

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Phoebe

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Phoebe

First-century Christian of Cenchreae, minister of her Church, recommended by Saint Paul to the Romans.

Feast day	September 3
Era	1st century

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Phoebe

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Phoebe

Saint Phoebe was a Christian of Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth, in the first century. She appears in only two verses of the New Testament, at the beginning of the last chapter of Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans, where the apostle warmly recommends her. These few lines are enough to make her one of the rare women whom Paul names as holding a service in a local Church. The Roman Martyrology commemorates her on September 3.

Who was Saint Phoebe?

All that we know of her is contained in this passage, here in the Douay-Rheims translation:

> *"And I commend to you Phebe, our sister, who is in the ministry of the church, that is in Cenchrae: That you receive her in the Lord as becometh saints; and that you assist her in whatsoever business she shall have need of you. For she also hath assisted many, and myself also." (Romans 16:1-2)*

Paul wrote this letter around the middle of the 50s, probably from Corinth, before leaving for Jerusalem. Cenchreae, a few miles from Corinth on the Saronic Gulf, was the harbor through which ships sailed toward Asia Minor and the East. The Acts of the Apostles mention that Paul stopped there (Acts 18:18). A Christian community had taken root in this busy port, and Phoebe was one of its members.

Her name, which means "the bright one" in Greek, is that of a figure from mythology, so she was most likely of pagan background before becoming a Christian. Nothing is known about her birth, her family or her death. The dates and places sometimes given for her are conjecture.



Saint Paul entrusts a letter to Phoebe, illumination of 1164.

Key dates in the life of Phoebe

- **The 50s**: Member of the Christian community of Cenchreae, near Corinth.
- **c. 55-57**: Saint Paul recommends her to the Christians of Rome in his Letter to the Romans.
- **Date unknown**: Her death, perhaps in Rome according to some traditions, though this is uncertain.
- **September 3**: Her commemoration in the Roman Martyrology.

"Minister of the church": what does this title mean?

For Phoebe, Paul uses the Greek word *diakonos*, translated according to context as "servant," "minister" or "deaconess." It is the same word he uses elsewhere for himself and his co-workers. He adds that she had been a *prostatis*

to many, and to himself: a word that means a protector, a benefactor, even a patron in the ancient sense. The French ecumenical translation of the Bible (TOB) concludes from this that she was probably a person of high standing who had intervened several times on behalf of Christians.

It is difficult to know exactly what function this title covered in such a young Church, at a time when ministries were not yet fixed. Biblical scholars debate it, and the question also comes up in current discussions about women and the diaconate. What is certain is that Phoebe exercised a recognized service in her community and that Paul trusted her fully.

Did Phoebe carry the Letter to the Romans?

If Paul recommends her at the very start of his closing greetings, it is probably because she was traveling to Rome. Many commentators, since antiquity, have concluded that she was entrusted with carrying the letter itself to its readers. It is a likely hypothesis, taken up by medieval illustrations, but the text does not say so explicitly. The Benedictine biblical scholar Augustin Calmet also suggested that Paul may have stayed in her house when he passed through Corinth.

If she did carry it, Phoebe would have been the first to bring to Rome the letter that has shaped Christian thought on grace, faith and salvation more than almost any other. In the ancient world, such letters were entrusted only to people the sender trusted completely.



The site of the ancient port of Cenchreae, near Corinth.

Why is Saint Phoebe honored today?

Phoebe is a saint of the very beginnings, whose memory rests on two sentences. But those two sentences say what matters most: a woman of faith, generous, who put her means and her time at the service of the young Church and of its apostles, so much so that Paul asks the Romans to welcome her as he would welcome them himself. She reminds us of the place of women in the first Christian communities and of the value of those who support, often behind the scenes, the proclamation of the Gospel.

She can be invoked by all who serve their parish in quiet ways: those who welcome newcomers, open their homes, give generously, carry messages or organize the life of a community. Her example also speaks to benefactors, who use their resources for the good of the Church, and to travelers on a mission.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Phoebe and the novena to Saint Phoebe, prayed from August 26 to September 3.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Phoebe in art

Representations of Phoebe are rare. Her main attribute is the letter scroll, recalling the tradition that she carried Paul's Letter to the Romans. An illumination of 1164 shows her receiving the letter from the hands of Saint Paul. In icons, she appears as a woman wrapped in a cloak, holding a scroll.



Saint Phoebe, icon.

Where to pray to Saint Phoebe

No shrine or relic of Saint Phoebe is known with certainty. The best place to meet her is the Bible itself: read slowly the sixteenth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, with its long list of men and women who served the Gospel alongside

Paul. Pilgrims to Greece can also visit the archaeological site of ancient Cenchreae (Kechries), near Corinth, where she lived.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Phoebe for Those Who Serve

No traditional prayer to Saint Phoebe has come down to us. The best way to begin is with the words Saint Paul wrote about her, which can themselves be read as a prayer of recommendation. You will find them below, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia for all who serve the Church.

Saint Paul's words about Phoebe

> *"And I commend to you Phebe, our sister, who is in the ministry of the church, that is in Cenchrae: That you receive her in the Lord as becometh saints; and that you assist her in whatsoever business she shall have need of you. For she also hath assisted many, and myself also."*

Source: Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans 16:1-2, Douay-Rheims translation.



Saint Paul entrusts his letter to Phoebe, illumination of 1164.

Prayer to Saint Phoebe for those who serve

Saint Phoebe, sister in the faith and servant of the Church of Cenchreae, you helped many, and Saint Paul himself: teach me to serve generously, without seeking to be seen.

You were trusted by the apostle and recommended to the Christians of Rome: help me to be faithful in what is entrusted to me, and worthy of the trust of others.

You set out on the roads of the Roman world for the sake of the Gospel: protect those who travel for the Church, and all who carry the Good News to others.

Pray for the women and men who serve their parishes in a thousand hidden ways, for those who welcome, give, organize and support. I also entrust to you my own intention: (name it in silence).

May I be welcomed one day in the Lord, as you were welcomed by the saints of Rome. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Phoebe is commemorated on September 3 in the Roman Martyrology. You can pray to her at the start of a new commitment in your parish, before a journey undertaken for your faith or your work, when you welcome a newcomer to your community, or to give thanks for the people who quietly support the life of the Church. Parish volunteers, hospitality ministers and benefactors can make her their friend.

A short prayer of thanksgiving for benefactors

> *Lord, you raised up Phoebe to help many, and the apostle Paul himself. Bless all who give their time, their homes and their goods for your Church. Reward them with your peace, and let us never forget to thank them. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

This short prayer is also an original text by Saintspedia. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Phoebe, and discover the life of Saint Phoebe.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Phoebe

This novena to Saint Phoebe is an original composition by Saintspedia. It is not an official liturgical text. Since everything we know about Phoebe fits into two verses of the Letter to the Romans, each day takes one word or idea from that short passage and lets it speak to our own lives. To end on her commemoration, September 3, begin it on August 26. You can also pray it at any other time, especially when you take on a new service in your parish or set out on a journey.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read slowly the verses of Romans 16:1-2, then the short meditation, and say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: Our sister

Paul begins by calling Phoebe "our sister." Before any title or role, she is a member of the family of believers. In the Church, we receive one another as brothers and sisters.

Prayer: Lord, help me to see in every believer a brother or a sister. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Greet warmly someone at church whom you do not usually speak to.

Day 2: A Church in a port

Phoebe belonged to the Church of Cenchreae, a busy harbor where sailors, merchants and travelers came and went. The Gospel took root in the middle of everyday life and trade. Paul himself passed through this port on his journeys, and the small community there became a place of welcome on the road between East and West.

Prayer: Lord, make my parish a welcoming home for all who pass through it. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray for your parish community and all who serve in it.

Day 3: Serving

Paul calls her *diakonos*, servant or minister. Christ himself came not to be served but to serve. Every Christian service shares in his. Whatever the exact meaning of her title, Phoebe's service was real and recognized by her community.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, servant of all, teach me to serve as you served. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Offer a concrete service to someone without being asked.

Day 4: Trusted by the apostle

Paul recommends Phoebe without reservation. Trust is built over time, through faithfulness in small and great things.

Prayer: Lord, make me faithful and worthy of the trust that others place in me. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Keep a promise you have been putting off.

Day 5: Receive her in the Lord

Paul asks the Romans to receive Phoebe "in the Lord, as becometh saints." Hospitality is one of the first Christian virtues: to welcome a stranger is to welcome Christ.

Prayer: Lord, open my heart and my home to those who need welcome. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Welcome a newcomer in your neighborhood, workplace or parish.

Day 6: Helping in whatever she needs

Paul asks the Christians of Rome to help Phoebe in any matter where she might need them. Even those who help others need help in turn. Generosity flows both ways in the Body of Christ.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to ask for help, and the readiness to give it. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Ask how you can help someone who usually helps others.

Day 7: A helper of many

Phoebe had been a *prostatis*, a protector and benefactor, to many people and to Paul himself. She put her means and her influence at the service of the Gospel.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to use my gifts, my time and my goods for the good of others. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Make a gift, even a small one, to support your parish or a work of charity.

Day 8: On the road to Rome

Phoebe was probably traveling to Rome, perhaps carrying Paul's letter. Long journeys were hard and dangerous, yet she set out for the sake of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, protect all who travel, and especially those who go out to bring your Word to others. Saint Phoebe, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray for missionaries and for those who are traveling today.

Day 9: A hidden holiness

We know almost nothing of Phoebe, and yet her name has been read in the Church for nearly two thousand years. God remembers what is done in secret, and no service given out of love is ever lost.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Phoebe, grant that my life may serve your Church faithfully, even in hidden ways. Amen.

Today: Thank someone whose quiet service you often take for granted.

Closing prayer

Saint Phoebe, sister and servant of the Church of Cenchreae, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have brought before you. Pray for all who serve the Church, for benefactors and volunteers, for travelers and for those who carry the Gospel to others. Obtain for me a generous and faithful heart. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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