

Saint Florian:

The patron saint of fire fighters

All fire fighters are aware that Saint Florian is the patron Saint of fire fighters. Many have purchased and are very proud to wear the Saint Florian medallion around their neck. These medallions are usually gold and many are shaped in the form of a Maltese cross with the image of Florian stamped in the centre of it.

If you ask who Florian was or why he is our Patron Saint, most fire fighters don't know. They assume it is because he made some heroic fire rescue or maybe he was a priest who was involved in the fire service. These answers are the typical response but neither is accurate.

St Florian, commemorated in the Roman Martyrology on 4 May, was an officer of the Roman army, who occupied a high administrative post in Noricum (now part of Austria) and who suffered death for the Faith in the days of Diocletian. He was a brave soldier and a tenacious fighter. Rome recognised the danger of fire and was the first to employ a fire department. This first fire department was made up of slaves. They had no real desire to risk their lives battling the flames of their captors.

Rome desperately needed fire protection. They called on Captain Florian to organise and train an elite group of soldiers whose sole duty was to fight fires. Captain Florian indeed organised such a group. They were highly trained and very successful at protecting Rome from fires.

A brigade of fire fighters followed the army and provided fire protection at their encampments. These fire fighters were highly respected and easily recognised. They wore the traditional Roman soldier uniform except the skirt was green.

The most famous picture of Saint Florian depicts him with a young boy pouring water from a pitcher onto a fire. This picture is seen in colour

reveals this green skirt. Rome was very impressed by this young Captain and all that he had accomplished. They decided to reward him by making him a general.

Generals were often given large tracks of conquered land to govern. The only rules were that they had to enforce the laws of Rome and collect the taxes. Florian's area included almost all of Poland. Rome began to hear some rumours about the way Florian was governing his land.

It was reported that he was not enforcing Rome's law forbidding Christianity. Rome did not believe this, but they did send investigators to check.

Rome sent a group of soldiers to confront Florian. They warned and threatened him that he must enforce the laws of Rome and abolish Christianity. Florian not only refused, he confessed that he had embraced the faith and become a Christian himself. Florian gave himself up at Lorch to the soldiers of Aquilinus and the governor, confirming that it was true. Rome was furious. They tortured him and demanded he renounce his faith. Florian steadfastly refused and Rome ordered his execution. Florian was to be burned at the stake.

Soldiers marched him out and secured him to the post while villagers gathered around to witness the execution. Florian begged his executioners to build the fire higher. He implored them to light the fire so his soul would rise up to heaven on the smoke from the blaze.

The soldiers had never seen this kind of reaction from a person about to be burned alive, so they were frightened. What if his soul did rise up, right in front of all the villagers? They could not afford a martyr. The fire was not lit.

Florian was taken away by the soldiers who decided to drown him in the River Enns. He was placed in a boat and rowed out into the river.



Saint Florian

A millstone was tied around his neck and he was pushed over board and drowned. After his death, people who were trapped by fire reported that they invoked Florian's name and his spirit delivered them from the flames. These occurrences were reported and documented many times.

His body, recovered and buried by a pious woman, was eventually moved to the Augustinian Abbey of St Florian, near Linz. It is said to have been, at a later date, transferred to Rome. Pope Lucius III, in 1138, gave some of the Saint's relics to King Casimir of Poland and to the Bishop of Cracow. Since that time, St Florian has been regarded as a patron of Poland as well as of Linz, Upper Austria and of fire fighters.

Florian was confirmed a saint for his commitment to his faith and the documentation of his spirit delivering trapped persons from the flames. It is only fitting, that fire fighters, committed to their duty, and instilled with the spirit to dedicate themselves to the protection of life and property, should choose such a man as their patron saint.

History credit: Lombard Fire Fighters Union Local 3009 