

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Roch of Montpellier

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 16

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IN BRIEF

Saint Roch of Montpellier

Pilgrim from Montpellier who served plague victims in 14th-century Italy, patron saint of dogs and of the sick.

Feast day	August 16
Born	14th century, Montpellier, France
Died	14th century (date debated), Lombardy, Italy (Voghera, according to the most accepted view)
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since the Middle Ages)
Era	14th century
Patron saint of	pilgrims, people with contagious diseases, dogs, plague victims

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Roch

Church of San Rocco and Scuola Grande di San Rocco, in Venice

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Roch of Montpellier

Saint Roch (also known as Saint Rocco) was a pilgrim from Montpellier, in southern France, who lived in the 14th century. According to tradition, he devoted his life to caring for plague victims along the roads of Italy, caught the disease himself and was fed by a dog, before dying unknown in a prison cell. Invoked for centuries against epidemics, he is one of the most popular saints in Europe. His feast day is August 16.

Who was Saint Roch?

Very little is known for certain about Saint Roch. The first accounts of his life, such as the one by the Venetian Francesco Diedo, published in 1478, or a short anonymous Latin *Life*, were written more than a century after his death, when his cult had already spread across northern Italy. They do not always agree on places and dates.

Old tradition places his birth around 1295; many historians today prefer to place his life in the second half of the 14th century, in the time of the great waves of plague that followed the Black Death of 1348. Yet the portrait that emerges from these accounts is consistent: a layman who gave up everything to become a pilgrim and a servant of the sick.

Key dates

- **14th century**: Born in Montpellier into a well-off family, according to all the accounts.
- **Youth**: Orphaned, he gives his goods to the poor and sets out on pilgrimage to Rome.
- **On the road to Rome**: He cares for plague victims at Acquapendente, then in Cesena and Rome.

- **At Piacenza**: Struck by the plague, he withdraws into a forest; a dog brings him bread every day.
- **End of his life**: Suspected of spying, he is imprisoned and dies in captivity without revealing who he is.
- **1478**: Francesco Diedo's *Life* of Saint Roch is published in Venice.
- **1485**: His relics are brought to Venice.
- **16th century**: Tintoretto decorates the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice.

A pilgrim at the service of plague victims

According to the accounts, Roch was the only son of a prominent family in Montpellier. He is said to have been born with a red, cross-shaped mark on his chest, a sign that would later make it possible to identify him. Having lost his parents young, he sold his possessions, gave the money to the poor and set out for Rome dressed as a pilgrim, with staff, satchel and hat.

In Italy, he found cities ravaged by the plague. At Acquapendente, north of Rome, instead of fleeing like so many others, he put himself at the service of the sick in the hospital. Tradition says he healed many of them with the sign of the cross. He continued on his way, caring for the sick in Cesena, in Rome and then in other towns of northern Italy. This devotion, in the midst of general fear, is the heart of his holiness.



Saint Roch Healing the Plague Victims, by Tintoretto, church of San Rocco, Venice (1549).

Saint Roch's dog

At Piacenza, Roch in turn caught the plague. So as not to infect others, he withdrew into a forest, near a spring. According to the legend, the dog of a local nobleman, named Gothard in the accounts, brought him every day a loaf of bread taken from his master's table. Intrigued, the nobleman followed the animal, found the sick man and cared for him; moved by the encounter, he was converted and became a hermit himself.

This episode gave rise to the familiar image of Saint Roch: a pilgrim lifting his tunic to show the plague sore on his thigh, accompanied by a dog with a loaf of bread in its mouth. Sculptors and painters have shown him this way thousands of times, from village churches to the canvases of Rubens.

Death in obscurity

Once healed, Roch set out again. Arrested in a town at war, he was taken for a spy. He refused to reveal who he was and remained in prison for several years, where he died. The accounts differ on the place: Montpellier in some early

versions, Angera or Voghera in Lombardy in others; most historians today favor Voghera. After his death, according to tradition, the red cross on his chest made it possible to identify him.



The Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, decorated by Tintoretto.

A cult born of epidemics

Devotion to Roch first developed in northern Italy in the 15th century. An early account reports that in 1414, when an epidemic threatened the Council of Constance, processions in his honor were followed by the end of the outbreak. In 1485, his relics were taken to Venice, a city especially exposed to epidemics because of its sea trade, and placed in the church of San Rocco. A powerful confraternity, the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, was founded in his name.

All over Europe, confraternities, chapels and churches were dedicated to him, often after an epidemic. In France, the church of Saint-Roch in Paris, on the rue Saint-Honoré, and the one in Montpellier, his hometown, are the best known. Italian immigrants carried his cult to the Americas, and in the United States the Saint Roch Chapel in New Orleans remains a well-known place of prayer for the sick. Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago also like to invoke him because of his pilgrim's garb.

Why is Saint Roch the patron saint of dogs and the sick?

Saint Roch is the saint of those who stay when others flee. He founded no order and wrote no book: he cared for the sick, then accepted being cared for, and died without seeking recognition. His humility and courage speak to all who look after the sick.

Because he served plague victims and suffered the plague himself, he is invoked in times of epidemic and for people with contagious diseases. Because of his pilgrimage, he is a patron of pilgrims and travelers. And because of the faithful dog that fed him, he is the patron of dogs and their owners; in many villages of France and Italy, his feast is the day for blessing animals.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Roch or follow the novena to Saint Roch, from August 7 to 15, ending on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Roch in art

- **The pilgrim's dress**: staff, satchel, cloak and broad hat, often with the scallop shell of pilgrims.
- **The plague sore**: he lifts his tunic to show a wound on his thigh.
- **The dog**: at his feet, holding a loaf of bread in its mouth.
- **The angel**: sometimes tending his wound, or holding a tablet announcing that he will be the protector against the plague, as in Rubens's painting.

Where to pray to Saint Roch

- **Venice**: the church of San Rocco, which keeps his relics, and the neighboring Scuola Grande.
- **Montpellier**: the church of Saint-Roch in his hometown, which keeps a relic of the saint.
- **Paris**: the church of Saint-Roch on the rue Saint-Honoré, a great 17th-century Baroque church.
- **Voghera** (Lombardy): the place of his death according to many historians, where his memory is honored.
- **New Orleans** (Louisiana): the Saint Roch Chapel and its cemetery, a long-standing place of prayer for healing.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Roch for the Sick

No prayer or writing by Saint Roch has come down to us: the pilgrim from Montpellier left only the memory of his deeds. The many prayers to Saint Roch used in parishes are later compositions. This page explains the origin of the devotion, then offers an original prayer to Saint Roch.

"You will be the patron against the plague"

An old tradition says that when Roch died, an inscription was found beside him announcing that those who called on him would be preserved from the plague. Painters often showed it as an angel holding a tablet with the Latin words *Eris in peste patronus*, "You will be the patron against the plague." This is the case in Rubens's great painting of the saint, made for a church in Aalst, Belgium. The story belongs to legend, but it expresses the trust that generations of Christians placed in him in times of epidemic.

Prayer to Saint Roch for the sick

Saint Roch, you who left everything to follow Christ along the roads, teach me to live as a pilgrim, with a free heart and open hands.

You who stayed with the sick when everyone fled the plague, give me the courage not to abandon those who suffer, and the tenderness to serve them.

You who knew sickness and loneliness yourself, and who accepted help from a dog and a stranger, teach me to receive the help of others with humility.

I entrust to you the sick, especially those with contagious diseases, the caregivers who take risks for them, pilgrims, and the animals who keep us company. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

In times of epidemic, be our protector; in the hour of trial, keep us in peace, and lead us to Christ, the physician of body and soul. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Roch is celebrated on August 16, the day after the Assumption. In many villages in France and Italy, the day is marked by processions and the blessing of animals. He is also prayed to throughout the year for someone who is ill, during an epidemic, or for a sick pet.

Caregivers, nurses and doctors can make this prayer their own at the start of a difficult shift, and pilgrims can say it before setting out. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Roch, and read the life of Saint Roch.

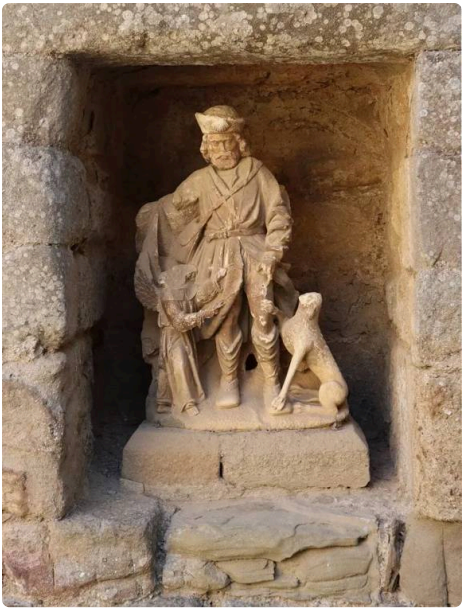
NOVENA

Novena to Saint Roch

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the traditional accounts of the life of Saint Roch. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on August 7; it ends on August 15, the Solemnity of the Assumption, the day before his feast on August 16. It can also be prayed at any time of year for someone who is ill, during an epidemic, or for a beloved animal.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into the rest of the day. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.



Saint Roch of Montpellier, in a church statue or stained glass window.

Day 1: Leaving everything

Young and wealthy, Roch gave his goods to the poor and set out on the road. He chose to own nothing so as to be free to serve. Like the rich young man of the Gospel, he heard the call to sell everything; unlike him, he did not go away sad.

Prayer: Lord, free my heart from whatever weighs it down, so that I may be ready for your call.

Today: Give something to a person in need.

Day 2: Becoming a pilgrim

With his staff and satchel, Roch walked toward Rome. The whole Christian life is a pilgrimage toward God. We are travelers, not settlers, on this earth. The pilgrim carries little, depends on the hospitality of others and keeps his eyes on

the goal.

Prayer: Jesus, you who are the Way, guide my steps and keep me from settling down far from you.

Today: Take a walk while praying, even a short one.

Day 3: Not running away

At Acquapendente, everyone fled the plague; Roch went into the hospital. The courage of charity begins with refusing to look away. It is often easier to send help from a distance than to stay close. Roch knew the risk, and chose love over safety.

Prayer: Lord, let me stay close to those whom others avoid.

Today: Visit someone who is lonely or ill.

Day 4: Caring in the name of Christ

Roch cared for the sick and traced the sign of the cross over them. He united the care of the body and prayer for the soul, as Jesus did when he healed and forgave. Every act of care, even the most ordinary, can be done in his name and become a prayer.

Prayer: Christ, physician of body and soul, bless caregivers, doctors, nurses and nursing assistants.

Today: Thank a caregiver you know.

Day 5: Struck in his turn

At Piacenza, Roch fell ill. The one who had cared for others now needed care himself. Illness is part of the road, even for the saints, and it does not mean that God has withdrawn. Roch did not curse his fate; he withdrew so as not to endanger others, and waited in trust.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those who are sick today. Give them strength and peace.

Today: Pray by name for someone who is ill.

Day 6: The dog and the bread

In his solitude, a dog brought Roch bread every day. God sometimes uses the humblest means to come to our aid. Creation itself can become a messenger of his providence. The faithful dog of Saint Roch reminds us that God watches over us even in the loneliest places.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for all the signs of your providence, and for the animals you have entrusted to our care.

Today: Take care of an animal or support an animal shelter.



Praying with Saint Roch of Montpellier.

Day 7: Accepting help

The nobleman Gothard found Roch and cared for him. Accepting help from others also takes humility. The one who gives must one day learn to receive. Roch's need also became the occasion of Gothard's conversion: our weakness can open a door for someone else.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to receive help from others without pride and with gratitude.

Today: Ask for help with something you have been carrying alone.

Day 8: The silence of prison

Taken for a spy, Roch did not justify himself and died in prison, unknown. In this he joined Christ, condemned without being understood. His hidden death became the seed of a great devotion.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you prisoners and those who are unjustly accused. Be their strength.

Today: Pray for people in prison.

Day 9: A protector in times of trial

For centuries, towns struck by epidemics have turned to Saint Roch. His hidden life has become a source of trust for whole peoples, from Venice to New Orleans. Churches, chapels and wayside shrines bear his name wherever fear of disease once gripped a town.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Roch, protect us from all evil and keep us in your peace. Amen.

Today: Visit a church or chapel dedicated to Saint Roch, if there is one near you.

Closing prayer

Saint Roch, pilgrim and servant of the sick, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. You who cared for others without counting the cost and suffered without complaint, pray for us. Obtain healing for the sick, courage for caregivers and peace for those who are afraid. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Church of San Rocco and Scuola Grande di San Rocco, in Venice

The Church of San Rocco in Venice has preserved the relics of Saint Roch beneath its high altar since 1485. Together with the neighboring Scuola Grande di San Rocco, seat of the confraternity founded in his name and entirely decorated by Tintoretto, it is the main pilgrimage site devoted to the pilgrim of Montpellier.

The arrival of the relics in Venice

In the 15th century, devotion to Saint Roch spread quickly in northern Italy as epidemics followed one another. Venice, a port open to the East and highly exposed to plague, placed itself under his protection. A confraternity of laymen, the Scuola di San Rocco, was founded in 1478. In 1485, the saint's relics were brought to Venice and entrusted to the confraternity, which had a church built to receive them. The present building, raised beginning in the late 15th century, received its façade in the 18th century.



Church of San Rocco and Scuola Grande di San Rocco, in Venice.

The Church of San Rocco

The body of Saint Roch rests in an urn placed above the high altar. The church houses several large canvases by Tintoretto devoted to the saint, including *Saint Roch Healing the Plague Victims*, painted in 1549, which shows the pilgrim among the sick in a hospital. On August 16, his feast day, the city traditionally celebrates its protector.

The Scuola Grande di San Rocco

Right next to the church, the confraternity's palace is one of the treasures of Venice. Between 1564 and about 1588, Tintoretto painted more than fifty canvases there, on the walls and ceilings of the lower hall, the great hall on the

upper floor, and the Albergo room, where his monumental *Crucifixion* hangs. The confraternity, which still exists, was for centuries one of the city's greatest charitable institutions.

Praying at San Rocco

Before your visit, you may wish to reread the life of Saint Roch. In the church, a time of silence before the altar of the relics is a good moment to entrust an intention for a sick person, a caregiver, or a trial. The prayer to Saint Roch can accompany this moment. At the Scuola, the great canvases of the life of Christ lend themselves to slow meditation. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.

Other places connected with Saint Roch

- **Montpellier**: his native city, with the Church of Saint-Roch, raised in the 19th century, which preserves a relic, and the memory of his family home in the old center.
- **Paris**: the Church of Saint-Roch, on Rue Saint-Honoré, one of the capital's great Baroque churches.
- **Voghera** (Lombardy): the town where, according to many historians, he died in prison.
- **Acquapendente** (Lazio): the town where, according to tradition, he cared for his first plague victims.
- **Piacenza** (Emilia-Romagna): the town where he fell ill; the place of his retreat with his dog is venerated in the surrounding area.

Practical information

The Church of San Rocco and the Scuola Grande are on Campo San Rocco, in the San Polo district, near the Frari basilica. The church is a place of worship; the Scuola is visited like a museum, with an admission fee. Check

opening and Mass hours before you come, especially around August 16.

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