

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Pope Saint Sixtus II

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: August 7

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Pope Saint Sixtus II

Bishop of Rome in 257-258, peacemaker between the Churches, martyred with his deacons under Valerian.

Feast day	August 7
Died	August 6, 258, Rome
Era	3rd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Sixtus II for Peace and the Unity of the Church

Novena to Saint Sixtus II

Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus

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

Pope Saint Sixtus II

Saint Sixtus II, also spelled Xystus, was bishop of Rome for less than a year, from the summer of 257 to the summer of 258. A conciliatory pastor, he restored peace between Rome and the Churches of Africa and the East, which had been torn apart by a dispute over baptism. Surprised by the soldiers of Emperor Valerian while he was gathering the faithful in a cemetery on the Appian Way, he was beheaded on August 6, 258, together with several of his deacons. His name is mentioned in the oldest Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Church. He and his companions are commemorated on August 7.

Who was Saint Sixtus II?

Little is known about his origins. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a collection of notices on the popes compiled much later, calls him a Greek and a former philosopher. This detail probably comes from confusion with the author of a collection of maxims, the *Sentences of Sextus*, which was long wrongly attributed to the bishop of Rome. The only certain text we have from him is a fragment of a letter addressed to Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria.

Key dates in the life of Sixtus II

- **August 257**: Succeeds Stephen I as bishop of Rome.
- **257**: First edict of Emperor Valerian against Christian worship.
- **Summer 258**: Second edict, ordering the execution of bishops, priests and deacons.
- **August 6, 258**: Arrested in a cemetery on the Appian Way, he is beheaded with several deacons.
- **August 10, 258**: Martyrdom of his deacon Lawrence, four days after him.

- **4th century**: Pope Saint Damasus has a verse inscription carved on his tomb in the Catacomb of Callixtus.

"A good and peaceable priest"

When he was elected, the Church was going through a serious crisis. Should Christians who had been baptized in groups separated from the Church be baptized again? The bishops of Africa, around Saint Cyprian of Carthage, and several Churches of Asia said yes. Rome, with Pope Stephen I, said no: baptism given in the name of the Trinity is valid, and it is enough to lay hands on those who return.

Sixtus II kept the Roman position, but he reopened dialogue. Cyprian's biographer, the deacon Pontius, called him "a good and peaceable priest" and credited him with restoring communion between the Churches. His letter fragment to Dionysius of Alexandria, who was also trying to calm the conflict, shows a pastor attached to tradition without closing the door.



Saint Sixtus II painted by Botticelli in the Sistine Chapel.

Martyrdom in the cemetery on the Appian Way

In 257 Emperor Valerian forbade Christians to assemble or to visit their cemeteries. The following year a second edict ordered that bishops, priests and deacons be put to death without delay. Saint Cyprian reported this to an African bishop in a letter that also passed on the news from Rome: Sixtus had been executed in the cemetery on August 6, and four deacons with him.

That day he was gathering his faithful in a cemetery on the Appian Way, probably that of Praetextatus, when soldiers arrested him. The sources disagree: was he executed on the spot, or first brought before a judge and then taken back to the cemetery? The inscription of Damasus can be read either way. He was beheaded with the deacons Januarius, Vincentius, Magnus and Stephanus; two other deacons, Felicissimus and Agapitus, were killed the same day.

The seventh deacon, Lawrence, was martyred four days later. Tradition embellished their last meeting: Saint Ambrose and the poet Prudentius relate that Lawrence begged his bishop not to leave without him, and that Sixtus told him he would soon follow. This famous dialogue belongs to legend, but it says something true: the bishop and his deacons shared the same service and the same fate.

A saint named at Mass

The body of Sixtus II was laid in the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Callixtus, along with, according to tradition, the chair stained with his blood. His tomb became one of the most venerated in Rome. His name appears in the Roman Canon, today's Eucharistic Prayer I, among the saints the Church remembers: "Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius..." Long commemorated on August 6, the feast of the Transfiguration, he has been celebrated since 1969 on August 7, together with his companions.

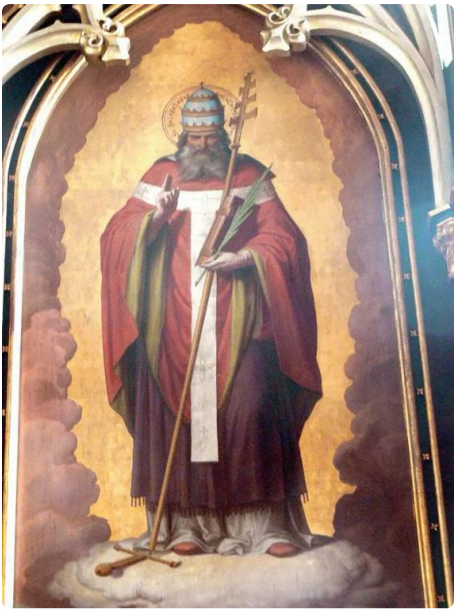
Why is Saint Sixtus II remembered today?

No traditional patronage is attached to Sixtus II. He is remembered above all as a peacemaker and a martyr. He governed the Church for only a few months, yet he combined the gentleness that reconciles with the courage that does not retreat. He can be invoked for Christian unity, for pastors in danger, for persecuted Christians and for those who must calm conflicts. Each time a priest uses the Roman Canon, his name is spoken again at the altar, in parishes from Manila to Dublin.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Sixtus II in art

Sixtus II is usually shown in papal vestments, as in the full-length portrait by Sandro Botticelli on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, painted among the series of early popes in the 15th century. He is often painted with his deacon

Lawrence, to whom, according to legend, he entrusted the goods of the Church before his death. Scenes of his martyrdom show him surrounded by his deacons, with soldiers and a sword.



The martyrdom of Saint Sixtus II and his deacons.

Where to pray to Saint Sixtus II

- **Rome, Appian Way**: the Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Callixtus, where he was buried.
- **Pisa, Italy**: the church of San Sisto, where the city remembers him every August 6.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Sixtus II and the novena to Saint Sixtus II.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Sixtus II for Peace and the Unity of the Church

No ancient prayer specific to Saint Sixtus II has come down to us, and he left only a short fragment of a letter. His name, however, has been spoken since ancient times in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Church. Below you will find that passage and the testimony of a contemporary, followed by an original prayer to Saint Sixtus II.

Two ancient texts to meditate on

> *"In communion with, and venerating the memory first of the glorious ever-Virgin Mary [...] and of all your holy apostles and martyrs: Peter and Paul, Andrew [...], Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian, Lawrence..."*

Source: the Roman Canon (Eucharistic Prayer I of the Roman Missal), the prayer known as the *Communicantes*, whose list of saints dates back to late antiquity. Translated from the Latin by Saintspedia.

> *"A good and peaceable priest."*

Source: Pontius, deacon of Carthage, *Life of Cyprian*, 3rd century, describing Sixtus II (*bonus et pacificus sacerdos*).



Saint Sixtus II and his deacon Lawrence.

Prayer to Saint Sixtus II for peace and the unity of the Church

Saint Sixtus, shepherd of Rome in a time of persecution, you were called a good and peaceable priest. Teach me to seek peace without giving up the truth.

You reconciled Churches that anger was about to divide. Pray for the unity of Christians. Give those who bear responsibility in the Church the patience of dialogue and the firmness of faith.

You stayed in the midst of your people when gathering together was a crime. Support the Christians who are persecuted today, and the pastors who risk their lives to celebrate the Eucharist.

With your deacons you gave your life for Christ on the same day. Obtain for us the grace to serve our brothers and sisters as they did, and not to be afraid. 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

The memorial of Saint Sixtus II and his companions is celebrated on August 7, the day after their martyrdom on August 6, 258. You can also pray to him whenever you hear his name at Mass in the first Eucharistic Prayer, or when you pray for deacons, for priests in danger and for Christians who suffer for their faith. His feast falls three days before that of Saint Lawrence on August 10, and the two can be honored together.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Sixtus II, from July 29 to August 6, and read the life of Saint Sixtus II.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Sixtus II

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint Sixtus II and his deacons. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish on the eve of his memorial on August 7, begin on July 29; the last day then falls on August 6, the anniversary of his martyrdom. It can also be prayed at any time for the unity of Christians or for persecuted believers.

How to pray this novena

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

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: *Lord, you gave your Church a good and peaceable shepherd in Saint Sixtus. Through his intercession and that of his deacons, keep me faithful and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

If you can attend Mass during these days, listen for his name in the first Eucharistic Prayer. It is a simple way to remember that the saints of the first centuries still pray with us.

This novena is especially suited to a parish group, a community of deacons and their families, or anyone who wants to pray for the persecuted Church. You may also join to it the memory of Saint Lawrence, whose feast follows on August 10: the bishop and his deacon, separated by four days, are united in the same witness. Let each day be a small step toward a faith that is gentle with others and firm before trial.

Day 1: A shepherd chosen in a storm

Sixtus became bishop of Rome in the summer of 257, when the Church was divided and a persecution was beginning. He did not choose an easy time. He accepted the charge entrusted to him.

Prayer: Lord, give courage to those who take on responsibility in difficult times.

Today: Pray for the pope and for your bishop by name.

Day 2: A good and peaceable priest

A deacon of Carthage described Sixtus as "a good and peaceable priest." These simple words say a great deal: goodness and peace are the marks of a true shepherd.

Prayer: Lord, make me good and peaceable in my words and actions.

Today: Speak gently in a situation where you would usually be sharp.

Day 3: Reopening dialogue

Rome and the Churches of Africa were at odds over baptism. Sixtus kept his position but reopened dialogue and restored communion. Faithfulness and openness can go together.

Prayer: Lord, heal the divisions among Christians, and make us one as you are one with the Father.

Today: Pray for Christians of another Church or community.

Day 4: A letter of peace

The only certain text left by Sixtus is a fragment of a letter to Dionysius of Alexandria, who was also working for peace. Peacemakers support one another.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who work quietly for reconciliation.

Today: Write a kind message to someone who is going through a conflict.

Day 5: When gathering becomes a crime

Emperor Valerian forbade Christians to assemble. Sixtus kept gathering his people, because the Church cannot live without the Eucharist.

Prayer: Lord, give me a love for Sunday Mass, and support Christians who cannot gather freely.

Today: Learn about a country where Christians are persecuted and pray for them.

Day 6: The shepherd among his flock

Sixtus was arrested in a cemetery on the Appian Way, in the midst of the faithful. He did not hide; he stayed with those entrusted to him.

Prayer: Lord, protect priests who risk their lives to remain with their people.

Today: Thank a priest who serves your parish.

Day 7: The deacons of Rome

Several of his deacons died with him: Januarius, Vincentius, Magnus, Stephanus, Felicissimus and Agapitus. They had served the poor and the community, and they shared their bishop's fate.

Prayer: Lord, bless deacons and all who serve the poor in your name.

Today: Do a hidden service for someone in your parish or family.

Day 8: Lawrence, who followed

Four days after Sixtus, his deacon Lawrence was martyred. Legend tells that Sixtus promised him he would soon follow. The witness of one gives strength to another.

Prayer: Lord, make me a witness who helps others to be faithful.

Today: Encourage someone who is struggling in their faith.

Day 9: A name spoken at every altar

Sixtus was beheaded on August 6, 258. Since then his name has been spoken in the Roman Canon. A short life given to Christ continues to bear fruit for centuries.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Sixtus and his companions, make me faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray for the persecuted Church and, if you can, attend Mass.

Closing prayer

On the last evening, take a moment to look back over these nine days. Thank God for what you have received, even if your intention has not yet been answered as you hoped, and entrust the future to him with confidence.

Saint Sixtus, good and peaceable shepherd, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have brought before you. Pray for the unity of Christians, for pastors in danger and for all who suffer for the name of Jesus. Obtain for us gentleness in conflict and courage in trial. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Crypt of the Popes in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus

The Crypt of the Popes is in the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, along the ancient Appian Way, south of Rome. It is where Saint Sixtus II was buried after his martyrdom on August 6, 258, among several bishops of Rome of the 3rd century. Rediscovered in the 19th century, it remains one of the most moving places of Christian Rome in the first centuries.

The official cemetery of the Church of Rome

At the beginning of the 3rd century, Pope Zephyrinus entrusted to the deacon Callixtus, the future pope, the administration of a cemetery on the Appian Way. The place became the cemetery of Rome's Christian community, and kilometers of galleries on several levels were gradually dug there. In one underground chamber, the bishops of Rome who died in the 3rd century were laid to rest: this is the Crypt of the Popes. Several plaques bearing their names, engraved in Greek, were found there, such as those of Saint Pontian, Saint Anterus, and Saint Fabian.

Sixtus II was buried there in 258, a few days after being arrested in a neighboring cemetery. In the 4th century, Pope Saint Damasus refurbished the crypt and had great inscriptions in verse engraved there in praise of the martyrs. Pilgrims of the early Middle Ages came to pray there, before the relics were transferred to the churches of Rome and the galleries fell into oblivion. In 1854, the archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi identified the crypt and found its inscriptions.



The entrance to the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way.

Visiting the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus

The visit is only with a guide, in small groups and in several languages. The route, which shows only a small part of the galleries, passes through the Crypt of the Popes, then the neighboring crypt where Saint Cecilia was first buried, and chambers decorated with some of the oldest paintings in Christian art. You see the burial niches cut into the tuff, the symbols of the fish, the anchor, and the Good Shepherd, and you take the measure of what the Church of the persecutions was.

Not far away is the Catacomb of Praetextatus, where Sixtus II's arrest is placed; it can be visited only on special occasions.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Sixtus II. The time spent in the crypt is short: prepare in advance the intention you want to entrust, for the persecuted Church or for the unity of Christians. On the way out, the prayer to Saint Sixtus II can extend the visit, in silence, under the trees of the Appian Way. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Sixtus II

- **Catacomb of Praetextatus** (Appian Way): the place of his arrest and martyrdom, according to ancient sources.
- **Basilica of Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls** (Rome): it honors his deacon Lawrence, martyred four days after him.
- **Pisa**: the church of San Sisto, where the city keeps his memory each August 6.

Practical information

The Catacomb of Saint Callixtus is on the ancient Appian Way, a few kilometers from central Rome; it can be reached by bus or on foot from the Porta San Sebastiano. It is cool there all year: bring a warm layer. There is an admission fee and the catacomb is not open every day: consult the official website of the Catacombs of Saint Callixtus for hours, prices, and tour languages.

CREDITS

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: Sandro Botticelli, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Sixtus II painted by Botticelli in the Sistine Chapel.: Image: Sandro Botticelli, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The martyrdom of Saint Sixtus II and his deacons.: Image: Leopold Schulz, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Sixtus II and his deacon Lawrence.: Image: Michael Pacher, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The entrance to the Catacomb of Saint Callixtus, on the Appian Way.: Image: Mister No, CC BY 3.0, 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