

Who was St. Phoebe ?

- St. Phoebe was a minister of a house church at Cenchreae, Greece, a busy seaport about six miles from land-locked Corinth.
- St. Paul speaks highly of Phoebe in his Letter to the Romans 16:1-2 and calls her a deacon (*diakonos* in Greek).
- Paul describes Phoebe as a benefactor, leading many to assume she was a woman of wealth. Others have theorized that she may not have been wealthy herself but instead was a gifted fundraiser, skilled at organizing people to support the needs of the early Christian community.
- Paul had not yet been to Rome, and he entrusted Phoebe to deliver his Letter to the Romans. She journeyed more than 750 miles from Cenchreae to Rome, crossing the Ionian Sea on the way, to meet with the Christian community.
- The name Phoebe means “radiant.” Her feast day in both the Eastern and Western Catholic Church is September 3 (though it is on October 25 in the Lutheran Church).
- In 1969, the feast of Pope Gregory the Great (590–604 CE) was moved from March 12 to September 3, the anniversary of his election as pope, thus displacing Phoebe in liturgical celebrations.
- The *Roman Martyrology*, the official Catholic list of saints, 2004 edition, calls her *ancilla Domini* (handmaid of the Lord) among the faithful of Cenchreae.



As we pray with the words of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, let us consider St. Phoebe’s charisms, drawing from the text itself and from our knowledge of her historical context while also giving ourselves permission to engage the imagination and see where the Holy Spirit inspires us during our contemplative prayer.



Romans 16:1-2

“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well.”

I commend her to you...

By calling her sister, deacon and benefactor, Paul signals that Phoebe is his co-worker in the kingdom.¹ He has chosen her to convey his message to the fledgling followers of the Way, hoping that they too will support and believe the Good News of Christ. What was it like for her to preach and teach the faith?

Receive her in the lord, in a manner worthy of the holy ones.

Paul asks the Roman community to receive Phoebe with hospitality. Did Phoebe wonder if she would be welcomed in a new place, where people did not know her, yet knew of Paul by reputation and name? Who might have traveled with her as she made this journey from Greece to Rome?

Help her in whatever she may ask of you, because she has been a benefactor to many, and to myself as well.

What was it like for Phoebe to share her gifts with others, while also having need of a warm reception? How was the Holy Spirit nudging Roman Christians to receive Paul’s message through Phoebe’s explanations and commentary about his letter?

Today, the devotion to St. Phoebe is growing – particularly since our Catholic Church has embarked on a journey to listen and consult with the People of God through the 2021-2024 Synod on Communion, Participation and Mission. As we consider how we are called to be Church in the third millennium, we can reflect on St. Phoebe and St. Paul’s first century witness for collaborative ministry. We can seek their intercession and the guidance of the Holy Spirit as our Church actively discerns how to better fulfill its mission through greater recognition and participation of women in a missionary Church.

¹ For more on St. Phoebe, read *“Befriending Phoebe, a co-worker in the kingdom”* by Colleen Gibson, SSJ, <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/ministry/befriending-phoebe-co-worker-kingdom>

