

Saints Nereus and Achilleus

SAINT OF THE DAY

12_05_2021



Nereus and Achilleus were two Roman soldiers who converted to Christianity. Their martyrdom, according to historians, probably took place around 300, during Diocletian's persecutions. The oldest document that has come down to us about the two martyrs is an inscription in Latin placed on their tomb by Saint Damasus (304-384), whose text had already been reproduced and preserved in some early medieval manuscripts.

In 1874 the archaeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi went to the tomb of Nereus and Achilleus

, in the Catacombs of Domitilla, on the Via Ardeatina in Rome, and found two important fragments of the epigraph composed by Pope Damasus: "The martyrs Nereus and Achilleus had joined the army and followed the orders of a tyrant, and were always ready, under the pressure of fear, to obey his will. O miracle of faith! Suddenly their fury ceased, they converted, fled the camp of the evil tyrant, threw away their shields, their armour, and their blood-stained javelins. Confessing the faith of Christ, they rejoiced in uniting their testimony to His triumph. Let us learn from the words of Damasus what great things the glory of Christ works".

Also during the excavations carried out in that year, the famous archaeologist brought to light a basilica with three naves, dedicated to Saints Nereus and Achilleus and erected on the very site of their tomb. According to de Rossi, the basilica was built during the pontificate of Damasus' successor, Pope Siricius (384-399). The *Liber Pontificalis* reports that John I (523-526) "rebuilt the cemetery of the blessed martyrs Nereus and Achilles on the Via Ardeatina". It is also known that Saint Gregory the Great, around 600, pronounced a moving homily in that same basilica in honour of the two martyrs, exalting their choice of eternal goods.

Their feast has been celebrated since ancient times on 12 May. The 1969 reform established for Nereus and Achilleus an optional memorial day in the General Roman Calendar, distinct from that of Saint Pancras of Rome, another glorious martyr remembered today.

Originally from Phrygia, Pancras converted to Christianity after being orphaned of his parents, and was beheaded along the Via Aurelia, under the Emperor Diocletian, when he was about 14 years old.