

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Pope Saint Zephyrinus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 20

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IN BRIEF

Pope Saint Zephyrinus

Bishop of Rome from 198 to 217, in the time of the debates on the Trinity and the criticism of Hippolytus.

Feast day	December 20, August 26
Died	217, Rome
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	Caldari

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Zephyrinus for Faithful Pastors

Novena to Saint Zephyrinus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

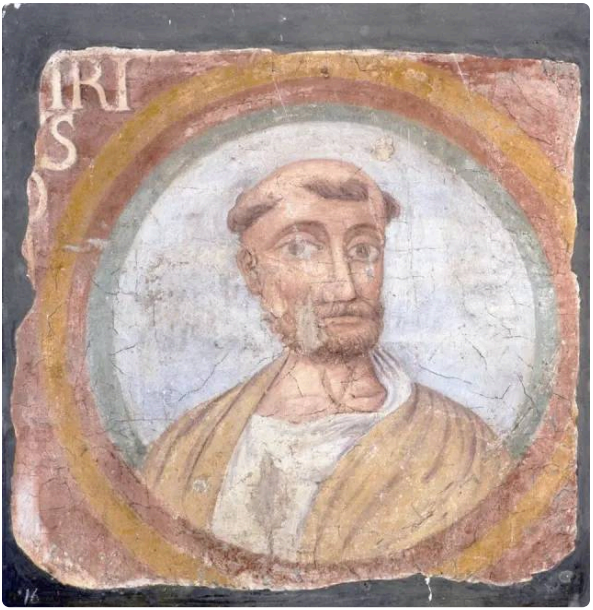
Pope Saint Zephyrinus

Saint Zephyrinus was bishop of Rome for nearly twenty years, from 198 or 199 until his death in 217. His pontificate, under the emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla, was marked by heated debates about the Trinity and by the attacks of a highly educated priest, Hippolytus. He entrusted the deacon Callixtus with the cemetery on the Appian Way that would become the Catacomb of Callixtus. He was traditionally celebrated on August 26; the current Roman Martyrology commemorates him on December 20, the day of his death.

Who was Saint Zephyrinus?

Little is known about him. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a collection of notices on the popes compiled much later, says he was a Roman. He succeeded Saint Victor I at the end of the 2nd century. We know him mainly through two writers: the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, in the following century, and Hippolytus, his contemporary and opponent, who left a very harsh portrait of him.

These two voices do not say the same thing, and the historian must listen to both. Eusebius presents Zephyrinus as a bishop who defended the faith against those who denied the divinity of Christ. Hippolytus describes a weak and uneducated man. Between the two stands a pastor who, for two decades, kept the Church of Rome together in a difficult time.



Saint Zephyrinus in the gallery of papal portraits at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Key dates in the life of Zephyrinus

- **198 or 199**: Succeeds Victor I as bishop of Rome.
- **Early 3rd century**: Origen comes to Rome to see "the most ancient Church."
- **Early 3rd century**: The Roman Christian Gaius points to the "trophies" of the apostles Peter and Paul.
- **217**: Dies in Rome; Callixtus succeeds him.

A pastor judged by his opponent

Hippolytus, a Roman priest who probably came from the East, was the greatest theologian in Rome in his day. In his *Refutation of All Heresies*, he describes Zephyrinus as a simple, uneducated man who was easily swayed and dominated by his deacon Callixtus. Historians read this testimony with

caution: it comes from a bitter rival who would go into schism after Zephyrinus's death. What it mainly shows is a bishop who was more a pastor than an intellectual, concerned to protect the simple faith of ordinary believers.

The debate concerned how to express at the same time the oneness of God and the divinity of Christ. Zephyrinus refused to decide between the followers of Sabellius, who blurred the distinction between the Father and the Son, and Hippolytus. According to Hippolytus, he simply stated that he knew only one God, Christ Jesus, and that it was the Son, not the Father, who died. Eusebius, for his part, records that he fought the disciples of Theodotus, who saw in Jesus only a man.

These discussions may seem remote, but they prepared the language the Church would later use in the Creed. In the early 3rd century the words "person" and "nature" had not yet been fixed. Bishops like Zephyrinus had to hold together, without a finished vocabulary, two truths the faithful already professed: there is only one God, and Jesus is truly God. Faced with brilliant but divided theologians, he chose to hold on to the faith received rather than to a system.

The time of the cemetery of Callixtus

As soon as he was elected, Zephyrinus made Callixtus, a former slave, his deacon and trusted assistant. He entrusted him with the management of the cemetery on the Appian Way where the bishops of Rome of the 3rd century would be buried, and which still bears the name of the Catacomb of Callixtus. Choosing a former slave for such a responsibility says something about the Church of that time, where social rank did not decide one's place in the community.

It was also under Zephyrinus that a Roman Christian named Gaius wrote to a Montanist opponent that he could show him the "trophies" of the apostles, on the Vatican hill and on the road to Ostia. This text, preserved by Eusebius, is

the oldest written testimony to the tombs of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Rome. Pilgrims who visit Saint Peter's Basilica and the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls today walk in the footsteps of the Christians of his time.

The great theologian Origen also came to Rome in these years, wishing, as he said, to see "the most ancient Church." The Church Zephyrinus led was already a point of reference for Christians of the whole world.

What do we know about his death and his cult?

Zephyrinus died in 217; the sources do not say how. He was buried near the cemetery of Callixtus. He was long given the title of martyr, but nothing indicates that he was put to death, and the title has been dropped. He remains honored as a saint, especially in Caldari, in the Abruzzo region of Italy, of which he is the patron.



The Catacomb of Callixtus, on the Appian Way.

Why is Saint Zephyrinus remembered today?

Zephyrinus has no universal patronage; he is the local patron of Caldari. He led the Church of Rome for twenty years, between persecution and quarrels among intellectuals. His reign coincided with the persecution under Septimius Severus, during which Saints Perpetua and Felicity were martyred in Africa. Criticized for his simplicity, he kept what matters most: faith in one God and in Jesus, the true Son of God, who died for us. He reminds us that a pastor does not need to be the most brilliant in order to be faithful.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Zephyrinus in art

Like the other early popes, Zephyrinus is shown in papal vestments. His best-known image is the painted medallion in the series of papal portraits that runs around the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls in Rome. In Caldari he is honored with a processional statue that shows him in pontifical dress.

Where to pray to Saint Zephyrinus

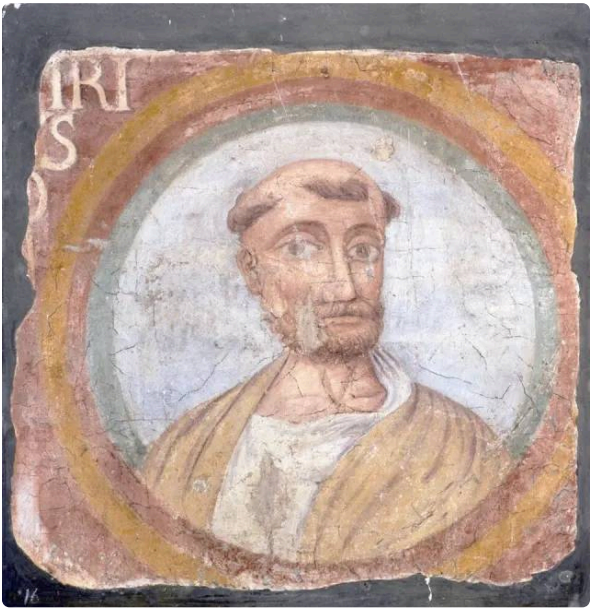
- **Rome, Appian Way**: the Catacomb of Callixtus, the cemetery he entrusted to his deacon, near which he was buried.
- **Caldari, Abruzzo, Italy**: the village of which he is the patron.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Zephyrinus and the novena to Saint Zephyrinus.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Zephyrinus for Faithful Pastors

No ancient prayer to Saint Zephyrinus has come down to us, and he left no writings. What we know of him is the faith he held on to in a time of fierce debate: one God, and Jesus Christ, the Son, who died for us. Below you will find an original prayer to Saint Zephyrinus, followed by a short ancient doxology that expresses the faith of the Church in his day.



Saint Zephyrinus, papal portrait at Saint Paul Outside the Walls.

Prayer to Saint Zephyrinus for faithful pastors

> *Saint Zephyrinus, shepherd of the Church of Rome for twenty years, you were criticized and misunderstood, yet you remained faithful. Pray for the pope, for our bishops and for all pastors, especially those who are judged harshly.*
>
> *In a time of quarrels and clever arguments, you held fast to the simple faith of your people: one God, and Jesus, the Son, who died for us. Keep me in that faith, and protect me from pride in what I know.*
>
> *You entrusted a former slave with the care of the Christian dead. Teach me to see the dignity of every person and to honor those who have gone before us in faith.*
>
> *Obtain for me patience under criticism, humility in success and perseverance in the daily work God gives me. 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.

An ancient doxology

> *"Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."*

Source: the traditional *Gloria Patri*, the short hymn of praise to the Trinity prayed by Christians for many centuries, in its classic English form. The Trinitarian faith it proclaims is the faith that the Church of Zephyrinus was struggling to put into words.

When to pray this prayer

The Roman Martyrology commemorates Saint Zephyrinus on December 20, the day of his death; he was traditionally celebrated on August 26, the date still kept in some places. You can pray to him for the pope and the bishops, for a priest who is going through criticism, for anyone who feels judged by more brilliant people, and for those who care for cemeteries and for the dead.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Zephyrinus, from December 11 to 19, and read the life of Saint Zephyrinus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Zephyrinus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint Zephyrinus. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish on the eve of his commemoration on December 20, begin on December 11, during Advent. If you follow the older date of August 26, pray it from August 17 to 25. It can also be prayed at any time for the pope, for bishops and for priests.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The Glory Be has a particular meaning here: Zephyrinus led the Church at a time when Christians were seeking the right words to speak of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: *Lord, you gave your Church a patient shepherd in Saint Zephyrinus. Through his intercession, keep me faithful to the faith I have received, and hear the prayer I bring you today. Amen.*

Little is known about Zephyrinus. This novena does not invent what the sources do not say; it draws on the few facts we have and lets them speak to our lives.



The Catacomb of Callixtus, on the Appian Way.

Day 1: A Roman bishop

Zephyrinus was probably a Roman, chosen to succeed Victor I at the end of the 2nd century. He served the Church of his own city for nearly twenty years.

Prayer: Lord, bless my parish and my diocese, and all who serve them.

Today: Pray for your bishop by name.

Day 2: Twenty years of faithfulness

His pontificate lasted from 198 or 199 to 217. Faithfulness is not a single act but a long road, walked day after day.

Prayer: Lord, give me perseverance in the commitments I have made.

Today: Renew a commitment you have let slip.

Day 3: Judged by others

Hippolytus described Zephyrinus as simple and uneducated. Zephyrinus bore this criticism and went on serving. God does not judge as people judge.

Prayer: Lord, give me peace when I am criticized, and keep me from judging others harshly.

Today: Refrain from a critical remark about someone.

Day 4: One God

In the debates of his time, Zephyrinus kept repeating that he knew only one God. Before all explanations, there is the faith of the first commandment.

Prayer: Lord, you alone are God. Take the first place in my heart.

Today: Identify one thing that takes too much place in your life and give it back to God.

Day 5: The Son who died for us

Zephyrinus insisted that it was the Son who died. The heart of our faith is not an idea but a person, Jesus, who gave his life for us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, true Son of God, thank you for dying for me.

Today: Spend a few minutes before a crucifix.

Day 6: Trusting a former slave

Zephyrinus made Callixtus, a former slave, his deacon and trusted assistant. In the Church, a person's past does not close the door to service.

Prayer: Lord, help me to see the dignity of every person and to give others a second chance.

Today: Trust someone with a task, especially someone who is often overlooked.

Day 7: Caring for the dead

Under Zephyrinus, the cemetery on the Appian Way was organized for the Christian community. Burying the dead with respect is a work of mercy.

Prayer: Lord, welcome into your light all who have died, especially those I have loved.

Today: Visit a grave or pray for someone who has died.

Day 8: The tombs of the apostles

In his time, the Roman Christian Gaius pointed to the "trophies" of Peter and Paul in Rome. The Church Zephyrinus led was built on the witness of the apostles.

Prayer: Lord, keep your Church faithful to the faith of the apostles.

Today: Read a passage from the Acts of the Apostles.

Day 9: A quiet holiness

Zephyrinus died in 217; the sources do not say how. He was not a famous writer or a martyr, only a faithful pastor. His holiness is hidden, like that of so many.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Zephyrinus, help me to be faithful in small things. Amen.

Today: Do a hidden service without telling anyone.

Closing prayer

On the last evening, take a moment to look back over these nine days. Thank God for what you have received, even if your intention has not yet been answered as you hoped, and entrust the future to him with confidence.

Saint Zephyrinus, faithful shepherd, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have brought before you. Pray for the pope, for bishops and for priests, and for all who serve without being recognized. Obtain for us a simple, firm faith and a patient heart. Amen.

Praying this novena in the days before Christmas gives it a special light. Zephyrinus defended the faith that Jesus is truly the Son of God; at Christmas the Church celebrates that same Son, born of the Virgin Mary. As you end these nine days, you might ask for the grace to welcome Christ with the simple, steady faith of this early bishop of Rome, who preferred fidelity to brilliance.

To go further, read the life of Saint Zephyrinus and the prayer to Saint Zephyrinus.

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