

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Ansgar

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Ansgar

Monk of Corbie, archbishop of Hamburg and apostle of Scandinavia in the ninth century.

Feast day	February 3
Born	801, Picardy, near Amiens, France
Died	February 3, 865, Bremen, Germany
Era	9th century
Patron saint of	Denmark, Scandinavia

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Ansgar, Apostle of the North

Novena to Saint Ansgar

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Ansgar

Saint Ansgar, also called Anskar or Oscar, was the first missionary to bring the Gospel to Sweden. A monk from Picardy trained at the abbey of Corbie, he became archbishop of Hamburg and bishop of Bremen in the ninth century, and gave his life to the mission among the Danes and the Swedes during the Viking Age. He is known as the "Apostle of the North." He died in Bremen in 865, is celebrated on February 3 and is honored as the patron saint of Denmark.

Who was Saint Ansgar?

Ansgar was born in 801 in Picardy, near Amiens, in the empire of Charlemagne. As a young man he entered the abbey of Corbie, one of the great intellectual centers of the Carolingian age, where he stood out for his love of study and his obedience. His superiors sent him to teach in Corbie's new foundation in Saxony, "New Corbie," today's Corvey in Westphalia.

Almost everything we know about him comes from the *Vita Anskarii*, written by his disciple and successor Saint Rimbert. It is a work of hagiography, but also one of the most valuable sources on Scandinavia in the Viking Age.

Key dates

- **801**: Birth in Picardy, near Amiens.
- **c. 822**: He teaches at Corvey, "New Corbie."
- **826**: First mission to Denmark, following the baptism of King Harald Klak.
- **829**: Arrival in Sweden, at Birka, at the invitation of King Björn.

- **831**: Archbishop of Hamburg; he receives the pallium from Pope Gregory IV.
- **845**: Hamburg is destroyed by the Danes; the diocese of Bremen is later united with Hamburg.
- **c. 850-852**: New missions in Denmark and return to Sweden.
- **February 3, 865**: Death in Bremen.

Mission in the land of the Vikings

In 826, the Danish king Harald Klak, an ally of the Franks, was baptized. Ansgar went with him to Denmark, but the king was soon driven out and the mission came to an early end.

Three years later, Emperor Louis the Pious received an invitation from King Björn, who ruled the region of Birka, a trading post on an island in Lake Mälaren, near present-day Stockholm. Ansgar set out in 829. On the way, the merchant ship carrying him was attacked by pirates, who took everything.

At Birka, he obtained freedom to preach. The prefect of the town, Herigar, was baptized and built a church: it was the first known Christian community in Sweden.

Archbishop of a poor diocese

In 831, Ansgar became the first archbishop of Hamburg, a see created as a base for the mission to the North, and Pope Gregory IV entrusted him with the evangelization of the Scandinavian peoples. But the diocese was poor, and its political protectors were weak.

In 845, the Danes of King Horik plundered and burned Hamburg. Ansgar did not lose heart. He negotiated peace with Horik and obtained permission to build churches at Hedeby and Ribe. He also received the diocese of Bremen,

united with Hamburg to give it resources. Later, he went back to Sweden himself to revive the mission, which the bishop he had left there had been forced to abandon.

Ransoming captives

According to the *Vita*, Ansgar did not rely only on the conversion of kings. He bought the freedom of captives, slaves and young Danes, and sent them to be trained in the monasteries of Corbie or Turnhout, so that one day they could serve the mission among their own people.

Rimbert also stresses the role of Christian women in spreading the faith, telling the story of a converted mother who lived in Birka. These accounts show fragile, scattered communities that the archbishop supported from afar through his envoys.

What does his holiness teach us?

Judged by its results, Ansgar's life might look like a failure: no Scandinavian king converted for good during his lifetime, and it would take two more centuries for Denmark and Sweden to become Christian. But he opened the way, founded the first churches of the North and trained disciples.

Rimbert reports that Ansgar asked God for only one miracle: to make him a good man. His holiness is one of perseverance, without illusions about success. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Ansgar and the novena to Saint Ansgar.

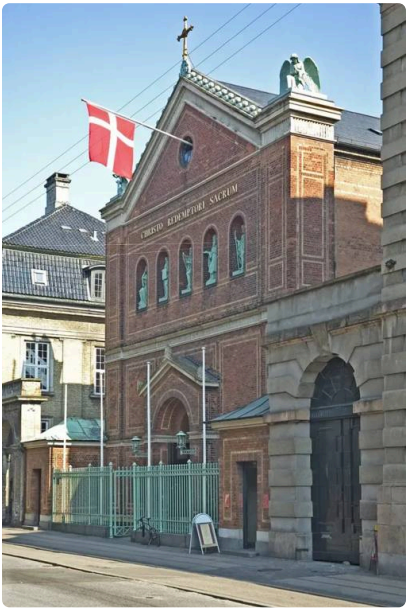
Why is Saint Ansgar the patron saint of Denmark?

Ansgar led the first Christian missions to Denmark, obtained from King Horik the right to build the first churches at Hedeby and Ribe, and ransomed young Danes to train them as future missionaries to their own people. For this reason

the Danes honor him as their patron and the first apostle of their country, and the Catholic cathedral of Copenhagen bears his name. More broadly, he is invoked as the patron of all Scandinavia, the "Apostle of the North."

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Ansgar in art

Saint Ansgar is usually shown as a bishop, with a miter and crozier, as in his bronze statue on the Trostbrücke in Hamburg. Stained glass windows depict him at prayer in his bishop's vestments. Because of his mission among the Vikings, images and monuments of him are found especially in northern Germany, Denmark and Sweden, like the memorial cross raised on the island of Björkö, the site of Birka.



Saint Ansgar's Cathedral in Copenhagen.

Where to pray to Saint Ansgar

- **Hamburg, Germany**: his relics are kept at the Catholic Cathedral of Saint Mary and at the church of Saints Ansgar and Bernard, nicknamed the "Kleiner Michel."
- **Copenhagen, Denmark**: the Catholic cathedral of Denmark is dedicated to him.
- **Birka, Sweden**: the archaeological site on the island of Björkö, where he founded the first Christian community in the country.
- **Corbie, France**: the former abbey where he became a monk.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Ansgar, Apostle of the North

No ancient prayer to Saint Ansgar has come into common use in the English-speaking world. His biography, written by his disciple Saint Rimbert, does however record something he said about miracles, which tells us a great deal about the kind of saint he was. You will find it below, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

A saying of Saint Ansgar to meditate on

> *When some people credited him with healings, he answered that, if he were worthy, he would ask the Lord for only one miracle: that by his grace God would make him a good man.*

Source: Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* (Life of Saint Ansgar), chapter 39, ninth century. Reported words, given here in substance.



Saint Ansgar at prayer, stained glass.

Prayer to Saint Ansgar, Apostle of the North

Saint Ansgar, Apostle of the North, you left the peace of your monastery to go to distant peoples: give me the courage to go out of myself to proclaim the Gospel.

You saw your church burned and your work ruined without losing trust: support those who are discouraged by failure, and teach me to persevere without waiting to see the fruit.

You ransomed captives to make them brothers: pray for the victims of slavery and human trafficking, and for those who work to set them free.

I entrust to you the Christians of Denmark, Sweden and all of Scandinavia, and my own intention: (name it in silence).

And obtain for me the one miracle you asked for: to become, by the grace of God, a good person. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Ansgar is celebrated on February 3, the day of his death in Bremen in 865. In the General Roman Calendar, his optional memorial falls on the same day as that of Saint Blaise. This prayer also fits:

- for missionaries and for those who share the faith in secular societies;
- in times of discouragement, when years of effort seem to bear no fruit;
- for victims of human trafficking and modern slavery;
- for the Church in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland.

A short invocation

> *Saint Ansgar, Apostle of the North, faithful in failure and patient in hope, pray for us.*

To get to know him better, read the life of Saint Ansgar, or pray the novena to Saint Ansgar.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Ansgar

This novena to Saint Ansgar is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the monk of Corbie who became archbishop of Hamburg and the first missionary to Denmark and Sweden, in the age of the Vikings. To end on his feast day, February 3, begin it on January 26. You can also pray it at any time, especially for missionaries, for the Church in Scandinavia and in times of discouragement.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a quiet moment. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed. If you miss a day, do not give up: perseverance was Ansgar's great virtue.

Day 1: A monk who loved to learn

Ansgar entered the abbey of Corbie as a young man and loved study and obedience. Before he was a missionary, he was a disciple who let himself be formed. Every mission begins by listening.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, give me a heart that is willing to learn and to be formed by God. Amen.

Today: Spend ten minutes reading Scripture or a good spiritual book.

Day 2: Sent to teach

His superiors sent him to teach at Corvey, the "New Corbie" in Saxony. He went where he was sent. Obedience took him, step by step, farther than he could have imagined.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, pray for teachers and catechists, and help me to go where God sends me. Amen.

Today: Thank a teacher who helped you in your life or your faith.

Day 3: A mission cut short

In 826, Ansgar followed the newly baptized King Harald Klak to Denmark. But the king was soon driven out, and the mission collapsed. It was the first of many setbacks. Ansgar did not conclude that God had abandoned him; he waited for the next door to open.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, when my efforts come to nothing, help me not to lose heart. Amen.

Today: Offer to God one of your disappointments.

Day 4: Robbed on the way

On his way to Sweden in 829, pirates attacked the ship and took everything Ansgar had. He arrived at Birka poor, but he arrived. The Gospel does not depend on our baggage.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, teach me to trust God when I lose what I thought I needed. Amen.

Today: Give away something you do not really need.

Day 5: The first Christians of Sweden

At Birka, the prefect Herigar was baptized and built a church. It was a small beginning, the first known Christian community in Sweden. God often begins great works with a few people. The mustard seed of the Gospel is the smallest of seeds, yet it becomes a tree where the birds of the air make their nests.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, pray for the Christians of Sweden and all of Scandinavia, and for small communities everywhere. Amen.

Today: Pray for your parish and for someone preparing for baptism.

Day 6: When everything burns

In 845, the Danes plundered and burned Hamburg, Ansgar's see. His church and his work went up in smoke. Rather than despair, he negotiated peace with the Danish king and obtained permission to build new churches.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, stand by all who have lost their homes, their work or their hope, and help them to rebuild. Amen.

Today: Help someone who is going through a hard time.

Day 7: Ransoming captives

Ansgar bought the freedom of captives and young slaves and had them trained in monasteries, so that they could one day bring the faith to their own people. He saw in each of them a brother.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, pray for the victims of slavery and trafficking today, and for all who work to free them. Amen.

Today: Learn about or support an organization that fights human trafficking.

Day 8: Women who carried the faith

Rimbert's *Life of Ansgar* tells of Christian women, among them a converted mother in Birka, who kept and passed on the faith in scattered communities. Faith is often handed on quietly, at home, in the prayers taught to a child and in the example of a life lived with God, long before any missionary arrives.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, bless mothers and grandmothers who pass on the faith, and all who keep it alive in difficult places. Amen.

Today: Thank a woman who helped you to believe.

Day 9: The only miracle

When people credited him with healings, Ansgar said he would ask God for only one miracle: to make him a good man. He died in Bremen on February 3, 865, without seeing the North become Christian, but faithful to the end.

Prayer: Saint Ansgar, obtain for me the grace to become good, and present to God the intention I have carried through this novena. Amen.

Today: Do one hidden act of kindness.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you sent Saint Ansgar to bring the light of the Gospel to the peoples of the North. Through his intercession, give us his perseverance in trials and his love for the poor and the captive. Make us faithful witnesses where you have placed us, and grant that, by your grace, we may become truly good. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Read more in the life of Saint Ansgar, or say the prayer to Saint Ansgar.

CREDITS

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