

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Pope Saint Vitalian

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 27

IN BRIEF

Pope Saint Vitalian

Pope from 657 to 672 who kept peace with Byzantium during the monothelite crisis and sent Theodore of Tarsus to England.

Feast day	January 27
Born	c. 600, Segni, Latium (Italy)
Died	January 27, 672, Rome
Era	7th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Vitalian for Unity and Wise Leadership

Novena to Pope Saint Vitalian

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Pope Saint Vitalian

Pope Saint Vitalian led the Church from 657 to 672. Elected only a few years after Pope Saint Martin I had been arrested and exiled by the Byzantine emperor, he governed with great prudence, seeking to restore peace with Constantinople without betraying the faith. His name is linked above all with England, where he sent Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus to Canterbury, a decision that shaped the English Church for centuries. His feast day is January 27.

Who was Saint Vitalian?

Vitalian was born around 600 in Segni, in Latium, south of Rome. After the death of Pope Eugene I on June 2, 657, he was elected and consecrated on July 30, keeping his baptismal name. His swift consecration, which required the emperor's approval, shows that Constantinople wanted to calm tensions.

The situation was heavy. For decades, Rome had opposed monothelitism, a doctrine backed by the Byzantine emperors, which held that Christ had only one will. For condemning it, Martin I had been arrested in 653, put on trial and exiled to Crimea, where he died. His successor and then Vitalian had to move forward with extreme care.

Key dates

- **c. 600**: Born in Segni.
- **July 30, 657**: Consecrated pope.
- **July 663**: Emperor Constans II stays in Rome.
- **664**: The Synod of Whitby, in England, adopts the Roman date of Easter.

- **666**: The emperor removes the Church of Ravenna from the pope's authority.
- **March 26, 668**: Vitalian consecrates Theodore of Tarsus as archbishop of Canterbury.
- **January 27, 672**: Dies in Rome and is buried in Saint Peter's.

Between Rome and Byzantium

Vitalian refrained from openly condemning the imperial edict that forbade debate about the wills of Christ, and he kept up courteous relations with Emperor Constans II and the patriarch of Constantinople. In return, his name was entered in the diptychs, the lists of bishops remembered in the liturgy of Constantinople. This gesture kept the bond between the two Churches alive at a time when it could easily have broken.

In July 663, Constans II came to Rome. The pope welcomed him, accompanied him to Saint Peter's and celebrated Mass in his presence. Yet the emperor left carrying away bronze ornaments from several monuments, including the gilded tiles of the Pantheon. It would be the last visit of a Byzantine emperor to Rome.

Relations remained difficult. In 666, the emperor removed the Church of Ravenna from the authority of the pope, a schism that would only be healed under one of Vitalian's successors, Saint Leo II. Vitalian bore these trials without breaking the communion between East and West.

The pope who looked to England

It was in England that Vitalian's work bore the most fruit. The country was then divided between Roman customs, brought by the successors of Augustine of Canterbury, and Irish customs, which had come with monks from Iona and Lindisfarne such as Saint Aidan. In 664, the Synod of Whitby decided in favor of the Roman date of Easter.

When the archbishop-elect of Canterbury died in Rome in 667, Vitalian chose to replace him with a Greek monk from Tarsus, Theodore, accompanied by the abbot Hadrian. He consecrated him on March 26, 668. Theodore would organize the English Church and, according to Saint Bede the Venerable, make it a Church united around the see of Canterbury. For English-speaking Catholics, Vitalian is in a real sense one of the fathers of the Church in England.



The ruins of Whitby Abbey, where the synod of 664 was held.

What we know and what we do not

A late tradition, reported in the fifteenth century by the humanist Platina, credits him with introducing the organ into the Roman liturgy. There is no firm evidence for this. What is certain is that he supported the *Schola cantorum*

of the Lateran, whose singers came to be called "Vitalians." He is venerated as a saint by the Catholic Church, and the Orthodox Churches also keep his memory.

What does his holiness teach us?

Saint Vitalian was neither a martyr nor a great Doctor of the Church. He was a patient shepherd who preferred careful dialogue to rupture, at a time when imperial power weighed heavily on Rome. He knew how to keep doors open without giving up the truth, and how to look beyond his immediate troubles to the needs of a young Church at the edge of the known world.

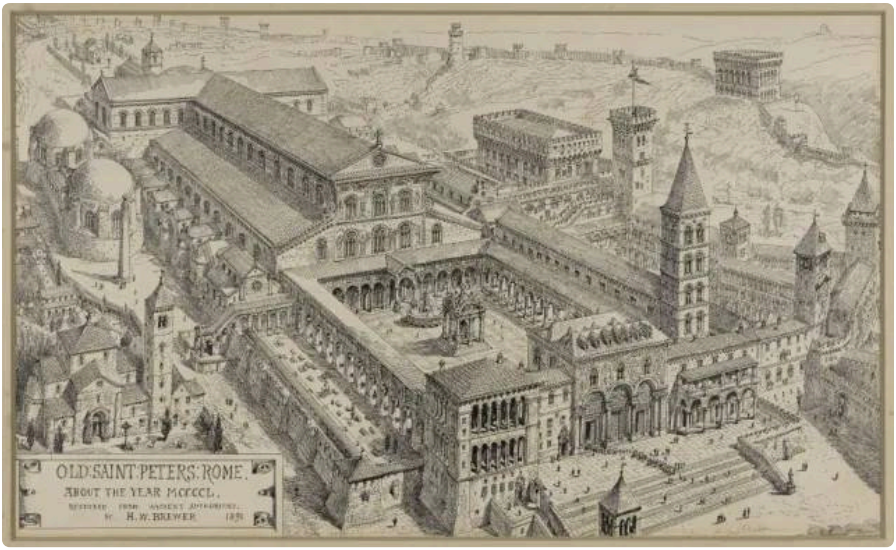
His choice of Theodore also shows a rare breadth of vision: he sent a Greek monk, already advanced in years, to lead the Church of the Anglo-Saxons. The result proved him right.

Why is Saint Vitalian not the patron of a particular cause?

No traditional patronage is attached to Saint Vitalian. He can nevertheless be invoked for those who must govern in difficult times, for dialogue and unity between the Churches of East and West, for diplomats and mediators, and for the Church in England, whose organization he made possible by sending Theodore to Canterbury.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Vitalian in art

Like the other early popes, Vitalian appears in the series of papal portraits in mosaic medallions at the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls in Rome. These are imaginary portraits made in the nineteenth century. He is shown as a pope with a halo; no particular attribute distinguishes him.



Old Saint Peter's Basilica, where Vitalian was buried.

Where to pray to Saint Vitalian

Vitalian was buried in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, in the old basilica that preceded the present building. His hometown of Segni, in Latium, also keeps his memory. In England, the places linked to his decisions, such as Canterbury and Whitby, recall the role he played in the history of the English Church.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Vitalian and the novena to Saint Vitalian, from January 19 to 27.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Vitalian for Unity and Wise Leadership

No traditional prayer to Pope Saint Vitalian has come down to us, and none of his own words has entered popular devotion. We offer here an original prayer by Saintspedia, drawn from what we know of his pontificate: patience in a time of tension, care for unity between East and West, and a far-sighted concern for the young Church in England.

Prayer to Saint Vitalian

Saint Vitalian, shepherd of the Church in troubled times, you chose patience over rupture and dialogue over anger, without betraying the faith. Pray for all who must govern when pressures are heavy and choices are hard.

You kept the bond between Rome and Constantinople when it could have broken: pray for the unity of Christians of East and West, that one day we may share the same table of the Lord.

You looked beyond your own difficulties to the needs of a distant Church, and sent Theodore to Canterbury: pray for the Church in England and in all English-speaking lands, and for those who send and support missionaries.

You encouraged the singers of the Lateran: may our liturgy be beautiful and our song rise to God with joy.

Teach me to be firm in what matters, gentle in the way I speak and wise in the choices I make. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Vitalian is celebrated on January 27, the day of his death in 672. You can pray to him for the pope and bishops, for leaders who must negotiate in tense situations, for Christian unity (his feast falls just after the Week of Prayer for

Christian Unity, January 18 to 25) and for the Church in England. Choir members and church musicians can also remember him, since he supported the Lateran school of singers.

A short prayer for Christian unity

Vitalian's whole pontificate was marked by the effort to keep East and West together. You can end your prayer with these words, inspired by the prayer of Jesus in the Gospel of John (17:21):

> *Lord Jesus, you prayed that all may be one, as you and the Father are one. Through the intercession of Saint Vitalian, heal the divisions among Christians and make us one in faith and love. Amen.*

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

NOVENA

Novena to Pope Saint Vitalian

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint Vitalian. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, January 27, begin it on January 19. The novena then overlaps with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which suits a pope who worked to keep East and West together.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation and say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into daily life. This novena is especially suited to those who carry responsibilities, to those who work for reconciliation and to all who pray for the unity of Christians.

Day 1: Called in a difficult hour

Vitalian became pope in 657, only a few years after Martin I had been arrested and exiled by the emperor. He did not choose an easy time. God often calls us precisely when things are hard.

Prayer: Lord, when you call me to a difficult task, give me the strength to accept it with trust.

Today: Say yes, without complaining, to a task you would rather avoid.

Day 2: Faithful to the truth

Rome had long resisted monothelitism, which claimed that Christ had only one will. Vitalian did not betray this faith in the true humanity and divinity of Christ, even when he chose silence over open conflict.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, true God and true man, you said to the Father: "Not my will but yours be done." Help me to unite my will to yours.

Today: In a decision today, ask yourself sincerely what God wants.

Day 3: The patience of dialogue

Vitalian kept up courteous relations with the emperor and the patriarch of Constantinople. His patience preserved a bond that could have been broken. Dialogue takes more courage than rupture, and it asks us to keep hoping in the other person.

Prayer: Lord, give me patience with those who disagree with me, and keep me from words that wound.

Today: Renew contact with someone with whom relations have become strained.

Day 4: Welcoming a difficult guest

In 663, Vitalian welcomed Emperor Constans II to Rome and celebrated Mass before him. The emperor left with the bronze ornaments of the city's monuments. The pope had welcomed him anyway.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to welcome others generously, even when they disappoint me.

Today: Show kindness to someone who has taken advantage of you.

Day 5: Bearing injustice

In 666 the emperor removed the Church of Ravenna from the pope's authority. Vitalian bore this wound without breaking communion. Some injustices can only be carried in patience and entrusted to God.

Prayer: Lord, give me peace in the face of the injustices I cannot change, and courage to change those I can.

Today: Entrust to God, in a short prayer, a situation that feels unjust.

Day 6: Looking far away

In the midst of his troubles in Rome, Vitalian did not forget a young Church at the edge of the world: England, where the Synod of Whitby had just been held. A good shepherd thinks of the whole flock, including those who live far from the center.

Prayer: Lord, open my heart beyond my own worries to the needs of the wider Church.

Today: Pray for a Church in a country far from your own.



Whitby Abbey, where the synod of 664 was held.

Day 7: Choosing the right person

When the archbishop-elect of Canterbury died in Rome, Vitalian chose Theodore, a Greek monk from Tarsus, and sent him with the abbot Hadrian. It was a bold choice, and it bore lasting fruit.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, guide those who must choose bishops, leaders and teachers, and give them wisdom.

Today: Pray for your bishop and for those who lead your parish.

Day 8: The beauty of song

Vitalian supported the Lateran school of singers, who came to be called "Vitalians." The beauty of the liturgy lifts hearts to God. Care for sacred music is not a luxury: it is a way of honoring the Lord with the best we have.

Prayer: Lord, may our worship be worthy of you, and may our song be a true prayer.

Today: Sing or listen prayerfully to a hymn or piece of sacred music.

Day 9: A quiet holiness

Vitalian died in Rome on January 27, 672, and was buried in Saint Peter's. He was neither a martyr nor a great writer, but a patient and faithful shepherd. His holiness was quiet, and it lasted. Through Theodore and the Church of Canterbury, the fruits of his choices reached generations he would never meet.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Vitalian, give me a patient and faithful heart. Amen.

Today: Pray for the pope and for the unity of the Church.

Closing prayer

Saint Vitalian, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for the pope and the bishops, for unity among Christians of East and West, and for the Church in England. Obtain for us the wisdom to be firm in the faith and gentle in dialogue, and the patience to bear what we cannot change. Amen.

To go further: the life of Pope Saint Vitalian and the prayer to Saint Vitalian.

CREDITS

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