

BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Saint Sabbas the Goth

*Life, prayer and novena*

Feast day: April 12

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IN BRIEF

## Saint Sabbas the Goth

*Gothic Christian, cantor of his community, martyr drowned in 372 north of the Danube.*

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| **Feast day** | April 12, April 15 (Orthodox Churches) |
| **Born** | c. 334, Buzău valley (present-day Romania) |
| **Died** | April 12, 372, Musaeus river (Buzău), north of the Danube |
| **Canonized** | pre-congregation (immemorial cult) |
| **Era** | 4th century |

## In this booklet


Life

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Novena to Saint Sabbas the Goth

Credits and sources



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LIFE

# Saint Sabbas the Goth

Saint Sabbas the Goth was a Gothic Christian who died a martyr on April 12, 372, drowned in a river in what is now Romania, north of the Danube. A cantor or reader in his small community, he refused again and again to eat meat offered to the pagan gods during the persecution led by King Athanaric. The account of his passion, written as a letter shortly after his death, is one of the rare firsthand witnesses to life in a Gothic village in the fourth century. His feast day is April 12.

## Who was Saint Sabbas the Goth?

Sabbas was born around 334 in a village in the valley of a river the ancient text calls the Musaeus, generally identified with the Buzău, in Wallachia. He belonged to the Tervingi, a branch of the Goths settled north of the Danube, outside the borders of the Roman Empire. Converted to Christianity as a young man, he served his community as a cantor or reader. His biographer describes him as a gentle, peaceful man with little education, but very firm in his faith.

Our main source is a letter written in Greek by the Church in Gothia to the Church of Cappadocia, shortly after his death, to accompany the sending of his relics. Historians regard it as a reliable and precious document, both an account of martyrdom and a portrait of Gothic society at the time.

## Key dates in the life of Saint Sabbas the Goth

- **c. 334**: Born in the Buzău valley, north of the Danube.
- **Youth**: Converts to Christianity and becomes cantor or reader of his community.
- **c. 369**: The Gothic king Athanaric begins persecuting Christians.

- **Easter 372**: He celebrates the feast with the priest Sansalas.
- **April 12, 372**: Martyred by drowning in the Musaeus river.
- **373 or 374**: His relics are sent to Caesarea in Cappadocia, at the request of Saint Basil.

## Refusing the sacrificial meat

Around 369, Athanaric, king of the Tervingi, launched a persecution against the Christians in his territory, whom he suspected of ties to the Roman Empire. Local leaders forced villagers to eat meat offered to the pagan gods, as a sign of loyalty to ancestral traditions. According to the letter, the pagan inhabitants of Sabbas's village, wanting to protect their Christian neighbors, came up with the idea of secretly serving them ordinary meat. Sabbas refused this trick: he did not want to appear to deny his faith, and he publicly refused all the food.

Another time, when the villagers were ready to swear that there were no Christians among them, Sabbas stepped forward and declared that he was a Christian. The villagers then presented him as a poor man of no importance, and the Gothic chief let him go with contempt: "That one can do neither good nor harm."

## The martyrdom of 372

In the spring of 372, Sabbas went to the priest Sansalas to celebrate Easter. Three nights after the feast, men sent by Atharid, a Gothic chief, burst in, arrested the priest and Sabbas, and mistreated them all night. The next day, they were again offered sacrificial meat; Sabbas refused, said that this meal was impure, and was beaten again. Atharid condemned him to death. Led to the bank of the Musaeus river, he was drowned with a beam tied to his neck, on April 12, 372. He was thirty-eight years old. The priest Sansalas was released.

## The relics and the letter of the Church in Gothia

Christians recovered his body and hid it. The Roman commander of the neighboring province, Junius Soranus, himself a Christian, had it brought into the Empire. At the request of Saint Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, the relics were transferred there in 373 or 374, together with the letter telling the story of his passion. Basil then wrote to Bishop Ascholius of Thessalonica to thank him, and hailed Sabbas as an "athlete of Christ" and a "martyr of the truth."

## Is Saint Sabbas the Goth the patron saint of anything?

No official patronage is traditionally attached to Saint Sabbas the Goth. He is honored above all as a witness to the first Christians among the Germanic peoples and in Romania, where he remains deeply venerated. His story also makes him a natural intercessor for lay people who serve in the liturgy, such as readers and cantors, for Christians under pressure to hide their faith, and for those who suffer persecution today.

## Symbols and how to recognize Saint Sabbas the Goth in art

In Orthodox icons, especially in Romania, Saint Sabbas the Goth is shown as a martyr holding a cross, the usual sign of those who gave their lives for Christ. He should not be confused with Saint Sabbas the Sanctified, the monk of the Judean desert, who is shown as an old monk with a long white beard.

## What can we learn from Saint Sabbas the Goth?

Sabbas was neither a bishop nor a scholar, but an ordinary Christian from a frontier village. He refused arrangements, even well-meant ones, that would have made him appear to deny his faith. His story is also moving because of the

portrait of his pagan neighbors, ready to lie to protect him: a reminder that human solidarity can exist even in the midst of persecution. He is a witness to the beginnings of Christianity among the Germanic peoples and in Romania.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Sabbas the Goth or follow the novena to Saint Sabbas the Goth.

## Where to pray to Saint Sabbas the Goth

- **Romania**: the region of Buzău, where his martyrdom is located, and the churches dedicated to him.
- **Churches of East and West**: he is celebrated on April 12 by Catholics and on April 15 by the Orthodox.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Sabbas the Goth for Courage in the Faith

Saint Sabbas the Goth left no writings, and no traditional English prayer to him is in common use. In Romania, where he is called Sfântul Sava Gotul, he is honored in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. Here is an original prayer by Saintspedia, inspired by the letter of the Church in Gothia that tells the story of his martyrdom: a gentle cantor of a frontier village who refused to hide his faith, even to make life easier.

## Prayer to Saint Sabbas the Goth

*Saint Sabbas, gentle and peaceful man, you sang the praises of God in your small village beyond the Danube: teach me to love the prayer of the Church and to serve it with joy.*

*When your neighbors wanted to protect you with a well-meant trick, you refused to seem to deny Christ: give me an honest faith, one that does not hide in order to be comfortable.*

*When others said you were of no importance, you were not ashamed to say, "I am a Christian": give me the courage to bear witness simply, without fear and without pride.*

*You celebrated Easter with your priest just before your death, and you went to the river trusting in the risen Lord: strengthen all who suffer for their faith today, and give them the hope of the Resurrection.*

*Bless the readers, cantors and all who serve in the liturgy. Pray for Romania and for the peoples of the Danube. 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.

## When to pray this prayer

Saint Sabbas the Goth is celebrated on April 12 by Catholics and on April 15 by the Orthodox. His feast often falls in the Easter season, which suits a martyr who died just days after celebrating Easter. You can pray to him when you are tempted to hide your faith, before reading or singing at Mass, or for Christians

who are persecuted. To pray over several days, follow the novena to Saint Sabbas the Goth, and to know him better, read the life of Saint Sabbas the Goth.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Sabbas the Goth

This novena to Saint Sabbas the Goth is an original composition by Saintspedia; it is not an official liturgical text. Over nine days, it follows the gentle cantor of a Gothic village north of the Danube, who was drowned for his faith on April 12, 372. To end on his feast day, April 12, begin it on April 4. Depending on the year, it will fall during Lent, Holy Week or the Easter season, all fitting times to pray with a martyr who died just after celebrating Easter. Orthodox Christians, who honor him on April 15, can begin on April 7.

## How to pray this novena

Each day, find a few quiet minutes. Begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be, and end with the small act proposed. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

The meditations follow the letter written by the Church in Gothia shortly after his death, which historians consider a reliable account. This novena is especially suited to praying for persecuted Christians, for those who serve in the liturgy, and for anyone tempted to hide their faith.

## Day 1: A Christian beyond the frontier

Sabbas was born around 334 among the Goths, north of the Danube, outside the Roman Empire. The Gospel had reached even there. God's call knows no borders.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, pray for Christians who live as a small minority, far from the centers of the Church. Amen.

**Today:** Pray for a country where Christians are few.

## Day 2: Gentle and peaceful

His biographer describes Sabbas as gentle, peaceful and of little learning, but firm in faith. Firmness and gentleness are not opposites: they grow together in a heart rooted in God.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, give me a gentle heart and a steady faith. Amen.

**Today:** Answer an irritation with patience.

## Day 3: The voice of the community

Sabbas served his community as a cantor or reader. Through him, the Word of God and the praise of the Church were heard in his village.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, bless readers, cantors and all who serve in the liturgy. Amen.

**Today:** Read aloud, slowly, the readings of today's Mass.

## Day 4: No pretending

His pagan neighbors offered to serve him ordinary meat in secret, so that he would seem to obey the king. Sabbas refused: he would not appear to deny Christ. Faith is not only a matter of the heart; it is also lived in what we do before others.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, keep me from compromises that hide my faith. Amen.

**Today:** Make the Sign of the Cross before a meal, even in public.

## Day 5: "I am a Christian"

When the villagers were ready to swear there were no Christians among them, Sabbas stepped forward. They called him a man of no importance, and the chief let him go with contempt. Sabbas did not mind being despised, as long as he was faithful.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, give me the courage to say simply that I belong to Christ. Amen.

**Today:** Speak naturally about your faith to someone, if the occasion arises.

## Day 6: Neighbors who cared

The pagan villagers tried to protect Sabbas, even at the cost of a lie. Their kindness was real, even if he could not accept their plan. Goodness can be found in unexpected places.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, help me to recognize and honor the goodness of those who do not share my faith. Amen.

**Today:** Thank a neighbor or colleague for a kindness.

## Day 7: Easter with the priest

In the spring of 372, Sabbas went to the priest Sansalas to celebrate Easter. A few days later, they were arrested together. The joy of the Resurrection prepared him for his last trial.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, pray for priests, and help me to draw strength from the Eucharist. Amen.

**Today:** Attend Mass, or make a spiritual communion.

## Day 8: A night of suffering

Sabbas and the priest were beaten all night. The next day, offered sacrificial meat again, Sabbas refused and was struck once more. He did not answer violence with violence.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, strengthen all who are tortured or imprisoned for their faith. Amen.

**Today:** Pray for a prisoner of conscience, or support an organization that helps persecuted Christians.

## Day 9: The river of the martyr

On April 12, 372, Sabbas was drowned in the river Musaeus with a beam tied to his neck. Christians recovered his body, and Saint Basil welcomed his relics in Cappadocia, calling him an "athlete of Christ." For us, the water of his martyrdom can recall the water of the baptism he received and honored to the end.

**Prayer:** Saint Sabbas, help me to live my baptism faithfully until the end. Amen.

**Today:** Bless yourself with holy water, renewing your baptismal promises in your heart.

## Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Sabbas, a humble cantor among the Goths, the strength to confess your name without pretense and to give his life in the joy of Easter. Through his intercession, give us an honest and courageous faith, strengthen persecuted Christians, bless all who serve in the liturgy, and grant the intention I have carried during these nine days: (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Saint Sabbas the Goth, pray for us.

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