

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Telesphorus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 5

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IN BRIEF

Saint Telesphorus

Eighth bishop of Rome around 125-138, the first pope after Saint Peter whose martyrdom is attested.

Feast day	January 5
Born	Terranova da Sibari, Calabria, Italy (according to tradition)
Died	Rome
Era	2nd century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Telesphorus for Courage and Unity

Novena to Saint Telesphorus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Telesphorus

Saint Telesphorus was the eighth bishop of Rome in the list drawn up by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, serving roughly between 125 and 138, under the emperors Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. Almost everything told about him comes from late traditions, but one fact is solidly attested: he died a martyr. He is in fact the first bishop of Rome after Saint Peter whose martyrdom is affirmed by a reliable early source. The old Roman calendar commemorated him on January 5.

Who was Saint Telesphorus?

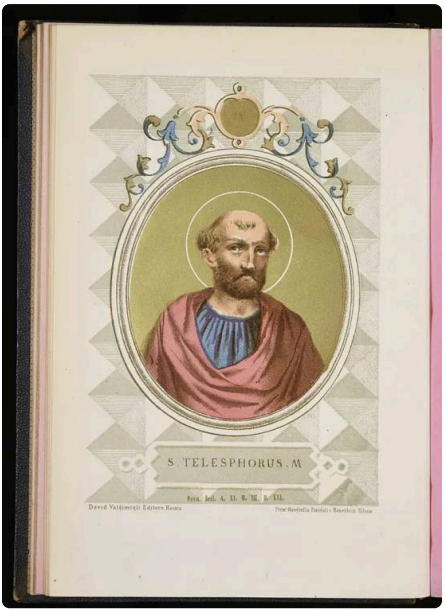
Tradition says he was Greek by origin and places his birth in Calabria, in southern Italy, at Terranova da Sibari. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a chronicle of the popes composed several centuries later, adds that he lived for a long time as a hermit, in Palestine or in Egypt, before coming to Rome. Some writers placed him among the hermits of Mount Carmel, and this is why the Carmelite Order counts him among its patron saints. None of these stories can be verified.

Historians also invite caution about his very title. In the second century, the Church of Rome was probably still led by a college of priests (presbyters) rather than by a single bishop. Irenaeus himself presents him as one of the "presbyters" who presided over the Roman Church before Soter. Whatever the exact shape of that leadership, Telesphorus was a leading figure of the Roman Christian community in his day.

Rome in the time of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius

The years of his ministry fall in a period often described as calm for the Empire. For Christians, however, faith remained a risk. There was no general persecution, but believers could be denounced and condemned at any time,

simply for bearing the name of Christian. Leading the Church of the capital meant being visible, and therefore exposed. Telesphorus accepted that exposure to the end.



Saint Telesphorus, an imaginary 19th-century portrait.

Key dates

- **c. 125-128**: Beginning of his ministry in Rome, under Hadrian, according to historians' estimates.
- **c. 136-138**: Martyrdom in Rome, at the start of the reign of Antoninus Pius.
- **c. 180**: Saint Irenaeus of Lyon records his "glorious martyrdom" in his list of the bishops of Rome.
- **4th century**: Eusebius of Caesarea repeats the information in his *Ecclesiastical History*.

The first attested papal martyrdom after Peter

Around 180, in his treatise *Against Heresies*, Saint Irenaeus of Lyon lists the bishops of Rome from the apostles onward, to show that the teaching of the apostles had been handed down without a break. When he reaches Telesphorus, he adds a single striking detail: he "suffered a glorious martyrdom." Eusebius of Caesarea repeats this in the fourth century.

This matters. Later chronicles readily gave the title of martyr to almost all the early popes. For Telesphorus, by contrast, the claim rests on testimony written barely two generations after his death, by a bishop who had himself spent time in Rome. On the other hand, the circumstances of his death are unknown: we do not know how he was arrested, judged or put to death. Tradition holds that he was buried on the Vatican Hill, near Saint Peter.

Easter, Christmas and the Gloria: what tradition attributes to him

In his time, Rome drew many Christian teachers from across the Mediterranean, among them the Gnostic Valentinus, who came from Egypt. The Church of Rome had to discern between faithful teaching and new speculations.

A letter of Irenaeus preserved by Eusebius gives another precious detail. Telesphorus was among the Roman bishops who celebrated Easter on a Sunday, while remaining in communion with the Churches of Asia Minor that followed a different custom. This breadth of spirit would be recalled later, when the date of Easter came to divide the Churches. Irenaeus held it up as an example: unity does not require every local custom to be identical.

The *Liber Pontificalis* attributes many other decisions to him: the institution of the Lenten fast, of the Mass during the night of Christmas, and the introduction of the *Gloria in excelsis* into the liturgy. Historians doubt these attributions. They mostly reflect the desire of later centuries to connect

familiar liturgical customs to the earliest days of the Church. Still, many Catholics who sing the Gloria at Midnight Mass have heard his name connected with it.



The Vatican necropolis, where tradition places the burial of the first popes.

Why is Saint Telesphorus honored by the Carmelites?

Saint Telesphorus is not invoked as the patron of a profession or a cause, as many later saints are. His particular link is with the Carmelite Order. Because a medieval tradition made him one of the hermits of Mount Carmel before he came to Rome, the Carmelites counted him among their patron saints and spiritual forerunners. Historians cannot confirm this tradition, but it shows how much the Order wished to root its contemplative life in the earliest centuries of the Church.

For Catholics today, he is above all a witness: a shepherd of the Church of Rome who gave his life for Christ, and a pastor who kept communion with Churches whose customs differed from his own.

What his holiness teaches

From Telesphorus we remember above all a witness given to the point of shedding his blood, at a time when being a Christian in Rome remained dangerous. We also remember a way of preserving unity despite differences in practice. His feast has varied from one calendar to another: the old Roman calendar commemorated him on January 5, some sources give January 2, and the Eastern Churches celebrate him on February 22. In Quebec, the municipality of Saint-Télesphore bears his name.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Telesphorus in art

No authentic portrait of Telesphorus exists. Later artists imagined him as a pope in pontifical vestments, as in the series of papal portraits produced in the nineteenth century. When he is shown as a martyr, the palm is the usual sign of martyrdom in Christian art. In Carmelite settings, he may appear among the saints whom the Order regarded as its forerunners.

Where to pray to Saint Telesphorus

Tradition places his tomb on the Vatican Hill, near the tomb of Saint Peter, in the area of the ancient necropolis that lies beneath Saint Peter's Basilica. Pilgrims who visit the basilica and its grottoes pray close to the place associated with the first bishops of Rome. Carmelite communities, who honor him as one of their patrons, also keep his memory.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Telesphorus for Courage and Unity

Saint Telesphorus led the Church of Rome in the second century and, according to Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, "suffered a glorious martyrdom." He is remembered as a faithful witness in dangerous times and as a pastor who kept communion with Churches whose customs differed from those of Rome. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Telesphorus for courage and unity

Saint Telesphorus, shepherd of the Church of Rome and martyr of Christ,
you led your people in an age when faith could cost a person everything,
and you did not turn back when the hour of witness came.

Obtain for me the courage to confess Jesus Christ
at work, at home and among my friends,
without fear and without harshness.

You celebrated Easter with your own Church,
yet you remained at peace with brothers who kept another custom.
Teach me to tell the essential from the secondary,
to love the unity of the Church more than my own preferences,
and to seek peace with those who do not think as I do.

Pray for the Pope and for all bishops,
that they may guard the faith received from the apostles.
Pray for Christians who are persecuted today,
that they may be strengthened, consoled and set free.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

This prayer is fitting on January 5, the day the old Roman calendar commemorated Saint Telesphorus, and during the Christmas season, since tradition links his name with the Mass of Christmas night and the *Gloria*. You can also pray it:

- when you find it hard to speak about your faith;
- for the Pope, for your bishop and for priests;
- for Christians persecuted for their faith in the world today;
- when disagreements over practices or opinions threaten peace in a parish, a community or a family.

A short prayer for persecuted Christians

> *Lord Jesus, you gave Saint Telesphorus the grace to bear witness to you even to the shedding of his blood. Through his intercession, strengthen all who suffer today because they bear your name. Give them courage, protect their families, and bring them peace. Amen.*

You can conclude with the *Gloria*, the ancient hymn of praise that tradition has connected with his name: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will."

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Telesphorus

This novena to Saint Telesphorus is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows what we know of this second-century bishop of Rome: a witness who gave his life for Christ, a pastor who kept unity despite differences, and a man whose memory the Church has linked with Christmas, Lent and the *Gloria*. To end on January 5, the day the old Roman calendar commemorated him, begin it on December 28, in the heart of the Christmas season. You can also pray it at any time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: A name kept by the Church

We know very little about Telesphorus, yet his name has been kept for almost nineteen centuries. Saint Irenaeus of Lyon wrote it down in the list of the bishops of Rome, to show that the faith of the apostles had been handed on without a break. Our lives, too, are part of that long chain of believers.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, help me to thank God for those who handed on the faith to me, and make me a faithful link in that chain. Amen.

Today: Name in prayer the person who first taught you to pray, and thank God for them.

Day 2: A life hidden in God

Tradition says Telesphorus lived for a long time as a hermit before coming to Rome. Whether or not the story is historical, it reminds us that every ministry needs a hidden root of prayer and silence. What is visible depends on what is hidden.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, teach me to make room for silence in my day, so that God may speak to my heart. Amen.

Today: Spend ten minutes in silence before God, without phone or screen.

Day 3: The spirit of Carmel

The Carmelite Order counted Telesphorus among its patrons, because a tradition linked him with the hermits of Mount Carmel. Carmel stands for a life turned toward God in contemplation and in closeness to Mary. Every Christian is called to some part of that inner life.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, pray for all Carmelites and for all contemplatives, and draw me closer to Jesus through Mary. Amen.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary slowly, for those who live a life of prayer in monasteries.

Day 4: A shepherd in a dangerous city

In the Rome of Hadrian, Christians could be denounced and condemned at any time. Telesphorus led the community there all the same. Responsibility in the Church has always meant serving others when it is costly, not only when it is easy.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, pray for the Pope, for our bishop and for all who carry responsibility in the Church. Give them courage and humility. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for your bishop and for the priests of your parish.

Day 5: Discerning true teaching

In his time, many teachers came to Rome, among them the Gnostic Valentinus, who offered new and attractive speculations. The Church had to hold on to the faith received from the apostles. We, too, need discernment amid the many voices that surround us.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, obtain for me a love of the truth and the grace to recognize the voice of Christ among all the voices of the world. Amen.

Today: Read a page of the Gospel or of the Catechism, and keep one sentence in your heart.

Day 6: Unity in diversity

Telesphorus celebrated Easter on a Sunday, while remaining in communion with the Churches of Asia that kept another date. Irenaeus later held up this peace as an example. Unity is not uniformity: it is charity that holds firm in what is essential.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, help me to tell the essential from the secondary, and to keep peace with those whose ways differ from mine. Amen.

Today: Take a step toward someone in your parish or family with whom you disagree.

Day 7: The joy of the Gloria

Tradition credits Telesphorus with introducing the *Gloria in excelsis* into the liturgy and with the Mass of Christmas night. Historians doubt it, but the connection is beautiful: the song of the angels at Bethlehem became the praise of the whole Church. Christian joy begins in adoration.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, teach me to praise God with a joyful heart, in good days and in difficult ones. Amen.

Today: Pray or sing the *Gloria* slowly, thinking about each phrase.

Day 8: Fasting and conversion

The *Liber Pontificalis* also attributes to Telesphorus the institution of the Lenten fast. Whatever its historical value, the tradition reminds us that conversion involves the body as well as the soul. A small sacrifice offered with love frees the heart.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, help me to give up what weighs me down, so that I may be freer to love God and my neighbor. Amen.

Today: Give up one small comfort today and give what you save to someone in need.

Day 9: A glorious martyrdom

Irenaeus summed up the life of Telesphorus in a few words: he "suffered a glorious martyrdom." We do not know how he died, but we know that he did not deny Christ. His glory is not in what he accomplished, but in his faithfulness to the end.

Prayer: Saint Telesphorus, pray for Christians persecuted today, and obtain for me the grace to remain faithful to Christ until my last day. Amen.

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

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Telesphorus, bishop of Rome, the grace to bear witness to your Son even to the shedding of his blood. Through his intercession, strengthen our faith, keep your Church in unity and peace, and support all who suffer for the name of Jesus. Hear also the intention I have entrusted to you during these nine days. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Telesphorus and the prayer to Saint Telesphorus.

CREDITS

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