

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Sixtus III

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: August 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Sixtus III

Pope from 432 to 440 who rebuilt the Basilica of Saint Mary Major in honor of the Mother of God.

Feast day	August 19
Born	c. 390, Rome
Died	August 19, 440, Rome
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Sixtus III for Unity and Love of Mary

Novena to Saint Sixtus III

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Sixtus III

Saint Sixtus III was pope from 432 to 440. His name remains linked to one of the most beautiful buildings in Rome: the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, which he rebuilt and dedicated to the Virgin Mary just after the Council of Ephesus had proclaimed her Mother of God. A conciliatory pope in an age of controversies about Christ and about grace, he is commemorated on August 19 in the Catholic liturgy.

Who was Saint Sixtus III?

Sixtus, in Latin *Xystus*, was born in Rome around 390. Before his election he was already an important figure among the Roman clergy, close to Popes Zosimus, Boniface I and Celestine I. In his youth he seems to have had some sympathy for Pelagius, the British monk whose ideas on grace were condemned. Pelagius taught, in short, that human beings can live without sin by their own efforts, with little need of God's grace. A correspondence with Saint Augustine, the great defender of grace, brought Sixtus to a fully orthodox position. When Celestine died, he was elected on July 31, 432.

Key dates in the life of Saint Sixtus III

- **c. 390**: Born in Rome.
- **431**: The Council of Ephesus proclaims Mary *Theotokos*, "Mother of God."
- **July 31, 432**: Elected Bishop of Rome.
- **433**: Reconciliation between Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch, which he encourages.
- **August 5, 434**: Consecration of the new Basilica of Saint Mary Major.
- **437**: Restores Brice to the episcopal see of Tours.

- **August 19, 440**: Dies in Rome.

A pope of reconciliation

The pontificate of Sixtus III began just after the Council of Ephesus (431), which had been called to respond to Nestorius. Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, refused to call Mary "Mother of God," which seemed to divide Christ into two persons. The council affirmed that the one born of Mary is truly God made man. The pope approved its acts, then worked to restore unity between Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch, whom the council had set against each other. The "Formula of Union" of 433 sealed their reconciliation.

His conciliatory character led some to suspect him, wrongly, of being soft on heresy. Yet he firmly refused to readmit Julian of Eclanum, one of the leaders of Pelagianism, who would not renounce his views.

He also watched over the Churches of the West and the Balkans. In 437 he restored Bishop Brice of Tours, the successor of Saint Martin, who had been unjustly deposed seven years earlier. He defended the authority of Rome over Illyricum by confirming the role of the Bishop of Thessalonica.

Saint Mary Major, a basilica for the Mother of God

Sixtus III rebuilt the basilica on the Esquiline Hill, erected in the previous century, and dedicated it to Mary. He made it the first great Marian shrine of Rome. The mosaics of the triumphal arch and of the nave, which tell the story of Christ's childhood and the history of Israel, date from his time. An inscription recalled the pope's dedication to the Virgin, and the arch still bears the words *Xystus episcopus plebi Dei*, "Sixtus, bishop, to the people of God." Sixteen centuries later, these mosaics are among the oldest images of Mary in a major church.

Saint Mary Major is one of the four major papal basilicas of Rome. The anniversary of its dedication is still celebrated on August 5 in the universal calendar, a feast also known as Our Lady of the Snows. Pilgrims from all over the world pray there before the ancient icon of Mary known as *Salus Populi Romani*, and Pope Francis chose to be buried there in 2025.

A great builder

His work as a builder did not stop there. The church of Santa Sabina on the Aventine was completed during his pontificate. He founded a monastery near San Sebastiano on the Appian Way, gave the Lateran Baptistery its octagonal form and restored San Lorenzo fuori le Mura. These great expenses did not please everyone, and Christian tradition also preserves Saint Jerome's criticism of lavish churches.

What does his holiness teach us?

Sixtus III died on August 19, 440, and was buried at San Lorenzo fuori le Mura. His successor was the great Leo I. His cult appears only in the 9th century, in the martyrology of Ado, and we know of no miracles or spiritual writings by him, apart from a few letters. What the centuries remember is a bishop who sought peace between the Churches and who entrusted Rome to the Mother of God by giving her a house. To pray in Saint Mary Major today is still to enter into this pope's project.

Why pray to Saint Sixtus III?

No traditional patronage is attached to Saint Sixtus III. His life makes him a natural intercessor for devotion to Mary, Mother of God, for reconciliation between Christians, and for all who build or care for churches: architects, artists, sacristans and parish volunteers. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Sixtus III and the novena to Saint Sixtus III.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Sixtus III in art

No portrait of Sixtus III from his own time survives. His imaginary portrait appears among the mosaic medallions of the popes in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls. His truest "image" is the triumphal arch of Saint Mary Major, which still bears his name: *Xystus episcopus plebi Dei*.



The Basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome.

Where to pray to Saint Sixtus III

- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Mary Major (Santa Maria Maggiore), which he rebuilt and dedicated to Mary.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura (Saint Lawrence Outside the Walls), where he was buried.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Sixtus III for Unity and Love of Mary

Saint Sixtus III, pope from 432 to 440, left no prayers of his own, and no ancient prayer to him is in common use. He is remembered for rebuilding the Basilica of Saint Mary Major and dedicating it to the Virgin Mary, just after the Council of Ephesus proclaimed her Mother of God. Below is an original prayer to Saint Sixtus III, followed by one of the oldest Marian prayers of the Church, which expresses the same faith he wanted to honor.

Prayer to Saint Sixtus III for unity and love of Mary

Saint Sixtus, bishop of Rome,
you offered the Mother of God a house of light and beauty,
so that the people of God might honor her there.
Help me to make room for Mary in my life,
and to welcome her Son as she welcomed him.

After the quarrels of Ephesus, you worked for reconciliation
between brothers who had become rivals.
Teach me to seek peace patiently,
without giving up the truth of the faith.

You wrote on the arch of your basilica:
"Sixtus, bishop, to the people of God."
Pray for the Pope and for all bishops,
that they may serve God's people with humility.
Pray for those who build and care for our churches,
and for all who work for the unity of Christians.
I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

A traditional prayer: We fly to thy patronage

We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin.

Source: *Sub tuum praesidium*, the oldest known prayer to Mary, preserved in a Greek papyrus generally dated to the 3rd or 4th century. It already calls Mary *Theotokos*, "Mother of God," the title solemnly confirmed at Ephesus in 431 and celebrated by Sixtus III in Saint Mary Major. Traditional English translation, public domain.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Sixtus III is commemorated on August 19, the anniversary of his death in 440. It is fitting to pray to him on August 5, the feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of Saint Mary Major, and during the Marian months of May and October. You can also pray to him when a conflict divides Christians, or when your parish is building, restoring or beautifying its church.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Sixtus III, and read the life of Saint Sixtus III.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Sixtus III

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Sixtus III, the pope who rebuilt the Basilica of Saint Mary Major. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast day, August 19, begin it on August 10. You can also pray it from July 27 to August 4, so that it ends on the eve of the Dedication of Saint Mary Major on August 5. It is suited to anyone who wants to grow in love for Mary or who prays for unity among Christians.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day. You may end each day with the ancient prayer "We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God."



The Basilica of Saint Mary Major in Rome.

Day 1: A son of Rome

Sixtus was born in Rome and served its Church for many years before becoming its bishop. He worked alongside several popes. Faithfulness is often built over a long time, in service to others.

Prayer: Lord, make me faithful in the service you entrust to me today, however small it may seem.

Today: Thank God for your parish and for those who serve it.

Day 2: Changing one's mind

In his youth, Sixtus seems to have been drawn to the ideas of Pelagius. Through his correspondence with Saint Augustine, he came to a fuller understanding of grace. It takes humility to let oneself be corrected.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me a humble heart, open to the truth even when it corrects me.

Today: Accept a criticism or a piece of advice without defending yourself.

Day 3: Everything is grace

The controversy with the Pelagians was about a simple question: can we save ourselves by our own efforts? The Church answered that everything good in us is a gift of God's grace.

Prayer: Lord, I know that without you I can do nothing. Thank you for your grace that carries me.

Today: Before going to sleep, name three graces received today.

Day 4: Mary, Mother of God

The Council of Ephesus proclaimed Mary *Theotokos*, Mother of God. By honoring Mary, the Church professes that her Son is truly God made man.

Prayer: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for me and lead me to your Son.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary slowly.

Day 5: Reconciling brothers

After Ephesus, Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch were divided. Sixtus encouraged their reconciliation, sealed in 433. Peace between Christians is worth the effort it costs. It rarely comes without someone taking the first step.

Prayer: Lord, make me a builder of peace where there is division.

Today: Pray for Christian unity, and for one person from whom you are estranged.

Day 6: Gentle but firm

Sixtus was conciliatory, yet he refused to readmit Julian of Eclanum, who would not renounce his errors. Gentleness does not mean giving up on the truth. Charity sometimes requires us to say a clear word.

Prayer: Lord, give me both gentleness and firmness, so that I may love in truth.

Today: Say no kindly to something you know is not right.

Day 7: A house for Mary

He rebuilt the basilica on the Esquiline and dedicated it to the Mother of God. Its mosaics have spoken to pilgrims for sixteen centuries. Beauty can lead us to God. A church built with care is already a silent sermon.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, make my heart a dwelling where your Son is welcome.

Today: Spend a moment in prayer before an image of Mary.

Day 8: To the people of God

On the arch of the basilica he wrote: "Sixtus, bishop, to the people of God." His work was not for his own glory, but a gift to the whole Christian people.

Prayer: Lord, help me to do my work as a gift to others, and not to seek my own glory.

Today: Give your time or your skills to your parish or to a neighbor.

Day 9: Handing on

Sixtus died on August 19, 440. His collaborator Leo, who would be called the Great, succeeded him. The saints prepare those who will come after them, and rejoice when others go further than they did.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Sixtus III and of Mary, Mother of God, grant me what is good for me. Amen.

Today: Encourage a young person in their faith.

Closing prayer

Saint Sixtus, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for the Church, that she may be one. Lead me to Mary, Mother of God, so that she may lead me to Jesus. Obtain for me a humble heart, open to grace and devoted to peace. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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