

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Rosalia

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 4

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Rosalia

12th-century Sicilian hermit, patron saint of Palermo, invoked against plague.

Feast day	September 4, July 15
Born	c. 1130, Palermo, Sicily
Died	c. 1166, Mount Pellegrino, near Palermo
Canonized	immemorial cult; entered in the Roman Martyrology by Pope Urban VIII in 1630
Era	12th century
Patron saint of	Palermo, plague victims

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Rosalia, Protector Against Epidemics

Novena to Saint Rosalia

Shrine of Saint Rosalia on Monte Pellegrino, Palermo

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Rosalia

Saint Rosalia was a young woman of the Norman nobility of Sicily who, in the twelfth century, left the court of Palermo to live as a hermit in mountain caves. Almost forgotten for centuries, she suddenly became the protector of the whole city when her bones were found on Mount Pellegrino in 1624, in the middle of an outbreak of plague. The Roman Martyrology celebrates her on September 4, and every July 15 Palermo also keeps the anniversary of the discovery of her relics.

Who was Saint Rosalia?

Little is known for certain about her life. According to tradition, Rosalia was born around 1130 in Palermo, then the capital of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. Her father, Sinibald, was lord of Quisquina and of the Mount of Roses, two fiefs in the interior of the island, and her high-ranking family is said to have been connected to the court of King Roger II. A later tradition, which belongs to legend, even makes her a descendant of Charlemagne.

While still young, Rosalia turned down marriage and life at court to give herself entirely to God in solitude. She first withdrew to a cave at Quisquina, on her father's lands, near today's Santo Stefano Quisquina, then to Mount Pellegrino, the mountain that overlooks the bay of Palermo. There she died alone, probably around 1166. Tradition holds that she died on September 4.

Key dates

- **c. 1130**: Born in Palermo, into a noble family of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily.
- **Mid-12th century**: Leaves the court and withdraws to a cave at Quisquina.
- **Later**: Settles in a cave on Mount Pellegrino, above Palermo.

- **c. 1166**: Dies on Mount Pellegrino, on September 4 according to tradition.
- **1624**: Plague strikes Palermo, brought by a ship from Tunis.
- **July 15, 1624**: Bones are discovered in the cave on Mount Pellegrino.
- **August 1624**: A Latin inscription attributed to Rosalia is found in the cave at Quisquina.
- **June 9, 1625**: The relics, recognized as authentic, are carried in procession through Palermo; the epidemic recedes.
- **1630**: Pope Urban VIII enters Saint Rosalia in the Roman Martyrology.

A hidden life in the caves

Twelfth-century Sicily was a crossroads where Latins, Greeks and Muslims lived side by side, and where the hermit life was very much alive, especially under the influence of Byzantine monasticism. Rosalia's choice belongs to this tradition: a life of prayer, penance and silence, far from the world.

Later accounts added many pious details to her story, but medieval sources are rare, and it is important to distinguish what is known from what is told.

In 1624, in the cave at Quisquina, an inscription carved into the rock was found. Written in Latin, it reads that a certain Rosalia, daughter of Sinibald, lord of Quisquina and of the Roses, had decided to live in this cave for love of her Lord Jesus Christ. For the people of Palermo, this text confirmed the tradition. Historians remain cautious about its date, but it faithfully expresses the meaning of her vocation: leaving everything for Christ.

The plague of 1624 and the discovery of the relics

In the spring of 1624, plague broke out in Palermo. The city, already placed under the protection of several women saints, multiplied its prayers. According to accounts from the time, a sick woman who said she had seen Rosalia in a

dream pointed out where to look for her body on Mount Pellegrino. On July 15, 1624, excavations in the cave uncovered bones encased in limestone.

The archbishop of Palermo, Cardinal Giannettino Doria, had the discovery examined with caution. The following year, a hunter reported that the saint had appeared to him on the mountain and asked that her remains be carried in procession. The relics were recognized, and on June 9, 1625, they were solemnly carried through the city. In the following months, the epidemic declined. Palermo saw in this the protection of Rosalia, who became its principal patron saint.

The Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck, who was in the city in 1624, then painted several pictures of the saint, which helped spread her cult across Europe.

The Festino and the "Santuzza"

The people of Palermo affectionately call Rosalia the *Santuzza*, "the little saint". Every year around July 15, the *Festino* of Santa Rosalia fills the whole city: a huge triumphal float carrying the statue of the saint goes down the Cassaro, the historic main street, all the way to the sea, amid songs and fireworks. The next day, the silver reliquary containing her relics is carried in procession from the cathedral.

On September 4, her liturgical feast, many of the faithful climb on foot to the shrine on Mount Pellegrino, often at night, along the old zigzag road. This pilgrimage, called the *acchianata*, "the climb", is one of the most popular acts of devotion in Sicily. Her cult also traveled with Sicilian emigrants, to southern Italy and to the Americas, where Italian American communities still honor her.

Why is Saint Rosalia the patron saint of Palermo and of plague victims?

Because her relics were found and carried through Palermo during the plague of 1624-1625, and the city attributed the end of the epidemic to her intercession. She has been the principal patron of Palermo ever since, and she is invoked against plague and epidemics, for the sick, and for those who seek God in silence.

Saint Rosalia reminds us that holiness can be entirely hidden. She founded nothing and left no writings, except perhaps one line carved in stone, and she remained unknown for almost five centuries. Yet her life of silent prayer became, in a time of trial, a source of hope for a whole people.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Rosalia, or follow the novena to Saint Rosalia from August 26 to September 3, so that it ends on the eve of her feast. The people of Palermo also pray it before the Festino, from July 6 to 14.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Rosalia in art

Saint Rosalia is usually shown as a young hermit, wearing a crown of roses, a reminder of her name and of the Mount of Roses. She often holds a crucifix, and a skull may lie near her as a sign of penance and of meditation on death. Baroque painters, Van Dyck first among them, show her in her cave or interceding above the city of Palermo, sometimes carried by angels.

Where to pray to Saint Rosalia

- **Palermo**: the shrine on Mount Pellegrino, set in the cave where her remains were found.
- **Palermo**: the cathedral, where a chapel holds the silver reliquary of her relics.

- **Santo Stefano Quisquina** (province of Agrigento): the hermitage of Quisquina, around her first cave.
- **Palermo**: the old pilgrim road up Mount Pellegrino, walked on the night of September 3 to 4.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Rosalia, Protector Against Epidemics

Saint Rosalia left no written prayer. The only words attributed to her are a short Latin inscription carved in the cave at Quisquina and found in 1624. Below you will find that text, with the caution it calls for, then an original prayer to Saint Rosalia, protector against epidemics, written by Saintspedia.

The inscription in the cave at Quisquina

In August 1624, a few weeks after the discovery of the relics on Mount Pellegrino, workmen deciphered a Latin inscription on the wall of a cave at Quisquina. Tradition sees in it the signature of Rosalia herself; historians debate its date. Translation by Saintspedia:

> *"I, Rosalia, daughter of Sinibald, lord of Quisquina and of the Roses, have resolved to live in this cave for love of my Lord Jesus Christ."*

Source: inscription in the cave at Quisquina, in Santo Stefano Quisquina (Sicily), discovered in 1624: *Ego Rosalia Sinibaldi Quisquinae et Rosarum domini filia amore Domini mei Iesu Christi in hoc antro habitari decrevi*. An ancient text in the public domain.

Prayer to Saint Rosalia

Saint Rosalia, you left the court of Palermo to live hidden with Christ: teach me to love the silence in which God speaks.

A whole people called on you in the time of plague: look with tenderness on all who suffer from sickness today. I entrust to you the sick, those who care for them, those who are afraid and those who are alone.

Protect our cities and our families from epidemics and disasters. And if trial comes, obtain for us patience, courage and charity toward one another.

I also entrust to you my intention (name it in silence).

You left everything for love of Jesus Christ: help me to give him the first place in my life. May my prayer, like yours, rise to him humble and faithful. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Rosalia is celebrated on September 4, the traditional day of her death. In Palermo, July 15 commemorates the discovery of her relics and opens the great Festino. She is also prayed to in times of epidemic, for the sick and for those who care for them, and by anyone who longs for more silence and prayer in a busy life.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Rosalia, and discover the life of Saint Rosalia.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Rosalia

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and tradition of Saint Rosalia. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast on September 4, begin on August 26: it ends on September 3. You can also pray it from July 6 to 14, before the anniversary of the discovery of her relics, or at any time for someone who is sick.

How to pray this novena

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

The nine days follow Rosalia from the Norman court to the cave on Mount Pellegrino, then follow the people of Palermo who, five centuries later, found her again in the middle of the plague. It is a path of detachment and silence, but also of compassion for the sick and of hope for a whole city.

Day 1: Leaving everything for Christ

Rosalia belonged to a noble family and could have hoped for a brilliant life. She chose something else: Christ alone. Her radical choice questions our own attachments, the things we hold onto as if they were the source of our happiness.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, show me what keeps me away from you, and give me the freedom to prefer you to everything.

Today: Give up one small, unnecessary thing.

Day 2: The silence of the cave

In the cave at Quisquina, Rosalia lived in silence. This silence was not empty: it was the place where she listened to God. Our lives are full of noise, and God rarely shouts.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to make silence within me so that I can hear your voice.

Today: Turn off your screens for an hour and pray for ten minutes in silence.

Day 3: For love of Jesus Christ

The inscription at Quisquina says it all in one line: Rosalia chose solitude "for love of my Lord Jesus Christ". Penance only makes sense through love. Without love, sacrifice becomes pride; with love, it becomes a gift.

Prayer: Jesus, may everything I do today be done for love of you.

Today: In the morning, offer each task of the day to God.

Day 4: The mountain above the city

From Mount Pellegrino, Rosalia could see Palermo at her feet. Withdrawn from the world, she was not absent from it: her prayer carried the city. Those who pray in hiddenness hold up more than they know.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you my city, its people, its poor and its leaders.

Today: Pray for your town or neighborhood, naming it before God.

Day 5: A hidden holiness

Rosalia remained unknown for almost five centuries. God sees what is done in secret, even when no one notices. Faithfulness in small and unseen things is not wasted.

Prayer: Father, you see in secret: keep me from the desire to be seen, and make me faithful in small things.

Today: Do someone a favor without telling anyone.

Day 6: In a time of epidemic

In 1624, plague struck Palermo. The people turned to God and went looking for the forgotten saint. The trial became a time of prayer and conversion. Many of us remember recent epidemics, the fear, the isolation, the grief.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Rosalia, protect us from epidemics, and support all who suffer from them today.

Today: Get in touch with someone who is sick.

Day 7: Those who care for the sick

During the plague, doctors, priests and religious stayed with the sick at the risk of their lives. Their devotion is part of the story of Rosalia, and it continues today in hospitals, nursing homes and family homes.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you nurses, doctors, caregivers and all who watch over the sick. Give them strength and gentleness.

Today: Thank a caregiver, in person or in writing.

Day 8: A whole city in procession

On June 9, 1625, the relics of Rosalia were carried through Palermo. The whole city prayed together. Faith is not only personal: it is also lived as a people, side by side.

Prayer: Lord, make our communities places of unity, where we pray and carry our trials together.

Today: Go to a weekday Mass or join a community prayer.

Day 9: The climb toward God

Every September 4, pilgrims climb on foot to the cave. The whole Christian life is a climb, step by step, toward the One who waits for us at the top.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Rosalia, grant me what is good for me, and help me move closer to you each day. Amen.

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

Closing prayer

Saint Rosalia, hermit of Mount Pellegrino and protector of Palermo, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for the sick, for those who care for them and for those who seek God in silence. Obtain for us the grace to receive everything from him and to give everything to him. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Shrine of Saint Rosalia on Monte Pellegrino, Palermo

The shrine of Saint Rosalia is on Monte Pellegrino, the promontory overlooking Palermo and its bay. It is set up in the cave where, according to tradition, the hermit lived her last years and where her bones were found in 1624. It is the main pilgrimage site of the patroness of Palermo, along with the cathedral that keeps her relics.

A cave become a church

After the discovery of the relics on July 15, 1624, and the end of the plague that was attributed to her, the cave immediately became a place of devotion. A facade and a small convent were built in front of it, and the interior of the cavity, left largely in its natural state, was turned into a church. The water seeping from the walls is collected by metal gutters; pilgrims look on it with piety, without it needing to be seen as a miracle.



The shrine of Saint Rosalia on Monte Pellegrino, in Palermo.

The reclining statue of the saint

At the back of the cave, behind a grille, lies a marble statue showing Rosalia stretched out, her head resting on one hand, at the spot where the discovery of her remains is placed. She wears a golden mantle offered, according to tradition, by King Charles III of Bourbon in the 18th century. Around it, ex-votos recall the graces the faithful attribute to her intercession.

Praying at the shrine of Saint Rosalia

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Rosalia. On site, take time to stop before the statue, in the half-light of the cave, to entrust a sick person or an intention. The prayer to Saint Rosalia can accompany this moment. Many pilgrims make the climb on foot, from the foot of the mountain, by the old winding road. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Palermo Cathedral and the silver shrine

The relics of Saint Rosalia are kept in Palermo Cathedral, in a chapel dedicated to her. They rest in a large silver shrine made in the 17th century, carried in procession through the city every year during the July festivities. The cathedral, a major monument of the Norman period altered over the centuries, also houses the tombs of several sovereigns of Sicily.

Other places of Saint Rosalia

- **Santo Stefano Quisquina** (province of Agrigento): the hermitage of La Quisquina, where the cave with the inscription attributed to the saint is found.
- **Palermo**: the Cassaro, the historic thoroughfare along which the Festino float passes each July.
- **Palermo**: the oratory and churches of the city that preserve works devoted to the saint, notably from the time of the plague of 1624.

Practical information

Monte Pellegrino can be reached from central Palermo by road, by car or bus, and on foot for walkers. Crowds are greatest around July 15 and on the night of September 3 to 4, during the pilgrimage on foot. Check Mass times and visiting hours with the shrine or the Archdiocese of Palermo before you come.

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Anthony van Dyck, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The shrine of Saint Rosalia on Monte Pellegrino, in Palermo.: Image: Giuseppe ME, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com