BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Nazarius of Milan

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 28

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IN BRIEF

Saint Nazarius of Milan

Martyr of the Church of Milan, whose body was discovered by Saint Ambrose in 395, celebrated with Saint Celsus.

Feast day	July 28
Born	Rome (according to tradition)
Died	date unknown (c. 56 or 64 according to tradition), Milan
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	1st century

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Novena to Saint Nazarius of Milan

Basilica of San Nazaro in Brolo, Milan

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Nazarius of Milan

Saint Nazarius is a martyr of the Church of Milan, whose body was discovered by Saint Ambrose in 395 in a garden outside the city. The date of his death is unknown: tradition places it in the 1st century, under Nero, but nothing allows us to be sure. His story, written much later, links him with the young Celsus, his disciple, put to death with him. He is celebrated with Saint Celsus on July 28.

Who was Saint Nazarius?

Two different things tell us about Saint Nazarius. The first is historical: toward the end of his life, Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, had the body of a martyr named Nazarius exhumed, whose memory had been preserved, and moved it to the basilica of the Apostles that he had built. This fact is reported by Paulinus, deacon and biographer of Ambrose, who witnessed it. The second is legendary: a Passion written several centuries after the events tells the life of Nazarius, his missionary journey in Gaul and his martyrdom in Milan with Celsus. This account, very popular in the Middle Ages and taken up by the Golden Legend, cannot be read as a biography. Above all, it bears witness to the immense spread of devotion to Nazarius, in Italy and in Gaul.

Key dates in the life of Nazarius

- **1st century**: According to the Passion, born in Rome, to a father of African origin and a Christian mother, Perpetua.
- **According to tradition**: Baptized by Linus, future successor of Saint Peter, he then sets out to preach the Gospel.
- **According to tradition**: At Cimiez, near Nice, a mother entrusts her young son Celsus to him, and the boy becomes his disciple.

- **According to tradition**: Preaching in the Alps and in Gaul, as far as Trier, then return to Italy by way of Genoa.
- **Date unknown**: Beheaded in Milan with Celsus; tradition suggests around 56 or 64, under Nero.
- **395**: Saint Ambrose discovers his body in a garden outside Milan and moves it to the basilica of the Apostles.
- **765**: Relics of the saint are brought to the abbey of Lorsch, in Germany, which takes his name.
- **1579**: Saint Charles Borromeo carries out an elevation of his relics and finds a silver casket from late antiquity.
- **1894**: The relics are placed in a new reliquary, still venerated in the basilica.

The discovery by Saint Ambrose

In 395, shortly after the death of Emperor Theodosius, Ambrose went to a garden outside the walls of Milan, where the memory of martyrs was kept. There he had the tomb of Nazarius opened. Paulinus, who was present, relates that the body was found intact and that the blood seemed still fresh. Ambrose at once carried the martyr's remains to the basilica he had built in honor of the apostles, on the great road leading toward Rome. In the same garden, the body of Celsus was also discovered, whom tradition presents as his young companion.

This was not Ambrose's first discovery of the kind: in 386 he had already brought to light the bodies of the martyrs Gervasius and Protasius. By honoring these witnesses of the faith, the bishop gave the Church of Milan roots and protectors. In the following century, several of his successors chose to be buried near Nazarius, a sign of the veneration he already enjoyed.

The story of his Passion

The Passion of Nazarius, written long afterward, relates that, once baptized in Rome, he gave away his goods and set out to proclaim the Gospel. At Cimiez, the old Roman city above Nice, a Christian woman entrusted her son Celsus, still a child, to him. Together they crossed the Alps, founded a community at Embrun, and reached Geneva, Autun and Trier. Imprisoned, they were condemned to be thrown into the sea; but a storm arose and they were saved. They landed near Genoa, where they evangelized the village of Albaro, then went to Milan. There the prefect had them arrested and beheaded.

This account follows a pattern common in ancient hagiography: a tireless missionary, a faithful disciple, trials from which God delivers, then final martyrdom. It explains why so many places, from Nice to Trier and from Genoa to Embrun, claimed a link with Saint Nazarius. But historians do not regard it as reliable testimony, and the date of the saint's death remains unknown.

Devotion and art

The Roman Martyrology commemorates Saints Nazarius and Celsus on July 28. In Milan, the body of Nazarius still rests in the basilica that now bears his name, San Nazaro in Brolo. In 1579, Saint Charles Borromeo had the sarcophagus under the altar opened and found there a precious silver casket decorated with biblical scenes, now on display in the diocesan museum of Milan.

Relics were sent to other cities very early. In 765, Saint Chrodegang, bishop of Metz, had some brought from Rome for the abbey of Lorsch, near Worms, which became the abbey of Saint Nazarius. In France, several great churches were dedicated to him, such as the basilica of Saints Nazarius and Celsus in Carcassonne, the former cathedrals of Saint-Nazaire in Autun and Béziers, and

the church that gave its name to the town of Saint-Nazaire, at the mouth of the Loire. He is depicted as a young or mature man holding the martyr's palm, often beside the child Celsus, sometimes with the sword of his beheading.

What can we learn from Saint Nazarius?

About Saint Nazarius we know few certain things, but we know the essential: he gave his life for Christ, and the Church of Milan never forgot him. Saint Ambrose wanted his body to rest among the apostles, as if to say that the martyrs prolong their witness. Tradition, by linking him with the little Celsus, made him the model of the adult who hands on the faith to a child and walks with him to the end. We can pray to him for missionaries, for catechists, for godparents, and for all who have received a child to guide.

Where to pray to Saint Nazarius

- **Milan** (Italy): the basilica of San Nazaro in Brolo, which keeps his body under the high altar.
- **Carcassonne** (Aude, France): the basilica of Saints Nazarius and Celsus, in the walled Cité.
- **Béziers** (Hérault) and **Autun** (Saône-et-Loire): the former cathedrals dedicated to him.
- **Lorsch** (Germany): the remains of the abbey that received his relics in the 8th century.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Nazarius for Missionaries and Those Who Hand On the Faith

Saint Nazarius is a martyr honored in Milan ever since Saint Ambrose discovered his body in 395. Tradition links him with the young Celsus, his disciple, who died with him. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him those who proclaim the Gospel and those who accompany children on the path of faith.

Prayer to Saint Nazarius

Saint Nazarius,
witness of Christ to the shedding of your blood,
the Church of Milan has kept you in its memory
and Saint Ambrose laid you among the apostles.
Grant that I too may be faithful
in small trials and in great ones.

According to tradition, you received a child to guide
and led him all the way to Christ.
Bless parents and godparents,
catechists and teachers:
may they hand on the faith with patience and with joy.

Support missionaries on the roads of the world
and those who suffer for the name of Jesus.
With Saint Celsus, pray for us,
so that in the day of trial we may not be ashamed of the Gospel.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Nazarius

- On his feast day, July 28, with Saint Celsus.
- For a child you accompany in faith, as a parent, godparent or catechist.
- For missionaries and those who go out to proclaim the Gospel.
- For Christians persecuted because of their faith.
- When visiting a church that bears his name.

A short invocation

> *Saints Nazarius and Celsus, master and disciple in the faith,*
> *pray for those who hand on and for those who receive. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Nazarius from July 20 to 28, and discover the life of Saint Nazarius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Nazarius of Milan

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It draws on what history teaches us about Saint Nazarius, martyr of Milan, and on the traditional account of his life, which is later and partly legendary. To finish it on his feast day, July 28, begin on July 20. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, make the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saints Nazarius and Celsus, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A faith received from a mother

According to tradition, the mother of Nazarius, Perpetua, was a Christian and wanted him to be baptized. Faith was handed on to him in his family, before becoming his own treasure.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who handed on the faith to me. Bless the mothers and fathers who pray for their children.

Act of the day: Thank, with a word or a prayer, the person who made Christ known to you.

Day 2: The gift of baptism

Tradition reports that Nazarius was baptized by Linus, who succeeded Saint Peter. Baptism is the starting point of all Christian life and of all mission.

Prayer: Lord, rekindle in me the grace of my baptism. Make me a true disciple of your Son.

Act of the day: Find the date of your baptism, or make the Sign of the Cross with holy water while renewing your promises.

Day 3: Leaving everything for the Gospel

The account says that Nazarius gave away his goods to go and proclaim the Gospel. He chose to be free in order to serve.

Prayer: Lord, free my heart from what clutters it, so that I may be available for what you expect of me.

Act of the day: Give away an object or a sum of money you can do without.

Day 4: A child entrusted

At Cimiez, a mother entrusted her son Celsus to Nazarius. From then on, the missionary walked with a child. Handing on the faith means walking patiently with someone.

Prayer: Lord, bless catechists and godparents. Give them patience, gentleness and faithfulness.

Act of the day: Pray for your godchild or for a child around you, and get in touch with them.

Day 5: On the roads

Tradition shows Nazarius and Celsus crossing the Alps and Gaul, from Embrun to Trier. Cold, weariness and rejection did not stop them.

Prayer: Lord, support the missionaries who proclaim your name far from home. Keep them persevering.

Act of the day: Pray for a missionary, or support a missionary work.

Day 6: Saved from the sea

Condemned to be thrown into the sea, Nazarius and Celsus were saved by a storm that frightened their guards. The account means that God keeps those who belong to him.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel overwhelmed, stretch out your hand to me as you did to Peter on the waters.

Act of the day: Entrust to God, in writing, a worry that weighs on you.

Day 7: Witness to the end

In Milan, Nazarius and Celsus were arrested and beheaded. Master and disciple died together, faithful to Christ.

Prayer: Lord, strengthen the Christians who are persecuted today. Give them your peace and the courage of faithfulness.

Act of the day: Pray for a country where Christians suffer for their faith.

Day 8: A memory preserved

The Christians of Milan did not forget the place where Nazarius rested. In 395, Saint Ambrose discovered his body and placed it in the basilica of the Apostles. The memory of the martyrs nourishes the faith of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the saints who have gone before us. Teach us to keep the memory of their witness alive.

Act of the day: Read the life of a saint, or visit a church that keeps relics.

Day 9: Among the apostles

By placing Nazarius in the basilica of the Apostles, Ambrose was saying that the martyr prolongs the witness of the apostles. Every baptized person is called, in their own measure, to be a witness.

Prayer: Lord, make me a witness of your love. Through the intercession of Saints Nazarius and Celsus, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass if you can, and speak simply about your faith to someone.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Nazarius,*
> *martyr of Christ and glory of the Church of Milan,*
> *with the young Celsus, your companion,*
> *present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me faithful to my baptism*
> *and help me to hand on the faith I have received.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray at any time the prayer to Saint Nazarius, and discover the life of Saint Nazarius.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of San Nazaro in Brolo, Milan

The basilica of San Nazaro in Brolo stands in Milan, on Corso di Porta Romana, a few minutes' walk from the cathedral. Founded by Saint Ambrose at the end of the 4th century as the basilica of the Apostles, it has kept the body of Saint Nazarius, martyr of the Church of Milan, since 395. It is one of the churches Ambrose founded in his city.

The basilica of the Apostles of Saint Ambrose

Saint Ambrose had this church built in the 380s, along the great road leaving Milan toward Rome. He dedicated it to the apostles and placed relics of apostles in it. The cross-shaped plan chosen by the bishop echoed that of the church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. In 395, Ambrose moved there the body of Nazarius, which he had just discovered in a garden outside the city; little by little the church took the martyr's name.

Over the centuries the basilica was remodeled several times. In 1579, Saint Charles Borromeo had the sarcophagus under the altar opened: he found there a silver casket from late antiquity, decorated with biblical scenes, now kept in the diocesan museum of Milan. In 1894, the saint's relics were placed in a new reliquary.

What to see

You enter the basilica through the Trivulzio chapel, a Renaissance mausoleum designed by Bramantino in the early 16th century for the Trivulzio family: a vast octagonal space, sober and full of light, where the family tombs are lined up. Beyond it opens the church itself, whose cross-shaped plan still recalls Ambrose's foundation. The body of Saint Nazarius rests under the high altar.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Nazarius. Before the altar, entrust to him missionaries, catechists and the children you accompany in faith, then say the prayer to Saint Nazarius. To complete the pilgrimage, you can visit the other basilicas founded by Saint Ambrose, especially the basilica of Sant'Ambrogio, where the bishop rests, and the diocesan museum, which displays the casket of Saint Nazarius.

Practical information

The basilica is located in the historic center of Milan, easily reached on foot or by metro from the Piazza del Duomo. It is an active parish church: modest dress is requested, and visits should respect services. Opening hours and Mass times may change: check with the parish before your visit.

Credits and sources

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