

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Symmachus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: July 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Symmachus

Bishop of Rome from 498 to 514 who overcame the schism of the antipope Laurentius.

Feast day	July 19
Born	c. 450, Sardinia
Died	July 19, 514, Rome, Italy
Era	6th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Symmachus for the Unity of the Church

Novena to Saint Symmachus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Symmachus

Saint Symmachus was bishop of Rome from 498 to 514, at a time when Italy was ruled by Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths. Elected on the same day as a rival, the archpriest Laurentius, he spent much of his pontificate defending the legitimacy of his election amid accusations, stormy synods and street violence. Having come through this schism, he showed himself a builder and a generous friend of the poor and of exiles. His feast is July 19.

Who was Saint Symmachus?

Symmachus was born around 450 in Sardinia, an island then under the control of the Vandals. The son of a man named Fortunatus, he is said to have been born into a pagan family, which sets him apart from most popes of his time, who often came from the Roman aristocracy. Baptized in Rome, he joined the clergy of the city and became archdeacon under Pope Anastasius II. This office, the first in the Roman clergy after the bishop, marked him out as a likely successor.



Pope Symmachus in the apse mosaic of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura, Rome.

Key dates

- **c. 450**: Born in Sardinia.
- **Before 498**: Archdeacon of the Church of Rome under Anastasius II.
- **November 22, 498**: Elected pope at the Lateran; on the same day, another faction elects Laurentius.
- **March 1, 499**: Roman synod forbidding campaigns for the succession of a living pope.
- **501-502**: Accusations against him, flight from Rimini and turbulent synods in Rome.
- **October 23, 502**: The "Synod of Palma" refuses to judge him and keeps him in the see of Peter.
- **c. 506**: Theodoric has the churches of Rome returned to him; end of the Laurentian Schism.

- **513**: He grants the pallium to Saint Caesarius of Arles.
- **July 19, 514**: Death in Rome; burial in the portico of old Saint Peter's.

A disputed election

On the death of Anastasius II, the Roman clergy split. The majority elected Symmachus in the Lateran Basilica on November 22, 498, while a group supported by part of the Senate, who favored a rapprochement with Constantinople, chose Laurentius at Saint Mary's. Both sides agreed to submit the matter to Theodoric, even though he was an Arian. The king decided in favor of the candidate who had been elected first and by the larger number: Symmachus.

A hostile text, the *Laurentian Fragment*, later accused him of buying this decision. Favorable sources, such as the *Liber Pontificalis*, tell the story very differently. Historians today cannot settle the question with certainty.

On March 1, 499, a Roman synod forbade anyone to campaign for the succession of a living pope, an attempt to prevent such crises in the future.

Accusations and the "Synod of Palma"

The crisis broke out again in 501. The senator Festus accused the pope of celebrating Easter on a date contrary to Eastern custom, then of moral failings and of mismanaging the goods of the Church. Summoned to Rimini, Symmachus took fright and fled by night, which his opponents read as an admission of guilt.

Several synods met in Rome in an atmosphere of riot, and priests of his party were killed in the streets. On October 23, 502, the assembled bishops finally declared that they could not judge the successor of Peter and left his case to

God. This assembly is known as the "Synod of Palma." Around 506, Theodoric had the churches of Rome returned to Symmachus, and the Laurentian Schism came to an end.

Builder and protector of the poor

Once peace returned, Symmachus built and restored. He raised a church of Saint Andrew near Saint Peter's, worked on the Basilica of Saint Agnes on the Via Nomentana, rebuilt the Basilica of San Martino ai Monti and embellished the old Vatican basilica. He also built houses for the poor near Saint Peter's, Saint Paul's and Saint Lawrence's. Forced to leave the Lateran during the schism, he set up residential buildings near the tomb of Peter, regarded as the first core of the future Vatican Palace.

His charity reached beyond Rome. He sent money and clothing to the bishops of Africa and Sardinia exiled by the Arian Vandal kings, and ransomed prisoners from northern Italy, which had been ravaged by invasions. Tradition also credits him with the custom of singing the *Gloria in excelsis* at Masses celebrated by bishops.

A pope looking toward Gaul and the East

Symmachus arbitrated the rivalry between the sees of Arles and Vienne. In 513 he confirmed the metropolitan rights of Saint Caesarius of Arles and granted him the pallium, the first known grant of this sign of office to a bishop outside Italy, making him his representative in Gaul and Spain. Toward the East, he supported the bishops faithful to the Council of Chalcedon against the religious policy of Emperor Anastasius I and refused any compromise with the *Henotikon*.

Why pray to Saint Symmachus?

Saint Symmachus has no traditional patronage. His pontificate is no golden legend: it shows a man caught in power struggles where political interests mixed with questions of faith, and where his own supporters did not always have clean hands. Forged legal documents, known as the "Symmachian forgeries," came from his camp.

What the Church has remembered of him is the firmness with which he kept the Church of Rome united, and the generosity he showed to the poor, to captives and to exiles. He is a fitting intercessor for divided communities, for people who are falsely accused, and for refugees and prisoners.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Symmachus in art

The best-known image associated with him is the 7th-century apse mosaic of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura in Rome, where Saint Agnes stands between two popes. One of them, Honorius I, holds a model of the church, the usual sign of a pope who built or restored it; the other is traditionally identified as Symmachus, remembered for his work on the basilica. Like the other popes, he also appears in the series of mosaic medallion portraits in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls.



The apse of Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura, a basilica Symmachus worked on.

Where to pray to Saint Symmachus

His tomb, in the portico of the old Basilica of Saint Peter, has disappeared. He is listed in the Roman Martyrology on July 19. In Rome, the churches linked to his work, Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura on the Via Nomentana and San Martino ai Monti, are good places to remember him.

To entrust a divided community or a falsely accused person to God, you can say the prayer to Saint Symmachus or pray the novena to Saint Symmachus.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Symmachus for the Unity of the Church

No ancient prayer to Saint Symmachus has passed into common use, and his surviving letters are texts of Church government rather than of devotion. Saintspedia therefore offers an original prayer inspired by what history remembers of him: faithfulness to the unity of the Church in the midst of turmoil, and generosity toward the poor, captives and exiles.

Prayer to Saint Symmachus for the unity of the Church

Saint Symmachus, you kept the see of Peter amid accusations, divisions and violence: pray for the Church when she is torn apart. Obtain for her shepherds who are firm in faith and patient in trial.

You were slandered and judged by men: support those who are unjustly accused, and teach me not to condemn my neighbor too quickly.

You clothed exiled bishops, ransomed prisoners and opened houses for the poor: make me attentive to those who have lost everything, refugees, captives and the homeless.

I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Help me to seek peace without giving up the truth, and to serve the unity of the Church wherever the Lord has placed me. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Symmachus is listed in the Roman Martyrology on July 19, the day of his death in 514. You can pray to him especially:

- when a parish, community or family is divided;
- for people who are victims of slander or false accusations;
- for refugees, exiles and prisoners;
- for the pope and the bishops in times of crisis.

A short invocation

For a moment of trial, you can repeat this brief prayer during the day:

> *Saint Symmachus, faithful in the storm, pray for the unity of the Church and for all who are falsely accused.*

To go further, pray the novena to Saint Symmachus, or read the life of Saint Symmachus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Symmachus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Symmachus, pope from 498 to 514, who held firm through a long schism and cared generously for the poor, captives and exiles. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, begin on July 11; it ends on July 19. You can also pray it at any time for a divided community or for someone who is unjustly accused.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps the prayer take shape in daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

You may begin each day with the sign of the cross and this short invocation:

> *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Saint Symmachus, faithful shepherd in a time of division, pray for me and for the unity of the Church. Amen.*

Choose a quiet moment, ideally at the same time each day. Nine days of faithful prayer matter more than long words: a few sincere minutes are enough.

Day 1: From Sardinia to Rome

Symmachus was born in Sardinia, said to be of a pagan family, and was baptized in Rome. He did not come from the great Roman families. God calls whom he wills, from wherever he wills.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for my baptism. Help me to live it fully, wherever I come from and whatever my past.

Today: Find out the date of your baptism, or thank God for it.

Day 2: The service of a deacon

Before becoming pope, Symmachus was archdeacon of Rome, responsible for the service of the Church and of the poor. Authority in the Church begins with service.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came to serve and not to be served. Give me a heart ready to serve.

Today: Do a hidden service for someone at home or at work.

Day 3: A divided Church

On the day of his election, another faction chose a rival pope. For years the clergy of Rome was split. Division in the Church is a deep wound, and it often comes from human ambitions.

Prayer: Lord, heal the divisions in your Church and in my parish. Keep me from feeding conflicts.

Today: Refuse to repeat a criticism or a rumor about someone in your community.

Day 4: Slander

Symmachus was accused of serious faults by powerful enemies. We do not know everything about these accusations, but we know how heavy slander can be to bear, and how quickly it spreads.

Prayer: Saint Symmachus, support those who are falsely accused. Give them peace and let the truth come to light.

Today: Pray for someone who is the target of gossip or accusation.

Day 5: Fear and weakness

Summoned to Rimini, Symmachus was afraid and fled by night. Saints are not people without fear. Like Peter on the night of the Passion, they know weakness, and God does not abandon them.

Prayer: Lord, you know my fears and my flights. Do not let my weakness separate me from you.

Today: Name one of your fears before God, and entrust it to him.

Day 6: Violence in the streets

During the schism, priests were killed in the streets of Rome. When conflicts are not healed, they can turn to violence. Peace is a gift to ask for, and a task to undertake.

Prayer: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Protect those who suffer violence because of hatred and division.

Today: Pray for a city or country torn by violence.

Day 7: Leaving the cause to God

In 502, the bishops declared that they could not judge him and left his case to God. There are situations we cannot untangle ourselves. Then we can place them in the hands of the One who sees hearts.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands what I cannot resolve. Judge with mercy, and give me peace.

Today: Hand over to God a conflict you have not managed to settle.

Day 8: Houses for the poor

Once peace returned, Symmachus built churches but also houses for the poor near the great basilicas. Faith that builds for God also builds for the poor.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes and my hands to the poor around me. May my faith become charity.

Today: Give to a work that houses or feeds people in need.

Day 9: Exiles and captives

Symmachus sent money and clothing to bishops exiled in Africa and Sardinia and ransomed prisoners from northern Italy. Today too, many Christians and others live in exile or in captivity.

Prayer: Saint Symmachus, pray for refugees, for prisoners and for persecuted Christians. May they find help and hope.

Today: Learn about a refugee or prison ministry near you, or support it.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Symmachus, shepherd of the Church in a time of storm, you held firm amid accusations and divisions, and you cared for the poor, the exiled and the captive. Pray for the unity of the Church, for those who are slandered, and for all who have lost their home or their freedom. Obtain for me the intention I have entrusted to you during these nine days, and teach me to seek peace in truth. Amen.*

To continue praying with him, use the prayer to Saint Symmachus, or read his life.

CREDITS

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