

14. October 2025
THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS
"Saint Callistus: From Slave to Pope"

Today, we celebrate the memory of an early-century pope whose story is very moving: Pope Callixtus I (*160 †222/223).

Much of his life remains unknown, and his implacable enemies are the main source of information about him, so some details may be biased by their hostility.

It is believed that Callistus was the son of a slave. Toward the end of the second century, a Christian named Carpophilus collected money to help orphans and widows and entrusted the administration of that money to his slave Callistus. However, Callistus lost all the money, fled out of fear, and was recaptured. He was returned to his master. Although he was later released again, Callistus caused a controversy in a synagogue, for which he was arrested and sent to the mines of Sardinia. At the request of the empress, who sympathized with the Christians, Callistus was released once more. The Christians then entrusted Callistus to the care of Pope Victor while he recovered from an illness. When Pope Victor died around 199, Callistus continued to serve his successor, Pope Zephyrinus, who ordained him a deacon.

At that time, deacons played a very important role. Callistus was appointed administrator of enormous underground burial facilities—the catacombs. To this day, they are known as the "Catacombs of Callixtus." When Pope Zephyrinus died, Callistus was elected pope.

His main opponents were Hippolytus, a Roman priest who proclaimed himself antipope, and Tertullian, an initially orthodox writer and theologian who eventually embraced Montanist heresy.

Pope Callistus I, a great evangelist who led many people to the true faith, was accused of being too lenient with sinners. At that time, there was a debate about how to handle Christians who had sinned publicly but then repented. This could include people who had joined a heretical sect, committed adultery, or submitted to the emperor's edicts requiring worship of him and the Roman gods. While Hippolytus and other Christians argued that certain sins were unforgivable, Callistus believed that confession allowed the repentant sinner to be reintegrated into the Church. He also permitted valid marriages between Roman nobles and slaves.

His opponents accused him of tolerating sin—an accusation that, in reality, does not correspond to the truth. He defended the idea that God's mercy could be applied to all sins, no matter how serious. Thankfully, this understanding has prevailed throughout the Church to this day.

Callistus introduced the custom of fasting on Ash Wednesday and three Saturdays, and he was the first to paint churches. He strove to increase the influence of the Bishop of Rome over the entire Church, even though primacy had not yet been defined.

His story shows how God used his time as a slave and the misery he experienced to open his heart to others' needs. He was aware not only of material need but also of the spiritual misery of people living in sin. This is an important aspect of true love. Sacred Scripture repeatedly testifies that God wants to have mercy on people and forgive their sins if they repent. The sinner is in a deplorable state! In this sense, Pope Callixtus's emphasis on the value of penance and God's mercy was a great merit.

In the present day, when there is much talk of mercy in the Church, it must be clear that mercy and the relativization of sin can never go hand in hand. Only when man converts and repents of his evil deeds can mercy reach his heart and transform him.

Callistus understood this prior to his ministry in the Church and became a “merciful pope.” He ultimately crowned his service with martyrdom. During the persecution of Christians under Emperor Alexander Severus, a Roman priest named Calepodius was tortured and thrown into the Tiber with a millstone tied around his neck. Pope Callixtus found his body and buried it in a catacomb. According to tradition, Calepodius appeared to Callistus and prophesied that he would soon suffer martyrdom as well. Soon after, Callistus was arrested, starved for a week, tortured, and thrown into a deep well with a stone tied around his neck. His body was later recovered and buried next to Calepodius'. In the ninth century, the two were transferred to the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere.

Saint Callistus, pray for us and for the Church, that in all mercy its fervent proclamation may ever be infused with unchanging truth.

Meditation on today's reading: <https://en.elijamission.net/2021/10/12/>