religious, for teachers and educators, for brothers and sisters, and for all who support a pastor by their prayer.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Marcellina and the novena to Saint Marcellina.

Where to pray to Saint Marcellina

- **Milan, Italy**: the Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, where her tomb is found.
- **Rome**: Saint Peter's Basilica, where she received the veil of consecrated virgins.
- **In the houses of the Marcelline Sisters**, in Italy and elsewhere, especially on July 17.



The Basilica of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan, where Saint Marcellina is buried.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Marcellina for Consecrated Life and Families

Saint Marcellina, sister of Saint Ambrose, gave her life to Christ when she received the veil of consecrated virgins from Pope Liberius. In his treatise *On Virgins*, Ambrose records the advice the pope gave her that day. This page offers a passage in free translation, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

The advice of Pope Liberius to Marcellina

In book III of *On Virgins*, Ambrose reconstructs the pope's exhortation to his sister. Here is its meaning, in a free translation by Saintspedia:

> *You have desired a noble wedding, my daughter. The one you have chosen as your Bridegroom is the Son of the eternal King, the Lord whom the angels serve. Love him, my daughter, for he is good. Keep sobriety, love silence, and let prayer accompany each of your days.*

Source: Saint Ambrose, *On Virgins*, book III, chapter 1; free and abridged translation by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Marcellina

Saint Marcellina, you gave your heart to Christ in the flower of your youth: teach me to love him with a simple and faithful love.

You supported your brother Ambrose with your prayer and your counsel: pray for our bishops and priests, and for all who carry the weight of responsibility.

You lived a hidden life of prayer, fasting and reading of Scripture: give me a taste for silence and for the Word of God.

Watch over brothers and sisters, that they may love and help one another. Watch over women religious and teachers, and over young women who are seeking their path in life. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Marcellina's feast day is July 17. You can pray to her:

- on the day of a religious profession or a consecration of virgins;
- for a sister or a brother, especially when family ties are strained;
- to support a priest or a bishop you know, by your prayer;
- for teachers and for the education of girls, as the Marcelline Sisters do;
- when you need silence and a steadier life of prayer.

A short invocation

> *Saint Marcellina, faithful bride of Christ and sister of Saint Ambrose, pray for us.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Marcellina or pray the novena to Saint Marcellina, from July 9 to July 17.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Marcellina

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Marcellina, the elder sister of Saint Ambrose of Milan, who received the veil of consecrated virgins from Pope Liberius and supported her brother with her prayer. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, begin on July 9; it ends on July 17. You can also pray it at any time of year, for a vocation, for a brother or sister, or for a priest you love.

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 proposed for each day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

You may begin each day with this invocation:

> *Lord Jesus, Bridegroom of faithful souls, draw me closer to you. Saint Marcellina, pray for us. Amen.*

Day 1: A family of faith

Marcellina grew up in a Christian family of the Roman nobility, with her brothers Ambrose and Satyrus. All three are honored as saints. Faith was not only learned at church: it was handed on at home, in the ordinary life of a household.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family. May the faith we received be handed on in our homes with joy and patience.

Today: Pray by name for each member of your family.

Day 2: Christ as Bridegroom

On Christmas Day, in Saint Peter's Basilica, Pope Liberius gave Marcellina the veil of consecrated virgins. He told her she had chosen as her Bridegroom the Son of the eternal King. Her whole life became an answer to that love.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you love me first. Help me to answer your love with my whole life, in the vocation you give me.

Today: Spend five minutes in silence before a crucifix or in a church.

Day 3: The gift of silence

Liberius urged Marcellina to love silence. Silence is not emptiness: it is the space where God's voice can be heard and where words become fewer and truer.

Prayer: Lord, quiet the noise in my heart. Teach me to listen before I speak.

Today: Turn off your phone or the radio for an hour and offer that time to God.

Day 4: Nourished by Scripture

Ambrose speaks of his sister's assiduous reading of Scripture. Day after day, the Word of God shaped her thoughts and her choices.

Prayer: Lord, may your Word be a lamp for my steps. Give me a hunger to read it and the grace to live it.

Today: Read the Gospel of the day slowly and keep one sentence in your heart.

Day 5: Fasting with measure

Marcellina fasted and kept vigils, so much that her brother advised her to moderate her penance as she grew older. Self-denial is good when it frees us for love, and wisdom knows its limits.

Prayer: Lord, teach me a penance that makes me freer and kinder, not proud or harsh with myself.

Today: Give up one small comfort and offer it for someone who is suffering.

Day 6: Supporting a pastor

When Ambrose became bishop of Milan, Marcellina stayed close to him. He wrote to her at the hardest moments, as during the Holy Week of 386, when he refused to hand a basilica over to the Arians. Her prayer and her counsel were part of his strength.

Prayer: Saint Marcellina, pray for our bishops and priests. Give them courage, wisdom and friends who pray for them.

Today: Pray for your parish priest or your bishop, and if you can, send him a word of thanks.

Day 7: Brothers and sisters

The letters of Ambrose to Marcellina show deep trust between brother and sister. When Satyrus died, Ambrose spoke of the affection that bound the three of them together.

Prayer: Lord, heal the wounds between brothers and sisters. Make our families places of trust and forgiveness.

Today: Call or write to a brother, a sister or a cousin you have not contacted for a long time.

Day 8: Grief and hope

Marcellina lost Satyrus around 378 and then Ambrose in 397, before dying herself shortly after. She lived these losses in faith, in the hope of the resurrection.

Prayer: Lord, comfort those who mourn a brother, a sister or a friend. Keep our hope fixed on the life you promise.

Today: Pray for a loved one who has died, and for someone who is grieving.

Day 9: A hidden life that bears fruit

Marcellina founded nothing and wrote nothing, yet her memory has lasted for sixteen centuries, and a congregation of sisters dedicated to educating girls bears her name. A life hidden in God is never wasted.

Prayer: Saint Marcellina, teach me to be faithful in small things. Pray for women religious, for teachers, and for young people seeking their vocation.

Today: Do a good deed in secret, without telling anyone.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Marcellina, sister of Saint Ambrose and faithful bride of Christ, you lived in prayer, silence and the Word of God. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days. Obtain for me a heart that loves Christ above all, a family united in faith, and the joy of supporting others by prayer. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Discover the life of Saint Marcellina and the prayer to Saint Marcellina.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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