

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Alphonsa

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 28

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IN BRIEF

Saint Alphonsa

Franciscan Clarist sister from Kerala who died in 1946, the first woman born in India to be declared a saint.

Feast day	July 28
Born	August 19, 1910, Kudamaloor, near Kottayam, Kerala, India
Died	July 28, 1946, Bharananganam, Kerala, India
Canonized	October 12, 2008, by Pope Benedict XVI
Era	20th century
Patron saint of	the sick, people with disabilities

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Alphonsa for the Sick

Novena to Saint Alphonsa

Tomb of Saint Alphonsa in Bharananganam

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Alphonsa

Saint Alphonsa Muttathupadathu, in religion Sister Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception, was an Indian religious sister from Kerala who died in 1946 at the age of 35, after a life marked by illness and suffering. A member of the Franciscan Clarist Congregation in the Syro-Malabar Church, she lived a hidden life with no spectacular works, yet her tomb at Bharananganam has become one of the great pilgrimage sites of India. Canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in 2008, she is the first woman born in India to be declared a saint. Her feast day is July 28.

Who was Saint Alphonsa?

Anna Muttathupadathu was born on August 19, 1910, in Kudamaloor, near Kottayam, in the princely state of Travancore, today Kerala, in southwestern India. She belonged to a family of Syro-Malabar Christians, heirs of a tradition that traces the evangelization of the region back to the apostle Thomas. Her family called her Annakutty, "little Anna." Her mother died when she was very young, and she was raised by an aunt and by a great-uncle who was a priest. From the age of three she suffered from eczema, the first sign of health that would always be fragile.

As a child she was deeply struck by the life of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, whose message of the "Little Way" was then spreading throughout the world, and by the memory of Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara, the great evangelizer of Kerala in the previous century. She longed to give her life to God in prayer and penance.

Key dates in the life of Saint Alphonsa

- **August 19, 1910**: Born in Kudamaloor, near Kottayam, Kerala.

- **1920s**: Refuses an arranged marriage; badly burned on the feet, she remains disabled.
- **August 12, 1935**: Enters the novitiate of the Franciscan Clarist sisters at Bharananganam.
- **August 12, 1936**: Religious profession under the name Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception.
- **1939**: A severe bout of pneumonia leaves her greatly weakened.
- **July 28, 1946**: Dies at Bharananganam, aged 35.
- **February 8, 1986**: Beatified in Kottayam by Pope John Paul II during his visit to India.
- **October 12, 2008**: Canonized in Rome by Pope Benedict XVI.

Refusing an arranged marriage

When Anna was a teenager, her aunt sought to arrange a marriage for her, as custom required. She resisted with all her strength. Fearing she would be forced into it, she badly burned her feet in a fire, and remained disabled for the rest of her life. This drastic act, which the Church does not hold up as an example, above all shows the intensity of her desire to belong to Christ alone. Her family eventually allowed her to enter religious life.

A religious sister in suffering

She joined the Franciscan Clarist sisters at Bharananganam, a congregation of the Syro-Malabar Church inspired by Saint Francis and Saint Clare. In 1936 she took her vows under the name Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception. She was given a class to teach in a primary school, but illness often kept her from it. The following years were a long series of ailments: fevers, infections, pneumonia in 1939, not to mention the misunderstanding of those around her.

Sister Alphonsa lived these trials with great simplicity, uniting them to the Passion of Christ. Those who knew her spoke of her gentleness, her smile and her availability to the children and visitors who came to share their troubles with her. Her biographers also report mystical graces. She died on July 28, 1946, at the age of 35.



The tomb of Saint Alphonsa at Bharananganam.

From Bharananganam to Rome

Buried at Bharananganam, she soon drew Christian pilgrims of every denomination, and even believers of other religions. Graces and healings were attributed to her intercession. When he beatified her in Kottayam in 1986, Pope John Paul II stressed that she knew how to find her happiness in simple, ordinary things, and that she came to love suffering because she loved the suffering Christ. The healing of a child in 1999 was recognized as a miracle and

opened the way to her canonization, celebrated in Rome on October 12, 2008. Pope Benedict XVI then presented her as an exceptional woman who had lived in extreme physical and spiritual suffering.

A saint of the Syro-Malabar Church

Sister Alphonsa belonged to the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the Eastern Catholic Churches, in full communion with Rome but with its own liturgy, inherited from the Syriac tradition. Its faithful, numerous in Kerala, call themselves Saint Thomas Christians. Alphonsa is the first canonized saint from this Church. On October 12, 2008, she was proclaimed a saint in Saint Peter's Square together with three other Blesseds: the Italian Gaetano Errico, the Ecuadorian Narcisa de Jesús Martillo Morán and the Swiss sister Maria Bernarda Bütler. Her name is now given to churches, schools and hospitals throughout India, as well as to parishes of the Indian diaspora abroad.

Why is Saint Alphonsa invoked for the sick?

Saint Alphonsa founded no institution, wrote no book and made no great journey. Her holiness lies in a life offered in the midst of illness, in the humility of daily life. Because she suffered from childhood until her death, the sick, especially those with chronic illness, feel that she understands them. Many pilgrims bring sick children to her tomb. Like Thérèse of Lisieux, she shows that love can transfigure small things and even suffering. People pray to her for the sick, for people with disabilities, for vocations and for the Christians of India.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Alphonsa in art

Saint Alphonsa is shown as a young Indian religious sister in the habit and veil of the Franciscan Clarist Congregation, with a peaceful, gentle face. Statues often show her holding a cross, a sign of the suffering she united to Christ's. In

Bharananganam her image is surrounded by oil lamps and flowers. She appeared on an Indian postage stamp in 1996.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Alphonsa and the novena to Saint Alphonsa, prayed from July 19 to 27.

Where to pray to Saint Alphonsa

- **Bharananganam** (Kottayam district, Kerala): her tomb, in a chapel near the parish church, the center of her pilgrimage. Each year, from July 19 to 28, her feast draws huge crowds.
- **Kudamaloor**, near Kottayam: her native village.
- Many churches in Kerala and in the Indian diaspora are dedicated to her.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Alphonsa for the Sick

Saint Alphonsa left no traditional prayer of her own, but the popes who beatified and canonized her summed up her path to holiness in a few words. Below you will find what they said, then an original prayer to Saint Alphonsa by Saintspedia.

What the popes said about Saint Alphonsa

In his homily for her beatification in Kottayam, India, on February 8, 1986, Pope John Paul II said that she knew how to find her happiness in simple and ordinary things, and that she came to love suffering because she loved the suffering Christ.

In his homily for her canonization in Saint Peter's Square, Rome, on October 12, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI described her as an exceptional woman who lived in extreme physical and spiritual suffering.

Prayer to Saint Alphonsa

Saint Alphonsa, you knew illness from childhood until your death: pray for all who suffer in body and in mind. Obtain for them peace of heart and, if it is God's will, healing.

You found your joy in simple things: teach me to recognize God's love in my ordinary life.

You wanted to belong to Christ alone: support young people searching for their vocation and all who have given themselves to God.

You welcomed children and visitors with a smile: make me patient and kind toward those who come to me.

Watch over India and its Christians. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Pray it at the bedside of a sick person, for a child in the hospital, for someone living with a disability or a chronic illness, or for a young person discerning a vocation. It is also a good prayer for Syro-Malabar and Indian Catholic families living far from Kerala.

Saint Alphonsa's feast day is July 28, the day of her death in 1946. At Bharananganam, the festivities run from July 19 to 28. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Alphonsa, from July 19 to 27, and read the life of Saint Alphonsa.

Where to pray to her

Her tomb at Bharananganam, in the Kottayam district of Kerala, near the parish church, is one of the most visited pilgrimage sites of Christian India. Many pilgrims entrust sick children to her there.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Alphonsa

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Alphonsa Muttathupadathu. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast day, begin it on July 19: it ends on July 27, the day before her feast on July 28, during the very days when the festivities are held at Bharananganam.

You can pray it for a sick person, especially a sick child, for someone living with a disability or a long illness, for vocations, for the Church in India, or for your own intention. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father. The small act suggested for each day helps you carry your prayer into daily life. This novena is especially suited to accompanying someone who is ill, and it can be prayed at their bedside or together with them.

Day 1: Little Anna

Her mother died when she was very young, and Anna was taken in and raised by her aunt and her great-uncle. God cared for her through the people around her. No child is forgotten by God, and those who welcome a child share in his own fatherly care.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you children who have lost their parents, and those who raise them.

Today: Thank someone who has taken care of you.

Day 2: A model of holiness

The life of Thérèse of Lisieux made a deep impression on little Anna. The saints help us discover our own path, and holiness is often passed on from one heart to another.

Prayer: Lord, help me learn trust and love from the saints.

Today: Read a few lines from the life of a saint.

Day 3: Belonging to Christ alone

Anna refused the marriage that others wanted to impose on her, because she felt called to give herself to God. Her vocation was stronger than every pressure. Her path was painful, but her desire was clear: to give her whole life to Christ.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, support those who are searching for their vocation, and give them the freedom to answer you.

Today: Pray for vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Day 4: Living with a disability

Badly burned on her feet, she remained disabled all her life. Her wounded body did not stop her from loving and serving. In God's eyes, no one is reduced to their limitations.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you people with disabilities and those who care for them.

Today: Pay attention to the needs of someone with limited mobility.

Day 5: Consecrated life

In 1936 she made her vows with the Franciscan Clarist sisters. She gave thanks every day for her vocation, even when it brought suffering. Her community became her family, the place where she learned to love day after day.

Prayer: Lord, bless religious sisters and brothers, and make them happy to belong to you.

Today: Pray for a consecrated person you know.

Day 6: Serving despite illness

She was given a class of children to teach, but illness often forced her to stop. She offered what she could, without complaining. Love is measured not by what we accomplish but by how we give.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to give my best, even when my strength is limited.

Today: Do a humble task with care and love.

Day 7: United to the Cross

Fevers, infections, pneumonia: her life was a long trial. She united it to the Passion of Christ, and found in him the strength to go on. She did not seek suffering for its own sake, but she refused to let it separate her from God.

Prayer: Crucified Jesus, be close to all who suffer today.

Today: Visit or call someone who is sick.

Day 8: The smile

Those who knew her spoke of her gentleness and her smile. She comforted those who came to share their troubles with her, even when she herself was in pain.

Prayer: Lord, make me gentle and welcoming, even on difficult days.

Today: Offer a word of comfort to someone who is going through a hard time.

Day 9: Simple things

Her life had nothing dazzling about it. She knew how to find her happiness in simple, ordinary things, and it was there that God made her holy. Her tomb, visited today by crowds of every faith, testifies that a hidden life can bear great fruit.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Alphonsa, teach me to love you in everyday life. Amen.

Today: In the evening, give thanks for three small joys of the day.

Closing prayer

Saint Alphonsa, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. Pray for the sick, for people with disabilities, for vocations and for the Church in India. Obtain for us peace of heart in times of trial, and the grace to find God's love in the simple things of each day. Amen.

Saint Alphonsa, pray for us.

On July 28, her feast day, you may attend Mass, visit a sick person or, if you live near a church dedicated to her, join the celebrations of the local community.

To go further: the life of Saint Alphonsa and the prayer to Saint Alphonsa.

PILGRIMAGE

Tomb of Saint Alphonsa in Bharananganam

Bharananganam is a small town in Kottayam district, Kerala, in southwestern India. It is where Sister Alphonsa lived her years as a religious, where she died in 1946, and where she is buried. Her tomb, near the parish church, has become one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in Christian India.

From a nun's grave to a shrine

When she died on July 28, 1946, Sister Alphonsa was buried simply at Bharananganam, where the convent of the Franciscan Clarist Sisters stood. Very soon the faithful came to pray at her grave and to entrust sick people to her, especially children. Accounts of graces received multiplied, and the place drew Christian pilgrims from all over Kerala, as well as people of other religions. After her beatification in 1986 and her canonization in 2008, the pilgrimage took on national importance.

Visiting Bharananganam

The pilgrimage is centered on the saint's tomb, in the chapel that shelters it, near the parish church of Bharananganam. Pilgrims pray there, leave flowers and candles, and many entrust sick children to her. You can also discover places and mementos linked to her life as a religious sister. Every year, from July 19 to 28, the feast of Saint Alphonsa gathers a huge crowd.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Alphonsa. At her tomb, entrust to her the sick people you carry in your heart, then say the prayer to Saint Alphonsa. During the feast days, the novena to Saint Alphonsa accompanies the pilgrimage. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The tomb of Saint Alphonsa, inside the chapel.

Other places of Saint Alphonsa

- **Kudamaloor**, near Kottayam: her native village.
- **Kottayam**: the city where John Paul II beatified her on February 8, 1986.
- **Rome**: Saint Peter's Square, where Benedict XVI canonized her on October 12, 2008.

Practical information

Bharananganam is in the Pala area, a few dozen kilometers from Kottayam, the nearest main-line railway station. Crowds are very large during the July feast and on weekends, so allow plenty of time. For the schedule of Masses and celebrations, check the official website of the shrine or of the Diocese of Palai before you come.

Credits and sources

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