

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Sergius I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 8

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IN BRIEF

Saint Sergius I

Pope from 687 to 701, of Syrian origin, who resisted Emperor Justinian II and introduced the Agnus Dei into the Mass.

Feast day	September 8
Born	c. 650, Palermo, Sicily
Died	September 8, 701, Rome
Era	8th century

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Sergius I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Sergius I

Saint Sergius I was pope from 687 to 701, at a time when Rome still belonged to the Byzantine Empire. The son of a Syrian family settled in Sicily, he stood up to Emperor Justinian II by refusing the canons of the Council "in Trullo," supported the missions to the Frisians and left a lasting mark on the Roman liturgy: the chant of the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") at Mass is attributed to him. He is celebrated on September 8.

Who was Saint Sergius I?

Sergius was born around 650 in Palermo, into a family from Antioch, in Syria. Like several popes of this period, he belonged to the Greek and Eastern world that was very present in Rome between the seventh and eighth centuries. He came to Rome under Pope Adeodatus II and rose through the ranks of the clergy. In 683, Saint Leo II made him priest of the titular church of Saint Susanna.

His election, in 687, took place amid disorder. Two factions had each elected their own candidate, the archdeacon Paschal and the priest Theodore, and each occupied part of the Lateran Palace. To break the deadlock, the magistrates, the garrison and most of the clergy and people gathered and chose a third man, Sergius, whom they installed at the Lateran. Theodore submitted; Paschal ended up confined in a monastery. Sergius was consecrated on December 15, 687.



Saint Sergius I in the gallery of popes at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Key dates

- **Around 650**: Birth in Palermo, into a Syrian family.
- **June 27, 683**: Named cardinal priest of Saint Susanna by Leo II.
- **December 15, 687**: Consecration as bishop of Rome.
- **April 10, 689**: He baptizes Caedwalla, king of Wessex, in Rome.
- **692**: Council "in Trullo" in Constantinople, some of whose canons he refuses to approve.
- **695**: He consecrates Willibrord as bishop of the Frisians.
- **September 8, 701**: Death in Rome; he is buried in Saint Peter's.

Rather die than give in

In 692, Emperor Justinian II gathered in Constantinople a council attended only by Eastern bishops. Known as the Council "in Trullo" or the Quinisext Council, it set out to reform the discipline of the Church. Several of its canons clashed with Roman customs: they allowed married priests to live with their wives, forbade depicting Christ in the form of a lamb and granted Constantinople the same privileges as Rome. Sergius refused to sign and declared, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, that he would rather die than consent to these novelties.

Furious, the emperor first had two of the pope's close associates arrested, then sent his bodyguard Zacharias to seize Sergius and bring him to Constantinople, as had been done in 653 with Saint Martin I. But the militias of Ravenna and the Pentapolis rushed to defend Sergius, and Zacharias nearly lost his life. The pope then worked to calm the crowd rather than stir up revolt against Byzantium.

A pope of the liturgy

The Lamb of God

In response to the Byzantine ban, Sergius introduced into the Roman Mass the chant "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us," sung during the breaking of the bread. He also had the mosaic of the Lamb restored on the façade of the old Saint Peter's Basilica. Catholics around the world still sing or say this prayer at every Mass, just before Communion.

The feasts of Mary

He also ordered processions for the great feasts of the Virgin Mary that had come from the East: the Annunciation, the Dormition, which would become the Assumption, and the Nativity of Mary, celebrated on September 8, the

very day of his own feast. Through him, these feasts took deep root in the Western calendar.

A pope of mission

His pontificate also looked north. He baptized King Caedwalla of Wessex, who had come to Rome to end his days there; this link with the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms makes him part of the early history of Christianity in England. In 695 he consecrated Saint Willibrord, the Northumbrian-born apostle of the Frisians, as bishop. A tradition says he also consecrated Saint Hubert as bishop.

What his holiness teaches

Saint Sergius I is not the patron saint of a particular cause. The Roman Martyrology sums up his life by presenting him as a pope who devoted himself to the evangelization of the Saxons and the Frisians and who, in the midst of controversy, preferred to die rather than approve errors. He joined firmness on principle with care to avoid violence. Every time the *Agnus Dei* is sung at Mass, the faithful repeat, often without knowing it, a gesture of this pope from Sicily. He is a natural intercessor for church musicians, for those who love the liturgy and for missionaries.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Sergius I in art

He appears as a pope in papal vestments, as in the series of mosaic medallions of the popes at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome. A painting from the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden shows "the dream of Pope Sergius," in which he receives a heavenly message while asleep. Because of the *Agnus Dei*, the image of the Lamb of God is closely associated with his memory.

Where to pray to Saint Sergius I

Sergius was buried in Saint Peter's, in Rome. The places linked to him in the city include the Lateran, where he was elected, the church of Saint Susanna, his titular church as a priest, and the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian, which he had restored. Above all, any Mass where the *Agnus Dei* is sung is a natural place to remember him.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Sergius I and the Agnus Dei

Saint Sergius I, pope from 687 to 701, gave the Roman Mass the chant of the *Agnus Dei* and refused to give in to an emperor who wanted to impose new rules on the Church. The best way to pray with him is to make his prayer your own: the Lamb of God, then an original prayer asking his intercession for faithfulness and love of the liturgy.

The Agnus Dei, the prayer of Saint Sergius

This ancient prayer of the Mass, sung during the breaking of the bread, was introduced into the Roman liturgy by Pope Sergius I, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*.

> *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*
> *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.*
> *Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.*

In Latin: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.*

Prayer to Saint Sergius I for Faithfulness

Saint Sergius, pope and shepherd,
you taught the Church of Rome to sing to the Lamb of God
who takes away the sins of the world.
Help me to recognize Christ in the broken bread of the Eucharist,
and to approach Communion with a humble and grateful heart.

You preferred to die rather than consent to what you believed was wrong,
yet you calmed the crowd that wanted to rise up in your defense.
Give me firmness in the faith and gentleness in my words,
so that I may defend the truth without hatred.

You honored the Virgin Mary with processions on her feasts:
lead me to love her as a mother.
You sent missionaries to the peoples of the North:
pray for all who proclaim the Gospel today.

Through Christ our Lord, the Lamb who was slain and now lives forever.
Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

- On September 8, the feast of Saint Sergius I, which is also the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary.
- Before Mass, to prepare your heart to receive Communion.
- For choirs, organists, cantors and all who serve the liturgy.
- When you are under pressure to give up a conviction of faith.
- For missionaries, especially in Northern Europe.

To go further, read the life of Saint Sergius I or pray the novena to Saint Sergius I, from August 31 to September 8.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Sergius I

This novena to Saint Sergius I is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the pope from a Syrian family of Palermo who stood up to Emperor Justinian II, gave the Roman Mass the *Agnus Dei* and supported the missions to the peoples of the North. To end on September 8, his feast day and the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, begin it on August 31. You can also pray it at any time of the year, especially to grow in love for the Eucharist.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. You may end each day by praying the *Agnus Dei* slowly. Then do the small act proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: From Antioch to Palermo to Rome

Sergius came from a Syrian family settled in Sicily, and he came to Rome as a young cleric. The Church of his time gathered people of the East and the West. The faith has always crossed borders.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, help me to welcome the richness of Christians from other cultures and rites. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Christians of Syria, the land of Sergius's ancestors.

Day 2: Chosen in a time of division

When the pope's see fell vacant, two factions each elected their own candidate. The clergy and people finally chose a third man, Sergius, to restore peace. God can bring unity out of confusion.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, pray for communities divided by rivalries, and help me to be a peacemaker. Amen.

Today: Refuse to take part in a quarrel or in gossip today.

Day 3: Rather die than consent

In 692, the emperor wanted the pope to approve the canons of the Council "in Trullo." Sergius refused, declaring that he would rather die than consent to novelties he judged contrary to the tradition of Rome.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, give me the courage to remain faithful when it would be easier to give in. Amen.

Today: Reflect on one area of your life where you are tempted to compromise your faith, and ask for strength.

Day 4: Firm but peaceful

When the emperor's envoy came to seize him, soldiers rushed to defend the pope. Sergius did not use them against Byzantium; he calmed the crowd and protected even the man who had come to arrest him.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, teach me to defend the truth without violence, and to wish no harm even to those who oppose me. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who has opposed or hurt you.

Day 5: Behold the Lamb of God

The emperor's council forbade depicting Christ as a lamb. Sergius answered by giving the Mass the chant "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world." He turned a controversy into a prayer.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, help me to recognize in the Eucharist the Lamb of God who takes away my sins. Amen.

Today: At your next Mass, pay special attention to the *Agnus Dei* and the breaking of the bread.

Day 6: Grant us peace

The *Agnus Dei* ends with a request: "grant us peace." In a time of tension with the emperor, Sergius placed on the lips of the faithful a prayer for peace that the Church has never stopped repeating.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, pray for peace in the world, in my country and in my home. Amen.

Today: Offer the sign of peace with special sincerity, or make peace with someone.

Day 7: Honoring the Mother of God

Sergius ordered processions for the feasts of the Virgin Mary that had come from the East: the Annunciation, the Dormition and her Nativity. His own feast falls on September 8, the birthday of Mary.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, lead me to love the Virgin Mary and to follow her example of trust in God. Amen.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary, or the Angelus, in honor of Mary.

Day 8: A king seeking baptism

In 689, Sergius baptized Caedwalla, king of Wessex, who had come to Rome to end his days there. A powerful ruler laid down his crown to become a child of God.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, pray for those who are seeking God, and for adults preparing for baptism. Amen.

Today: Give thanks for your own baptism, and if you can, find out its date.

Day 9: Sending missionaries

In 695, Sergius consecrated Saint Willibrord as bishop of the Frisians. From Rome, he supported the Gospel in the lands of the North. His holiness was not only a matter of resisting but also of sending.

Prayer: Saint Sergius, pray for missionaries throughout the world, and make me a witness of the Gospel where I live. Amen.

Today: Support a missionary work by a prayer or a gift.

Closing prayer

Lord God, you gave your Church in Saint Sergius I a pope faithful to tradition, gentle in conflict and devoted to the worship of the Lamb. Through his prayers, grant us to love the Eucharist, to honor the Virgin Mary and to proclaim the Gospel with courage. Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace. Amen.

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