

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Publius of Malta

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 21

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IN BRIEF

Saint Publius of Malta

Chief magistrate of Malta who welcomed Saint Paul, first bishop of the island according to tradition.

Feast day	January 21
Died	early 2nd century (according to tradition)
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	2nd century
Patron saint of	Malta, Floriana

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Publius for Hospitality and the Sick

Novena to Saint Publius

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Publius of Malta

Saint Publius was the chief magistrate of the island of Malta who, according to the Acts of the Apostles, welcomed Saint Paul after his shipwreck, around the year 60. Paul healed his sick father, and Maltese tradition holds that Publius became the first Christian and the first bishop of the island. Another tradition identifies him with a bishop of Athens who died a martyr early in the second century. A patron saint of Malta, together with Saint Paul and Saint Agatha, he is celebrated on January 21.

Who was Saint Publius?

All that we know for certain about Publius fits into a few verses of the Acts of the Apostles, written by Saint Luke, Paul's traveling companion. The rest belongs to the traditions of the Church of Malta and of the early Church, which must be received with prudence.

His Latin name points to a man connected with the Roman administration. Acts calls him "the chief man of the island," a title that inscriptions found in Malta confirm as that of the principal local magistrate. Luke, who was there, gives the detail with the precision of an eyewitness.

Key dates according to the sources and tradition

- **c. 60**: Saint Paul is shipwrecked on Malta; Publius welcomes him for three days.
- **Soon after**: Paul heals Publius's father, then other sick people of the island.
- **According to tradition**: Publius becomes a Christian, then the first bishop of Malta.
- **Early 2nd century**: According to an ancient tradition, as bishop of Athens he dies a martyr, around 112 or under the emperor Hadrian.

The host of Saint Paul

The Acts of the Apostles tell how Saint Paul, a prisoner being taken to Rome for trial, was shipwrecked on the island of Malta with the other people on board, two hundred and seventy-six in all. The islanders welcomed them with unusual kindness and lit a fire to warm them. Paul was bitten by a viper without suffering any harm, which astonished the onlookers.

Luke goes on to say that near the place there were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, Publius, who received them and gave them friendly hospitality for three days. Publius's father lay sick with fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him, prayed, laid his hands on him and healed him. After this, the other sick people of the island came and were healed as well. When the travelers left three months later, the Maltese honored them in many ways and supplied them with what they needed for the voyage (Acts 28:1-10).

The account is told in the first person plural: "we" were received, "we" were honored. Luke was one of the guests in Publius's house. This is why the passage has always carried so much weight for the people of Malta: it is not a distant legend, but the testimony of a man who sat at their table.

The first bishop of Malta

The tradition of the Church of Malta holds that Publius was converted and that Paul left him at the head of the young Christian community of the island. According to local tradition, his house stood where the cathedral of Mdina, the old capital, stands today, and the grotto where Paul is said to have stayed is venerated in nearby Rabat.

These traditions cannot be verified historically, but they express the conviction of the Maltese people that they received the faith directly from the Apostle. For Malta, today an English-speaking Catholic nation at the heart of the Mediterranean, Publius is the first link in a chain of faith that goes back to Paul himself.

The bishop of Athens

Eusebius of Caesarea and Saint Jerome mention a Publius, bishop of Athens, who died a martyr early in the second century and was succeeded by Quadratus, one of the first Christian apologists. Tradition identified this bishop with Publius of Malta, which would mean that he left his island for Greece. Historians remain cautious about this identification, which no ancient source states explicitly.

Why is Saint Publius the patron saint of Malta?

Publius is the first Maltese whose name we know to have met the Gospel, and tradition makes him the first shepherd of the island's Church. That is why he shares the patronage of Malta with Saint Paul, who brought the faith, and Saint Agatha. He is also the patron of Floriana, the town just outside Valletta whose great parish church is dedicated to him.

Above all, Publius is a man of hospitality. He welcomed shipwrecked strangers, among them a prisoner, and that openness gave God the opportunity to enter his house and his island. His memory reminds Malta, a land of welcome in the middle of the sea, of its calling to receive those whom the sea brings to its shores. He can be prayed to for hospitality, for the sick and for those who hold public office.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Publius in art

In Maltese churches, Saint Publius is usually shown as a bishop, wearing a miter and holding a crosier, the signs of his role as first bishop of the island. He sometimes appears together with Saint Paul, in scenes of the shipwreck or of the healing of his father.

Where to pray to Saint Publius

- **Floriana** (Malta): the parish church of Saint Publius, the main church dedicated to him.
- **Mdina** (Malta): Saint Paul's Cathedral, built according to tradition on the site of his house.
- **Rabat** (Malta): Saint Paul's Grotto, where the Apostle is said to have stayed.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Publius or the novena to Saint Publius.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Publius for Hospitality and the Sick

Saint Publius is honored above all in Malta, where he is one of the patron saints of the islands, together with Saint Paul and Saint Agatha. No traditional prayer to him has come into wide use in English. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by what the Acts of the Apostles and Maltese tradition tell of him: the magistrate who welcomed shipwrecked strangers, the son whose father was healed, the first bishop of his island.

A saint of hospitality

When Paul and his companions were thrown ashore on Malta, Publius received them and gave them friendly hospitality for three days. Paul prayed over his sick father and healed him (Acts 28:7-8). From that open door, according to tradition, the faith entered the island.

Prayer to Saint Publius for hospitality and the sick

Saint Publius, you opened your house to shipwrecked strangers and to a prisoner in chains: give me a heart that is open and generous, ready to welcome those whom God places on my path.

Through the prayer of Saint Paul, your father was healed of his fever: I entrust to you the sick, and especially (name the person). May they receive comfort, courage and, if God wills, healing.

You held public office before you became a shepherd of the Church: pray for all who govern, that they may serve the common good with justice and humility.

Watch over the people of Malta and Gozo, over migrants who cross the sea and over all who receive them. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Help me, like you, to recognize the visit of God in the guest who knocks at my door. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Publius is celebrated on January 21. This prayer also fits:

- when you are about to welcome a guest, a newcomer or a stranger;
- at the bedside of a sick parent or relative;
- for leaders and civil servants;
- for Malta and for migrants who cross the Mediterranean.

A short invocation

> *Saint Publius, host of Saint Paul and first shepherd of Malta, pray for us. Amen.*

To get to know him better, read the life of Saint Publius, or pray the novena to Saint Publius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Publius

This novena to Saint Publius is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the chief man of Malta who welcomed Saint Paul after his shipwreck, saw his father healed and, according to tradition, became the first bishop of the island. To end on his feast day, January 21, begin it on January 13. You can also pray it at any time, especially for the sick, for a family welcoming someone, or for Malta.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a quiet moment. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed. The first days follow the account of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 28:1-10); the last days follow the traditions of the Church of Malta, which cannot be verified historically but express a living faith.

Day 1: A storm at sea

For two weeks the ship carrying Paul was battered by the storm, until it ran aground off Malta. Everyone on board reached the shore safely. God was already at work in the shipwreck. What looked like a disaster became the way the Gospel reached a new land.

Prayer: Saint Publius, pray for all who are going through a storm in their lives, and help them to trust that God has not abandoned them. Amen.

Today: Pray for sailors, fishermen and all who travel by sea.

Day 2: Unusual kindness

The islanders welcomed the castaways with unusual kindness and lit a fire to warm them in the cold and the rain. Before they knew the Gospel, they already practiced charity. Simple human kindness often prepares the way for faith.

Prayer: Saint Publius, bless the people who welcome strangers, and make me attentive to those who are cold, alone or lost. Amen.

Today: Offer something warm, a meal, a coat or a kind word, to someone in need.

Day 3: The viper and the fire

A viper fastened on Paul's hand, but he shook it off into the fire and suffered no harm. The onlookers were amazed. God protects his messengers in ways that surprise us.

Prayer: Saint Publius, protect me from evil and from fear, and help me to keep going when I am attacked. Amen.

Today: Hand over to God one fear that has been weighing on you.

Day 4: An open house

Publius, the chief man of the island, received Paul and his companions and gave them friendly hospitality for three days. A man of rank, he did not refuse to welcome a prisoner. He did not ask what his guests could give him in return.

Prayer: Saint Publius, give me your generous hospitality, and help me to see Christ in every guest. Amen.

Today: Invite someone to your home or to share a coffee.

Day 5: A father healed

Publius's father was lying sick with fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him, prayed, laid his hands on him and healed him. The welcome Publius gave was returned to him a hundredfold.

Prayer: Saint Publius, I entrust to you the sick of my family, and especially elderly parents. Amen.

Today: Visit or call an elderly or sick person.

Day 6: A whole island comes

After this healing, the other sick people of the island came to Paul and were healed. What began in one home spread to a whole people. Grace is never meant to stay locked up. It overflows from one person to the next, from one house to a whole people.

Prayer: Saint Publius, make my home a place where others can meet God. Amen.

Today: Share with someone a good thing God has done for you.

Day 7: A Christian of the first hour

According to Maltese tradition, Publius received the faith from Paul himself. He was among the first on the island to follow Christ, and his conversion opened the way for others.

Prayer: Saint Publius, renew in me the grace of my baptism and the joy of believing. Amen.

Today: Renew your baptismal promises in a quiet moment of prayer.

Day 8: The shepherd of Malta

Tradition holds that Paul left Publius at the head of the young Church of Malta. The magistrate became a shepherd, serving his people now as a pastor. Authority, in the Church, is always a form of service.

Prayer: Saint Publius, bless bishops and priests, and pray for all who hold public office, that they may serve with justice. Amen.

Today: Pray for your bishop, your pastor and your local leaders by name.

Day 9: Witness to the end

An ancient tradition identifies Publius with a bishop of Athens who died a martyr early in the second century. Whatever the history, the memory of his faith has crossed twenty centuries.

Prayer: Saint Publius, present to the Lord the intention I have carried through this novena, and help me to remain faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Thank God for those who first passed on the faith to you.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, through the shipwreck of Saint Paul you brought the light of the Gospel to the people of Malta, and you chose Saint Publius to welcome your Apostle. Through his intercession, open our hearts and our homes to strangers, comfort the sick and give us leaders who serve the common good. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Read more in the life of Saint Publius, or say the prayer to Saint Publius.

CREDITS

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