

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Sebastian

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 20

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IN BRIEF

Saint Sebastian

Roman martyr of the 3rd or 4th century, venerated on the Appian Way, invoked against the plague, patron saint of soldiers and archers.

Feast day	January 20
Born	Milan or Narbonne, according to different traditions
Died	c. 288 or early 4th century, Rome
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since the early Church)
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	soldiers, archers, athletes, plague sufferers

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Sebastian

Saint Sebastian is a martyr of Rome, venerated since ancient times in the catacombs of the Appian Way. According to tradition, he was an officer of the imperial guard, sentenced to be shot with arrows for his faith, nursed back to health by a Christian widow, and then beaten to death. Invoked for centuries against the plague, he is one of the most frequently depicted saints in Western art. His feast day is January 20, the same day as the martyr pope Saint Fabian.

Who was Saint Sebastian?

What history knows of Sebastian is very brief. The Roman calendar of 354, known as the *Depositio martyrum*, records under January 20 the memory of Sebastian "in the catacombs," that is, in the cemetery on the Appian Way that would later bear his name. In the 4th century, Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, mentions in a commentary on the Psalms a martyr Sebastian from Milan who came to Rome in the time of persecution.

His cult is therefore ancient and well established. The detailed story of his life, on the other hand, comes from a *Passion* written in the 5th century, which historians consider to be largely an edifying legend. The account below follows that tradition, while keeping in mind what is history and what is pious story.

Key dates

- **3rd century**: Born, in Milan according to Saint Ambrose, in Narbonne according to a later tradition.
- **c. 288 or c. 303**: Martyred in Rome, under Emperor Diocletian according to the *Passion*.
- **354**: His feast on January 20 appears in the *Depositio martyrum* of the Roman calendar.

- **4th century**: The Basilica of the Apostles, which would later take his name, is built on the Appian Way.
- **5th century**: His legendary *Passion* is written.
- **680**: According to Paul the Deacon, a plague epidemic in Pavia ends after an altar is dedicated to him.
- **826**: Part of his relics is transferred to the Abbey of Saint-Médard in Soissons, France.

The Christian soldier of tradition

According to the *Passion*, Sebastian was an officer, perhaps a tribune, in the Praetorian Guard. A Christian in secret, he used his position to visit and encourage imprisoned believers. The account shows him supporting two brothers, Mark and Marcellian, who were tempted to deny their faith in the face of their family's tears.

Denounced, he was brought before the emperor, who accused him of ingratitude. Sebastian answered that he had never stopped praying for the emperor and the Empire, but that he could not worship idols.

The emperor then ordered him to be tied to a stake and shot with arrows by archers. Left for dead, he was taken in by a Christian widow, Irene, who came to bury him and discovered that he was still breathing. She nursed him in her home.



Saint Sebastian, by Andrea Mantegna (c. 1480, Louvre Museum, Paris).

The second martyrdom

Once healed, Sebastian refused to flee. According to tradition, he went back before the emperor to reproach him for persecuting Christians. This time he was beaten to death, and his body was thrown into the great sewer of Rome, the *Cloaca Maxima*. A Christian woman named Lucina, warned in a dream, recovered it and buried it in the cemetery on the Appian Way, near the place where, according to another tradition, the bodies of the apostles Peter and Paul were for a time kept safe.

The arrows that made him famous in art are therefore not the cause of his death in the traditional story. Sebastian is the martyr who survived once, and who went back to bear witness.



Saint Sebastian tended by Irene, after Georges de La Tour (17th century, Louvre Museum).

Why is Saint Sebastian the patron saint of plague victims, soldiers and archers?

From the early Middle Ages, Sebastian became the great saint invoked against the plague. The historian Paul the Deacon reports that in 680 an epidemic ravaging Pavia came to an end after an altar was consecrated in his honor. For people of that time, disease struck like a sudden, invisible arrow: the man who had survived the arrows seemed the natural protector. During the great epidemics of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, confraternities of Saint Sebastian were founded all over Europe, and chapels and votive offerings multiplied, often together with Saint Roch.

Because tradition makes him a soldier, he is the patron of soldiers. Because of the arrows, he became the patron of archers and crossbowmen, and many archery companies still bear his name, especially in northern France and

Belgium. In the English-speaking world he is also widely invoked as a patron of athletes, a devotion inspired by the image of his strength and endurance.

Beyond the legend, Saint Sebastian is the witness of a faithfulness that does not retreat. He embodies the Christian who loyally serves society while refusing to betray his conscience, and who supports those who are weak in faith. His story also recalls the role of Irene and Lucina, women who cared for the wounded and the dead at the risk of their lives. People pray to him in times of epidemic, for the sick, for soldiers and for anyone who needs courage.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Sebastian, or follow the novena to Saint Sebastian from January 11 to 19, finishing on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Sebastian in art

- **Arrows**: his main attribute. He is usually shown as a young man tied to a tree or a column, his body pierced by arrows.
- **A bearded older man**: some early images, such as the 7th-century mosaic in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome, show him as a mature man holding a martyr's crown.
- **Irene at his side**: painters such as Georges de La Tour show the widow tending his wounds by lantern light.

Renaissance artists, from Mantegna to Botticelli, from Perugino to Titian, made him a favorite subject, which allowed them to depict the human body in the manner of classical antiquity.



The Basilica of Saint Sebastian Outside the Walls, on the ancient Appian Way, in Rome.

Where to pray to Saint Sebastian

- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Sebastian Outside the Walls (San Sebastiano fuori le mura), on the Appian Way, which houses his tomb and the catacombs.
- **Rome**: the church of San Sebastiano al Palatino, on the spot where tradition places his first martyrdom.
- **Soissons** (France): the site of the former Abbey of Saint-Médard, which received part of his relics in 826.
- **Milan**: the church of San Sebastiano, built after a plague epidemic in the 16th century.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Sebastian for Protection and Courage

There is no prayer written by Saint Sebastian: not a single authentic word of his has come down to us. Since the Middle Ages, however, Christians who called on him against the plague loved to pray a psalm that speaks of arrows and pestilence, Psalm 91 (90 in the Latin numbering). You will find below an original prayer by Saintspedia to Saint Sebastian, followed by the opening verses of that psalm.

Prayer to Saint Sebastian for protection and courage

Saint Sebastian, you who served loyally without ever denying your faith, teach me to be faithful to my conscience, in small things as in great ones.

You who encouraged Christians in prison, support those who doubt, who are afraid, or who are persecuted for their faith.

You who were pierced with arrows and raised up again by the care of Irene, I entrust to you the sick, the wounded, and all who care for them: doctors, nurses, caregivers. Protect us from epidemics, and help us not to give in to fear or selfishness when they strike.

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

Obtain for me the courage to rise again after trials and to bear witness once more, gently and without hatred, to the love of Christ. Amen.

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



Saint Sebastian in prayer.

The psalm of protection (Psalm 91)

This psalm has no historical link with Saint Sebastian, but its images of arrows and plague have made it, over the centuries, a natural prayer in times of epidemic. Saintspedia translation from the Latin Vulgate, whose text is in the public domain.

Whoever dwells under the protection of the Most High abides in the shadow of the God of heaven.

He says to the Lord: "You are my support and my refuge, my God, in whom I hope."

It is he who frees you from the snare of the hunter and from the word that wounds. He covers you with his wings, and under his feathers you find shelter.

His faithfulness surrounds you like a shield: you will not fear the terrors of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the plague that prowls in the darkness, nor the attack of the noonday devil.

Source: Psalm 91 (90), verses 1-6, after the Latin Vulgate. It is traditionally prayed at Night Prayer (Compline) on Sundays. Many English-speaking Catholics also know it through the hymn "On Eagle's Wings."

When to pray this prayer

Saint Sebastian's feast day is January 20, shared with the martyr pope Saint Fabian. He is traditionally invoked in times of epidemic, often together with Saint Roch. This prayer also suits soldiers and their families, athletes before a competition, patients facing a long illness, and anyone who needs courage to stay faithful under pressure. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Sebastian, and read the life of Saint Sebastian.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Sebastian

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition of Saint Sebastian. It is not an official liturgical text. The episodes it recalls come largely from the saint's legendary *Passion*; they are offered here as images for prayer. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on January 11; it ends on January 19, the day before his feast on January 20. You can also pray it at any time, especially during an illness or an epidemic.

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 each day helps carry the prayer into the rest of the day. You can pray it alone, as a family, or with friends who share the same intention.

Day 1: Serving loyally

According to tradition, Sebastian was a respected officer. He served the Empire honestly, without confusing that service with the worship owed to God alone. Our daily work, done honestly and well, can also be a place where we remain faithful to God.

Prayer: Lord, help me to do my work well and to serve others loyally, while keeping you in first place.

Today: Do carefully a task you usually rush through.

Day 2: A hidden faith

A Christian in a hostile environment, Sebastian first lived his faith discreetly. Discretion is not cowardice: sometimes it makes it possible to help more widely. What matters is that the faith kept in the heart bears fruit in deeds.

Prayer: Lord, give me the wisdom to know when to speak and when to act in silence.

Today: Do someone a favor without letting it be known.

Day 3: Encouraging the weak

Tradition shows Sebastian supporting Mark and Marcellian, who were ready to give up their faith under pressure from their loved ones. He found the words that restored their courage. Many people around us are tired in their faith and need only one word of hope.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, make me a support for those who doubt and grow weak.

Today: Write a note of encouragement to someone who is struggling.

Day 4: Praying for those who govern

Before the emperor, Sebastian declared that he had always prayed for him. Refusing injustice does not prevent us from praying for those who hold authority.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those who govern us. Give them wisdom and a care for the common good.

Today: Pray by name for a political or local leader.

Day 5: The arrows

Tied to the stake, Sebastian received the arrows without denying his faith. Not all our wounds are visible: mockery, injustice, illness. Christ knows them all, because he carried his own wounds to the cross and rose with them, transfigured.

Prayer: Lord, I present to you the wounds of my body and of my heart. Come and heal them.

Today: Entrust an old wound to God, calling it by its name.

Day 6: Irene, the caregiver

Irene came to bury a dead man and found a living one. She nursed him in her home, at the risk of her life. Caring for others is already a way of praying. Irene's courage reminds us that holiness often takes the form of a simple, risky kindness: opening a door, binding a wound, staying at a bedside.

Prayer: Lord, bless doctors, nurses and all who care for the sick. Make me attentive to those who suffer near me.

Today: Visit or call someone who is sick.



Praying with Saint Sebastian.

Day 7: Rising and returning

Once healed, Sebastian did not run away. He went back to bear witness. After a trial, the temptation is to protect ourselves; faith sometimes invites us to set out again.

Prayer: Lord, after my falls and my trials, give me the strength to get up and continue on my way.

Today: Take up again a commitment you dropped after a difficulty.

Day 8: In time of epidemic

For centuries, Saint Sebastian was invoked against the plague. Epidemics awaken fear and withdrawal into ourselves; they can also give birth to solidarity. In every age, Christians have cared for the sick when others fled, and this witness still speaks today.

Prayer: Lord, protect us from epidemics. Keep us from the fear that isolates, and help us to take care of one another.

Today: Pray Psalm 91, the psalm of protection.

Day 9: Witness to the end

Sebastian died under the blows, and Lucina recovered his body to give it a dignified burial. His tomb became a place of prayer that has never fallen silent in seventeen centuries. Faithfulness to the end is not a single heroic moment, but the sum of many small choices made day after day.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I give you my intention. Through the intercession of Saint Sebastian, grant me to be faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray at the grave of a loved one, or pray for the forgotten dead.

Closing prayer

Saint Sebastian, courageous witness of Christ, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for the sick, for those who care for them, for soldiers and for all who are afraid. Obtain for me a faithful faith and a heart without hatred. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Sebastian Outside the Walls, on the Appian Way in Rome

The Basilica of Saint Sebastian Outside the Walls, on the ancient Appian Way south of Rome, houses the tomb of the martyr and gives access to the catacombs that bear his name. It is one of the seven churches that pilgrims to Rome have traditionally visited since the 16th century, following Saint Philip Neri.

A place of memory for the apostles and martyrs

In antiquity the site was called *ad catacumbas*, and it gave its name to all catacombs. Excavations have uncovered, beneath the basilica, hundreds of 3rd-century graffiti invoking the apostles Peter and Paul: according to an ancient tradition, their remains were sheltered there for a time. In the 4th century, a great basilica was built there, at first called the Basilica of the Apostles. The tomb of Sebastian, venerated in the crypt, gradually gave it its present name.



Basilica of Saint Sebastian Outside the Walls, on the Appian Way in Rome.

The present basilica

The building seen today dates mostly from the early 17th century, when Cardinal Scipione Borghese had it rebuilt. A side chapel preserves a marble statue of the saint lying pierced with arrows, sculpted in the 17th century by Antonio Giorgetti, an artist from Bernini's circle. Visitors are also shown a stone bearing, according to tradition, the imprint of Christ's feet, linked to the *Quo vadis* story, and a column presented as the one of Sebastian's martyrdom.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Sebastian

Before your visit, you may wish to reread the life of Saint Sebastian. On site, going down into the catacombs, among the tombs of the first Christians, is in itself a meditation. Before the saint's altar, you can entrust an intention for a

sick person or for those suffering from an epidemic, and say the prayer to Saint Sebastian. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



Basilica of Saint Sebastian Outside the Walls, on the Appian Way in Rome, the interior.

Other places connected with Saint Sebastian

- **Rome**: the Church of San Sebastiano al Palatino, on the supposed site of his first martyrdom.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Peter in Chains, which preserves an ancient mosaic of the saint, shown as a bearded man, and an altar linked to the plague of 680.
- **Soissons** (Aisne): the remains of the Abbey of Saint-Médard, which received part of his relics in 826.
- **Milan**: the civic temple of San Sebastiano, built after a vow made during the plague of 1576.

Practical information

The basilica is on the ancient Appian Way, a few miles from the center of Rome; it is served by city buses and can be reached on foot or by bicycle from the Appia Antica Regional Park. The catacombs can be visited only with a guide. On January 20, his feast day, a special celebration is held there. Check the hours of the basilica and the catacombs before you come.

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