

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Urban I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Urban I

Bishop of Rome from 222 to 230, successor of Callistus, honored as the patron saint of winegrowers.

Feast day	May 19, May 25
Died	230, Rome, Italy
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (immemorial veneration)
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	winegrowers

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Urban I

Pope Saint Urban I was bishop of Rome from 222 to 230, in the time of Emperor Severus Alexander, a period of relative peace for Christians. The successor of Saint Callistus, he led for eight years a Roman Church still divided by the schism of Hippolytus. Very little is known about him for certain, but tradition linked him to the story of Saint Cecilia and, in wine-growing regions, made him the patron saint of winegrowers. The Roman Martyrology commemorates him on May 19; he is also traditionally honored on May 25.

Who was Saint Urban I?

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, a collection of notices on the popes compiled in the sixth century, Urban was a Roman, the son of a man named Pontianus. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea, writing in the fourth century, reports that after the death of Callistus, Urban received the leadership of the Church of Rome and held it for eight years. The so-called Liberian Catalogue, an ancient list of the bishops of Rome, places his pontificate from 222 to 230. These markers are reliable enough for historians to consider his pontificate one of the first that can be dated with good precision.

Beyond that, the stories told about him were written long after his death and mix memories, embellishments and legends. They need to be read with care.

Key dates

- **222**: He succeeds Callistus I as bishop of Rome, in the year Emperor Elagabalus is murdered and replaced by Severus Alexander.
- **222-230**: Pontificate in a climate of peace for Christians; the schism of Hippolytus continues.
- **230**: Death in Rome, probably of natural causes; Pontian succeeds him.

- **862**: According to tradition, part of his relics is given by Pope Nicholas I to King Charles the Bald; they reach Auxerre, in Burgundy.

A pontificate in a time of peace

The reign of Severus Alexander was favorable to Christians. A Latin historian reports that the emperor "allowed Christians to exist." His mother, Julia Mamaea, took an interest in the Christian faith and met the great theologian Origen in Antioch. Although the legal status of Christians did not change, this calm allowed the Church of Rome to grow: the expansion of the Roman catacombs in the first half of the third century shows that the faithful were becoming ever more numerous.

Yet the Church of Rome remained wounded by division. Hippolytus, a learned priest, had broken with Callistus and led a rival community. Urban seems to have kept to his predecessor's line toward this group. The schism ended only under Pontian, when Hippolytus and the pope, exiled together to Sardinia, were reconciled.

A tradition preserved in the old Roman Breviary attributes to him a teaching on the offerings of the faithful: these gifts, consecrated to God, must serve only the good of the Church, the community and the poor, because they are "the patrimony of the needy." The attribution is uncertain, but it expresses well the early Church's concern for the poorest.

Martyr or confessor?

For centuries Urban was honored as a martyr, beheaded after torture. The accounts of this passion are late and have no historical value. Since he lived in a peaceful period, historians today think he died a natural death in 230.

His burial place has also been debated. The old pilgrim itineraries place the tomb of a bishop Urban in the Catacomb of Praetextatus, on the Appian Way. But the archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi found, in the Catacomb of Saint Callistus, a fragment of a sarcophagus lid bearing the Greek inscription "Urban, bishop." He concluded that the pope lay in Saint Callistus, and the other Urban in Praetextatus. Other historians think the reverse. This uncertainty explains the two dates of his feast: May 19, kept by the Roman Martyrology, and May 25, the traditional date of Saint Urban's Day in France and elsewhere.

Saint Cecilia and the legends

Urban's name is best known through the *Passion of Saint Cecilia*, an ancient but legendary account. In it, a bishop Urban baptizes Valerian, the husband of Saint Cecilia, then his brother Tiburtius, and turns the martyr's house into a church, today's Santa Cecilia in Trastevere. The Middle Ages identified this bishop with the pope, and the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer brought him into *The Canterbury Tales*, in the Second Nun's Tale. The *Liber Pontificalis* also credits him with having silver sacred vessels made for the churches of Rome, a claim historians consider unfounded.

Why is Saint Urban the patron saint of winegrowers?

Part of his relics, which according to tradition reached Auxerre in the ninth century, helped to make Saint Urban a protector of vineyards in Burgundy, Champagne, Lorraine, Alsace and the German-speaking lands. His feast at the end of May falls at the time when vines are still threatened by late frosts, and he is sometimes counted among the "ice saints" of popular weather lore. Confraternities of winegrowers still bear his name, and in many wine villages Saint Urban's Day remains the occasion for a Mass, a procession or a blessing of the vines.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Urban I in art

- **Papal vestments and tiara**: as bishop of Rome, he is shown as a pope.
- **A bunch of grapes or a vine**: the sign of his patronage of winegrowers, especially in statues from wine regions.
- **Justice and Charity**: in the Vatican's Hall of Constantine, he sits between these two virtues.
- **A mosaic medallion**: like every pope, he has his portrait in the series at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

What can we learn from Saint Urban I?

Urban I is one of those bishops of Rome of whom history has kept almost nothing except his name and his faithfulness. He led the Church during a time of peace, which he knew how to put to good use, while bearing the wound of division. His memory reminds us that the life of the Church does not depend only on hours of persecution, but also on ordinary years of patient building. Winegrowers who pray to him in spring entrust to God, with him, the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Urban I or pray the novena to Saint Urban I.

Where to pray to Saint Urban I

- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Saint Callistus, on the Appian Way, where one tradition places his tomb.
- **Rome**: the church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, linked to his name by the legend of Saint Cecilia.
- **Wine regions**: the churches and chapels of Saint Urban in Burgundy, Champagne, Lorraine and Alsace, where Saint Urban's Day is celebrated.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Urban I for Winegrowers and the Harvest

No ancient prayer to Saint Urban I is in common use in English, although in the wine regions of France and Germany his feast has long been marked by Masses and blessings of the vines. Below, Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by what we know of him: a bishop of Rome in a time of peace, attentive to the poor, honored by winegrowers as the protector of their harvest.

A pope of ordinary years

Urban I did not leave writings, and we know little of his deeds. He guided the Church of Rome from 222 to 230, in a time of calm, while a painful division still wounded the community. A tradition attributes to him the teaching that the offerings of the faithful are "the patrimony of the needy." His memory invites us to make good use of peaceful times, and to place both our work and its fruits in God's hands.

Prayer to Saint Urban I for Winegrowers and the Harvest

Saint Urban, shepherd of the Church of Rome, you guided the faithful in a time of peace and bore the pain of division with patience. Obtain for the Church unity, and for our communities a generous heart toward the poor.

Patron of winegrowers, watch over the vines in this season of growth. Protect them from frost, hail and disease, and bless the hands that tend them.

May the fruit of the vine and the work of human hands become, on our altars, the offering of the Eucharist, and at our tables, a sign of joy shared with others.

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

Help me to work faithfully in ordinary days, and to give God thanks for every harvest. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Urban I is commemorated on May 19 in the Roman Martyrology and traditionally honored on May 25, Saint Urban's Day in wine country. You can pray this prayer:

- in late spring, when vines are vulnerable to late frosts;
- at a blessing of the vines or before the grape harvest;
- for winemakers, farmers and all who live from the land;
- for unity in the Church and in divided communities.

A short blessing at table

> *Bless, O Lord, this wine, fruit of the vine and work of human hands. Through the intercession of Saint Urban, may it bring us joy in friendship and remind us to share with those in need. Amen.*

To know him better, read the life of Saint Urban I.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Urban I

This novena to Pope Saint Urban I is an original composition by Saintspedia. Little is known of his life, so these nine days draw on what history and tradition have kept: a bishop of Rome in a time of peace, a Church wounded by division, a concern for the poor, the legend of Saint Cecilia and his patronage of winegrowers. To end on his traditional feast, May 25, begin on May 17. If you prefer to follow the Roman Martyrology, begin on May 11 to end on May 19.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then pray one Our Father, one Hail Mary and one Glory Be. Close with the small act suggested. Winegrowers and farmers may pray it in the vineyard or the field, as an offering of the season's work. Families and parish groups can also pray it together, perhaps ending on the feast with a Mass or a blessing of the vines where that custom survives.

Day 1: A Son of Rome

Urban was a Roman, the son of a man named Pontianus. He grew up in the capital of the empire, among a Christian community that was still small but growing. God called him to serve the Church in his own city.

Prayer: Saint Urban, pray for my city and my parish, and help me to serve God where I have been placed. Amen.

Today: Pray for your parish priest and your local community.

Day 2: Receiving a Charge

After the death of Callistus, Urban received the leadership of the Church of Rome and kept it for eight years. He did not choose this burden; he accepted it as a service.

Prayer: Lord, give me the grace to accept the responsibilities you entrust to me, and to carry them as a service. Amen.

Today: Carry out a duty you have been avoiding, with a willing heart.

Day 3: Using Times of Peace

Under Severus Alexander, Christians enjoyed a rare calm. The Church grew, and the catacombs expanded. Peace is not a time for idleness, but for patient building.

Prayer: Lord, help me to use the calm moments of my life to grow in faith and to build up others. Amen.

Today: Use some free time to read a passage of the Gospel.

Day 4: Bearing Division

The Church of Rome was divided by the schism of Hippolytus. Urban held to the line of his predecessor, and the wound would only heal under Pontian. Unity is a gift we must pray for and work for.

Prayer: Saint Urban, pray for unity in the Church, in my family and among my friends. Heal what is divided. Amen.

Today: Take a step toward someone with whom you are in conflict.

Day 5: The Patrimony of the Needy

Tradition attributes to Urban the teaching that the gifts of the faithful belong to God and must serve the Church and the poor, for they are "the patrimony of the needy."

Prayer: Lord, make me generous with what I have, and remind me that what I give to the poor I give to you. Amen.

Today: Make an offering to your parish or to a charity that serves the poor.

Day 6: Baptism and New Life

In the legend of Saint Cecilia, a bishop Urban baptizes her husband Valerian and his brother Tiburtius. Whatever its history, the story celebrates the joy of baptism and of a family that comes to faith together.

Prayer: Saint Urban, bless families who seek God, and help me to live the grace of my baptism each day. Amen.

Today: Make the Sign of the Cross slowly with holy water, remembering your baptism.

Day 7: A House Becomes a Church

According to the legend, Cecilia's house became a church, today's Santa Cecilia in Trastevere. Every Christian home is called to be a little church, a place of prayer and welcome.

Prayer: Lord, make my home a place of prayer, peace and hospitality. Amen.

Today: Pray together with your household, even briefly, or invite someone to share a meal.

Day 8: The Fruit of the Vine

Winegrowers have long entrusted their vines to Saint Urban as spring frosts threaten. The vine reminds us of Jesus' words: "I am the vine, you are the branches." Without him, we can bear no fruit.

Prayer: Saint Urban, protect the vineyards and all who work the land. Keep me united to Christ, the true vine. Amen.

Today: Pray for farmers and for a good harvest this year.

Day 9: Faithful in Ordinary Days

Urban I died in 230, probably peacefully, after years of quiet faithfulness. History has kept little of him except his name, yet the Church still remembers him. Faithfulness in ordinary days is also holiness.

Prayer: Saint Urban, help me to be faithful in small things, day after day, until the Lord calls me home. Amen.

Today: Thank God for the ordinary blessings of your life, naming at least three.

Closing prayer

Lord God, you gave Saint Urban to your Church as a shepherd in a time of peace and a witness to care for the poor. Through his intercession, grant unity to your people, protect the fruits of the earth, and bless the work of our hands. I place before you the intention of this novena (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Saint Urban I, pray for us.

CREDITS

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