

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Sixtus I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Sixtus I

Bishop of Rome in the early 2nd century, under Emperor Hadrian, successor of Alexander I.

Feast day	April 3
Born	Rome
Canonized	Pre-Congregation
Era	2nd century
Patron saint of	Alife, Alatri

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Sixtus I for the Unity of the Church

Novena to Saint Sixtus I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Sixtus I

Saint Sixtus I, also called Xystus, was according to tradition the sixth successor of Saint Peter as head of the Church of Rome, at the beginning of the 2nd century, under Emperor Hadrian. Very little is known about him, but an early witness shows him respectful of the customs of the Churches of the East, and two towns in Italy long disputed the possession of his relics. His feast day is April 3.

Who was Saint Sixtus I?

The ancient lists of the Bishops of Rome place him after Alexander I and before Saint Telesphorus. The *Annuario Pontificio*, the official yearbook of the Holy See, says he was a Roman by birth, the son of a man named Pastor, and tradition links him to the Via Lata district of Rome.

Even his name raises questions. The oldest documents write *Xystus*, a Greek word meaning "polished." But it has often been noted that he was precisely the sixth pope after Peter, which may have encouraged the Latin form *Sixtus*, "sixth." He should not be confused with Saint Sixtus II, martyred in 258.

The title "pope" was not yet used for the Bishop of Rome in his day. He belonged to the generation that followed the apostles and their first disciples, at a time when the Church of Rome was growing quietly in a pagan empire.



Saint Sixtus I, an imaginary portrait from the series of popes.

Key dates in the life of Sixtus I

- **Around 115-117**: Begins his time as Bishop of Rome, under Emperor Hadrian (the sources differ).
- **Around 125-128**: End of his time as bishop, after about ten years.
- **1132**: According to a tradition of Alatri, part of his remains are moved to the town's cathedral.
- **1584**: A lead urn bearing his name is rediscovered in Alatri.

What we know, and what we do not

Even the dates are uncertain. The so-called Liberian Catalogue sets his time as bishop from 117 to 126, Eusebius of Caesarea gives two different chronologies, and the 2012 *Annuario Pontificio* gives "117 or 119 to 126 or 128."

Liturgical rules attributed to him

The *Liber Pontificalis*, written in the 6th century, credits him with several liturgical rules: only ministers could touch the sacred vessels, the Sanctus was to be sung by the priest together with the people, and the institution of Lent was even traced back to him. Historians consider these attributions legendary: they project onto the first popes customs that appeared later.

Unity without uniformity

The most solid testimony comes from Irenaeus of Lyon, at the end of the 2nd century. He recalls that Sixtus, like his successors, did not force the Churches of Asia, which celebrated Easter on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, to adopt the Roman custom. This tolerance, which Saint Anicetus would practice in his turn, shows a Church capable of unity without uniformity.

Martyr or confessor?

A 4th-century tradition states that he died a martyr, and several ancient calendars describe him that way. However, no account or document gives the circumstances of his death. The Church therefore no longer records his martyrdom as an established fact.

Two towns for one saint

In the Middle Ages, Alife, in Campania, and Alatri, in Lazio, each claimed to have the pope's entire body. Studies carried out in the 1980s showed that each keeps about half of it. Since then, the two dioceses have been twinned and exchange delegations every year for their patronal feasts. Other relics are reported in Rome, in Savona and in Lorraine, in France.

Is Saint Sixtus I named at Mass?

The Roman Canon, Eucharistic Prayer I, names a Pope Sixtus among the saints remembered after the first successors of Peter: "Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius." This Sixtus is generally identified with Sixtus II, the martyr of 258, rather than with Sixtus I. The memory of Sixtus I is kept above all by the Roman Martyrology on April 3 and by the towns that guard his relics.

What does his holiness teach us?

What remains of Sixtus I is above all a name in the chain of the shepherds of Rome, and one trait of character: respect for the traditions of other Churches. In a time when Christians sometimes argue over customs, his example invites us to distinguish what is essential to the faith from what can legitimately differ from one people to another.

His holiness also reminds us that most of those who serve the Church do so without leaving a trace in history. Their faithfulness is known to God, and that is enough.

Why is Saint Sixtus I the patron saint of Alife and Alatri?

Both towns keep part of his relics and have honored him for centuries as their patron. Their long rivalry over his body ended in friendship: the dioceses of Alife and Alatri are now twinned and celebrate his memory together. More broadly, Catholics can pray to him for the unity of the Church and for respect between Christians of different traditions.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Sixtus I in art

All images of Sixtus I were made long after his time. He is shown as a pope, in pontifical vestments, sometimes wearing the tiara and holding a book or a palm, the sign of the martyrdom attributed to him by tradition. In the Basilica

of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome, he appears in the series of mosaic medallions portraying every pope.

Where to pray to Saint Sixtus I

- **Alatri** (Lazio, Italy): the co-cathedral of Saint Paul, which keeps part of his relics.
- **Alife** (Campania, Italy): the Romanesque crypt of the cathedral.
- **Savona** (Liguria, Italy): the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption.

Wherever you are, you can pray to him with the prayer to Saint Sixtus I or the novena to Saint Sixtus I.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Sixtus I for the Unity of the Church

No prayer written by Saint Sixtus I has come down to us, and almost nothing is known of his life. One trait, however, has been handed down by Saint Irenaeus: as Bishop of Rome, he did not force the Churches of Asia to give up their own date for Easter. Here is an original prayer that entrusts to him the unity of the Church and respect between Christians of different traditions.

Prayer to Saint Sixtus I

Saint Sixtus I, sixth successor of the Apostle Peter, you guided the Church of Rome in the generation that followed the apostles, and you kept the faith you had received.

You respected the customs of the Churches of the East and did not impose your own: teach us to seek unity without demanding uniformity, and to welcome what is good in the traditions of others.

Pray for our Holy Father the pope and for all the bishops, that they may hold firmly to what is essential and show patience in all the rest.

Your memory is shared by two towns that once argued over your relics and are now united in friendship: obtain reconciliation for Christians who are divided, for families and for communities in conflict.

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 Sixtus I is remembered on April 3. This prayer is especially suited:

- on his feast day, April 3;
- when praying for the pope and for the unity of the Church;
- during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, in January;
- for a community or family divided by disagreements over secondary matters;
- for the people of Alife and Alatri, who honor him as their patron.

A short prayer for unity

> *Lord Jesus, on the night before you died, you prayed that all might be one. Through the intercession of Saint Sixtus I and of all the holy popes, heal the divisions among your disciples, and make us one in faith, in hope and in love. Amen.*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Sixtus I, or pray the novena to Saint Sixtus I.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Sixtus I

This novena to Saint Sixtus I is an original composition by Saintspedia. Little is known of his life, so each day draws on what can be said with confidence: he was Bishop of Rome at the beginning of the 2nd century, he respected the customs of the Churches of the East, and his memory is kept by two Italian towns once rivals for his relics. To end on his feast day, April 3, begin it on March 26. It is especially suited to praying for the unity of the Church.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed. If you miss a day, simply continue.

Day 1: In the line of the apostles

Sixtus I was the sixth successor of Saint Peter, after Alexander I and before Telesphorus. He did not invent the faith he taught: he received it from those who came before him. The Church is a long chain of witnesses going back to the apostles.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the faith of the apostles that has reached me. Keep me faithful to it. Amen.

Today: Pray the Apostles' Creed slowly.

Day 2: A Roman among Romans

Tradition says he was born in Rome, the son of a man named Pastor, in the Via Lata district. He served the Church in his own city, among his own people. Holiness often begins where we live.

Prayer: Lord, help me to serve you where you have placed me, in my neighborhood, my family and my parish. Amen.

Today: Do a kindness for a neighbor.

Day 3: A name and a number

His name, *Xystus*, means "polished" in Greek, and it came to be read as *Sixtus*, "sixth." God knows each of us by name. No one is just a number in his eyes.

Prayer: Father, thank you for calling me by name. Help me to see each person as unique and loved by you. Amen.

Today: Learn and use the name of someone you meet often but do not know.

Day 4: Faithful in obscurity

Almost nothing is known of the ten years Sixtus led the Church of Rome. His service left little trace in the records, but it was known to God. Many faithful Christians serve in the same way, without being noticed.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve without seeking to be seen. Amen.

Today: Do a hidden act of service, without telling anyone.

Day 5: Unity without uniformity

According to Saint Irenaeus, Sixtus did not force the Churches of Asia to give up their own date for Easter. He knew how to distinguish what is essential from what can differ. True unity respects legitimate diversity.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, make us one in what is essential, free in what is secondary, and loving in all things. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians of another tradition, Eastern Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant.

Day 6: Respecting others

Respecting the customs of others does not mean giving up one's own. It means recognizing that God also acts through other ways of praying and living the faith. Humility opens the door to communion.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the pride that wants everyone to do things my way. Amen.

Today: In a disagreement, let someone else's way win on a matter that is not essential.

Day 7: Honesty about the truth

The Church no longer presents the martyrdom of Sixtus I as an established fact, because no document confirms it. This honesty is a lesson: faith has nothing to fear from the truth, and holiness does not need embellishment.

Prayer: Lord, you are the Truth. Make me truthful in my words and in my life. Amen.

Today: Avoid any exaggeration or small lie today.

Day 8: From rivalry to friendship

For centuries, Alife and Alatri each claimed to have his whole body. Studies showed that each keeps about half, and the two dioceses are now twinned and celebrate together. An old quarrel became a bond of friendship.

Prayer: God of peace, turn our rivalries into friendship and our quarrels into reconciliation. Amen.

Today: Take a first step toward someone with whom you have a disagreement.

Day 9: Praying for the pope

Sixtus I was one of the first successors of Peter. Today, the pope continues the same service of unity for the whole Church. Praying for him is a way of sharing in that service, and of standing with the whole Church gathered around the successor of Peter, as the Christians of Rome stood around Sixtus nineteen centuries ago.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Sixtus I, protect the pope and keep your Church united. Amen.

Today: Pray an Our Father for the pope and his intentions.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Sixtus I, faithful shepherd of the Church of Rome, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you my intention. Pray for the unity of all Christians, for the pope and for the bishops, and for all who are divided. Teach us to hold firmly to the faith and to welcome one another with patience and love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Sixtus I and the prayer to Saint Sixtus I.

CREDITS

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