BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Pothinus of Lyon

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: June 2

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IN BRIEF

Saint Pothinus of Lyon

First bishop of Lyon, who died in prison during the persecution of 177 with the martyrs of Lyon.

Feast day	June 2
Born	c. 87, Asia Minor (probably)
Died	June 2, 177, according to tradition, Lyon (Lugdunum)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	2nd century
Patron saint of	Diocese of Lyon

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Pothinus of Lyon

Saint Pothinus (Pothin in French) is the first bishop of Lyon whose name history has kept, and the first known bishop in all of Gaul. Coming from the East, he led the small Christian community of Lugdunum in the 2nd century. Arrested during the persecution of 177, under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, he died in prison at more than ninety years of age, a few days before Saint Blandina and their companions. His feast day is June 2, with the martyrs of Lyon.

Who was Saint Pothinus?

We know Pothinus through an exceptional document: the letter that the Christians of Lyon and Vienne sent, shortly after the events, to their brothers in Asia and Phrygia. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea copied long extracts from it, at the beginning of the 4th century, in Book V of his *Ecclesiastical History*. Tradition attributes this text to Saint Irenaeus, his successor, without decisive proof. Written by eyewitnesses, it is one of the oldest and most moving accounts in Christian literature. It says almost nothing about the life of Pothinus before his arrest, but it describes his end precisely.

His Greek name, *Potheinos*, means "desired." It points to an Eastern origin, probably Asia Minor, where several of the Christians of Lyon came from. We do not know when he arrived in Gaul or when he became bishop: he is thought to have taken charge of the Church of Lyon around the middle of the 2nd century. He seems to have cared for the faithful of both Lyon and Vienne.

Key dates in the life of Pothinus

- **c. 87**: Born, probably in Asia Minor; the date is deduced from the age given to him by the letter of the martyrs.

- **Mid-2nd century**: He leads the Christian community of Lyon, of which he is the first known bishop.
- **177**: Under Marcus Aurelius, violent popular hostility breaks out against the Christians of Lyon and Vienne, followed by arrests.
- **177**: Sick and over ninety years old, he appears before the governor, is beaten and thrown into prison.
- **June 2, 177, according to tradition**: He dies in prison, two days after his interrogation.
- **Summer 177**: Saint Blandina, Sanctus, Maturus, Attalus, Alexander and the young Ponticus die in turn in the amphitheater.
- **After 177**: Saint Irenaeus succeeds him as bishop of Lyon.
- **Early 4th century**: Eusebius of Caesarea hands down the letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne.
- **17th century**: A vault at the Antiquaille, on Fourvière hill, is presented as his prison cell.
- **1843**: The church of Saint-Pothin is inaugurated in the Brotteaux district of Lyon.

A bishop from the East

In the 2nd century, Lyon was the capital of the Three Gauls, a busy and cosmopolitan city where merchants, soldiers and officials from all over the Empire met. The first Christians of the city often bore Greek names: Attalus came from Pergamum, Alexander was a Phrygian physician, and Irenaeus himself grew up in Asia Minor. The Gospel reached Gaul along these roads of trade and of friendship between Churches.

A Lyon tradition, illustrated in the 19th century by the mosaics of the basilica of Fourvière, makes Pothinus an envoy of Saint Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and disciple of the apostle John. This link is plausible, since the Christians of

Lyon remained very close to the Churches of Asia, but no ancient text clearly states it. What is certain is that Pothinus rooted a living community, able to stand firm in trial.

The witness of an old man

In 177, the people of Lyon turned against the Christians. They were driven from the baths and the forum, insulted, beaten, then arrested and questioned by the authorities. They were accused of monstrous crimes, which rumor then attributed to Christians. Pothinus was among the first brought before the court.

The letter describes him this way: an old man of more than ninety, worn out by illness, barely able to breathe, but strengthened by the Spirit because he longed to bear witness to Christ. Soldiers carried him to the tribunal, followed by the notables and a howling crowd. The governor asked him who the God of the Christians was. Pothinus answered: "If you are worthy, you will know." Then the blows rained down: those near him struck him with feet and fists, those far away threw whatever came to hand. He was thrown into prison half dead. He gave up his soul two days later. Tradition places his death on June 2.

His companions then suffered other torments. The slave Blandina, whom the letter admires for her courage, died last in the amphitheater. According to the same text, the bodies of the martyrs were burned and their ashes thrown into the Rhône, so that nothing of them would remain. Gregory of Tours, in the 6th century, gives a list of forty-eight names.

Devotion and memory in Lyon

Saint Pothinus is celebrated on June 2, with Saint Blandina and the martyrs of Lyon. He is one of the patrons of the diocese of Lyon, and his name opens the list of the city's bishops. Several places in Lyon keep his memory. In the 17th century, the superior of the Visitation convent established at the Antiquaille

associated, after a dream, a vault in the cloister with the prison of Pothinus. Historians have rejected this identification, but the place became a shrine: a crypt covered with mosaics recalling the martyrs was completed there in 1893. The cell and the crypt can be seen today at the Espace culturel du christianisme à Lyon.

In the 19th century, Lyon dedicated a large church to him in the Brotteaux district, the church of Saint-Pothin, built from 1841 to 1843 in the style of an ancient temple. Its stained-glass windows bring together the founders of the Church of Lyon: Polycarp, Pothinus, Irenaeus and Blandina. Saint Pothinus is most often shown as an aged bishop, with a crozier, sometimes carried by soldiers or among his companions.

What can we learn from Saint Pothinus?

Pothinus left neither a book nor a great work. He left a Church. At an age when one might feel useless, he gave the strongest witness of his life: a single sentence before a judge, and the peace of a man who knows in whom he has placed his trust. He reminds us that faith is handed on from person to person, from one Church to another, and that faithfulness has no age. You can pray to him for the Church of Lyon, for bishops, for the elderly and the sick, and for Christians persecuted today.

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

Where to pray to Saint Pothinus

- **The Antiquaille** (Lyon, Fourvière hill): the presumed prison cell of Saint Pothinus and the crypt of the martyrs, at the Espace culturel du christianisme à Lyon.
- **The church of Saint-Pothin** (Lyon, 6th arrondissement): the parish church that bears his name, in the Brotteaux district.

- **The basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière** (Lyon): mosaics recalling his arrival and the martyrs of 177.
- **The basilica of Saint-Martin d'Ainay** (Lyon): a place that Lyon tradition links with the memory of the martyrs.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Pothinus for the Church of Lyon and Christians in Trial

Saint Pothinus, first bishop of Lyon, bore witness to Christ in 177, at more than ninety years of age, and died in prison from the blows he received before the tribunal. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him the Church of Lyon, pastors, the elderly and the sick, and all who suffer for their faith.

Prayer to Saint Pothinus

Saint Pothinus,
shepherd who came from the East to proclaim the Gospel in Gaul,
you gathered a living Church in Lyon
and kept it in the faith to the very end.
Teach us to hand on faithfully
what we have received.

Old man weakened by age and illness,
you found in the Holy Spirit the strength to bear witness.
Before the judge you said simply:
"If you are worthy, you will know."
Give us that quiet courage
that seeks neither to shine nor to flee.

Watch over bishops and priests,
over the elderly, the sick and prisoners,
and over the persecuted Christians of our time.
With Saint Blandina and the martyrs of Lyon,
obtain for us the grace to remain faithful to the end.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Pothinus

- On his feast day, June 2, with the martyrs of Lyon.
- For the Church of Lyon, its bishop and all who serve there.
- When age or illness makes you feel you are no longer useful.
- For Christians imprisoned or mistreated because of their faith.
- For those called to give an account of their faith before others.

A prayer for the elderly

You can say this while thinking of an elderly or sick person:

> *Lord, you who strengthened Saint Pothinus in his old age,*
> *sustain those whose strength is failing.*
> *Saint Pothinus, pray for them. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Pothinus from May 25 to June 2, and read the life of Saint Pothinus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Pothinus of Lyon

This novena is an original composition inspired by the life of Saint Pothinus, first bishop of Lyon, who died in prison in 177. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, June 2, begin on May 25. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with 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: "Saint Pothinus and martyrs of Lyon, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. The facts recounted come from the letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne, handed down by Eusebius of Caesarea; others belong to Lyon tradition, and this is indicated.

Day 1: The desired one

The name Pothinus means "desired" in Greek. Before being awaited by a community, each of us is desired by God, who willed us and loves us.

Prayer: Lord, you desired me before I knew you. Teach me to receive my life as a gift of your love.

Act of the day: Thank God for three people who welcomed you in life.

Day 2: From far away

Pothinus came from the East, like several Christians of Lyon. The Gospel reached Gaul through foreigners, merchants and travelers who carried their faith with them.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who have left their country. Make our communities houses open to strangers.

Act of the day: Greet and welcome attentively someone who has recently arrived in your parish or neighborhood.

Day 3: A shepherd for Lyon

Bishop of a small community in the midst of a great pagan city, Pothinus fed the faithful with the Word and the sacraments. His Church held firm in trial because it had been well rooted.

Prayer: Lord, give your Church shepherds after your own heart, and keep our bishop faithful.

Act of the day: Pray by name for the bishop of your diocese and for the priests of your parish.

Day 4: A Church in touch with others

After the persecution, the Christians of Lyon and Vienne wrote to their brothers in Asia. Lyon tradition links Pothinus to Saint Polycarp of Smyrna. The Church is a communion that overcomes distance.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to Christians in other countries, and let communion grow between us.

Act of the day: Pray for a distant Church, or support a charity serving Eastern Christians.

Day 5: Strength in weakness

At more than ninety, sick and barely able to breathe, Pothinus found in the Holy Spirit the ardor to bear witness. God does not need our strength to act through us.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, come to the help of my weakness. Give me the strength to do today what you expect of me.

Act of the day: Visit or call an elderly or sick person.

Day 6: "If you are worthy"

To the governor who asked him who the God of the Christians was, Pothinus replied: "If you are worthy, you will know." God reveals himself to those who seek him with an upright heart.

Prayer: Lord, purify my heart so that I may know you better, and that my life may make you known.

Act of the day: Spend ten minutes in silence before God, without asking for anything.

Day 7: Under the blows

The crowd struck the old bishop and threw at him whatever came to hand. Like Christ, he did not answer violence with violence.

Prayer: Jesus, meek and humble of heart, keep me from returning evil for evil, and bless those who make me suffer.

Act of the day: Pray for someone who has hurt you, and hold back a harsh word.

Day 8: Dying in prison

Thrown into a cell, Pothinus died two days later. He had no spectacle and no crowd to admire him: only the darkness of a prison and the presence of God.

Prayer: Lord, remember prisoners, especially those locked up because of their faith. Be their light.

Act of the day: Pray for prisoners and those who visit them, or support a prison chaplaincy.

Day 9: A seed for the Church

After Pothinus came Irenaeus, then generations of Christians in Lyon. The blood of the martyrs of 177 was a seed for the Church of Gaul.

Prayer: Lord, make my faithfulness bear fruit, even when hidden. Through the intercession of Saint Pothinus, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass and pray for Christians persecuted today.

Living the novena with Saint Pothinus

Saint Pothinus left only one sentence, but it is enough to express his faith. During these nine days, you can carry the Church of Lyon, pastors, the elderly and the sick, prisoners and persecuted Christians. If you can, visit the Antiquaille, on Fourvière hill, or the church of Saint-Pothin in the Brotteaux district.

Closing prayer

Saint Pothinus,
first shepherd of the Church of Lyon,
you kept the faith into old age
and confessed it before your judges.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Keep me faithful in small and great trials,
and obtain for me the peace of those who know they are loved by God.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

The Antiquaille: Prison Cell of Saint Pothinus

On Fourvière hill in Lyon, the former Visitation convent that later became the Antiquaille hospital holds a remarkable place of memory: a vault presented since the 17th century as the prison cell of Saint Pothinus, and a crypt covered with mosaics dedicated to the martyrs of 177. Today they belong to the Espace culturel du christianisme à Lyon, opened in 2014, which tells the story of the city's Christian origins.

A vault that became a shrine

In the 17th century, the Visitation nuns settled at the Antiquaille, on an estate then believed to be the site of the Roman governor's palace. Their superior, after a dream, linked a vault in the cloister with the prison where Saint Pothinus is said to have died in 177. Lyon historians have rejected this identification, which rests on no ancient source: the letter of the martyrs does not say where the prison was. But the place became a shrine, where generations of people from Lyon came to pray to the first martyrs of Gaul.

At the end of the 19th century, a crypt was built next to the cell to welcome pilgrims. Its walls are entirely covered with mosaics, completed in 1893, recalling Saint Pothinus, Saint Blandina and their companions. The cell and the crypt have been listed as historic monuments since 2005. After the hospital closed in 2003, they were restored and included in an interpretation center on the history of Christianity.

What you can see

The visit leads to the vaulted cell presented as the prison of Saint Pothinus, then to the crypt of the mosaics, a fine example of 19th-century religious art in Lyon. The tour also presents the persecution of 177, the letter of the Churches of Lyon and Vienne, and the history of Christianity in Lyon. The cloister of the former convent gives access to the site. Close by are the ancient theater of Fourvière and the Lugdunum museum, which show the Roman city where Pothinus lived.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Pothinus. In the cell, remember Christians imprisoned today for their faith; in the crypt, entrust the Church of Lyon to God and say the prayer to Saint Pothinus. June 2, the feast of the martyrs of Lyon, is a fine time for this pilgrimage. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Pothinus in Lyon

- **The basilica of Notre-Dame de Fourvière**: a mosaic there shows the arrival of Saint Pothinus in Lyon.
- **The church of Saint-Pothin** (6th arrondissement): a 19th-century parish church dedicated to him.
- **The basilica of Saint-Martin d'Ainay**: tradition links it with the memory of the martyrs of 177.
- **The church of Saint-Nizier**: the former church of the Apostles, where, according to Ado of Vienne, the ashes of the martyrs were kept.

Practical information

The Antiquaille is at 49, montée Saint-Barthélemy, in the 5th arrondissement of Lyon, on the slopes of Fourvière. You can walk up from Old Lyon, or take the funicular that climbs to Fourvière. The site is a cultural and memorial place: opening days, hours and visiting conditions may change, so check with the Espace culturel du christianisme à Lyon before you come.

Credits and sources

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