BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Alena of Dilbeek

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: June 16

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IN BRIEF

Saint Alena of Dilbeek

Young martyr of Brabant in the 7th century according to tradition, venerated at Forest.

Feast day	June 16
Born	7th century, Dilbeek (Brabant), according to tradition
Died	c. 640, Forest or Dilbeek (Brabant), according to tradition
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	7th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Alena for Young People and Families

Novena to Saint Alena of Dilbeek

Church of Saint-Denis, Forest (Brussels)

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Alena of Dilbeek

Saint Alena, also called Aline, Alène or Halene, is a young martyr of Brabant whom tradition places in the 7th century, dying around 640. The daughter of a pagan lord of Dilbeek, near Brussels, she is said to have converted to Christianity and been killed by her father's men. Her cult has been attested since the 12th century at Forest, where her relics are venerated. Her feast day is June 16 in Brabant.

Who was Saint Alena?

Saint Alena is one of the oldest saints of the Brussels region, but also one of the most mysterious. The only account of her life, the "Vita Alenae," was written in the 13th century, about six hundred years after the events it describes. The historians who have studied it see it as a hagiographical romance, composed by borrowing passages from other lives of women saints: it tells us almost nothing certain about the real Alena, and some even wonder whether she existed. What is certain, on the other hand, is the antiquity of her cult at Forest and the popular devotion that surrounded her for centuries. It is this living memory that the Church honors in her.

Key dates in the life of Alena

- **7th century**: According to tradition, born at Dilbeek, into the family of Levold, the pagan lord of the place, and his wife Hildegard.
- **Youth**: According to her Life, she discovers Christianity through a hermit of Forest and receives baptism.
- **c. 640**: She is killed by her father's guards while on her way to prayer.
- **After her death**: According to the account, her parents convert in the face of the miracles obtained through her intercession.

- **Late 12th century**: Abbot Godescalc of Affligem develops her cult at the Benedictine priory of Forest.
- **May 19, 1193**: Solemn elevation of her relics at Forest.
- **c. 1200**: The Romanesque cenotaph of Saint Alena is made; it is now in the church of Saint-Denis in Forest.
- **13th century**: The "Vita Alenae," the only source on her life, is written.

The story told by tradition

According to the Life, Alena was the daughter of Levold, lord of Dilbeek, who was not a Christian. One day while hunting along the Senne, her father came to Forest and met a hermit there who spoke to him of Christ. Back home, he told his family about this meeting. Alena was moved by what she heard. She went to find the hermit, was instructed in the faith and received baptism. She began to attend religious services.

Her father, furious, forbade it, but she carried on. One day, as she was going to the oratory, she was seized by her father's guards. She refused to follow them and clung to a tree. The account says they tore off her arm and then, from violence to violence, ended up killing her. In the face of the miracles that followed, her father is said to have converted together with his wife Hildegard. This story, very close to those of other young martyrs, should be read as a meditation on faithfulness to Christ rather than as a chronicle.

What historians say

The cult of Saint Alena truly took off at the end of the 12th century. Abbot Godescalc of Affligem, on whom the priory of Benedictine nuns at Forest depended, promoted it, and on May 19, 1193, he carried out the elevation of her relics. A modern scientific study of the bones kept at Forest under her name showed that they belong mainly to a single person, who died around the age of thirty-five, and that they most probably date from between 780 and 980.

They are therefore clearly older than the founding of the priory, which confirms the antiquity of the veneration at this place, without making it possible to identify the person.

Devotion and memory

The chapel of Saint Alena at Forest was incorporated into the parish church of Saint-Denis when that church was built. It houses a Romanesque cenotaph carved around 1200, which was long the destination of pilgrimages and popular devotion. The dates of her feast vary from one calendar to another: she is commemorated on June 16 in Brabant, while other sources, such as Nominis, give a different date, and the Eastern Churches celebrate her on June 19.

What can we learn from Saint Alena?

Even though the story of Saint Alena has come down to us through a late account, it carries a clear message: faith in Christ may require resisting the closest pressures, including those of one's family. Alena is presented as a young woman who chose prayer despite being forbidden, and whose faithfulness eventually touched those who persecuted her. You can pray to her for young people discovering the faith, for converts who meet opposition from those around them, and for the reconciliation of families.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Alena and the novena to Saint Alena.

Where to pray to Saint Alena

- **Forest** (Brussels): the church of Saint-Denis and its chapel of Saint Alena, with the Romanesque cenotaph and the relics venerated under her name.
- **Dilbeek** (Flemish Brabant): her place of origin according to tradition.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Alena for Young People and Families

Saint Alena, or Aline, is venerated at Forest, near Brussels, as a young woman of Dilbeek who, according to tradition, converted to Christ and was killed around 640 because she refused to give up prayer. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to her young people, converts and families divided over faith.

Prayer to Saint Alena

Saint Alena,
you heard of Christ
and wanted to know him;
give me a heart open to his word
and the desire to seek him every day.

You were forbidden to pray,
and you kept going to the oratory.
Help those who are discovering the faith
and meet with misunderstanding from their loved ones
to remain faithful with gentleness.

According to tradition, your faithfulness
in the end opened the hearts of your parents.
I entrust to you divided families,
young people who seek God,
and all who suffer for their faith.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Alena

- On her feast day, June 16, in Brabant.
- For young people discovering the faith or preparing for baptism.
- For converts who meet opposition from their families.
- For reconciliation between parents and children.
- For persecuted Christians.

A prayer for families

> *Lord, gather divided families in your love,*
> *and make faith grow in our homes.*
> *Saint Alena, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Alena from June 8 to 16, and read the life of Saint Alena.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Alena of Dilbeek

This novena offers nine days of prayer with Saint Alena, or Aline, a young martyr of Brabant venerated at Forest. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on her feast day, June 16, begin on June 8. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

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 Alena, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes come from a Life written in the 13th century, which belongs more to legend than to history.

Day 1: A story overheard

According to tradition, Alena heard of Christ through her father, who had met a hermit at Forest. A simple conversation awakened her heart.

Prayer: Lord, may my words awaken in others the desire to know you.

Act of the day: Share with someone a Gospel passage that touches you.

Day 2: Seeking a teacher

Alena went to find the hermit to be instructed in the faith. She was not content with a passing interest.

Prayer: Lord, give me the desire to deepen my faith and the humility to learn.

Act of the day: Take time to read a text of the Church or of Scripture.

Day 3: Baptism

After being instructed, Alena received baptism. She became a child of God and a member of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for my baptism. Renew in me the grace received that day.

Act of the day: Make the Sign of the Cross with holy water as you enter a church, or look up the date of your baptism.

Day 4: The joy of prayer

Alena attended religious services. Prayer in common became a need for her.

Prayer: Lord, give me a taste for prayer and for the Mass.

Act of the day: Attend a weekday Mass or service.

Day 5: The prohibition

Her father forbade her to practice her faith. Alena had to choose between obeying her father and being faithful to Christ.

Prayer: Lord, support those who are forbidden to believe or to pray, and give them strength and gentleness.

Act of the day: Pray for a country where religious freedom is not respected.

Day 6: Holding fast

Seized on the way to the oratory, Alena clung to a tree and refused to follow the guards. She held firm.

Prayer: Lord, when I am tempted to let go, help me to cling to you as to a solid tree.

Act of the day: Keep today a good resolution you have often abandoned.

Day 7: The gift of her life

Tradition tells that Alena was killed by her father's men. She is honored as a martyr.

Prayer: Lord, welcome all who die because of their faith, and console their loved ones.

Act of the day: Pray for Christians persecuted today.

Day 8: The conversion of her parents

According to the account, her father and mother converted in the face of the miracles. Alena's faithfulness bore fruit in her own family.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the members of my family who are far from you.

Act of the day: Show affection to a relative with whom the relationship is difficult.

Day 9: A living memory

Since at least the 12th century, people have come to pray to Saint Alena at Forest. Pilgrims have entrusted their sorrows to her there for centuries.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the faith of those who went before us. Through the intercession of Saint Alena, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: If possible, attend Mass, and pray for the departed members of your family.

Living the novena with Saint Alena

The story of Saint Alena is poorly known, but the prayer of the faithful at Forest is very real. During these nine days, you can carry young people who seek God, converts, divided families and persecuted Christians in your prayer. If you can, visit the church of Saint-Denis in Forest.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Alena,*
> *young woman of Brabant and martyr of Christ,*
> *you preferred prayer to everything else.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me faithful when my faith is tested,*
> *and bring back to God those I love.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

PILGRIMAGE

Church of Saint-Denis, Forest (Brussels)

The church of Saint-Denis stands in Forest, a municipality in the south of Brussels. It houses the chapel of Saint Alena, the heart of the cult of this young martyr of Brabant whom tradition says died around 640. Here you can see a remarkable Romanesque cenotaph, and relics kept under her name are venerated. It is the main place where you can pray to the saint.

A priory and a saint

At the beginning of the 12th century, Benedictine nuns settled at Forest, in a priory that depended on the abbey of Affligem and later became the abbey of Forest. At the end of the same century, Abbot Godescalc of Affligem developed the cult of Saint Alena, and on May 19, 1193, he carried out the solemn elevation of her relics. A recent scientific study showed that the bones venerated under her name belong mainly to a single person and most probably date from the years 780 to 980: veneration at this place is therefore older than the priory.

The chapel of Saint Alena was later incorporated into the parish church of Saint-Denis when that church was built. For centuries, it drew pilgrims who came to entrust their sorrows to the young martyr.

The cenotaph of Saint Alena

The chapel's main treasure is a Romanesque cenotaph, that is, a monumental tomb that does not contain the body, carved around 1200. This stone monument, studied by art historians, bears witness to the importance of the

saint's cult at the end of the 12th century. It was long the object of popular devotion.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Alena. Before the cenotaph, entrust to her young people who seek God, converts and divided families, then say the prayer to Saint Alena. You can also meditate on the faith of the generations who have come to pray here for more than eight centuries. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Forest is a municipality of the Brussels-Capital Region, served by public transport. The church of Saint-Denis is a parish church: modest dress and silence are requested, especially during services. Opening hours, Mass times and access to the chapel of Saint Alena may vary: check with the parish before you come.

Credits and sources

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