

# Is Phoebe a "Saint"?

by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

Some people have recently asked:

**Is Phoebe, the woman mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:1, considered a “saint” by the Church?**

The answer is definitely **YES**, at least for Roman Catholics, as well as for Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Lutherans,<sup>(1)</sup> and possibly some other Christians.

On the one hand, she is not currently included in the “Universal Calendar” of the Catholic Church, meaning that her commemoration is not prescribed for Masses and other liturgical celebrations (such as the Liturgy of the Hours) of the Church world-wide, and thus her name may not be familiar to many people.

On the other hand, she has been included for centuries in the “Roman Martyrology,” the official book of the Catholic Church that lists thousands of saints, some for each day of the calendar year. (See <https://archive.org/details/MartRom2004/page/494/mode/2up> for the 2004 edition.)

Phoebe is the second of eighteen entries for **September 3**. Her entry reads,

*2. Commemoratio sanctae Phoebes, ancillae Domini inter fideles Cenchrēnses, quae beato Paulo Apóstolo multisque ástitit, ipso testante in epístula ad Romános.*

[Translation: “Commemoration of **Saint** Phoebe, handmaid of the Lord among the faithful of Cenchrenia, who stood by blessed Paul the Apostle and many others, as he testified in his Epistle to the Romans.”]

So, she has clearly been honored with the title “Saint” for many centuries, and there is no reason to doubt or dispute this fact.

Some people might object that she was never “officially canonized” by the Church. That may be true, but it is also true for most of the saints of the first millennium, including all the biblical figures that we indisputably venerate as saints. One must recall that the formal processes of “canonization” (a Pope officially declaring someone as a saint) began only in the 10th Century.

## What does the Bible say about Phoebe?

In the concluding chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Christian community in Rome, Phoebe<sup>(2)</sup> is not only the first person Paul names, but he talks about her very highly and positively:

“I commend to you **Phoebe** our **sister** (Gk. *adelphē*), who is also a **minister of the church** (*diakonos tēs ekklēσίας*) at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the **holy ones** (*hagioi*), and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a **benefactor** (*prostatis*) to many and to me as well.” (Rom 16:1-2, NAB).



Early Christians often referred to each other as “brothers and sisters” and as “holy ones, saints”; so Paul’s use of these terms here does not tell us much about Phoebe in particular. Cenchreae was one of the two ports of the ancient city of Corinth, where Paul almost certainly was when he wrote to the Christians in Rome (see 1 Cor 16:5-7; Rom 16:23; Acts 20:2-3).

Paul’s mentioning Phoebe first in Romans 16 (before greetings to and from dozens of other people) indicates that she most likely was the person who delivered his letter to Rome, thus also serving as his representative to the Christians there. Moreover, Paul’s reference to Phoebe is especially prominent in that he calls her a *diakonos* (“minister; servant”) and a *prostatis* (“patron, benefactor”).

Does this mean Phoebe was a “deacon”? Here we should be careful not to be anachronistic, since the Church’s understanding of ordained ministries developed only gradually over the first few centuries. In the Gospels, Jesus asks **everyone** who follows him to be a “servant” (*diakonos*; Matt 20:26; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 12:26).<sup>(3)</sup>

The related Greek words *diakonein* (“to serve, minister”) and *diakonia* (“service, ministry”) are used dozens of times in the New Testament, not only for the distribution of food, but also for a wide variety of other forms of service. Interestingly, St. Stephen and the other men appointed to assist the apostles in Acts 6:1-6 are never directly called “deacons” (*diakonoi*) in the Bible. Instead of giving them any title, their role in “serving at table” is described using the related words *diakonia* and *diakoneo*.

Yet the early Christian *diakonoi* were not merely “servants”; they were clearly also leaders in the early Church, including Timothy (1 Tim 4:6), Tychichus (Col 4:7; Eph 6:21), and many others who are unnamed (2 Cor 11:23; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8-13).<sup>(4)</sup> The apostle Paul also refers to himself as a *diakonos* at least eight times (1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; etc.), and even calls Jesus Christ a *diakonos* twice (Rom 15:8; Gal 2:17)!

Therefore, Paul’s reference to Phoebe as a *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 clearly indicates that she was a servant-leader, especially when paired with Paul’s mention of her as a “patron” (*prostatis*) of many early Christians.<sup>(5)</sup>

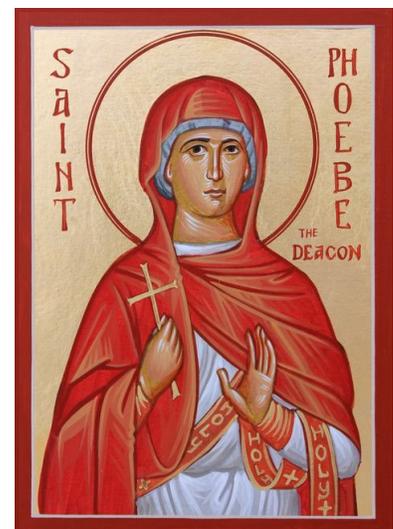
**Another question I was recently asked:**

**Can Saint Phoebe be celebrated in the liturgy of the Catholic Church?**

Here the answer is both Yes and No, depending on when, where, who, and why one wants to celebrate her.

If September 3 is a Sunday, then all Masses should use the presidential prayers and lectionary readings prescribed for the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, rather than any liturgical texts related to a saint.<sup>(6)</sup> However, St. Phoebe could certainly be included in the introduction to the Mass, the homily, the Prayers of the Faithful, the final announcements, and/or the parish bulletin.

If September 3 is a weekday, the Universal Calendar of the Catholic Church ordinarily requires the liturgical celebration of St. Gregory the Great, Pope and Doctor of the Church, since he is ranked as an “Obligatory Memorial,” at least since 1969.<sup>(7)</sup> However, while using



the liturgical texts prescribed for St. Gregory, one can certainly also include other saints (like St. Phoebe) in the homily and other parts of the Mass, as mentioned above for Sundays. Moreover, in any parish dedicated to St. Phoebe (is there one somewhere yet?), the celebration of her patronal feast day would be a "Solemnity," which outranks the Memorial of St. Gregory, according to the Church's ranking of liturgical celebrations.<sup>(8)</sup>

Can we celebrate St. Phoebe liturgically on any other day? The answer again depends on when and why one wants to celebrate her. On the one hand, we should not normally ignore any Solemnities (which includes all Sundays), Feasts, or Obligatory Memorials prescribed for a particular day. However, the 2011 edition of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*<sup>(9)</sup> states that Votive Masses "of any given Saint" may be celebrated "in response to the devotion of the faithful on weekdays in Ordinary Time, even if an Optional Memorial occurs" ([GIRM, 375](#)).

Moreover, although Votive Masses are generally forbidden on obligatory memorials, the *General Instruction* allows for some exceptions: "If, however, some real necessity or pastoral advantage calls for it, in the estimation of the rector of the church or the Priest Celebrant himself, a Mass appropriate to the same may be used in a celebration with the people" ([GIRM, 376](#)). So apart from days with solemnities and feasts, one might consider what kind of "real necessity or pastoral advantage" would allow for the celebration of a Votive Mass of St. Phoebe on other weekdays.

Finally, it is good to remember that the Universal Calendar of the Catholic Church is not set in stone, but is constantly evolving. Since the 1970's, various Popes have made over 50 changes to the calendar (see <https://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Supplements.htm>): adding newly-canonized saints to the calendar; changing the dates of some memorials; changing the rank of some celebrations (e.g., Mary Magdalene, July 22, was upgraded from a "Memorial" to a "Feast"), or even adding some biblical characters to the calendar (e.g., changing the Memorial of St. Martha, July 29, to now include her siblings: Sts. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus).

So, it is entirely possible that St. Phoebe could someday be added to the liturgical calendar of the Church, especially since she is the only woman explicitly referred to as a *diakonos* in the Bible!

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## Addenda & Notes:

- 1) Most Western and Eastern Christian Churches commemorate St. Phoebe on **September 3**, but the Lutheran Church celebrates her on **October 25**.
- 2) **Phoebe** is a Latin version of the Greek name Φοίβη (*Phoibē*), which means "radiant, bright, shining." In ancient Greek mythology, Phoebe is a "Titan" who is related to the sun-god Apollo and the moon-goddess Artemis.
- 3) Many English-language versions of the Bible also use "servant" to translate the common Greek noun *doulos*, which would better be translated "slave," since it connotes more servile types of work and/or the master/slave relationship that includes ownership of someone by another person. In contrast, *diakonos* has no connotations of slavery or servile work.

- 4) Although not directly using the noun *diakonoi*, the NT says that many other individual men and women perform various kinds of "service" (using the noun *diakonia* and/or the verb *diakonein*). See the Appendix at the bottom of my webpage on "[Ministry in the New Testament](#)."
- 5) Some scholars suggest that Phoebe may not have been wealthy herself but was a capable fundraiser, organizing her local community to support those in need. Most biblical scholars, however, suggest that the title *prostatis* implies that Phoebe herself was wealthy enough to support Paul and other early Christians financially. Similarly, some women in the Gospels are said to use their own resources to "serve" or "provide for" (*diakonein*) the material needs of Jesus and his disciples (see Matt 27:55; Mark 15:41; Luke 8:1-3).
- 6) Four types of "Proper Solemnities" can outrank the Sundays in Ordinary Time in the Catholic Church's official "Table of Liturgical Days." These include (a) "The Solemnity of the principal Patron of the place, city or state"; (b) "The Solemnity of the dedication and of the anniversary of the dedication of one's own church"; (c) "The Solemnity of the Title of one's own church"; (d) "The Solemnity either of the Title, or of the Founder, or of the principal Patron of an order or congregation" (*Universal Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, #59). In such cases, Sept. 3 could be celebrated as the Solemnity of St. Phoebe, rather than the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time. However, I am unaware of any place, church, or religious order for which Phoebe is a patron; so these exceptions may not apply (yet), but they would if a diocese or parish or religious order were dedicated to St. Phoebe sometime in the future!
- 7) Prior to 1969, Sept. 3 was the Memorial of Pope St. Pius X, while **St. Gregory the Great** was commemorated on **March 12** (the day of his death in 604). With the 1969 reform of the liturgical calendar, however, St. Gregory was moved to **Sept. 3** (the anniversary of his election as Pope), and St. Pius X was moved to Aug. 21 (the day after his death, which was Aug. 20, 1914).
- 8) According to the *Universal Norms* mentioned in note 4 above, the "Solemnity" of a patron saint would outrank the "Memorial" of any other saint assigned to that day.
- 9) The **GIRM** is available online at <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal>.
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## Resources and Related Websites:

- [Discerning Deacons](#) - a Catholic organization that has St. Phoebe as their patron
- [St. Phoebe Center for the Diaconess](#) - a similar organization within the Orthodox Church
- [Saint Phoebe School for Deacons](#) - a partnership of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia and the Episcopal Diocese of Southwestern Virginia
- [Phoebe \(biblical figure\)](#) - a good overview article on Wikipedia
- [St Phoebe - A Benefactor to Many](#) - a nice brief blog entry by Theresa Doyle-Nelson
- [Feast of St. Phoebe](#) - the preaching on Sept. 3, 2021, by Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ (also YouTube)
- [Bible Character: Phoebe](#) - a short video produced by Dan Daly, SJ