

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Agilbert

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: October 11

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IN BRIEF

Saint Agilbert

Seventh-century Frankish bishop, bishop of the West Saxons and then of Paris, buried at Jouarre.

Feast day	October 11
Born	early seventh century, Kingdom of the Franks
Died	between 679 and 690, Gaul (buried at Jouarre)
Canonized	immemorial cult

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Agilbert

The Crypts of Jouarre Abbey

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Agilbert

Saint Agilbert was a seventh-century Frankish bishop whose life links Gaul, Ireland and England. Bishop of the West Saxons, in Wessex, in the 650s, he took part in the Synod of Whitby in 664 and later became bishop of Paris. He died between 679 and 690 and was buried at Jouarre Abbey, near his sister, the abbess Theodechild. His feast day is October 11.

Who was Saint Agilbert?

Agilbert came from a noble Frankish family; his sister Theodechild was abbess of Jouarre, in the Brie region east of Paris. What we know of him comes mostly from the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by Saint Bede the Venerable, who presents him as a Frank who came from Ireland, where he had stayed a long time to study the Scriptures. His was the life of a man moving between several worlds, who helped draw the Churches of the British Isles closer to Rome and to the continent.

Key dates

- **Early seventh century**: Born into a noble family in the Kingdom of the Franks.
- **Before 650**: A long stay in Ireland to study the Scriptures.
- **Around 650**: King Cenwalh of Wessex invites him to succeed Saint Birinus as bishop of the West Saxons, at Dorchester.
- **Around 660**: The king, tired of not understanding his language, divides the diocese and creates the see of Winchester; Agilbert, hurt, leaves Wessex.
- **Around 663-664**: In Northumbria, he ordains Saint Wilfrid a priest.
- **664**: At the Synod of Whitby, he supports the Roman custom for the date of Easter, letting Wilfrid speak in his place.

- **Around 666-668**: Becomes bishop of Paris.
- **668-669**: According to Bede, he welcomes Theodore of Tarsus in Paris, on his way to Canterbury.
- **Around 670**: Recalled by Cenwalh, he declines and sends his nephew Leuthere, who becomes bishop of Winchester.
- **Between 679 and 690**: Dies; he is buried in the crypt of Jouarre Abbey.

A Frankish bishop among the Saxons

Around 650, King Cenwalh of Wessex called Agilbert to lead the Church of the West Saxons, founded shortly before by Saint Birinus. Agilbert settled at Dorchester-on-Thames and carried out his ministry there for about ten years.

But language created a distance. Bede tells us that the king, who understood only Saxon, eventually grew tired of this "barbarous speech." He divided the diocese and gave a new see, at Winchester, to another bishop, Wine. Agilbert, offended, left Wessex. Later, when the king asked him to come back, he refused, but he sent his nephew Leuthere, who became bishop of Winchester. In this way he kept his care for the Church he had served.

The Synod of Whitby

In the middle of the seventh century, two traditions lived side by side in the north of England: that of the monks who had come from Ireland and Iona, and that which had come from Rome. They did not celebrate Easter on the same date, and this difference divided even the royal family of Northumbria. In 664, King Oswiu called a synod at Whitby to settle the matter.

Agilbert, then in Northumbria, was the spokesman for the Roman custom. Shortly before, he had ordained the young Wilfrid a priest. When it was time to speak, he asked that Wilfrid speak in his place, since Wilfrid spoke the

language of the Angles better than he did. The king finally chose to follow the Roman custom. This gesture of Agilbert, stepping aside for a younger man who could make himself better understood, says much about his humility.

Bishop of Paris

Back in Gaul, Agilbert became bishop of Paris around 666-668. According to Bede, he welcomed Theodore of Tarsus there, sent by the pope as archbishop of Canterbury, who spent the winter with him before going on to England. Shortly after Whitby, Agilbert also took part in the episcopal consecration of Wilfrid at Compiegne. He died on a date we do not know, between 679 and 690.

Veneration and iconography

Agilbert was buried at Jouarre Abbey, in the Brie, which his sister Theodechild governed. His sarcophagus, kept in the crypt, is one of the masterpieces of Merovingian sculpture: it shows Christ in glory surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists, and a scene of the Last Judgment. He is honored as a saint by an old local tradition, especially at Jouarre, and celebrated on October 11.

What can we learn from Saint Agilbert?

Agilbert knew misunderstanding, to the point of having to leave the diocese he served. He did not stay bitter: he went on serving the Church elsewhere, knew how to let a younger man speak, and sent his nephew where he himself no longer wished to go. He can walk with those who work for the unity of the Church, with missionaries who struggle with a foreign language, and with all who have known failure without losing their peace.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Agilbert and the novena to Saint Agilbert.

Where to pray to Saint Agilbert

- **Jouarre** (Seine-et-Marne, France): the crypts of the abbey, where his sarcophagus lies, and the Benedictine abbey of Notre-Dame.
- **Paris**: the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, the see of which he was bishop.
- **Dorchester-on-Thames** (Oxfordshire, England): the former episcopal town of the West Saxons.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Agilbert for the Unity of the Church

Saint Agilbert, a seventh-century Frankish bishop, served the Church in Gaul, Ireland and England. As bishop of the West Saxons, he met with misunderstanding and had to leave; at the Synod of Whitby, he humbly let a younger man speak in his place; he ended his life as bishop of Paris. This prayer is an original composition inspired by his life, not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to his intercession the unity of the Church and those who live far from home.

Prayer to Saint Agilbert

Saint Agilbert,
you left Gaul to study the Scriptures in Ireland
and to serve the Church among the Saxons;
you knew the struggle of a foreign language
and the pain of being misunderstood.

Instead of closing in on your hurt,
you went on serving,
you let a younger man speak when it was needed,
and you worked for the unity of Christians.

Pray for the Church, that she may be one,
for missionaries who proclaim the Gospel in a foreign language,
for those who have had to leave a post or a country.
Teach us the humility that knows how to step aside
and the faithfulness that holds no grudge.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Agilbert

- On his feast day, October 11.
- During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.
- When you are living abroad or learning a new language.
- After a misunderstanding or being pushed aside at work or in your commitments.
- For bishops and for those preparing the next generation of leaders in the Church.

A short prayer for humility

> *Lord, help me to speak when I should,*
> *and to let others speak when they will do it better.*
> *Saint Agilbert, pray for me. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Agilbert from October 3 to October 11, and read the life of Saint Agilbert.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Agilbert

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Agilbert, a seventh-century Frankish bishop, bishop of the West Saxons and then of Paris. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, October 11, begin on October 3. You can also pray it at any other time, for example during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Agilbert, pray for us." The act suggested for each day helps you live the novena in a concrete way.

Day 1: Studying the Word

Before becoming a bishop, Agilbert spent long years in Ireland studying the Scriptures. Whoever wants to proclaim the Word must first be nourished by it.

Prayer: Lord, give me a love for your Word. May it become my daily bread.

Today: Read a chapter of one of the Gospels, slowly.

Day 2: Called to another people

The king of Wessex called Agilbert to be the bishop of his people. The Frank agreed to serve a young Church, in a country that was not his own.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the priests from other lands who serve our parishes. Bless their ministry.

Today: Welcome or thank a priest or religious who has come from another country.

Day 3: The language barrier

The king did not understand Agilbert's language well and eventually grew tired of it. It is hard to be a foreigner and not to be understood.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you migrants and all who struggle to make themselves understood. Give me the patience to listen to them.

Today: Take time to truly listen to someone who does not speak your language well.

Day 4: Leaving without bitterness

Hurt, Agilbert left Wessex. But he did not break with that Church: years later, he sent his nephew there as bishop.

Prayer: Lord, heal in me the wounds of being pushed aside, and free me from resentment.

Today: Pray for a person or a community that has hurt you.

Day 5: Forming a disciple

In Northumbria, Agilbert ordained the young Wilfrid a priest, who would become a great bishop. He knew how to recognize and encourage a gift.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to encourage the young and to trust them.

Today: Encourage a young person in their studies, their work or their faith.

Day 6: Letting another speak

At the Synod of Whitby, Agilbert asked that Wilfrid speak in his place, because he would be better understood. He put the good of the Church before his own prestige.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the need to always have the leading role.

Today: In a conversation, let someone else have the floor and the credit.

Day 7: The unity of the Church

At Whitby, the question was how to celebrate Easter on the same day, so that the Church would be united. Agilbert worked for this unity, beyond local traditions.

Prayer: Lord, may all be one, as you asked of your Father. Heal the divisions among Christians.

Today: Pray for Christian unity, or meet a Christian of another denomination.

Day 8: The bishop's hospitality

As bishop of Paris, Agilbert welcomed Theodore of Tarsus, on his way to Canterbury. Hospitality is a way of serving the mission of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, make my home and my heart welcoming.

Today: Invite someone to share a meal or some time at your home.

Day 9: Resting at Jouarre

Agilbert rests in the crypt of Jouarre, near his sister. On his tomb, Christ in glory recalls the hope that guided his whole life.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Agilbert, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will, and keep me in the hope of your glory.

Today: Pray for your brothers and sisters, living and deceased.

Living this novena with Saint Agilbert

Saint Agilbert is a little-known saint, but very close to our lives. He was called far from home, knew the language barrier, was pushed aside, and yet kept on serving with humility. Perhaps you are praying this novena after a misunderstanding, a difficult departure, or while living abroad. You can also offer it for the unity of the Church and for missionaries. Entrust your intention each day, and ask with him for the grace to serve without trying to shine.

Closing prayer

Saint Agilbert,
bishop of the West Saxons and of Paris,
you served the Church in several lands
and worked humbly for her unity.
Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days.
Obtain for me a heart without resentment,
the humility to step aside when I should,
and a love for unity among Christians.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Agilbert at any time, and read the life of Saint Agilbert.

PILGRIMAGE

The Crypts of Jouarre Abbey

The crypts of Jouarre, in Seine-et-Marne, east of Paris, are among the oldest Christian monuments in France. They are one of the rare witnesses to the architecture and sculpture of the 7th century. Here rests Saint Agilbert, bishop of the West Saxons and then of Paris, in a carved sarcophagus that is one of the masterpieces of Merovingian art, not far from his sister, the abbess Theodechild.

A Merovingian burial ground

Jouarre Abbey was founded around 630 by Ado, brother of Saint Ouen, in the valley of the Petit Morin. It quickly became a great monastery, and Theodechild, Agilbert's sister, was one of its first abbesses. Around the monastery's funeral church grew a burial ground where abbesses, members of their families and bishops were laid to rest. The present crypts are its heart.

Agilbert's sarcophagus is especially remarkable. On one face, Christ in majesty is enthroned, surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists; on a long side, a scene shows the elect at the Last Judgment, their arms raised. The neighboring tomb of Theodechild bears a long Latin inscription and a decoration of shells.



The sarcophagus of Saint Agilbert, crypts of Jouarre.

Visiting the crypts of Jouarre

The crypts are in the center of the village of Jouarre, beside the parish church and the Romanesque tower of the former abbey. Inside you will find the sarcophagi of the foundresses and of bishops, reused ancient columns and carved capitals. Nearby, the Abbey of Notre-Dame de Jouarre is still home to a community of Benedictine nuns, who welcome those who wish to pray with them.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Agilbert. Before his tomb, entrust to him the unity of the Church and those who live far from home, then recite the prayer to Saint Agilbert. You can also join the nuns of the abbey for the Divine Office. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Agilbert

- **Paris**: the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, the see of which he was bishop.
- **Dorchester-on-Thames** (England): the former see of the bishops of the West Saxons, today an abbey church.
- **Whitby** (England): the ruins of the abbey where the synod of 664 was held.

Practical information

Jouarre is near La Ferte-sous-Jouarre, in the east of the Seine-et-Marne department. Visiting arrangements and opening hours for the crypts vary with the season: check with the local tourist office or the town hall before you come. To pray with the nuns or stay at the abbey, contact the Abbey of Notre-Dame de Jouarre directly.

CREDITS

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