

St. Callistus I

Feast: October 14



Facts

Feast Day: October 14

Patron: of Cemetery workers

Imagine that your biography was written by an enemy of yours. And that its information was all anyone would have not only for the rest of your life but for centuries to come. You would never be able to refute it -- and even if you could no one would believe you because your accuser was a saint.

That is the problem we face with Pope Callistus I who died about 222. The only story of his life we have is from someone who hated him and what he stood for, an author identified as Saint Hippolytus, a rival candidate for the chair of Peter. What had made Hippolytus so angry? Hippolytus was very strict and rigid in his adherence to rules and regulations. The early Church had been very rough on those who committed sins of adultery, murder, and fornication. Hippolytus was enraged by the mercy that Callistus showed to these repentant sinners, allowing them back into communion of the Church after they had performed public penance. Callistus' mercy was also matched by his desire for equality among Church members, manifested by his acceptance of marriages between free people and slaves. Hippolytus saw all of this as a degradation of the Church, a

submission to lust and licentiousness that reflected not mercy and holiness in Callistus but perversion and fraud.

Trying to weed out the venom to find the facts of Callistus' life in Hippolytus' account, we learn that Callistus himself was a slave (something that probably did not endear him to class-conscious Hippolytus). His master, Carporphorus made him manager of a bank in the Publica Piscina sector of Rome where Callistus took in the money of other Christians. The bank failed -- according to Hippolytus because Callistus spent the money on his own pleasure-seeking. It seems unlikely that Carporphorus would trust his good name and his fellow Christians' savings to someone that unreliable.

Whatever the reason, Callistus fled the city by ship in order to escape punishment. When his master caught up with him, Callistus jumped into the sea (according to Hippolytus, in order to commit suicide). After Callistus was rescued he was brought back to Rome, put on trial, and sentenced to a cruel punishment -- forced labor on the treadmill. Carporphorus took pity on his former slave and manager and Callistus won his release by convincing him he could get some of the money back from investors. (This seems to indicate, in spite of Hippolytus' statements, that the money was not squandered but lent or invested unwisely.) Callistus' methods had not improved with desperation and when he disrupted a synagogue by shouting for money, he was arrested and sentenced again.

This time he was sent to the mines. Other Christians who had been sentenced there because of their religion were released by negotiations between the emperor and the Pope (with the help of the emperor's mistress who was friendly toward Christians). Callistus accidentally wound up on the same list with the persecuted brothers and sisters. (Hippolytus reports that this was through extortion and conniving on Callistus' part.) Apparently, everyone, including the Pope, realized Callistus did not deserve his new freedom but unwilling to carry the case further the Pope gave Callistus an income and situation -- away from Rome. (Once again, this is a point for suspecting Hippolytus' account. If Callistus was so despicable and untrustworthy why provide him with an income and a situation? Leaving him free out of pity is one thing, but giving money to a convicted criminal and slave is another. There must have been more to the story.)

About nine or ten years later, the new pope Zephyrinus recalled Callistus to Rome. Zephyrinus was good-hearted and well-meaning but had no understanding of theology. This was disastrous in a time when heretical beliefs were springing up everywhere. One minute Zephyrinus would endorse a belief he

thought orthodox and the next he would embrace the opposite statement. Callistus soon made his value known, guiding Zephyrinus through theology to what he saw as orthodoxy. (Needless to say it was not what Hippolytus felt was orthodox enough.) To a certain extent, according to Hippolytus, Callistus was the power behind the Church before he even assumed the bishopric of Rome.

When Zephyrinus died in 219, Callistus was proclaimed pope over the protests of his rival candidate Hippolytus. He seemed to have as strong a hatred of heresy as Hippolytus, however, because he banished one of the heretics named Sabellius.

Callistus came to power during a crucial time of the Church. Was it going to hang on to the rigid rules of previous years and limit itself to those who were already saints or was it going to embrace sinners as Christ commanded? Was its mission only to a few holy ones or to the whole world, to the healthy or to the sick? We can understand Hippolytus' fear -- that hypocritical penitents would use the Church and weaken it in the time when they faced persecution. But Callistus chose to trust God's mercy and love and opened the doors. By choosing Christ's mission, he chose to spread the Gospel to all.

Pope Callistus is listed as a martyr but we have no record of how he was martyred or by whom. There were no official persecutions at the time, but he may well have been killed in riots against Christians.

As sad as it is to realize that the only story we have of his life is by an enemy, it is glorious to see in it the fact that the Church is large enough not only to embrace sinners and saints, but to proclaim two people saints who hold such wildly opposing views and to elect a slave and an alleged ex-convict to guide the whole Church. There's hope for all of us then!

<https://www.catholic.org/>