

## 12// HERE FOLLOWETH THE LIFE OF ST. SILVESTER

**S**ilvester was son of one Justa and was learned and taught of a priest named Cyrinus, which did marvellously great alms and made hospitalities. It happed that he received a Christian man into his house named Timothy, who no man would receive for the persecution of tyrants, wherefore the said Timothy suffered death and passion after that year whilst he preached justly the faith of Jesu Christ.

### ST. SILVESTER IS IMPRISONED BY TARQUINIUS

It was so that the prefect Tarquinius supposed that Timothy had had great plenty of riches, which he demanded of Silvester, threatening him to the death but if he delivered them to him. And when he found certainly that Timothy had no great riches, he commanded to St. Silvester to make sacrifice to the idols, and if he did not he would make him suffer divers torments.

*Silvester is said of sile or sol which is light, and of terra the earth, as who saith the light of the earth, that is of the church. Or Silvester is said of silvas and of trahens, that is to say he was drawing wild men and hard unto the faith. Or as it is said in glossario, Silvester is to say green, that is to wit, green in contemplation of heavenly things, and a toiler in labouring himself; he was umbrous or shadowous. That is to say he was cold and refrigate from all concupiscence of the flesh, full of boughs among the trees of heaven. Eusebius of Cæsarea compiled his legend, which the blessed Blasius in the counsel of seventy bishops recordeth, like as it is had in the decree.*

St. Silvester answered: False, evil man, thou shalt die this night, and shalt have torments that ever shall endure, and thou shalt know, whether thou wilt or not, that he whom we worship is very God.

Then St. Silvester was put in prison, and the provost went to dinner. Now it happed that as he ate, a bone of a fish turned in his throat and stuck fast, so that he could neither have it down ne up, and at midnight died like as St. Silvester had said, and then St. Silvester was delivered out of prison.

### HE IS CHOSEN BISHOP OF ROME

**H**e was so gracious that all Christian men and paynims loved him, for he was fair like an Hangel to look on, a fair speaker, whole of body, holy in work, good in counsel, patient and charitable, and firmly established in the faith. He had in writing the names of all the widows and orphans that were poor, and to them he administered their necessity. He had a custom to fast all Fridays and Saturdays. And it was so that Melchiades, the bishop of Rome, died, and all the people chose St. Silvester for to be the high Bishop of Rome, which sore against his will was made pope. He instituted for to be fasted Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, and the Thursday for to be hallowed as Sunday.

## THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE ESTABLISHES CHRISTIANITY IN ROME

Now it happened that the Emperor Constantine did do slay all the Christian men over all where he could find them, and for this cause St. Silvester fled out of the town with his clerks and hid him in a mountain. And for the cruelty of Constantine God sent him such a sickness that he became leprosy and measles [afflicted by leprosy and a pox], and by the counsel of his physicians he got three thousand young children for to have cut their throats, for to have their blood in a bath all hot, and thereby he might be healed of his leprosy.

And when he should ascend into his chariot for to go to the place where he should be bathed, the mothers of the children came crying and braying for sorrow of their children. And when he understood that they were mothers of the children, he had great pity on them and said to his knights and them that were about him: The dignity of the empire of Rome is brought forth of the fountain of pity, the which hath established by decree that who that slayeth a child in battle shall have his head smitten off. Then should it be great cruelty to us for to do to ours such thing as we defend [forbid] to strange nations, for so should cruelty surmount us. It is better that we leave cruelty and that pity surmount us, and therefore me seemeth better to save the lives of these innocents, than by their death I should have again my health, of the which we be not yet certain. Ne we may recover nothing for to slay them, for if so were that I should thereby have health, that should be a cruel health that should be bought with the death of so many innocents.

Then he commanded to render and deliver again to the mothers their children, and gave to every each of them a good gift, and thus made them return to their houses with great joy, from whence they departed with great sorrow, and he himself returned again in his chariot unto his palace.

Now it happened that, the night after, St. Peter and St. Paul appeared to this Emperor Constantine, saying to him: Because thou hast had horror to shed and spill the blood of innocents, our Lord Jesu Christ hath had pity on thee, and commandeth thee to send unto such a mountain where Silvester is hid with his clerks, and say to him that thou comest for to be baptized of him and thou shalt be healed of thy malady.

And when he was awaked he did do call his knights [had his knights summoned] and commanded them to go to that mountain and bring the Pope Silvester to him courteously and fair, for to speak with him.

When St. Silvester saw from far the knights come to him, he supposed they sought him for to be martyred, and began to say to his clerks that they should be firm and stable in the faith for to suffer martyrdom. When the knights came to him they said to him much courteously that Constantine sent for him, and prayed him that he would come and speak with him.

And forthwith he came, and when they had intersaluted each other, Constantine told to him his vision. And when Silvester demanded of him what men they were that so appeared to him, the emperor wist not [did not know] he could not name them. St. Silvester opened a book wherein the images of St. Peter and St. Paul were portrayed, and demanded of him if th

{Here is a lacuna in the text. Looking at the pictures, the emperor identifies the saints as the ones who had appeared to him. After a week of fasting, he is baptized by Silvester. A great light attends this event, Constantine has a vision of Christ, and his leprosy is cured. He then issues seven decrees on seven successive days:

1. In Rome, Christ is to be worshiped as truly divine.
2. Blasphemy against Christ will be punished.
3. Anyone wronging a Christian will lose half his property.
4. The Bishop of Rome is head of all the bishops.
5. Anyone seeking sanctuary in a church is immune from harm.
6. No one can build a church in a city without permission of that city's } bishop.
7. The seventh, that the dime and tenth part of the possessions should be given to the church.

After this the emperor came to St. Peter's church and confessed meekly all his sins tofore all people, and what wrong he had done to Christian men, and made to dig and cast out to make the foundements for the churches, and bare on his shoulders twelve hods or baskets full of earth.

### **THE DEBATE BETWEEN CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH SCHOLARS**

**W**hen Helen, the mother of Constantine, dwelling in Bethany, heard say that the emperor was become Christian, she sent to him a letter, in which she praised much her son of this that he had renounced the false idols, but she blamed him much that he had renounced the law of the Jews, and worshipped a man crucified. Then Constantine remanded to his mother that she should assemble the greatest masters of the Jews, and he should assemble the greatest masters of the Christian men, to the end that they might dispute and know which was the truest law.

Then Helen assembled twelve masters which she brought with her, which were the wisest that they might find in that law, and St. Silvester and his clerks were of that other party. Then the emperor ordained two paynims [pagans], gentiles, to be their judges, of whom that one was named Crato, and that other Zenophilus, which were proved wise and expert, and they to give the sentence, and be judge of the disputation.

Then began one of the masters of the Jews for to maintain and dispute his law, and St. Silvester and his clerks answered to his disputation, and to them all, always concluding them by scripture. The judges which were true and just, held more of the party of St. Silvester than of the Jews.

Then said one of the masters of the Jews named Zambry, I marvel, said he, that ye be so wise and incline you to their words, let us leave all these words and go we to the effect of the deeds.

Then he did do come [summoned] a cruel bull, and said a word in his ear, and anon the bull died. Then the people were all against Silvester.

Then said Silvester, believe not thou that he hath named in the ear the name of Jesu Christ, but the name of some devil, know ye verily it is no great strength to slay a bull, for a man, or a lion, or a serpent may well slay him, but it is great virtue to raise him again to life, then if he may not raise him it is by the devil. And if he may raise him again to life, I shall believe that he is dead by the power of God.

And when the judges heard this, they said to Zambry, that had slain the bull, that he should raise him again. Then he answered that if Sylvester might raise him in the name of Jesus of Galilee his master, then he would believe in him, and thereto bound them all the Jews that were there.

And St. Silvester first made his orisons and prayers to our Lord, and sith came to the bull and said to him in his ear: Thou cursed creature that art entered into this bull and hast slain him, go out in the name of Jesu Christ, in whose name I command thee, bull: arise thou up and go thou with the other beasts debonairly [meekly].

And anon the bull arose and went forth softly. Then the queen and the judges, which were paynims, were converted to the faith.

### **ST. SILVESTER BINDS THE DRAGON**

**I**n this time it happed that there was at Rome a dragon in a pit, which every day slew with his breath more than three hundred men. Then came the bishops of the idols unto the emperor and said unto him: O thou most holy emperor, sith [since] the time that thou hast received Christian faith the dragon which is in yonder fosse [ditch] or pit slayeth every day with his breath more than three hundred men.

Then sent the emperor for St. Silvester and asked counsel of him of this matter. St. Silvester answered that by the might of God he promised to make him cease of his hurt and blesure of [make him stop hurting and wounding] this people. Then St. Silvester put himself to prayer.

And St. Peter appeared to him and said: Go surely to the dragon and the two priests that be with thee take in thy company, and when thou shalt come to him thou shalt say to him in this manner: “Our Lord Jesu Christ which was born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, buried and arose, and now sitteth on the right side of the Father, this is he that shall come to deem and judge the living and the dead, I commend thee Sathanas that thou abide him in this place till he come.” Then thou shalt bind his mouth with a thread, and seal it with thy seal, wherein is the imprint of the cross. Then thou and the two priests shall come to me whole and safe, and such bread as I shall make ready for you ye shall eat.

Thus as St. Peter had said, St. Silvester did. And when he came to the pit, he descended down one hundred and fifty steps, bearing with him two lanterns, and found the dragon, and said the words that St. Peter had said to him, and bound his mouth with the thread, and sealed it, and after returned, and as he came upward again he met with two enchanterers which followed him for to see if he descended, which were almost dead of the stench of the dragon, whom he brought

with him whole and sound, which anon were baptized, with a great multitude of people with them. Thus was the city of Rome delivered from double death, that was from the culture [worship] and worshipping of false idols, and from the venom of the dragon.

At the last when St. Silvester approached towards his death, he called to him the clergy and admonished them to have charity, and that they should diligently govern their churches, and keep their flock from the wolves. And after the year of the incarnation of our Lord three hundred and twenty, he departed out of this world and slept in our Lord, etc.

---

The [iconography of St. Silvester](#) is available at the [Christian iconography website](#).

For other saints, see the [index to this Golden Legend website](#).

Scanned by Robert Blackmon. [bob\\_blackmon@mindspring.com](mailto:bob_blackmon@mindspring.com).

This text was taken from the [Internet Medieval Source Book](#). The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts related to medieval and Byzantine history.

Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use. If you do reduplicate the document, indicate the source. No permission is granted for commercial use.

E-text © Paul Halsall, September 2000  
[halsall@fordham.edu](mailto:halsall@fordham.edu)

Reformatted with paragraphs, rubrics, italics, and explanatory insertions by Richard Stracke, [rstracke@aug.edu](mailto:rstracke@aug.edu)