

BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Saint Alphege of Canterbury

*Life, prayer and novena*

Feast day: April 19

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IN BRIEF

## Saint Alphege of Canterbury

*Archbishop of Canterbury killed by the Vikings at Greenwich in 1012 for refusing to be ransomed.*

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| **Feast day** | April 19 |
| **Born** | c. 953-954, Weston, near Bath, England |
| **Died** | April 19, 1012, Greenwich, England |
| **Canonized** | 1078, by Pope Gregory VII |
| **Era** | 11th century |

## In this booklet


Life

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Novena to Saint Alphege

Credits and sources



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LIFE

# Saint Alphege of Canterbury

Saint Alphege, in Old English Ælfheah, was a monk of Bath who became Bishop of Winchester and then Archbishop of Canterbury. Captured by a Viking army in 1011, he refused to let a ransom be paid for him, so as not to burden his people further, and he was killed at Greenwich on April 19, 1012. Canonized in 1078 by Pope Gregory VII, he is celebrated on April 19, the anniversary of his death.

## Who was Saint Alphege?

Alphege, first called Godwine, was born around 953 or 954, probably at Weston, near Bath, in Anglo-Saxon England. He became a monk at a very young age, first at the monastery of Deerhurst, then at Bath, where for a time he lived as an anchorite. Noticed for his piety and the austerity of his life, he became abbot of Bath around 977.

He lived in the age of the great English monastic revival led by Saint Dunstan, but also in the age of the Viking raids that ravaged the kingdom. His whole life as a bishop was shaped by these two realities: the reform of the Church and the suffering of an invaded country.

## Key dates

- **c. 953-954**: Born, probably at Weston, near Bath.
- **c. 977**: Becomes abbot of Bath.
- **October 19, 984**: Consecrated Bishop of Winchester.
- **994**: Confirms the Norwegian leader Olaf Tryggvason in the faith, after a peace treaty.

- **1006**: Becomes Archbishop of Canterbury; the following year he receives the pallium in Rome from Pope John XVIII.
- **September 1011**: The Vikings take Canterbury and carry off the archbishop as a captive.
- **April 19, 1012**: Killed at Greenwich.
- **1023**: King Cnut has his body translated from London to Canterbury.
- **1078**: Canonized by Pope Gregory VII.

## Bishop of Winchester

Probably with the support of Saint Dunstan, Alphege was consecrated Bishop of Winchester on October 19, 984. He built and enlarged churches there, and had a great organ installed in the cathedral, which, it was said, could be heard a mile away. He honored the memory of his predecessors, Saint Swithun and Saint Æthelwold.

In 994, after a Viking attack, a peace treaty was concluded with the Norwegian leader Olaf Tryggvason, who received tribute but converted to Christianity. Alphege confirmed him in his new faith, and Olaf promised never again to fight the English. The bishop who received a former enemy into the Church showed that, for him, the answer to violence was conversion and peace.

## Archbishop of Canterbury

In 1006, Alphege became Archbishop of Canterbury. He brought a relic of Saint Swithun there and had a new life of Saint Dunstan written. In 1007, he traveled to Rome to receive the pallium from Pope John XVIII and was robbed on the way. He encouraged learning and entrusted the learned monk Ælfric with the direction of the monastic school of Cerne.

## The refusal of the ransom

In September 1011, a Viking army led by Thorkell the Tall besieged Canterbury. Through an act of treachery, the attackers entered the city on September 29, plundered the cathedral and carried the archbishop off into captivity. They demanded a ransom of three thousand pounds for his release. Alphege refused to let it be paid: according to tradition, he knew the country was exhausted by tributes and did not want the poor to be crushed in order to buy his freedom.

After seven months of captivity, on April 19, 1012, the warriors, enraged by his refusal, fell upon him during an assembly at Greenwich. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that they pelted him with ox bones; according to John of Worcester, a convert named Thrum dealt him the final blow. He was the first Archbishop of Canterbury to die a violent death.

## A martyr for justice

First buried in Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, his body was moved to Canterbury in 1023 by King Cnut, who wished to reconcile Danes and English. After the Norman Conquest, Archbishop Lanfranc doubted that he was truly a martyr. Saint Anselm, then abbot of Bec, convinced him by explaining that one who dies for justice dies for God. Later, according to tradition, Saint Thomas Becket commended his soul to Saint Alphege shortly before he was murdered in the same cathedral in 1170.

## Is Saint Alphege a patron saint?

Saint Alphege has no widely recognized official patronage. He is, however, closely tied to the places of his life and death: Bath, Winchester, Canterbury and above all Greenwich, where the parish church bears his name. By his life he is a natural intercessor for bishops and pastors, for hostages and captives, and

for peoples worn down by war and heavy taxes. Anselm's description of him as a martyr for justice also makes him a model for all who refuse to save themselves at the expense of the weak.

## Symbols and how to recognize Saint Alphege in art

Saint Alphege is shown as an archbishop, with mitre, crozier and pallium, as in the stained glass of Canterbury Cathedral. In medieval illuminations he appears as a mitred archbishop holding his crozier. Scenes of his life focus on two moments: his capture at Canterbury and his death at the hands of the Viking warriors at Greenwich.

## What can we learn from Saint Alphege?

Saint Alphege was a shepherd who refused to save himself at the price of his people's misery. Monk, reformer and builder, he gave his life rather than let the poor pay for him. His example speaks to anyone in a position of responsibility: true leadership is measured by the willingness to bear a burden instead of passing it on to the weakest. You can pray to him with the prayer to Saint Alphege.

## Where to pray to Saint Alphege

His remains were placed near the high altar of Canterbury Cathedral, where a stained glass window recalls his story. Several churches in England are dedicated to him, especially the church of St Alfege in Greenwich, in southeast London, built on the spot where tradition places his death. The present building was designed in the 18th century by Nicholas Hawksmoor. Bath, where he was a monk and abbot, and Winchester, where he was bishop, also keep his memory.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Alphege, Shepherd and Martyr

Saint Alphege, Archbishop of Canterbury killed by the Vikings in 1012, is honored as a shepherd who chose to die rather than let his people pay his ransom. Here is an original prayer, inspired by his life as a monk, a bishop and a martyr.

## The shepherd who refused the ransom

A monk at Bath, then Bishop of Winchester and Archbishop of Canterbury, Alphege was captured when the city fell in 1011. Through seven months of captivity, he refused to allow a ransom of three thousand pounds to be paid for him. Saint Anselm saw him as a martyr for justice, because one who dies for justice dies for God.

## Prayer to Saint Alphege

*Saint Alphege, faithful monk and courageous shepherd,*
*you sought God in prayer and silence before serving your people:*
*teach me to root my life in prayer.*

*You refused to be ransomed at the cost of the poor's misery:*
*give me care for those who carry the heaviest burdens,*
*and the courage never to save myself at their expense.*

*You confirmed in the faith a leader who had come as an enemy:*
*help me to hope for the conversion of those who hurt me,*
*and to forgive them.*

*Pray for the shepherds of the Church,*
*for captives and hostages,*
*for peoples tried by war.*
*I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).*

*Obtain for me the grace to stay faithful to justice and truth,*
*even when they cost me, for the love of Christ. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

## When to pray this prayer

Saint Alphege is celebrated on April 19, the day of his death in 1012. You can pray to him for bishops and priests, for hostages and prisoners, or when you have to choose between your own interest and that of the weakest. Parishioners of Greenwich, Canterbury, Winchester and Bath may pray it as a prayer to a saint of their own place.

## A short prayer for hostages

> *Saint Alphege, you knew the long months of captivity.*
> *Remember all who are held hostage today.*
> *Give them strength and hope, comfort their families,*
> *and inspire those who hold them to choose mercy. Amen.*

Discover the life of Saint Alphege, or pray the novena to Saint Alphege over nine days.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Alphege

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Alphege, monk of Bath, Bishop of Winchester, Archbishop of Canterbury and martyr. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on his feast day, April 19, begin on April 11. You can also pray it at any time of the year, for a pastor, for a hostage or for a difficult decision.

## How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life.

This novena is especially suited to bishops, priests and all who carry responsibility for others, to prisoners and hostages and their families, and to those who suffer from war or injustice.

Over nine days, the meditations follow the stages of his life: the monk of Bath, the builder bishop of Winchester, the archbishop who welcomed an enemy into the Church, the captive of Canterbury and the martyr of Greenwich. Each stage offers a light for our own life, whatever our vocation, and an invitation to love God and our neighbor with the same generosity.

## Day 1: A life rooted in prayer

As a young man, Alphege became a monk at Deerhurst, then at Bath, where he lived for a time as an anchorite. Before he led others, he learned to listen to God in silence. Every fruitful action begins in prayer.

**Prayer:** Saint Alphege, teach me to give God the first place in my day.

**Today:** Spend ten minutes in silent prayer.

## Day 2: Simplicity of life

Alphege was known for the austerity of his life. He did not seek comfort, but freedom of heart for God and for others. What we do without can become a space for love.

**Prayer:** Saint Alphege, help me to live more simply, so that my heart may be free.

**Today:** Do without one superfluous thing and give its value to the poor.

## Day 3: Building up the Church

As Bishop of Winchester, Alphege built and enlarged churches and gave the cathedral a great organ. He wanted God to be praised with beauty. The Church is also built by our care for its life and its worship.

**Prayer:** Lord, through Saint Alphege, bless my parish and all who serve it.

**Today:** Offer a little time or help to your parish.

## Day 4: Honoring those who came before

Alphege honored the memory of his predecessors, Saint Swithun and Saint Æthelwold, and had a life of Saint Dunstan written. Faith is received from others and passed on to others.

**Prayer:** Lord, I thank you for those who handed on the faith to me.

**Today:** Pray for a person who taught you to believe.

## Day 5: Turning an enemy into a brother

In 994, Alphege confirmed in the faith Olaf Tryggvason, a leader who had come to attack England. Olaf promised never again to fight the English. Grace can transform even an enemy.

**Prayer:** Saint Alphege, help me to pray for those who hurt me and to hope for their conversion.

**Today:** Pray by name for someone with whom you are in conflict.

## Day 6: Love of learning

Alphege encouraged learning and entrusted the monk Ælfric with a monastic school. Knowing God better helps us to love him more, and to serve our neighbor with intelligence.

**Prayer:** Lord, bless teachers, students and all who search for truth.

**Today:** Read a few pages of a good spiritual book.

## Day 7: In captivity

In 1011, the Vikings took Canterbury and carried off the archbishop. For seven months he lived as a captive. Many people today are held hostage, imprisoned unjustly or trapped by violence.

**Prayer:** Saint Alphege, pray for hostages, prisoners and all who have lost their freedom.

**Today:** Pray for a hostage or a political prisoner in the news.

## Day 8: Not saving oneself at the expense of the poor

Alphege refused to let a ransom of three thousand pounds be paid for him, because the country was exhausted and the poor would have borne the cost. He chose to carry the burden himself rather than pass it on to the weakest.

**Prayer:** Saint Alphege, give me the courage not to protect my comfort at the expense of others.

**Today:** Make a choice that costs you something but helps someone weaker.

## Day 9: A martyr for justice

On April 19, 1012, at Greenwich, Alphege was killed by angry warriors. Saint Anselm later explained that one who dies for justice dies for God. Faithfulness to what is right is a form of faithfulness to Christ.

**Prayer:** Saint Alphege, obtain for me the grace to remain faithful to justice and truth, even when they cost me.

**Today:** Go to Mass if you can, and offer it for the intentions of this novena.

## Closing prayer

*Lord God,*
*you gave Saint Alphege, your bishop, the grace to give his life*
*rather than let his people suffer for his sake.*
*Through his intercession, grant the intention I have placed before you,*
*if it is according to your will.*
*Give your Church shepherds after your own heart,*
*free those who are held captive,*
*and make me faithful to justice and charity all my days.*
*Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Alphege on any day of the year.

CREDITS

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