

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Martha

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 29

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IN BRIEF

Saint Martha

Sister of Mary and Lazarus, friend and hostess of Jesus in Bethany, patron saint of cooks and homemakers.

Feast day	July 29
Born	1st century, Bethany, near Jerusalem (according to the Gospel)
Died	1st century, Tarascon, according to the tradition of Provence
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	innkeepers, cooks, homemakers

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Martha: the Faith of Bethany

Novena to Saint Martha

Royal Collegiate Church of Saint Martha in Tarascon

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Martha

Saint Martha is one of the friends of Jesus named explicitly in the Gospels. With her sister Mary and her brother Lazarus, she welcomed him into their home in Bethany, at the gates of Jerusalem. She is often remembered as the busy hostess, but the Gospel of John also gives her one of the most beautiful professions of faith in the New Testament. A tradition from Provence brings her to Gaul and has her die at Tarascon. She is celebrated on July 29, now together with Mary and Lazarus.

Who was Saint Martha?

All that is known for certain about Martha comes from three Gospel passages. She lived in Bethany, a village on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, about two miles from Jerusalem, with her sister Mary and her brother Lazarus. Saint Luke presents her as the one who welcomed Jesus into her home; Saint John notes that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5).

The text says nothing about her age, her parents or her circumstances, except that she seems to have run the household and taken charge of its hospitality. Her name, of Aramaic origin, means "lady" or "mistress of the house". The Gospels mention no husband, and tradition has always seen her as a woman devoted to the service of Jesus and his disciples, who found in Bethany a familiar stopping place on their way up to Jerusalem.

Key dates

- **c. 28-30**: Jesus is welcomed in Martha's home; the episode of Martha and Mary told by Saint Luke (Luke 10:38-42).
- **Shortly before the Passion**: Death of Lazarus; Martha goes out to meet Jesus and professes her faith; Lazarus is raised to life (John 11).

- **Six days before Passover**: A meal in Bethany where "Martha served" and Mary anoints the feet of Jesus (John 12:1-3).
- **1st century**: Dies, in a place the ancient sources do not specify.
- **12th century**: The cult of Saint Martha grows at Tarascon, where her tomb is venerated; the church is consecrated in 1197.
- **13th century**: The *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine spreads the story of her coming to Provence and of the Tarasque.
- **1969**: The reform of the Roman calendar keeps her memorial on July 29.
- **2021**: Pope Francis enters in the calendar the joint memorial of Saints Martha, Mary and Lazarus on July 29.

Martha and Mary: serving and listening

The best-known episode is found in Saint Luke. Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him. Her sister Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to his word, while Martha was busy with much serving. Exasperated, she spoke up: did he not care that her sister had left her to serve alone? His answer has become famous: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her."

This passage has fed centuries of commentary. The Fathers of the Church saw in it the image of the active life and the contemplative life, and Saint Augustine stresses that Martha did nothing wrong: she was serving the Lord, but she let herself be scattered. Jesus does not reproach her for her hospitality; he invites her not to lose sight of the one she is welcoming. Martha thus became the saint of all who serve and risk wearing themselves out.



Christ in the House of Martha and Mary, by Johannes Vermeer (c. 1655, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh).

Martha's faith at the tomb of Lazarus

Chapter 11 of John's Gospel shows another side of Martha. Lazarus fell ill; the two sisters sent word to Jesus, who arrived only after his death. As soon as she heard he was coming, Martha went out to meet him, while Mary stayed seated in the house. She did not hide her grief: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." But she added at once that she knew God would give him whatever he asked.

Jesus then revealed to her: "I am the resurrection and the life." And Martha answered with a profession of faith of great power: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." These words, spoken by a woman, are the counterpart in John's Gospel of Peter's profession of faith in the other Gospels.

Shortly afterward, at the tomb, Martha objected realistically that the body would already smell; Jesus reminded her that if she believed, she would see the glory of God. Lazarus came out of the tomb. A few days later, at a meal given in Bethany in honor of Jesus, the evangelist simply notes: "Martha served." Service and faith are no longer opposed: the woman who believed now serves the one she has recognized.

The tradition of Provence and the Tarasque

The Gospels say nothing about the rest of Martha's life. From the Middle Ages, a tradition, set down in particular in the *Golden Legend* in the thirteenth century, tells that the friends of Jesus, driven out of Judea, landed in Provence. Martha is said to have settled near the Rhône, at Tarascon, where an amphibious monster, the Tarasque, was terrorizing the region. She tamed it with the sign of the cross and holy water, then led it, docile, to the townspeople, and lived a life of prayer and charity until her death.

Historians consider this story a legend, whose present form developed in the Middle Ages, when Tarascon claimed to possess the saint's tomb. The Church does not make it an article of faith. But it deeply marked Provence: the collegiate church of Tarascon keeps the crypt where her tomb is venerated, and the Tarasque processions, held every June, are among the traditions listed by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage.

Why is Saint Martha the patron saint of cooks, innkeepers and homemakers?

Because the Gospel shows her welcoming Jesus, preparing the meal and serving at table. She is the patron saint of innkeepers and hotel keepers, of cooks, and of homemakers. Saint Martha is a saint of everyday life: she reminds us that we can love God by opening our door, preparing a meal or taking care of a home, as long as we do not let ourselves be consumed by busyness. She also shows

that firm faith can live alongside frankness, grief and even a reproach addressed to the Lord. She is prayed to for families, for hosts, for those who work in restaurants or in caregiving, and for inner peace amid daily tasks.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Martha, built on her profession of faith, or follow the novena to Saint Martha, from July 20 to 28, the eve of her feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Martha in art

Saint Martha is often shown with a bunch of keys at her belt, the sign of the mistress of the house, or with a ladle or kitchen utensils. In Provence and in many churches, she appears with the tamed Tarasque at her feet, holding a cross and an aspergillum for holy water. In Gospel scenes, painters like Vermeer show her standing and bringing bread, while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus.



Saint Martha and the Tarasque, according to the tradition of Provence.

Where to pray to Saint Martha

- **Tarascon** (Provence, France): the royal collegiate church of Sainte-Marthe, whose crypt holds her venerated tomb.
- **Bethany** (today al-Eizariya, West Bank): the Franciscan Church of Saint Lazarus, built near the tomb of Lazarus, on the site of the family's home.
- **Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer** (Camargue): the church where tradition places the arrival of the friends of Jesus in Provence.
- **Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume** (Var): the basilica linked, in the same tradition, to Saint Mary Magdalene.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Martha: the Faith of Bethany

There is no prayer composed by Saint Martha herself. But the Gospel of John has kept her words at the most painful moment of her life, the death of her brother Lazarus, and one of them is a true prayer of faith. Below you will find that passage, then an original prayer to Saint Martha by Saintspedia.

Martha's profession of faith (John 11:25-27)

Jesus arrives in Bethany four days after the death of Lazarus. Martha goes out to meet him. Translation from the Greek by Saintspedia; the Gospel text is in the public domain.

> *Jesus said to her: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*
>
> *She said to him: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world."*

Source: Gospel of John, chapter 11, verses 25 to 27. Martha's answer can be prayed just as it is, especially in grief or in times of trial.

Another word to ponder

> *"Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needed."*

Source: Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verses 41 and 42 (translation by Saintspedia). These are not Martha's words, but those Jesus spoke to her, with affection, calling her twice by name.

Prayer to Saint Martha

> *Saint Martha, you opened your home to the Lord and served him with your hands: pray for me.*
>
> *You know the tiredness of overfull days, the meals to prepare, the worries that pile up. When I am anxious about many things, remind me of the one thing needed, and teach me to serve without losing my peace.*
>
> *You wept for your brother and still said to Jesus, "I believe": strengthen my faith in days of sorrow. I entrust to you my home, those who live in it and those I welcome there, and my intention (name it in silence).*
>
> *Obtain for me a welcoming heart, generous hands, and eyes turned toward the One who is the resurrection and the life. Amen.*

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Martha is celebrated on July 29, together with her sister Mary and her brother Lazarus since 2021. You can pray to her at any time for family life, for hospitality, when you feel overwhelmed by work and chores, or in a time of mourning.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Martha, and discover the life of Saint Martha.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Martha

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the Gospel passages in which Saint Martha appears. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast on July 29, begin on July 20: it ends on July 28. You can also pray it at any time of year, for your family and your home, for a heavy workload, or in a time of grief.

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. The small act suggested for the day, often very simple, helps carry the prayer into the life of the home. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow Martha through the Gospels: the welcome in Bethany, the busy service, the gentle words of Jesus, the grief at the death of Lazarus, the great "I believe", and the last meal where "Martha served" in peace.



Saint Martha, in a church window or statue.

Day 1: Opening the door

"A woman named Martha welcomed him." Everything begins with a welcome. Martha opened her home to Jesus and to those who followed him, without calculation.

Prayer: Lord, I want to welcome you into my home. Make my house open, and my heart even more so.

Today: Invite someone over, or check in on a person who lives alone.

Day 2: Serving with her hands

Martha prepared, cooked and organized. Practical service is a way of loving, and Jesus never looked down on it: he himself came to serve, and he washed the feet of his disciples.

Prayer: Jesus, servant of all, bless the work of my hands and make it an offering.

Today: Do a household task with care, entrusting it to God.

Day 3: Busyness

Martha let herself be swallowed up by much serving, to the point of irritation. Everyone knows those moments when we do a great deal but have lost our peace.

Prayer: Lord, you see how restless I am. Calm me, and show me what really matters.

Today: Give up one unnecessary activity to make room for a quiet moment.

Day 4: The one thing needed

"One thing is needed." Jesus does not ask Martha to stop serving, but not to forget the one she is serving. Listening to his word is the better part. Even a few minutes of attention to God can change the way we live a whole day of work.

Prayer: Lord, help me to sit at your feet, like Mary, even in the middle of my work.

Today: Slowly read Luke 10:38-42.

Day 5: Telling God her pain

"Lord, if you had been here..." Martha did not hide her grief or her confusion. She spoke to Jesus with the frankness of a friend, and he did not rebuke her.

Prayer: Lord, I tell you simply what weighs on me. I know you hear me, even when I do not understand.

Today: Entrust to God, in writing or in silence, a sorrow you have kept to yourself.

Day 6: I believe

In the depth of her sorrow, Martha answered Jesus: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God." Her faith did not take away the pain; it carried her through it.

Prayer: Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world. Increase my faith.

Today: Slowly pray the Creed.

Day 7: The resurrection and the life

"I am the resurrection and the life." Before the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus revealed that he had conquered death. Martha was the first to receive these words, which are read at so many Christian funerals.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you my loved ones who have died. Make the hope of the resurrection grow in me.

Today: Pray for a deceased member of your family, or visit a grave.

Day 8: The family of Bethany

Martha, Mary and Lazarus were very different, but Jesus loved all three of them. The house in Bethany was a family where each had a place, with its tensions and its affection. Jesus felt at home there, not because it was perfect, but because he was loved.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust my family to you. Keep us united despite our differences, and always be our guest.

Today: Make a gesture of reconciliation or tenderness toward a brother, a sister or someone close to you.

Day 9: Serving in peace

At the last meal in Bethany, "Martha served". She was still serving, but now in the presence of the one in whom she had believed. Service had become the fruit of faith. The same hands, the same tasks, but a heart at rest.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Martha, teach me to serve in peace and trust. Amen.

Today: Prepare a meal for others, offering it as a service to Christ.

Closing prayer

Saint Martha, friend of Jesus, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for my home, for those who pass through it, and for all who serve without being thanked. Obtain for me the grace to believe as you did, in joy and in sorrow. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Martha and the prayer to Saint Martha.

PILGRIMAGE

Royal Collegiate Church of Saint Martha in Tarascon

The Royal Collegiate Church of Saint Martha in Tarascon, on the banks of the Rhône, facing King René's castle, is the main sanctuary dedicated to Saint Martha in the West. Its crypt holds the tomb where, according to Provençal tradition, the hostess of Bethany rests. It is the heart of a devotion that has been alive since the Middle Ages, closely tied to the legend of the Tarasque.

A Church Born of Provençal Tradition

According to a medieval tradition, Martha, who came to Provence with other friends of Jesus, settled in Tarascon and died there. In the 12th century, the discovery in 1187 of a burial identified as hers gave great impetus to the pilgrimage, and a new church was consecrated in 1197. Historians link this account to legend rather than history, but the fervor it aroused is quite real: kings, princes and anonymous pilgrims have come to pray here for centuries.



The Royal Collegiate Church of Saint Martha in Tarascon.

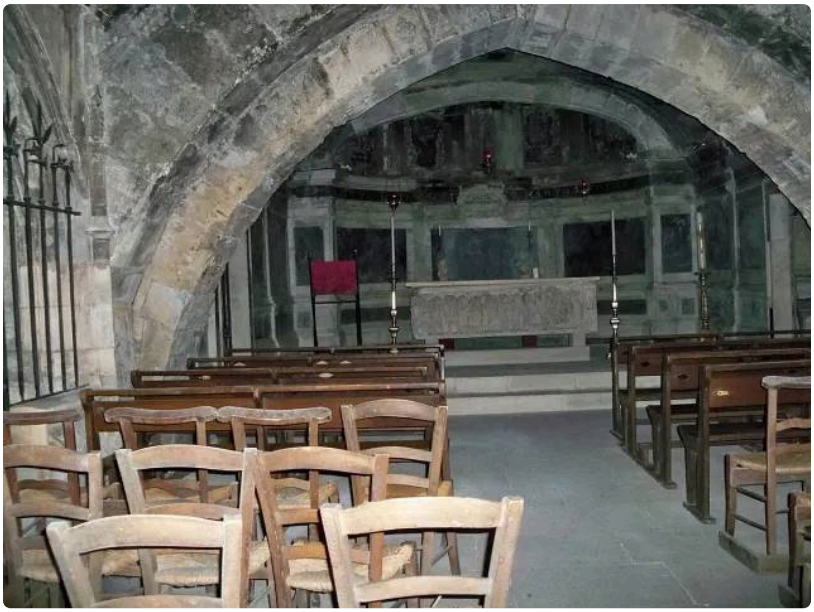
The Building and Its Crypt

The collegiate church combines a Romanesque portal, on the south side, with a Gothic nave rebuilt beginning in the 14th century. It preserves many paintings and works linked to the saint's life. But it is the crypt that draws pilgrims: they go down to pray before the tomb of Saint Martha, topped by a marble recumbent figure. Hit by the bombings of 1944, the church was restored after the war.

The Tarasque and the June Festivals

The town owes its name, according to legend, to the monster that Martha is said to have tamed. Each year, at the end of June, the Tarasque festivals parade a large effigy of the beast through the streets. These processions of giants and dragons, in France and Belgium, are inscribed by UNESCO on the

Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. On July 29, the liturgical feast of Saint Martha, the collegiate church hosts celebrations in her honor.



The tomb of Saint Martha in the crypt of the collegiate church of Tarascon.

Praying in Tarascon

Before your visit, you might reread the life of Saint Martha and the Gospel passages that concern her (Luke 10:38-42; John 11 and 12). In the crypt, a time of silence allows you to entrust your family, your home or a bereavement. The prayer to Saint Martha, which takes up her profession of faith, fits this moment well. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other Places Associated with Saint Martha

- **Bethany** (al-Eizariya, West Bank): the Church of Saint Lazarus, entrusted to the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land, near the tomb of

Lazarus.

- **Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer** (Camargue): the fortified church where tradition places the arrival of the friends of Jesus in Provence.
- **Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume** (Var): the basilica where the relics attributed to Saint Mary Magdalene are venerated.

Practical Information

Tarascon is served by train, on the line linking Avignon to Arles, and the collegiate church is in the old town, a short walk from the castle. Opening and Mass times vary with the seasons and feasts. Check with the parish or the Tarascon tourist office before you come.

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