

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Marcellus the Centurion

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: October 30

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Marcellus the Centurion

Roman army officer martyred in Tangier in 298 for refusing to worship the gods, patron saint of León.

Feast day	October 30
Born	3rd century, unrecorded (León according to Spanish tradition)
Died	October 30, 298, Tangier, Morocco
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	León, Spain

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Marcellus the Centurion, Soldier of Christ

Novena to Saint Marcellus the Centurion

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Marcellus the Centurion

Saint Marcellus the Centurion, also called Marcellus of Tangier, was an officer of the Roman army who threw down his military belt during a feast in honor of the emperors, declaring that he served Christ alone. He was beheaded in Tangier, in North Africa, on October 30, 298. The acts of his trial, very plain and sober, are among the most valuable records of the martyrs of that period. Patron saint of the city of León, in Spain, he is celebrated on October 30.

Who was Saint Marcellus the Centurion?

Marcellus was a centurion, an officer commanding about a hundred men, in a legion of the Roman army. At the end of the third century, the Empire was ruled by Diocletian and Maximian, and the feasts honoring the emperors included sacrifices to the gods. For a Christian, taking part meant denying the faith. Marcellus refused publicly, and his refusal cost him his life.

What the sources tell us

We know his story from the *Acts of Saint Marcellus*, which reproduce the questioning at his trial. Several versions exist, but historians consider that they preserve an authentic core, close to the official court records.

A later tradition, born in Spain, makes Marcellus a native of León, married and the father of twelve sons, all martyrs. These additions are legendary, as the Bollandist scholar Baudouin de Gaiffier showed. The most reliable account places his sentence and death in Tingis, today's Tangier, in Morocco.

Key dates in the life of Marcellus

- **Second half of the 3rd century**: Born at an unknown date and place; Spanish tradition links him to León.

- **Late 3rd century**: A Christian, he serves as a centurion in a legion of the Roman army.
- **298**: During a feast honoring the emperors, he throws down his belt and insignia before the standards and declares himself a soldier of Christ.
- **Summer and autumn 298**: Imprisoned, then tried in Tangier.
- **October 30, 298**: Sentenced by Aurelius Agricolanus and beheaded in Tangier.
- **1493**: According to the tradition of León, his relics are moved from Tangier to León, under the Catholic Monarchs.

The gesture of the belt

According to the *Acts*, while the legion was celebrating the emperors' birthday with banquets and sacrifices, Marcellus stepped forward before the standards. He took off his military belt, the sign of his office, and threw it to the ground along with his vine staff, the badge of a centurion, and his weapons. He declared that he served Jesus Christ, the eternal King, and could no longer serve the emperors if he had to worship their gods of wood and stone.

A saying is often quoted in his name, in various forms, expressing his refusal of any service that would keep him from belonging wholly to Christ. Cardinal Baronius, the sixteenth-century Church historian, summed up the affair this way: Marcellus was horrified by these impious superstitions and declared aloud that he was a soldier of Jesus Christ, the eternal King.

Trial and death

Marcellus was arrested at once and put in prison. A first magistrate, the prefect of the legion, questioned him and wrote a report. The case was then sent to Aurelius Agricolanus, who held office in Tangier as deputy of the praetorian prefects.

Before him, Marcellus simply confirmed what he had said. He did not try to defend himself or to provoke: he repeated that a Christian could not take part in the worship of idols. Agricolanus sentenced him to death for deserting military service and offending the gods. Marcellus was beheaded on October 30, 298. The *Acts* report that he said to his judge: "May God bless you."

Saint Cassian the court clerk

Tradition adds that the court clerk, Cassian, refused to write down the sentence, which he considered unjust, and was martyred in turn a few weeks later. Saint Cassian of Tangier is celebrated on December 3.



The church of San Marcelo in León, which keeps his relics.

Why is Saint Marcellus the patron saint of León?

Devotion to Saint Marcellus grew above all in Spain, in León, where a very old church is dedicated to him. The local tradition, attested in the Middle Ages, makes him a son of the city and the father of a family of martyrs, including Saints Claudius, Lupercus and Victorius, who are also honored in León.

According to tradition, his relics were brought from Tangier to León in 1493, during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. They are venerated in the church of San Marcelo, in the heart of the city. Saint Marcellus is one of the patrons of León, and his feast is celebrated there with solemnity.

Beyond León, Catholics also turn to him as a model for Christians in the armed forces and for anyone facing a conflict between their work and their conscience.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Marcellus in art

Saint Marcellus is shown as a Roman soldier, often with the centurion's insignia he threw to the ground, such as the belt and the vine staff, and sometimes with the palm of martyrdom. Icons may show him in an officer's tunic holding a cross.

What can we learn from Saint Marcellus the Centurion?

Marcellus was not a rebel who enjoyed provocation. He served loyally until the day he was ordered to perform an act contrary to his faith. His gesture proclaims the primacy of God over every human authority and the freedom of conscience. He also reminds us that faithfulness to Christ may require giving up a career, a position or security.

We can pray to him for Christian soldiers and military families, for those who face a conflict of conscience at work, and for the courage to say no when necessary, calmly and without hatred. See the prayer to Saint Marcellus the Centurion and the novena to Saint Marcellus the Centurion.

Where to pray to Saint Marcellus the Centurion

- **León** (Spain): the church of San Marcelo, where his relics are venerated.
- **Tangier** (Morocco): the city of his martyrdom, where the Catholic Church is still present.
- **Churches of Saint Marcellus**: many parishes in Spain and elsewhere honor him under this name.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Marcellus the Centurion, Soldier of Christ

Saint Marcellus the Centurion, a Roman officer beheaded in Tangier in 298 for refusing to sacrifice to the gods, is honored as patron of León, in Spain. As far as we know, there is no traditional English prayer in his honor. This page offers an original prayer by Saintspedia, drawn from the words the *Acts* of his martyrdom attribute to him, along with intentions connected to his life.

The words of the martyr

According to the *Acts of Saint Marcellus*, the centurion declared before his soldiers that he served Jesus Christ, the eternal King. Before his judge he stayed calm and spoke no word of hatred. You can begin your prayer by repeating this profession of faith: "Lord Jesus, eternal King, it is you I want to serve."

Prayer to Saint Marcellus the Centurion

Saint Marcellus, soldier of Christ, you laid down your belt rather than deny your faith: give me the courage to stay faithful to the Lord when the world asks me to compromise my conscience.

You served loyally before saying no: teach me to fulfill my duties honestly, and to discern the moment when I must refuse, calmly and without pride.

You blessed your judge instead of cursing him: keep me from anger and resentment. Give me a free and peaceful heart toward those who wrong me.

Watch over soldiers and their families, over all who hold power or authority, and over everyone facing a conflict of conscience at work. Protect the city of León and all who call upon you. I entrust to you my intention (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may I serve Jesus Christ, the eternal King, all the days of my life. Amen.

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

Intentions to entrust to Saint Marcellus

- For Christians in the armed forces and their chaplains.
- For those who must make a difficult decision for the sake of their conscience.
- For the Christians of North Africa and the Church in Morocco.
- For the city and diocese of León.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Marcellus is celebrated on October 30, the anniversary of his martyrdom. You can pray to him before a delicate professional choice, for a loved one serving in the military, or to ask for the strength to remain faithful. You can also pray the novena to Saint Marcellus the Centurion or read his life.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Marcellus the Centurion

This novena to Saint Marcellus the Centurion is an original composition by Saintspedia. For nine days, it follows the Roman officer who laid down his military belt rather than worship false gods, and who was beheaded in Tangier in 298. To end on his feast day, October 30, begin on October 22. It is also a good novena for anyone facing a conflict of conscience, or for a loved one serving in the armed forces.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a few quiet minutes. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and add an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. You may also repeat the words attributed to Marcellus: "Lord Jesus, eternal King, it is you I want to serve." Then do the small act suggested.

Day 1: A faithful servant

Marcellus was a centurion, an officer responsible for about a hundred men. He did his duty loyally. Holiness does not despise ordinary work; it begins by doing it well and honestly. Before his great act of witness, Marcellus lived years of quiet faithfulness.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, help me to fulfill my daily duties with honesty, diligence and care for those entrusted to me. Amen.

Today: Do your work today with special care, offering it to God.

Day 2: A Christian among soldiers

Marcellus was a Christian in an army where faith in Christ was not shared by all and could be dangerous. He lived his faith in a demanding environment, among comrades who may not have shared it, without hiding who he was.

Prayer: Lord, bless Christians in the armed forces and all who live their faith in difficult workplaces. Give them courage and peace. Amen.

Today: Pray for a soldier, a veteran or a military family you know.

Day 3: The line that cannot be crossed

When the legion celebrated the emperors with sacrifices, Marcellus knew that taking part would mean denying Christ. Every conscience has a line that it must not cross.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, enlighten my conscience, and help me to know clearly what I must never do. Amen.

Today: Take a moment for an honest examination of conscience.

Day 4: Laying down the belt

Before the standards, Marcellus threw down his belt, his vine staff and his weapons. He gave up his career and his security rather than his faith. Faithfulness to Christ can cost something real. Marcellus knew what he was losing, and he chose Christ anyway.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, obtain for me the freedom to let go of what keeps me from belonging entirely to Christ. Amen.

Today: Give up something that distracts you from God, even for one day.

Day 5: Christ the eternal King

Marcellus declared that he served Jesus Christ, the eternal King. Earthly powers pass away; Christ reigns forever. To serve him is the deepest freedom.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, eternal King, reign in my heart, my home and my work. Amen.

Today: Pray slowly the words of the Our Father: "Thy kingdom come."

Day 6: Calm before the judge

At his trial, Marcellus neither defended himself nor provoked his judges. He simply confirmed what he had said. Courage is not noise; it is peaceful firmness. The truth does not need shouting to be heard.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, help me to speak the truth calmly, without aggression and without fear. Amen.

Today: In a disagreement, express your view gently and firmly, and listen to the other person.

Day 7: Blessing the judge

According to the *Acts*, Marcellus said to the man who sentenced him: "May God bless you." Like Christ on the cross, he answered injustice with blessing.

Prayer: Lord, heal my heart of resentment, and teach me to bless those who wrong me. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for someone who has hurt you.

Day 8: The witness of Cassian

Tradition says that Cassian, the court clerk, refused to write down the unjust sentence and was martyred in turn. One person's courage can awaken courage in others. We never know who is watching our example and drawing strength

from it.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Marcellus and Saint Cassian, give courage to those who are pressured to take part in injustice. Amen.

Today: Refuse to take part in gossip, dishonesty or injustice, however small.

Day 9: The crown of the martyr

Marcellus was beheaded on October 30, 298. Centuries later, his relics are venerated in León, and the Church still remembers his witness. Faithfulness to Christ is never lost. What is given to God out of love bears fruit far beyond what we can see, in our own lives and in the lives of those who come after us.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus the Centurion, soldier of Christ, obtain for me the grace to serve the eternal King faithfully until the end of my life. Amen.

Today: Choose one concrete way to witness to your faith in the coming week.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Marcellus the courage to lay down the honors of this world rather than deny your Son. Through his intercession, strengthen those who face conflicts of conscience, protect soldiers and their families, bless the city of León and the Church in North Africa, and hear the intention I have carried during these nine days (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord, the eternal King. Amen.*

To continue, pray the prayer to Saint Marcellus the Centurion or read his life.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Bocachete, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source
- The church of San Marcelo in León, which keeps his relics.: Image: Zarateman, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com