

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Polyeuctus of Melitene

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 13

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IN BRIEF

Saint Polyeuctus of Melitene

Roman officer martyred at Melitene in Armenia in the third century, hero of Corneille's tragedy.

Feast day	February 13
Died	mid-3rd century, Melitene (Malatya, Turkey)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	oaths and treaties (Byzantine tradition)

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Polyeuctus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Polyeuctus of Melitene

Saint Polyeuctus was a Roman officer martyred at Melitene, in Lesser Armenia, in the third century. Won to the faith by the example of his friend Nearchus, he was put to death for refusing to sacrifice to the gods of the Empire. His cult, very old in the East, inspired one of the greatest churches of Constantinople and, many centuries later, a famous tragedy by the French playwright Pierre Corneille. The Catholic Church celebrates him on February 13.

Who was Saint Polyeuctus?

According to tradition, Polyeuctus was a wealthy officer of the Twelfth Roman Legion, the legion known as "Fulminata" (the Thundering Legion), stationed at Melitene, today's Malatya, in eastern Turkey. He died a martyr under Emperor Decius, in the middle of the third century. The date of January 10, 259, is often given, although it fits poorly with the reign of Decius, who died in 251.

The detailed account of his martyrdom has come down to us mainly through the Byzantine hagiographer Symeon Metaphrastes, who wrote in the tenth century, several hundred years after the events. That calls for caution about the details of the story. The antiquity of his cult, however, is solidly established, and that is the most reliable witness to the memory of a martyr whom the early Christians honored by name.

Key dates

- **Third century**: Polyeuctus serves as a Roman officer at Melitene, in Lesser Armenia.
- **Under Emperor Decius**: He becomes a Christian through the influence of his friend Nearchus.

- **Mid-third century**: He is martyred by beheading at Melitene.
- **Fifth century**: A church dedicated to him stands at Melitene, where the parents of Euthymius the Great come to pray.
- **524-527**: Princess Anicia Juliana builds the Church of Saint Polyeuctus in Constantinople.
- **1642**: Pierre Corneille stages his tragedy *Polyeucte martyr*.

A soldier won by a friend

In the account of Symeon Metaphrastes, Polyeuctus is deeply moved by the zeal of his friend and fellow soldier Nearchus, who was already a Christian. Friendship opened the door to faith: Polyeuctus came to believe in turn. With the fervor of a new believer, he then openly attacked the official cult. He tore down the edict of Emperor Decius posted in the public square, which ordered everyone to honor the gods, and he smashed idols on his way. This spectacular act led to his arrest.

The tears of his family

The authorities had him tortured to make him give in. His wife, Pauline, and his father-in-law, Felix, a magistrate of the city, begged him in tears to offer sacrifice and save his life. The scene is one of the most moving in his story: the pressure did not come only from judges and executioners, but from the people he loved most. Polyeuctus refused and confessed his faith to the end. He was beheaded.

A baptism of blood

According to some traditions, Polyeuctus died before he had even received baptism with water. The Church has always taught that catechumens who die for Christ are baptized in their own blood. For this reason, Polyeuctus is often cited as an example of the "baptism of blood," the gift of one's life that unites a believer fully to the death and resurrection of Christ.

An ancient cult

Buried at Melitene, Polyeuctus was venerated there in a church dedicated to him, whose existence is attested as early as the fifth century. It was in this church that the parents of the monk Euthymius the Great came to pray for the birth of a son.

In Constantinople, the wealthy princess Anicia Juliana had a Church of Saint Polyeuctus built between 524 and 527. It was then the largest church in the capital. Its remains were identified thanks to an inscription in the Saraçhane district of Istanbul and have been excavated since the 1960s. Their sculptures, inspired by Persian art, are among the finest of the Byzantine period.

In the Byzantine Empire, people invoked Polyeuctus as the guarantor of oaths and treaties. A man who refused to break faith with God, even at the cost of his life, seemed the right witness for promises made before him.

From Melitene to Corneille

In 1642, Pierre Corneille drew from the martyrdom the tragedy *Polyeucte martyr*, one of the high points of French classical theater. He imagines a conflict between human love, that of Pauline for her husband and for Severus, and the call of grace, which in the end touches Pauline herself. The play later inspired operas by Donizetti (*Poliuto*) and Gounod, and an overture by Paul Dukas. For many English-speaking readers, this literary and musical tradition is the first way they meet the saint's name.

Why is Saint Polyeuctus the patron of oaths and treaties?

Saint Polyeuctus is not linked to a long list of modern patronages. In the Byzantine tradition, however, he was invoked as the protector of oaths and treaties. His fidelity, kept even through torture and the pleas of his own family,

made him a natural patron for those who give their word. Today, Catholics can also pray to him for soldiers, for new converts and for anyone who must choose between conscience and the pressure of those around them.

What can we learn from Saint Polyeuctus?

Polyeuctus reminds us that faith can be born from the witness of a friend, and that it may ask us to give everything. His impulsive zeal, tearing down edicts and breaking statues, is not a model to copy in its actions. But his faithfulness until death, in spite of the tears of those he loved, remains an example for every believer who meets opposition close to home.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Polyeuctus in art

In Byzantine icons, Saint Polyeuctus appears as a young Roman soldier. He often wears military dress and holds a martyr's cross, the sign of those who gave their life for Christ. In Western art, his name is better known through illustrations of Corneille's tragedy than through religious paintings.

Where to pray to Saint Polyeuctus

- **Malatya**, Turkey: ancient Melitene, the place of his martyrdom.
- **Istanbul**, Turkey: the remains of the Church of Saint Polyeuctus at Saraçhane.

Wherever you are, you can also pray to him with the prayer to Saint Polyeuctus or the novena to Saint Polyeuctus, which ends on his feast, February 13.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Polyeuctus for Faithfulness

No traditional prayer to Saint Polyeuctus has come into common use in the English-speaking world. The Roman officer of Melitene, converted by his friend Nearchus and beheaded in the third century for refusing to sacrifice to the gods, is a fitting intercessor for soldiers, for new converts and for all who must stay faithful under pressure. Below is a prayer inspired by his life. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Polyeuctus for Faithfulness

Saint Polyeuctus, soldier of Rome and soldier of Christ,
you discovered the faith through the witness of a friend.
Thank you for reminding me that God often speaks
through the people he places on my path.

When your wife and your father-in-law begged you in tears
to deny your Lord and save your life,
you chose to remain faithful to the end.
Obtain for me a heart that does not bend
when those I love push me away from God.

Pray for soldiers and for all who serve under orders,
that they may keep a clear conscience.
Pray for those who have just come to the faith,
and for those preparing for baptism,
that their first love may grow stronger with the years.

You who were invoked as the witness of oaths,
help me keep my word, in small things and in great ones.
I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through Christ our Lord, for whom you gave your life. Amen.

This original text by Saintspedia may be freely used for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

- On February 13, the feast of Saint Polyeuctus in the Catholic Church.
- For a soldier, a police officer or anyone in military service.

- For a catechumen or a new convert, especially during Lent and before the Easter Vigil.
- When family or friends pressure you to set your faith or your conscience aside.
- Before making an important promise, a vow or a commitment.

A short invocation

For a quick prayer during the day, you can simply say:

> *Saint Polyeuctus, faithful witness of Christ, pray for us. Make us loyal friends who lead others to God.*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Polyeuctus or pray the novena to Saint Polyeuctus, from February 5 to February 13.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Polyeuctus

This novena to Saint Polyeuctus is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the Roman officer of Melitene who came to the faith through his friend Nearchus, refused to sacrifice to the gods of the Empire and was beheaded in the middle of the third century. To end on February 13, his feast day, begin it on February 5. You can also pray it at any time: for a soldier, for a person preparing for baptism, or when you need courage to stay faithful.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a few quiet minutes. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act suggested for the day. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off: a novena is an act of trust, not a performance.

Day 1: A soldier in a distant land

Polyeuctus served in the Twelfth Legion at Melitene, on the eastern edge of the Roman world. He was a man of rank and means, with a career and a family. God came to meet him in the middle of ordinary duties.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, you served faithfully in your post. Help me to see that God is present in my daily work, wherever I am sent. Amen.

Today: Offer the first task of your day to God before you begin it.

Day 2: The witness of a friend

Polyeuctus was touched by the faith of his friend and fellow soldier Nearchus. No sermon is recorded, only the force of a Christian life lived close to him. Friendship became the path to Christ.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, thank God with me for the friends who have helped me believe. Make me, in turn, a friend who leads others gently to the Lord. Amen.

Today: Thank a person who has helped you in your faith, in a message or a call.

Day 3: The joy of a new believer

Once converted, Polyeuctus burned with the fervor of a new Christian. His zeal was impetuous, and he went as far as tearing down the emperor's edict. The Church does not ask us to copy these gestures, but it honors the fire of a heart that has found Christ.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, rekindle in me the joy of my first encounter with the Lord, and teach me to express it with wisdom and charity. Amen.

Today: Pray for a person who is preparing for baptism or has recently entered the Church.

Day 4: Arrested for the faith

Polyeuctus was arrested for refusing to honor the gods of the Empire. He lost his rank, his reputation and his freedom. For him, Christ was worth more than all of it.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, pray for Christians who are persecuted today, imprisoned or threatened for their faith. Give them strength and obtain their freedom. Amen.

Today: Learn about one country where Christians suffer persecution, and pray for them.

Day 5: The tears of those he loved

His wife, Pauline, and his father-in-law, Felix, begged him in tears to sacrifice and save his life. This was perhaps his hardest trial: refusing the pleas of the people closest to his heart.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, help those whose families do not understand their faith. Teach them to remain faithful without ceasing to love. Amen.

Today: Pray for a family member who is far from God, without judging them.

Day 6: Faithful under torture

The authorities tortured Polyeuctus to make him give in. He held firm. His strength did not come from his military training but from the grace of God, who sustains those who trust in him.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, when I suffer in body or in spirit, help me to lean on the Lord rather than on my own strength. Amen.

Today: Visit, call or pray for someone who is sick or in pain.

Day 7: A baptism of blood

According to some traditions, Polyeuctus died before receiving baptism with water. The Church recognizes in his death a baptism of blood: by giving his life for Christ, he was fully united to him.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, help me to treasure the grace of my baptism and to live each day as a child of God. Amen.

Today: Renew your baptismal promises, or bless yourself slowly with holy water.

Day 8: A witness of oaths

In the Byzantine Empire, people invoked Polyeuctus as the guarantor of oaths and treaties. The one who would not break faith with God became the patron of promises kept.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, help me to be faithful to my word: in marriage, in friendship, in work and in my promises to God. Amen.

Today: Keep a small promise you have been putting off.

Day 9: A memory that endures

His church at Melitene drew pilgrims, a great church in Constantinople bore his name, and centuries later Corneille made him the hero of a tragedy. The memory of a faithful witness does not fade.

Prayer: Saint Polyeuctus, you who now see God face to face, present to him all the intentions of this novena and pray for me, that I may one day share your joy. Amen.

Today: Read a short passage of the Gospel about faithfulness, such as Matthew 10:32-33.

Closing prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
you gave Saint Polyeuctus the grace to recognize you through the witness of a friend
and the courage to confess you to the end.
Through his intercession, strengthen our faith,
make us loyal to our promises
and faithful when our conscience is tested.
Protect soldiers, new converts and persecuted Christians,
and grant us the graces we ask in this novena.
You who live and reign for ever and ever. Amen.

To learn more, read the life of Saint Polyeuctus or pray the prayer to Saint Polyeuctus.

CREDITS

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