

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Robert Bellarmine

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Robert Bellarmine

Italian Jesuit, cardinal and theologian of the Catholic Reformation, Doctor of the Church.

Feast day	September 17
Born	October 1542, Montepulciano, Tuscany, Italy
Died	September 17, 1621, Rome, Italy
Canonized	June 29, 1930, by Pope Pius XI
Era	17th century
Patron saint of	catechists, catechumens, canon lawyers

In this booklet

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Prayer to Saint Robert Bellarmine for the Love of Truth

Novena to Saint Robert Bellarmine

Tomb of Saint Robert Bellarmine, Church of Saint Ignatius in Rome

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Robert Bellarmine

Saint Robert Bellarmine was an Italian Jesuit, born in 1542 in Montepulciano, Tuscany, who died in Rome on September 17, 1621. A professor at Louvain and then at the Roman College, he wrote the famous *Controversies* against Protestant doctrines and a short catechism that was used for centuries, and he became a cardinal and adviser to popes. His name is also linked to the trials of Giordano Bruno and to the Galileo affair. Canonized and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XI, he is celebrated on September 17.

Who was Saint Robert Bellarmine?

Roberto Bellarmino was born in October 1542 into a noble but not wealthy family of Montepulciano. His mother, Cinzia Cervini, was the sister of Cardinal Marcello Cervini, who was pope for a few weeks in 1555 under the name of Marcellus II.

A pupil at the college the Jesuits had just opened in his town, young Robert thought for a while of studying medicine, then entered the Society of Jesus on September 20, 1560.

He studied philosophy at the Roman College, taught the humanities in Florence and Mondovì, then began theology in Padua and completed it in Louvain, in the Southern Netherlands. Ordained a priest in Ghent on March 25, 1570, he immediately began teaching at Louvain, where he introduced the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas and became known as a preacher.



Montepulciano, Robert Bellarmine's hometown.

Key dates in the life of Saint Robert Bellarmine

- **October 1542**: Born in Montepulciano, Tuscany.
- **September 20, 1560**: Enters the Society of Jesus.
- **March 25, 1570**: Ordained a priest in Ghent.
- **1570-1576**: Professor of theology at Louvain.
- **1576**: Chair of controversies at the Roman College.
- **1586-1593**: Publication of the *Controversies*.
- **1597**: Publication of his short catechism, *Dottrina cristiana breve*.
- **1599**: Made a cardinal by Pope Clement VIII.
- **1602-1605**: Archbishop of Capua.
- **1616**: Informs Galileo that he may not defend heliocentrism as true.

- **September 17, 1621**: Dies in Rome, at the Jesuit novitiate of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale.
- **1923**: Beatified by Pope Pius XI.
- **June 29, 1930**: Canonized by Pope Pius XI.
- **1931**: Proclaimed a Doctor of the Church.

The master of controversy

In 1576, Bellarmine was called to Rome to hold the "chair of controversies" at the Roman College, whose task was to present and discuss the positions of the Protestant reformers. His lectures led to a monumental work, the *Controversies of the Christian Faith*, published between 1586 and 1593. The work went through some twenty editions in his lifetime and drew replies from great Protestant theologians, a sign of how seriously it was taken.

At a time when religious debates often descended into insults, Bellarmine refuted doctrines but respected persons, and even Anglican opponents acknowledged his great integrity.

He also took part in the revision of the Latin Bible, the Vulgate, published in 1592, and wrote a short catechism that Pope Clement VIII recommended to parishes. It was used to teach generations of children.

A cardinal who remained a religious

At the Roman College, Bellarmine was the spiritual director of a young Jesuit, Aloysius Gonzaga, who died in 1591 after caring for victims of the plague; Bellarmine later asked to be buried near him.

Made a cardinal in 1599 and then archbishop of Capua, he visited every parish of his diocese and regularly held synods. Recalled to Rome by Pope Paul V in 1605, he sat on several Roman congregations. He lived simply and gave a great

deal to the poor. His last writings were books of spirituality, such as *The Ascent of the Mind to God by the Ladder of Created Things* (1615).



Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, portrait in the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp.

Giordano Bruno and Galileo

As a member of the Holy Office, Bellarmine was involved in two famous cases. He conducted part of the investigation in the trial of the philosopher Giordano Bruno, who was burned alive in Rome in February 1600; Bellarmine had tried several times to bring him back to the faith.

In 1616, he informed Galileo that he was forbidden to teach the theory of Copernicus as true, accepting it only as a mathematical hypothesis. He then gave Galileo a document stating that he had not been condemned. Bellarmine died in 1621 and took no part in the trial of 1633. These episodes, which the Church itself revisited with repentance at the end of the 20th century, are part of his memory.

Why is Saint Robert Bellarmine invoked by catechists and teachers?

The Church has not given him an official patronage, but his life makes him a natural patron for those who teach the faith. His short catechism formed generations of children, and his lectures and books set out Catholic doctrine with clarity and rigor. He is therefore prayed to by catechists, by teachers of religion and by theologians. Several Catholic schools and universities in the English-speaking world bear his name, a sign of the place he holds in Catholic education.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Robert Bellarmine in art

- **The red robes of a cardinal**, often with the mozzetta and biretta.
- **A book or a pen**, signs of the theologian and author of the *Controversies* and the catechism.
- **A grave, bearded face**, as in the portraits of his old age.
- **The Jesuit emblem IHS**, sometimes added as a reminder of the Society of Jesus.



The church of Sant'Ignazio in Rome, where the remains of Saint Robert Bellarmine rest.

What his holiness teaches us

Saint Robert Bellarmine placed an exceptional intelligence at the service of the Church, convinced that the faith is defended with arguments, not with insults. A man of power in spite of himself, he remained a Jesuit through the simplicity of his life and the depth of his prayer.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Robert Bellarmine or follow the novena to Saint Robert Bellarmine.

Where to pray to Saint Robert Bellarmine

- **Rome**: the church of Sant'Ignazio di Loyola, the church of the Roman College, where his remains rest under the altar of the chapel dedicated to him, near Saint Aloysius Gonzaga.

- **Rome**: the church of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale, linked to the Jesuit novitiate where he died.
- **Rome**: the church of San Roberto Bellarmino in the Parioli district, which has borne his name since 1933.
- **Montepulciano** (Tuscany): his hometown.
- **Louvain** (Belgium): the university town where he taught from 1570 to 1576.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Robert Bellarmine for the Love of Truth

Saint Robert Bellarmine left many spiritual writings, including *The Ascent of the Mind to God by the Ladder of Created Things* (1615), and a short catechism that taught generations of children to pray. No prayer addressed to him, however, has become established in tradition. Below is an original prayer to Saint Robert Bellarmine for the love of truth.

Prayer to Saint Robert Bellarmine

Saint Robert Bellarmine, you devoted your intelligence to the Church: teach me to love the truth and to seek it with humility.

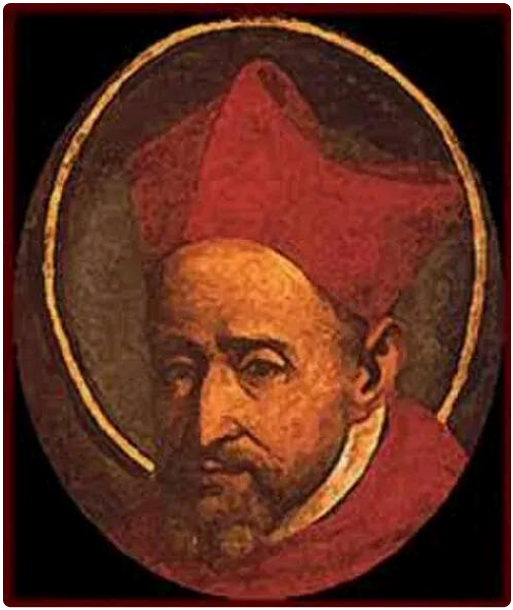
You knew how to debate without contempt: help me to defend what I believe with gentleness and respect, never wounding the person of one who thinks differently.

You wrote a catechism for children: pray for catechists, for parents and for teachers who hand on the faith.

You guided the young Aloysius Gonzaga: pray for young people seeking their vocation, and for those who walk with them.

Teach me, as you did, to rise toward God through the beauty of created things. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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



Saint Robert Bellarmine, cardinal and Doctor of the Church.

A prayer before study or catechesis

> *Lord, through the intercession of Saint Robert Bellarmine, open my mind to your truth and my heart to your love. May what I learn and what I teach lead others and myself closer to you. Amen.*

This short prayer is also an original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Robert Bellarmine is celebrated on September 17, the day of his death in Rome in 1621. Before the reform of the calendar in 1969, his feast was kept on May 13. His feast falls at the start of the school year in many countries, a good time to entrust to him students, teachers and catechists.

You can also pray to him before a difficult conversation about faith, or when you need to defend your convictions without losing charity. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Robert Bellarmine, and read the life of Saint Robert Bellarmine.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Robert Bellarmine

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and writings of Saint Robert Bellarmine, Jesuit, cardinal and Doctor of the Church. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, September 17, begin on September 9.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day.

Because it falls at the beginning of the school year in many countries, this novena is well suited to students, teachers, catechists and parents. It can be prayed alone, in a family, in a class or in a parish group, and at any time of the year.



Saint Robert Bellarmine, Jesuit and cardinal.

Day 1: A vocation discerned

As a young man in Montepulciano, Robert thought of becoming a doctor before choosing the Society of Jesus. Discerning one's path takes time, prayer and honesty. God often speaks through our desires, once they have been purified.

Prayer: Lord, show me the path you have prepared for me, and give me the courage to follow it.

Today: Pray for a young person who is seeking his or her vocation.

Day 2: The love of study

Robert studied and taught in Rome, Florence, Padua and Louvain. For him, the intelligence was a gift of God to be used in his service. Study done with love can become a form of prayer.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, enlighten my mind and give me a taste for the truth.

Today: Take fifteen minutes to read something that nourishes your faith.

Day 3: Debating without contempt

In an age of bitter religious quarrels, Bellarmine refuted ideas but respected persons. Even his opponents recognized his integrity. Today too, debates easily turn into insults, online and elsewhere.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to speak the truth with charity, and to listen before answering.

Today: In a disagreement, try first to understand the other person's point of view.

Day 4: Handing on the faith to children

The great theologian also wrote a short catechism for children, which was used for centuries. He did not think it beneath him to explain the faith simply. The simplest words are often the deepest, and a child's question can open the greatest mysteries.

Prayer: Lord, bless the catechists, parents and teachers who hand on the faith to children.

Today: Thank someone who taught you the faith, or pray for them.

Day 5: Accompanying a soul

At the Roman College, Bellarmine was the spiritual director of the young Aloysius Gonzaga, who died caring for the sick during the plague. He wanted to be buried near him. Accompanying another person on the way to God is a great responsibility and a great joy.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who guide others in the spiritual life, and help me to be a good companion to those around me.

Today: Pray for your confessor, your spiritual director or a person who has helped you grow.

Day 6: A shepherd among his people

As archbishop of Capua, Bellarmine visited every parish of his diocese. He did not govern from a distance: he went to meet his people. A shepherd must know the faces of those entrusted to him.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishops and priests, and give them the joy of being close to their people.

Today: Pray for your bishop by name.

Day 7: Simplicity in high office

Though a cardinal and adviser to popes, Bellarmine lived simply and gave much to the poor. Honors did not change his heart, and he kept the habits of prayer of a Jesuit. Whatever our responsibilities, we remain servants.

Prayer: Lord, keep me humble in success and generous with what I have received.

Today: Give something to a person in need, discreetly.

Day 8: Rising to God through creation

At the end of his life, Bellarmine wrote *The Ascent of the Mind to God by the Ladder of Created Things*. The beauty of the world, the order of nature and the gifts of each creature can lead us to the Creator, step by step.

Prayer: Creator of all things, open my eyes to your presence in the world you have made.

Today: Take a few minutes outdoors to contemplate creation and give thanks.

Day 9: Truth and humility

Bellarmine's name is linked to the trials of Giordano Bruno and to the Galileo affair, which the Church later revisited with repentance. Even saints are people of their time, with their limits. Holiness does not mean never being wrong, but seeking God with all one's heart.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Robert Bellarmine, give me a love of truth joined to humility, and keep me faithful to you until the end. Amen.

Today: Ask God for the grace to recognize your own mistakes and to forgive those of others.

Closing prayer

Saint Robert Bellarmine, teacher of the faith and humble religious, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for students and teachers, for catechists and theologians, and for all who seek the truth. Obtain for us a clear mind, a gentle heart and a living faith. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Tomb of Saint Robert Bellarmine, Church of Saint Ignatius in Rome

The remains of Saint Robert Bellarmine rest in Rome, in the Church of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, beneath the altar of a chapel dedicated to him. It is the church of the Roman College, where he taught for years, and it also houses the tomb of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, whose spiritual director he was: Bellarmine had wished to rest near him.

The church of the Roman College

The Church of Saint Ignatius was built in the 17th century, after the canonization of Ignatius of Loyola, to serve as the church of the Roman College, the great school founded by the Jesuits. It was in this college that Bellarmine held the chair of controversial theology from 1576 and accompanied the young Aloysius Gonzaga. He is therefore deeply tied to this part of Rome's historic center, between the Pantheon and the Via del Corso.



The Church of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in Rome.

Visiting the church

The Baroque interior is famous for the trompe-l'oeil ceiling painted by the Jesuit Andrea Pozzo, depicting the glory of Saint Ignatius, and for its painted false dome. In the side chapels, pilgrims find the altar of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga and the chapel where the remains of Saint Robert Bellarmine rest. Taking time to pray before these two tombs is a way of rediscovering the bond between master and disciple.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Robert Bellarmine. At his tomb, you can entrust to God those who teach the faith, theology students, or someone with whom dialogue is difficult, by saying the prayer to Saint Robert Bellarmine. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places connected with Saint Robert Bellarmine

- **Rome**: the Church of Sant'Andrea al Quirinale, tied to the Jesuit novitiate where he died on September 17, 1621.
- **Rome**: the Church of San Roberto Bellarmino, in the Parioli district, which has borne his name since 1933.
- **Montepulciano** (Tuscany): his native town.
- **Leuven** (Belgium): the university town where he taught from 1570 to 1576.

Practical information

The Church of Saint Ignatius is in the historic center of Rome, a few minutes' walk from the Pantheon. It remains a place of worship: modest dress is required, and visits are suspended during services. Check the church's official website for opening and Mass times.

CREDITS

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