

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Pontian

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: August 13

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IN BRIEF

Saint Pontian

Bishop of Rome from 230 to 235, deported to the mines of Sardinia, the first pope to resign his office.

Feast day	August 13
Born	Rome
Died	235, Sardinia
Era	3rd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Pontian for Reconciliation

Novena to Saint Pontian

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Pontian

Saint Pontian was bishop of Rome from 230 to 235, the eighteenth pope in the traditional list. Deported to the mines of Sardinia during the persecution of Emperor Maximinus Thrax, he gave up his office so that the Church of Rome would not be left without a shepherd: this is the first precisely known date in the history of the papacy. He died in exile, is venerated as a martyr, and is celebrated on August 13 together with Saint Hippolytus, his former opponent who became his companion in deportation.

Who was Saint Pontian?

Very little is known about his life. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a collection of entries on the popes compiled several centuries later, says he was a Roman, the son of a man named Calpurnius, and gives him a term of five years, two months and twenty-two days as bishop. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea speaks of six years. He succeeded Saint Urban I in 230.

The Church of Rome was then divided. The priest and theologian Hippolytus, one of the most learned minds of his time, had opposed, since the days of Saint Callixtus I, a policy he judged too lenient toward repentant sinners. He had placed himself at the head of a separate community, becoming the first known antipope. Pontian inherited this schism when he became bishop.



Saint Pontian in the gallery of popes at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Key dates

- **230**: He succeeds Urban I as bishop of Rome.
- **231**: A Roman synod approves the condemnation of Origen by Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria.
- **March 235**: Maximinus Thrax becomes emperor and persecution resumes.
- **235**: Deportation to Sardinia together with Hippolytus.
- **September 28, 235**: He resigns his office; Saint Anterus succeeds him.
- **Late 235**: Death in exile, probably as a result of harsh treatment.
- **August 13, around 236**: Under Pope Fabian, his body is brought back to Rome and buried in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus.

A Roman Church in a time of tension

The early third century was a period of relative calm for Christians in the Roman Empire, but not of calm inside the Church of Rome. The quarrel that divided it concerned discipline and doctrine: how to receive back those who had sinned gravely, and how to speak of the Father and the Son. Hippolytus, a gifted writer, accused the bishops of Rome of weakness. The community that followed him refused to recognize Callixtus and his successors.

During Pontian's time as bishop, in 231, a Roman synod approved the condemnation of the great Alexandrian theologian Origen, pronounced by his own bishop, Demetrius of Alexandria. This is one of the few acts of his ministry recorded by history. For the rest, the sources say little, and it is wiser not to fill the silence with legends.

A deported pope who stepped aside

In 235, Maximinus Thrax seized power and struck first at the leaders of the Church. Pontian and Hippolytus were arrested together and sent to Sardinia, condemned to forced labor in the mines. The *Liber Pontificalis* specifies that it was a small island near Tavolara, off the northeastern coast of Sardinia. For a convict, such a sentence often meant a slow death.

On September 28, 235, Pontian resigned his office so that the Roman community could choose a new bishop. The gesture was above all pastoral: a captive shepherd could no longer guide his flock. It is the first known resignation of a bishop of Rome, and the first date in papal history known to the exact day, thanks to the Roman list of bishops known as the Liberian Catalogue. Saint Anterus was elected to succeed him.

The reconciliation of two opponents

Historians think that Hippolytus also gave up his opposition at about this time, and that the two men were reconciled during their shared deportation. The Roman schism came to an end. Pontian died soon afterward, worn out by ill treatment, as the *Liber Pontificalis* states; Hippolytus also died in Sardinia.

A few years later, Pope Saint Fabian had their bodies brought back to Rome. They were buried on the same day, an August 13: Hippolytus on the Via Tiburtina, Pontian in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus on the Appian Way. His tomb there opened the "Crypt of the Popes," where his third-century successors would be laid to rest. The slab bearing the Greek inscription "Pontian, bishop" has been found there.

Why is Saint Pontian remembered today?

Saint Pontian is not the patron saint of a particular cause or country. He is remembered for two things that still speak to the Church. First, he put the good of his Church before his own position: when he could no longer serve, he made room for another. His resignation is often recalled when people speak of later popes who stepped down.

Second, shared suffering reconciled two men whom everything had set against each other. The Church celebrates them together on August 13, a reminder that communion can be reborn where no one expected it. Pontian is a natural intercessor for divided communities, for those in exile or prison, and for those who must accept letting go of a role for the good of others.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Pontian in art

No authentic portrait of Pontian exists. Like the other early popes, he appears in the series of mosaic medallions of the popes in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome, shown in papal vestments. As a martyr, he may be

shown with the palm, the usual sign of those who gave their lives for Christ. He is rarely depicted on his own; in liturgical calendars and books he is almost always paired with Saint Hippolytus.

Where to pray to Saint Pontian

The main place linked to Saint Pontian is the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way in Rome, where he was buried and where his funerary inscription can still be seen. Pilgrims visiting the catacomb pass through this crypt, which holds the memory of several third-century popes. In Sardinia, the islands of Tavolara and Molara, off the northeastern coast, recall the place of his deportation.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Pontian for Reconciliation

Saint Pontian, bishop of Rome in the third century, was deported to the mines of Sardinia and gave up his office so that his Church would not be left without a shepherd. In exile he was reconciled with Hippolytus, who had long opposed him. This prayer asks his help for those who suffer division, exile or imprisonment, and for the grace to put the good of others before our own place. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Pontian for Reconciliation

Saint Pontian, faithful shepherd of the Church of Rome,
you were torn from your people and sent to hard labor in a far country,
yet you did not think first of yourself.
You laid down your office so that your flock would not be left alone,
and you trusted the Lord to give them another shepherd.

In exile, you found a brother in the one who had opposed you.
Obtain for me the grace of reconciliation:
help me to forgive those who have hurt me,
to ask forgiveness of those I have hurt,
and to seek peace where there is division in my family, my parish and my community.

Pray for all who are in prison, in exile or forced to work in harsh conditions.
Pray for the pastors of the Church, that they may serve with humility,
and for all who must let go of a role they loved.
Teach me to hold my place in this world lightly,
and to place my whole hope in Christ, who gave his life for us.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

- On August 13, the feast of Saints Pontian and Hippolytus.
- When a conflict divides your family, your workplace or your parish, and you long for peace.
- When you must step down from a responsibility, retire or hand over a task to someone else.

- For prisoners, exiles, migrants and those who work in dangerous conditions, such as miners.
- For the pope and the bishops, especially in times of trial for the Church.

A short prayer with Saints Pontian and Hippolytus

Because the Church celebrates the two men on the same day, you may also pray to them together:

> *Saints Pontian and Hippolytus, once divided and then reconciled in suffering, pray for the unity of the Church. Where there is quarrel, may we find the way back to communion; where there is pride, may we find humility. Amen.*

This short prayer is also an original text by Saintspedia. You may end your prayer with an Our Father, asking the Father to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Pontian

This novena to Saint Pontian is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the bishop of Rome who was deported to Sardinia in 235, resigned his office for the good of his Church and was reconciled in exile with Hippolytus, his former opponent. To end on August 13, the feast of Saints Pontian and Hippolytus, begin it on August 5. You can also pray it at any time of the year, especially for reconciliation, for prisoners and exiles, or when you must let go of a responsibility.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. 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 proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: A shepherd in a divided Church

When Pontian became bishop of Rome in 230, the community was split. Hippolytus, a learned priest, led a separate group and refused to recognize the bishops of Rome. Pontian did not choose this situation; he received it, and had to serve in the middle of it.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, help me to serve faithfully in the place where God has put me, even when it is marked by tension and division. Amen.

Today: Name before God one division in your life, without blaming anyone, and entrust it to him.

Day 2: Little known, yet faithful

We know almost nothing of Pontian's daily ministry. History kept only a few lines. Most of his work, like most of ours, was hidden. God sees what no record keeps.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, teach me to do good without seeking to be noticed, and to be faithful in small and hidden things. Amen.

Today: Do one service for someone without telling anyone about it.

Day 3: Arrested for the faith

In 235, Emperor Maximinus Thrax struck at the leaders of the Church. Pontian was arrested and condemned to the mines of Sardinia. Many Christians in the world today are still imprisoned or harassed because they believe in Christ.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, pray for all Christians persecuted for their faith, and give them courage and hope. Amen.

Today: Learn about a country where Christians are persecuted, and pray for them by name.

Day 4: The hardship of exile

The mines of Sardinia were a place of exhausting labor, far from home. For many convicts, it was a slow death. Pontian knew hunger, fatigue and separation from his people.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, be close to prisoners, exiles, migrants and all who work in harsh and dangerous conditions. Amen.

Today: Pray for those who work in mines, or support an organization that helps prisoners or migrants.

Day 5: Stepping aside for the good of others

On September 28, 235, Pontian resigned so that the Church of Rome could choose a new bishop. A shepherd in chains could no longer lead his flock. He let go of his office for the sake of his people.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, give me the freedom to let go of a role, a habit or a position when the good of others asks it of me. Amen.

Today: Ask yourself what you are holding on to out of pride, and offer it to God.

Day 6: From opponents to brothers

Hippolytus had long opposed the bishops of Rome. Deported with Pontian, he seems to have given up his opposition, and the two men were reconciled. Shared suffering opened a way that years of argument had closed.

Prayer: Saints Pontian and Hippolytus, obtain for me the grace to be reconciled with those from whom I am separated. Amen.

Today: Take one small step toward someone with whom you are in conflict: a message, a kind word, a prayer for them.

Day 7: The unity of the Church

With this reconciliation, the Roman schism came to an end. The unity of the Church is a gift of Christ, but it also asks for humility from each of us. Pontian and Hippolytus are celebrated together, as a sign of that restored communion.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, pray for the unity of the Church, and for peace in my own parish. Amen.

Today: Pray for the pope and for your bishop, and avoid speaking ill of anyone in the Church today.

Day 8: A death far from home

Pontian died in Sardinia, worn out by ill treatment. He did not see Rome again during his life. Yet his witness did not end with his death: the Church kept his memory and honored him as a martyr.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, pray for all who are dying far from their families, and for those who die alone. Amen.

Today: Pray for the dead, especially those who have no one to pray for them.

Day 9: Brought home

A few years later, Pope Fabian had the bodies of Pontian and Hippolytus brought back to Rome. They were buried on the same day, August 13. Pontian rests in the Crypt of the Popes, in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus. The exile ended in the communion of the saints.

Prayer: Saint Pontian, help me to live in hope of the true homeland, where God will gather all his children. Amen.

Today: Give thanks for the saints who have gone before us, and for one person who passed on the faith to you.

Closing prayer

Lord God, you gave Saint Pontian the strength to suffer exile for your name and the humility to step aside for the good of your Church. Through his prayers and those of Saint Hippolytus, heal our divisions, comfort prisoners and exiles, and grant us to place our whole hope in you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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