BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Sylvester I

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 31

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IN BRIEF

Saint Sylvester I

Bishop of Rome from 314 to 335, in the time of Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea.

Feast day	December 31
Born	late 3rd century, Rome
Died	December 31, 335, Rome
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	4th century

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Sylvester I

Saint Sylvester I was Bishop of Rome from 314 to 335, during the reign of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. Born in Rome and dying in that city on December 31, 335, he governed the Church for more than twenty years, just as it was emerging from persecution. His real life is little known, and famous legends have covered it over. His feast day is December 31, the last day of the civil year, which in many countries bears his name.

Who was Saint Sylvester?

Sylvester is the pope of the Constantinian peace. Elected a year after the Edict of Milan, he saw Rome fill with Christian basilicas thanks to the emperor's gifts, and the Church hold its first great councils, at Arles in 314 and at Nicaea in 325. Yet contemporary documents say little about him: he attended none of these councils and was represented there by priests. Later generations wanted to fill this silence. From the end of the 5th century, legendary accounts made him the one who baptized Constantine and the hero of spectacular miracles. These legends had immense influence in the Middle Ages, but historians must distinguish them from what is really known. What is certain is that he was venerated as a saint very early, from the 5th century.

Key dates in the life of Sylvester

- **Late 3rd century**: Born in Rome; he is said to have been the son of a priest named Rufinus.
- **Early 4th century**: A priest of the Church of Rome, he is said to have suffered in the persecution of Diocletian.
- **January 31, 314**: He is elected Bishop of Rome after the death of Miltiades.

- **August 314**: Council of Arles against the Donatists; he sends two priests and two deacons.
- **325**: First Council of Nicaea, which condemns Arius; his two legates sign the acts just after Hosius of Cordoba.
- **c. 333**: Constantine begins building St. Peter's Basilica, after the Lateran.
- **December 31, 335**: Dies in Rome; he is buried in the cemetery of Priscilla, on the Via Salaria.
- **756**: His remains are taken from the cemetery of Priscilla; they are later venerated at San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, and the abbey of Nonantola also claims to have received them.

A pope in the time of Constantine

Sylvester was probably Roman by birth. Ordained a priest under Pope Marcellinus, he is said to have lived through the last great persecution, that of Diocletian. He succeeded Miltiades on January 31, 314. His pontificate, one of the longest of antiquity, coincided with an upheaval: Christianity, persecuted only yesterday, became the religion favored by the emperor.

Constantine built great churches in Rome and endowed them with lands for their upkeep. Under Sylvester rose the Lateran basilica, ancestor of St. John Lateran, the Sessorian basilica near the palace of Saint Helena, which became Holy Cross in Jerusalem, basilicas over the tombs of Saint Paul and Saint Lawrence, and then, around 333, the first St. Peter's Basilica. According to the Liber Pontificalis, Sylvester himself founded a church near the Baths of Diocletian, the title of Equitius, whose remains lie beneath the present Basilica of San Martino ai Monti. He also had work done in the catacombs of Callixtus and Priscilla.

The councils of Arles and Nicaea

In 314, the emperor called a council at Arles to settle the Donatist crisis, born in Africa from a dispute over the election of the bishop of Carthage. Sylvester did not go but sent two priests and two deacons. The bishops then wrote him a respectful letter asking him to make their decisions known to all the Churches. In 325, he again declined the invitation to the Council of Nicaea, because of his advanced age. His two priests, Vincent and Vitus, signed the acts just after Hosius of Cordoba. The council condemned Arius and proclaimed that the Son is "of the same substance as the Father". This discretion on the part of the Bishop of Rome has been judged in various ways; it also created a lasting custom: the popes of the 4th and 5th centuries did not attend in person the councils called by the emperor.

The legend of Constantine's baptism

At the end of the 5th century, the Acts of Sylvester appeared. They tell how Constantine, struck with leprosy, refused the cruel remedy proposed by the pagan priests, and then, on the advice of the apostles Peter and Paul who appeared to him in a dream, sent for Sylvester, who had taken refuge on Mount Soracte, and who healed him by baptizing him. In reality, Constantine was baptized at the end of his life, in 337, by Eusebius of Nicomedia. This account nevertheless served as the basis for a famous forgery, the Donation of Constantine, written around the 8th or 9th century, which claimed that the emperor had handed the pope power over Rome and the West. The text was exposed in the 15th century by the humanist Lorenzo Valla. The Golden Legend attributes still other wonders to Sylvester, such as victory over a dragon.

Cult and iconography

Sylvester was listed as a saint as early as the 5th century in the Hieronymian Martyrology, and a lamp from that period, found near San Martino ai Monti, bears an invocation to "Saint Sylvester". Buried in the cemetery of Priscilla, he received a funerary basilica there. In 756, his remains were taken from it during the Lombard siege; Pope Paul I then founded in Rome a monastery and a church, the present San Silvestro in Capite, where his relics are honored. The abbey of Nonantola, near Modena, claims for its part to have received his body and is dedicated to him: the traditions differ. He is depicted as a pope, with the tiara, often beside Constantine, sometimes with a bull or a dragon, reminders of the legend. His feast is December 31; the Eastern Churches celebrate him on January 2.

What can we learn from Saint Sylvester?

Sylvester led the Church through an unexpected time of peace, after centuries of persecution. He saw Christian Rome come into being and supported, even from afar, the faith proclaimed at Nicaea. His discreet figure reminds us that service of the Church is not measured by how much noise one makes. On the last day of the year, many of the faithful pray to him to give thanks for the year gone by and to entrust to God the one that is beginning.

Where to pray to Saint Sylvester

- **San Silvestro in Capite** (Rome): the church founded in the 8th century by Pope Paul I to receive his relics.
- **Basilica of San Martino ai Monti** (Rome): built near the ancient title of Equitius that tradition attributes to Sylvester.
- **Nonantola Abbey** (Emilia-Romagna, Italy): the Benedictine abbey dedicated to him, which claims his relics.
- **Catacombs of Priscilla** (Rome): the cemetery where he was first buried.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Sylvester for the End of the Year

Saint Sylvester I, Bishop of Rome from 314 to 335, guided the Church as it emerged from persecution, in the time of Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicaea. His feast, on December 31, closes the civil year. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him our thanksgiving for the year gone by, the Church and the pope, and the year that is beginning.

Prayer to Saint Sylvester

Saint Sylvester,
shepherd of the Church of Rome
as the persecutions came to an end,
you saw Christians pray at last in broad daylight
and build houses for God.
Teach me to give thanks for the peace I have received
and not to forget those who still suffer for their faith.

In the time of the Council of Nicaea,
you kept the faith in Jesus, true God and true man.
Keep the Church in the unity of this faith,
support the pope and the bishops,
and make us faithful witnesses.

On this last day of the year,
I place in your hands all that I have lived:
the joys I wish to offer,
the faults for which I ask forgiveness,
the sorrows I entrust to God.
Present to the Lord the year that is beginning,
so that it may belong wholly to him.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Sylvester

- On December 31, his feast day, to give thanks for the year gone by.
- On the threshold of a new stage of life: a move, a new job, a new year.
- For the pope and the unity of the Church.
- For Christians who still live in countries where the faith is persecuted.

- For those who carry responsibility quietly.

An invocation for the turn of the year

On the evening of December 31, before the celebrations or at the time of the Te Deum, you can say:

> *Lord, thank you for this year you have given me.*
> *Forgive what was not according to your heart,*
> *and bless the days to come.*
> *Saint Sylvester, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Sylvester from December 23 to 31, and read the life of Saint Sylvester.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Sylvester

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint Sylvester I, Bishop of Rome from 314 to 335, in the time of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, December 31, begin on December 23: it then passes through Christmas and ends with the year. You can also pray it at any other time.

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: "Saint Sylvester, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. Some of the episodes mentioned come from legendary accounts written after his death; they are indicated as such.

Day 1: A child of the Church of Rome

Sylvester is said to have been born in Rome, the son of a priest named Rufinus. He grew up in a Christian community that was still a minority, often threatened, but faithful.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the community that passed on the faith to me. Bless my parish and make it alive and welcoming.

Act of the day: Pray for the priests and faithful of your parish, naming them if you can.

Day 2: The time of persecution

A priest at the beginning of the 4th century, Sylvester is said to have lived through the persecution of Diocletian, the most violent of all. He saw brothers die for Christ.

Prayer: Lord, sustain Christians who are persecuted today. Give them strength and peace, and open the hearts of those who oppress them.

Act of the day: Learn about a suffering Church and pray for it.

Day 3: An unexpected peace

Elected Bishop of Rome in 314, a year after the Edict of Milan, Sylvester saw Christians practice their faith freely. Peace is a gift to be welcomed and made fruitful.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the freedom to pray to you. Teach me not to take it for granted and to use it well.

Act of the day: Take a moment to pray in a church, simply to say thank you.

Day 4: Houses for God

Under Sylvester, Rome filled with basilicas: the Lateran, St. Peter's, St. Paul's, St. Lawrence's. The faith became visible in the heart of the city.

Prayer: Lord, make me a living stone of your Church. Bless those who care for our churches and keep them open.

Act of the day: Do a service for your parish: arranging flowers, cleaning, welcoming.

Day 5: Seeking unity

In 314, at the Council of Arles, the Church tried to end the Donatist schism. Sylvester sent his representatives there, and the bishops asked him to make their decisions known to all the Churches.

Prayer: Lord, heal the divisions among Christians. Make me a builder of reconciliation in my family and my community.

Act of the day: Take the first step toward someone with whom you are on bad terms.

Day 6: The faith of Nicaea

In 325, the Council of Nicaea proclaimed that the Son is of the same substance as the Father. Sylvester's legates signed this Creed that we still say every Sunday.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, eternal Son of the Father, I believe in you. Strengthen my faith and grant that I may profess it with joy.

Act of the day: Slowly recite the Creed, weighing each phrase.

Day 7: Serving without noise

The ancient sources say little about Sylvester: he hardly appears in the foreground. Yet his long service carried the Church for twenty-one years.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve without seeking to be seen. May I do good for you alone.

Act of the day: Do a service without telling anyone about it.

Day 8: What the legends say

Later, stories made Sylvester the one who healed and baptized Constantine. This is not historical, but these legends express a conviction: Christ alone heals and saves, even the powerful.

Prayer: Lord, heal what is sick in me. I also entrust to you those who govern: enlighten them and convert their hearts.

Act of the day: Pray for the leaders of your country and your town.

Day 9: Giving the year back to God

Sylvester died on December 31, 335. His name has remained attached to the last day of the year. It is the time to give thanks, to ask forgiveness and to entrust the future.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for this year. I give you its joys and its sorrows. Through the intercession of Saint Sylvester, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Look back over your year and note three graces received, and if possible take part in the Te Deum or a Mass of thanksgiving.

Living the novena with Saint Sylvester

This novena accompanies the last days of the year, between the preparation for Christmas and the passage into the New Year. Saint Sylvester knew persecution and then peace, and he kept the faith of Nicaea. During these nine days, you can carry persecuted Christians, the unity of the Church and the pope, and look back over your year. On the evening of December 31, before the celebrations, take a moment of prayer as a family.

Concluding prayer

Saint Sylvester,
shepherd of Rome in the time of peace restored,
you kept the faith of the Church
and served quietly for many years.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Receive the year that is ending
and bless the one that is beginning.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Sylvester at any time, and read the life of Saint Sylvester.

PILGRIMAGE

Nonantola Abbey

Nonantola Abbey stands in the plain of Emilia-Romagna, in Italy, near Modena. Founded in the 8th century, this great Benedictine abbey is dedicated to Saint Sylvester I, the pope of Constantine's time, whose body it claims to have received. Its Romanesque basilica, its crypt with many slender columns and its abbot's palace make it one of the high places of medieval monasticism in Italy.

An abbey born in the time of the Lombards

The abbey was founded in 752 by Saint Anselm, who became its first abbot, on land given to him by his brother-in-law, Aistulf, King of the Lombards. It was first dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Saint Benedict, then to the Holy Apostles. According to the abbey's tradition, the remains of Saint Sylvester were brought there from Rome in the middle of the 8th century, after they were taken from the cemetery of Priscilla in 756: the abbey then took his name. In Rome, another tradition places them in the church of San Silvestro in Capite, founded at the same time by Pope Paul I. The sources differ, and both places honor his memory.

Nonantola became a powerful center, with a renowned scriptorium and vast estates. It was plundered by the Hungarians in 899, then struck by the earthquake of 1117. It hosted the meeting of Pope Marinus I and Emperor Charles the Fat, and holds the tomb of Pope Adrian III.

What you can see

The Romanesque facade, marked by Lombard bands, opens through a portal whose columns rest on lions. Its jambs, carved by followers of the master Wiligelmo, tell on one side the story of the abbey, including the translation of

the relics of Saint Sylvester, and on the other the childhood of Christ. In the tympanum, Christ in glory is surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists.

In the crypt, sixty-four slender columns support the vaults; many have capitals carved between the 9th and 12th centuries. The altar holds the relics of Saint Anselm, the founder, and of several other saints. Behind the altar is the urn that, according to the abbey, held the relics of Saint Sylvester. The neighboring abbot's palace houses the archives, rich in thousands of medieval parchments, a library and a museum of sacred art.

Praying there

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Sylvester. In the basilica, entrust the Church and the pope to him, and give thanks for the freedom to believe. Go down into the crypt to pray in silence near the relics of the saints, then say the prayer to Saint Sylvester. December 31, his feast day, is a fine time to go. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Nonantola lies near Modena, in the province of the same name. The abbey church is a place of worship: modest dress and silence are requested, especially during services. Opening hours for the basilica, the crypt and the museum may vary: check with the abbey or the tourist office before your visit.

Credits and sources

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