

BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Saint Pancras of Rome

*Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage*

Feast day: May 12

**Saintspedia** · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

## Saint Pancras of Rome

*Young Roman martyr of the persecution of Diocletian, patron saint of children and one of the Ice Saints.*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Feast day** | May 12 |
| **Born** | c. 289, Phrygia (according to tradition) |
| **Died** | c. 304, Rome |
| **Era** | 4th century |
| **Patron saint of** | children, teenagers |

## In this booklet


Life

Prayer to Saint Pancras for Children and Young People

Novena to Saint Pancras

Basilica of Saint Pancras (San Pancrazio) in Rome

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 Pancras of Rome

Saint Pancras of Rome is a young Roman martyr who, according to tradition, died at the age of fourteen during the persecution of Emperor Diocletian, at the beginning of the 4th century. His tomb on the Via Aurelia very early became one of the great pilgrimage sites of Rome, and his cult spread across Europe, as far as England, where the London district of St Pancras still bears his name. In France and Central Europe he is also known as one of the "Ice Saints" of May. His feast day is May 12, shared with Saints Nereus and Achilleus.

## Who was Saint Pancras?

Little is known for certain about Pancras. A young Christian of that name was put to death in Rome during the persecutions and buried on the Via Aurelia, west of the city, where his tomb was venerated from ancient times.

Everything else comes from a *Passion* (an account of his martyrdom) written later, probably in the 6th century, and taken up in the 13th century by Jacobus de Voragine in *The Golden Legend*. This account has the value of an edifying tradition more than of a historical record.

According to this tradition, Pancras was born around 289 in Phrygia, in Asia Minor, into a noble and wealthy family. Orphaned, he was entrusted to his uncle Dionysius, with whom he moved to Rome. There both of them discovered the Christian faith and were baptized; the *Passion* credits their conversion to Pope Saint Caius.

## Key dates in the life of Saint Pancras

- **c. 289-290**: Born in Phrygia, according to tradition.

- **303-304**: The Great Persecution of Diocletian against Christians.
- **c. 304**: Martyred in Rome, at the age of fourteen according to tradition; buried on the Via Aurelia.
- **Early 6th century**: Pope Saint Symmachus builds a basilica over his tomb.
- **7th century**: Pope Honorius I rebuilds the basilica.
- **1798**: His relics are desecrated during the French occupation of Rome; part of them is saved and returned in 1814.

## "The heart of an old man"

The *Passion* tells that after his baptism Pancras was denounced and brought before Emperor Diocletian. The emperor, who was said to have known his father, tried to win him over gently: if he gave up this "folly," he would be treated like a son.

The boy replied that he was a child in body, but carried within him the heart of an old man, and that the power of Christ kept him from all fear. He refused to sacrifice to the gods and was beheaded. A Christian woman named Octavilla took up his body and buried it.

The story highlights both the fragility of a boy and the firmness of his faith. Pancras thus joins the company of the young martyrs of Rome, such as Saint Agnes and Saint Tarcisius.

## The saint of oaths

In the 6th century, Bishop Gregory of Tours reported that people came to swear oaths at his tomb, and that anyone who swore falsely there was punished at once. From this comes Pancras's reputation as a protector of good faith and of the given word.

### Saint Pancras in England

At the end of the 6th century, according to tradition, relics of Pancras traveled with the mission sent to England by Pope Saint Gregory the Great, and Saint Augustine of Canterbury dedicated a church to him. The London district of St Pancras, with its famous railway station, takes its name from a very old church dedicated to him, St Pancras Old Church.

## Why is Saint Pancras the patron saint of children?

Because he gave his life for Christ at the age of fourteen, Pancras has long been a patron of children and teenagers. Young people facing mockery or pressure because of their faith find in him a companion of their own age. In Corsica he was the saint of shepherds; elsewhere he was invoked for domestic animals or against rheumatism. His tomb's link with oaths also made him a patron of honesty and of keeping one's promises.

## One of the "Ice Saints"

In France, Pancras forms with Saint Mamertus (May 11) and Saint Servatius (May 13) the trio of the "Ice Saints." Gardeners knew from experience that late frosts could still occur at that time of year, and old sayings advised waiting until these days had passed before planting tender crops. This popular tradition has kept his name alive in the countryside.



*The Basilica of San Pancrazio, in Rome.*

## Symbols and how to recognize Saint Pancras in art

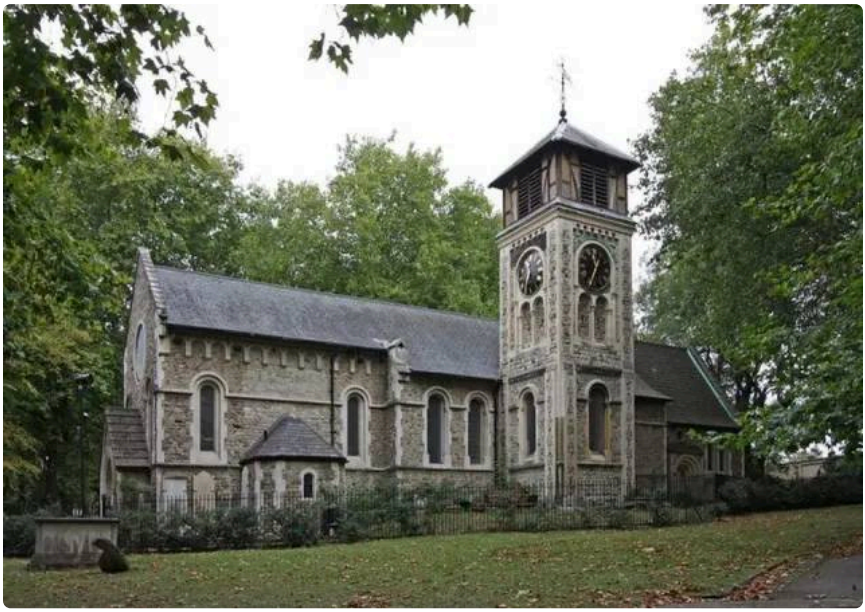
Saint Pancras is shown as a young man, often dressed as a Roman soldier, holding a **sword** and the **palm** of martyrdom. Older paintings show him as a youth with his eyes raised to heaven. The statue in Barcelona Cathedral is a well-known example of the soldier type.

## What his holiness teaches us

What history guarantees about Pancras fits in a few words: a young Christian chose to die rather than deny Christ, and the Church of Rome lovingly kept his tomb. Tradition added words and details that say the same thing: faith does not depend on age. Catholics pray to him for children and teenagers, for young

people who face ridicule because of their faith, and for faithfulness to one's word. Parents and godparents can also entrust to him a child preparing for First Communion or Confirmation.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Pancras and the novena to Saint Pancras.



*St Pancras Old Church, London.*

## Where to pray to Saint Pancras

- **Rome**: the Basilica of San Pancrazio, on the Janiculum Hill, built over his tomb.
- **London**: St Pancras Old Church, one of the oldest Christian places of worship in England.
- **Castellare-di-Casinca** (Corsica, France): the church of Saint Pancras and its feast on May 12.

- **Villar-Saint-Pancrace** (Hautes-Alpes, France), of which he is the patron.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Pancras for Children and Young People

No ancient prayer of Saint Pancras has become traditional in the Church, and we have no writings from him. Yet the answer that *The Golden Legend* places on his lips before the emperor sums up well the way Christians have prayed to him for centuries. You will find it below with its source, followed by an original prayer to Saint Pancras for children, young people and the given word.

## A saying from tradition to meditate on

> *"Though I am a child in body, I carry within me the heart of an old man, and by the power of my Lord Jesus Christ, the terror you inspire does not frighten us."*

Source: answer attributed to Pancras before Diocletian in *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (13th century), based on an older *Passion*. It is a tradition, not a historical record.

## Prayer to Saint Pancras for children and young people

> *Saint Pancras, you were still a child when you gave your life for Christ: watch over the children and teenagers of today. Keep them in the faith, protect them from fear and mockery, and give them friends who lift them up.*
>
> *Your tomb was the place where oaths were sworn: teach us honesty in our words. May we not lie, may we keep our promises, and may our yes be a true yes.*
>
> *You were taken in by an uncle after the death of your parents: pray for orphans and for those who welcome them.*
>
> *Give me a little of your courage, so that I may not hide my faith, and entrust to the Lord 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 Pancras's feast day is May 12, which he shares with Saints Nereus and Achilleus, also martyrs. It is the day of the second "Ice Saint." You can pray to him at any time:

- for a child or a teenager who is struggling, at school or in faith;
- on the occasion of a baptism, a First Communion or a Confirmation;
- for young people mocked or isolated because they believe;
- before making a promise, a commitment or a vow, or when you are tempted to break your word;
- for orphans and for foster and adoptive families.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Pancras, from May 4 to 12, and read the life of Saint Pancras.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Pancras

This novena to Saint Pancras is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what history and tradition tell us about the young martyr of Rome. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on his feast day, May 12, begin it on May 4. You can also pray it at any time of the year for a child or a teenager, for a young person preparing for Confirmation, or for the grace to keep your word.

## How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act proposed for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. This novena can easily be prayed as a family, with children: the meditations are short and the acts are simple. If you miss a day, simply continue.

## Day 1: A child far from home

According to tradition, Pancras was born in Phrygia, in Asia Minor, and lost his parents while still young. His uncle Dionysius took him in and brought him to Rome. Before he was a martyr, he was an orphan and an exile.

**Prayer:** Saint Pancras, pray for children who have lost their parents, and for all who take them in with love. Amen.

**Today:** Pray for a child you know who is going through a hard time, or support a charity that helps orphans.

## Day 2: Discovering Christ

In Rome, Pancras and his uncle discovered the Christian faith and asked for baptism. Faith was not an inheritance for him; it was an encounter. He welcomed it with his whole heart.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for the gift of my baptism. Renew in me the joy of knowing you. Amen.

**Today:** Find out the date of your baptism, or thank the people who brought you to the faith.

## Day 3: Faith in a time of danger

Pancras became a Christian during the Great Persecution of Diocletian. Being baptized meant risking one's life. He chose Christ knowing the cost.

**Prayer:** Lord, give courage to Christians who are persecuted today, and make me faithful in the small trials of my life. Amen.

**Today:** Pray for a country where Christians suffer for their faith.

## Day 4: Before the emperor

Brought before Diocletian, the boy was offered comfort and protection if he would give up his faith. The temptation was not violence, but kindness and promises. Sometimes it is easier to resist a threat than a flattering offer.

**Prayer:** Saint Pancras, help me to recognize the gentle temptations that lead me away from God. Amen.

**Today:** Turn down something that pleases you but distracts you from what matters.

## Day 5: The heart of an old man

"Though I am a child in body, I carry within me the heart of an old man." The answer the tradition gives him reminds us that wisdom is not a matter of age. Children and young people can teach adults a great deal about faith.

**Prayer:** Lord, make the faith of young people strong, and make me humble enough to learn from them. Amen.

**Today:** Ask a child or a young person what they think about God, and listen.

## Day 6: Without fear

Pancras said that the power of Christ kept him from all fear. He was not reckless: he trusted. Fear is human, but it does not have to have the last word.

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I give you my fears. Be my strength when I am afraid. Amen.

**Today:** Take one step you have been avoiding out of fear.

## Day 7: A gift to the end

Pancras refused to sacrifice to the gods and was beheaded. A Christian woman, Octavilla, took up his body and buried it with respect. Around every martyr there are discreet people who honor the dead and keep their memory.

**Prayer:** Lord, receive all who have died for you, and bless those who care for the dead and the grieving. Amen.

**Today:** Pray for your deceased loved ones, or visit a grave.

## Day 8: The saint of the given word

People came to swear oaths at his tomb, and false oaths were said to be punished there. Pancras became a guardian of honesty. In a world of broken promises, a word kept is already a witness.

**Prayer:** Saint Pancras, help me to be truthful and to keep my promises, in small things and in great ones. Amen.

**Today:** Keep a promise you had put off, or apologize for one you broke.

## Day 9: From Rome to the ends of the world

His tomb became a place of pilgrimage, and his relics traveled as far as England with the missionaries sent by Pope Gregory the Great. The faith of a fourteen-year-old boy has inspired Christians for seventeen centuries.

**Prayer:** Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Pancras, make my faith fruitful for others. Amen.

**Today:** Share your faith simply with someone, by a word, an invitation or a prayer.

## Closing prayer

Saint Pancras, young martyr of Rome, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Watch over children and teenagers, strengthen persecuted Christians, and teach us to keep our word. Obtain for us a faith that does not fear. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

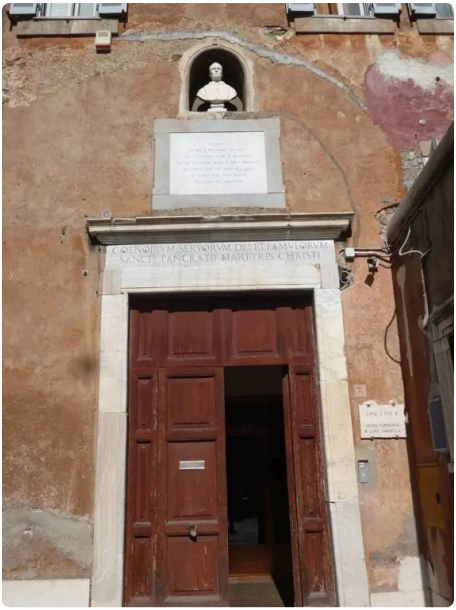
# Basilica of Saint Pancras (San Pancrazio) in Rome

The Basilica of Saint Pancras, San Pancrazio in Italian, stands on the Janiculum Hill in Rome, along the ancient Via Aurelia, not far from the gate that also bears the saint's name. It is built over the cemetery where the young martyr was buried in the early 4th century, and it preserves his relics. It is one of the oldest cardinalatial titular churches in Rome.

## A Basilica over a Martyr's Tomb

The body of Pancras was laid, according to tradition, in an underground cemetery on the Via Aurelia, west of the city. His tomb drew pilgrims very early on. In the early 6th century, Pope Saint Symmachus had a basilica built above it. In the 7th century, Pope Honorius I rebuilt it and enlarged the choir, so that the martyr's tomb lay beneath the altar. As early as the 6th century, Gregory of Tours mentioned the oaths people came to swear at this tomb.

The church suffered several times. In 1798, during the occupation of Rome by French troops, it was ransacked and the relics desecrated; part of them was saved, kept at the Lateran, then solemnly brought back to San Pancrazio in 1814. The present building keeps the ancient basilican plan, despite numerous restorations.




*The Basilica of Saint Pancras, on the Janiculum.*

## Visiting the Basilica

You enter through a courtyard that precedes the facade. Inside, the nave leads to the raised choir; beneath the altar, the confessio holds the memory of the martyr and his relics. Beneath the church extend the galleries of the Catacombs of Saint Pancras, a small part of which can be visited on certain occasions. The neighborhood, quieter than the center of Rome, also offers fine walks on the Janiculum and its views over the city.

## Praying on the Spot

Before your visit, you might read the life of Saint Pancras. Before the confessio, entrust to the young martyr the children and teenagers dear to you, or a promise you want to keep. The prayer to Saint Pancras can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

## Other Places Associated with Saint Pancras

- **London**: St Pancras Old Church, a very ancient church that gave its name to the district and to St Pancras station.
- **Castellare-di-Casinca** (Haute-Corse): the Church of Saint Pancras and the feast on May 12.
- **Villar-Saint-Pancrace** (Hautes-Alpes) and **San Pancrazio Salentino** (Apulia), villages that bear his name.
- **Sembrancher** (Valais, Switzerland), whose name derives from his.

## Practical Information

The basilica is in the Monteverde district, west of Trastevere, about a twenty-minute walk from the center or a bus ride. Modest dress is required. Opening hours and access to the catacombs vary, so check with the parish or its official website before you come.

# 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: Didier Descouens, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Basilica of San Pancrazio, in Rome.: Image: user:Lalupa, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source
- St Pancras Old Church, London.: Image: John Salmon, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Basilica of Saint Pancras, on the Janiculum.: Image: Lalupa, CC BY-SA 4.0, 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**