

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Barbara, Virgin and Martyr

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 4

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IN BRIEF

Saint Barbara, Virgin and Martyr

Virgin and martyr of the early centuries, whose legend made her the patron saint of firefighters, miners and artillerymen.

Feast day	December 4
Born	Third century, according to tradition, Nicomedia or Heliopolis, according to different traditions
Died	Third or early fourth century, according to tradition, Nicomedia or Heliopolis, according to different traditions
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since antiquity)
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	firefighters, miners, artillerymen, a good death

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Barbara

Chapel of Saint Barbara in Le Faouët, Brittany

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Barbara, Virgin and Martyr

Saint Barbara is a virgin martyr of the early Christian centuries, venerated in both East and West. Her story, handed down through legendary accounts written long after her death, tells that her father shut her up in a tower, then beheaded her himself, before being struck by lightning. From this story grew an immense devotion: Saint Barbara is the patron saint of firefighters, miners and artillerymen. She is celebrated on December 4.

Who was Saint Barbara?

It must be said from the outset: we know almost nothing certain about Saint Barbara. The oldest accounts of her passion date at best from the seventh century, and they agree neither on the place nor on the date of her martyrdom. Some place it at Nicomedia, in Asia Minor, others at Heliopolis, in Egypt or Syria, under the emperor Maximian or during a third-century persecution. Her cult, on the other hand, is ancient and widespread: she has been invoked since the early Middle Ages in Constantinople, and then throughout the West.

This is why, in the reform of the liturgical calendar in 1969, the Catholic Church removed her feast from the General Roman Calendar for lack of sufficient historical data. This was not a condemnation: Saint Barbara remains in the Roman Martyrology on December 4, and her feast is still celebrated in many places and by the Eastern Churches, which call her "the Great Martyr."



Saint Barbara, by Jan van Eyck (1437, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp).

Key dates in the tradition of Saint Barbara

- **Third or early fourth century**: Martyrdom, according to tradition, at Nicomedia or Heliopolis.
- **c. seventh century**: The first Greek accounts of her passion are written.
- **Early Middle Ages**: Her cult spreads in Constantinople, then in Italy.
- **Thirteenth century**: The *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine makes her story popular in the West.
- **Fourteenth and fifteenth centuries**: She is counted among the Fourteen Holy Helpers, invoked in times of danger.
- **1489-1512**: Construction of the Chapel of Sainte-Barbe at Le Faouët, in Brittany.
- **1969**: Her feast leaves the General Roman Calendar but remains in the Martyrology on December 4.

The legend of the tower

According to the traditional account, Barbara was the daughter of a rich pagan named Dioscorus. To shield her from prying eyes and suitors, her father made her live in a tower. While Dioscorus was away, she discovered the Christian faith and asked for baptism. She then had a third window opened in the tower, in honor of the Trinity, and traced a cross on the wall. The tower, present in almost all her images, became her emblem.

On his return, her father realized that his daughter was a Christian. In a rage, he wanted to kill her. Barbara fled, but was handed over to the governor, who had her tortured. The legend multiplies torments and miraculous healings, in the manner of martyrdom accounts of that period. She refused to deny her faith. Her own father beheaded her; at once, he was struck by lightning.

Why is Saint Barbara the patron saint of firefighters, miners and artillerymen?

That last episode explains most of her patronages. Since lightning avenged her death, she is invoked against storms and sudden death. With the arrival of gunpowder, she became the patron of all who handle fire and explosives: artillerymen, fireworks makers, then miners, quarry workers and firefighters.

In the mines of northern France, Belgium and Germany, Saint Barbara's Day on December 4 was a holiday when Mass was celebrated before a shared meal. To this day, firefighting units and artillery regiments celebrate her every year; in the United States, the field artillery honors her through the Order of Saint Barbara.

On sailing ships, the powder magazine was often placed under her protection, and in French it was even called the *sainte-barbe*. She is also invoked for a good death: tradition says that before her execution she asked God that those who called on her would not die without receiving the sacraments.



Saint Barbara reading, by Robert Campin (1438, Prado Museum).

A much-loved saint

Few saints have been depicted so often. Flemish painters show her as an elegant young woman absorbed in a book, with her tower under construction in the background. With Saint Margaret of Antioch and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, she forms the trio of the most popular virgin martyrs of the Middle Ages.

In Provence, "Saint Barbara's wheat," sown on December 4 in small dishes, announces Christmas: if it grows well, they say, the year will be good. In the Americas, her name lives on in places such as Santa Barbara in California.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Barbara in art

- **The tower**, often with three windows, recalling the Holy Trinity.
- **The palm of martyrdom**, held in her hand.

- **A crown**, sign of the victory of the martyrs.
- **A chalice and a host**, sign of the Communion she obtains for the dying.
- **A book**, especially in Flemish paintings, where she is shown reading.
- **A cannon or lightning**, in later images linked to her patronages.



The Chapel of Sainte-Barbe at Le Faouët, in Brittany (15th-16th century).

What does her holiness teach us?

Even if her story is largely legendary, Saint Barbara bears witness to the memory the Church keeps of the anonymous martyrs of the early centuries, often women, who chose to die rather than deny Christ. Her legend speaks of a faith stronger than fear, and of a trust that stays with us to the very last moment. Catholics pray to her for those who risk their lives in their work and for a peaceful death, reconciled with God.

To pray with her, use the prayer to Saint Barbara for those who face danger, or follow the novena to Saint Barbara, from November 25 to December 3, the eve of her feast.

Where to pray to Saint Barbara

- **Le Faouët** (Brittany, France): the Chapel of Sainte-Barbe, clinging to the rock above the Ellé valley.
- **Kyiv** (Ukraine): Saint Volodymyr's Cathedral, which keeps relics attributed to her.
- **Kutná Hora** (Czech Republic): the great Gothic Church of Saint Barbara, built by the town's silver miners.
- **The mining regions** of northern France and Lorraine, where many churches and chapels are dedicated to her.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Barbara for Those Who Face Danger

There is no prayer composed by Saint Barbara, and her story has reached us through legendary accounts written long after her death. Many popular prayers are addressed to her, but their wording varies from region to region and century to century. This page therefore offers a psalm of protection that Christians have long prayed in danger, followed by an original prayer to Saint Barbara for firefighters, miners, soldiers and all who face danger.

A psalm for times of danger

Psalm 91 (90 in the Latin numbering) is the great prayer of those who entrust themselves to God in the face of danger. The Church sings it every week at Night Prayer (Compline). Here are a few verses, translated from the Latin by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the shadow of the Almighty, say to the Lord: "My refuge, my fortress, my God in whom I trust!"*
>
> *He will cover you with His wings, and under His feathers you will find refuge; His faithfulness is a shield.*
>
> *You will not fear the terrors of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the plague that prowls in the darkness.*
>
> *For He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways.*

Source: Psalm 91 (90), verses 1-2, 4-6 and 11, after the Vulgate.

Saint Barbara's last wish

According to the accounts of her passion, before being beheaded Barbara asked God to grant His grace to those who would remember her, and medieval tradition took from this that she obtains for the dying the grace of receiving the sacraments. That is why people pray to her for a good death, prepared and reconciled. This wish belongs to legend rather than history, but it expresses well the meaning of her cult.

Prayer to Saint Barbara for those who face danger

> *Saint Barbara, you who discovered Christ in the solitude of your tower and remained faithful to Him even to martyrdom, teach me to keep the faith when everything seems to stand against it.*
>
> *I entrust to you those who face danger in their work: firefighters, miners, artillerymen and soldiers, rescue workers and all who risk their lives for others. Keep them safe in fire, underground and in combat, and bring them home safe and sound to their families.*
>
> *Protect us from fear and violence. And when the hour of our death comes, obtain for us the grace to meet it in peace, surrounded by prayer, reconciled with God and with our brothers and sisters.*
>
> *I also 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

Saint Barbara is celebrated on December 4, the day when firefighters, miners and artillerymen traditionally keep Saint Barbara's Day. You can pray to her for a loved one exposed to danger, during a storm, or for someone at the end of life. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Barbara, and read the life and legend of Saint Barbara.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Barbara

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition of Saint Barbara. It is not an official liturgical text. The episodes it recalls belong to the legend of the saint, which we meditate on for what it says about faith. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin on November 25; it ends on December 3, the day before her feast on December 4.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then a Hail Mary. This novena can be prayed as a family or as a team, for example in a fire station, a military unit or a miners' association, in the days before Saint Barbara's Day. You may also pray it for a single person: a firefighter in your family, a son or daughter in the armed forces, or a loved one who is seriously ill.



The Chapel of Sainte-Barbe at Le Faouët, in Brittany.

Day 1: The tower

According to the legend, Barbara lived shut up in a tower. It was there, in solitude, that she discovered Christ. God can reach us even in the places where we feel enclosed, whether by circumstances, illness or loneliness.

Prayer: Lord, come to me where I feel shut in. Make my solitude a place of meeting with you.

Today: Spend ten minutes alone in silence, listening to God.

Day 2: Baptism

Barbara asked for baptism in secret. She knew what it might cost her, and she chose it anyway. Her baptism was not a formality but a decision that shaped her whole life.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the grace of my baptism. Help me live it with courage and faithfulness.

Today: Make the sign of the cross slowly, thinking of your baptism.

Day 3: Three windows

Barbara had a third window opened in her tower, in honor of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Her faith was written even into the walls around her. What we believe can shape the places where we live.

Prayer: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. May my home and my life be open to your light.

Today: Place a crucifix or a holy image in your home.

Day 4: Facing her father

Barbara's father rejected her faith and became her enemy. Sometimes our deepest choices are misunderstood by those closest to us. Love does not always mean agreement, but it never means hatred. Barbara's story invites us to remain faithful without closing our hearts to those who oppose us.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you families divided over faith. Help me to love those who do not understand me.

Today: Pray for a relative with whom things are difficult.

Day 5: Courage

Handed over to the governor, Barbara refused to deny Christ. The legend makes her a figure of courage under trial. In many countries today, Christians still pay a high price for their faith.

Prayer: Spirit of fortitude, give me the courage to stay faithful when it costs me. Sustain the Christians who are persecuted today.

Today: Learn about Christians who are persecuted somewhere in the world and pray for them.

Day 6: Those who face fire

Because lightning struck her executioner, Barbara became the patron of firefighters and of all who handle fire. They risk their lives to save ours, often without knowing the people they rescue.

Prayer: Lord, protect firefighters and rescue workers. Keep them safe in danger and bring them home to their families.

Today: Thank, in one way or another, those who come to our aid.

Day 7: Those who work underground

For generations, miners entrusted their lives to Saint Barbara before going down the shaft. Much of their work was hard and dangerous, and many never came back up.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you workers exposed to danger, and those who have died at work. Grant them peace.

Today: Pray for someone whose work is hard or risky.

Day 8: Those who serve in arms

Artillerymen and many soldiers celebrate Saint Barbara's Day. They often serve far from home, in situations where death is close. Their families, too, carry the weight of that absence.

Prayer: God of peace, watch over soldiers and their families. Put an end to wars and enlighten those who make decisions.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary for peace.

Day 9: A good death

Tradition says that Barbara obtains for the dying the grace to receive the sacraments. She teaches us to look at death with trust, as a passage to meet the Lord we have tried to serve.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Barbara, help me to live each day ready to meet you. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who is ill or near the end of life.

Closing prayer

Saint Barbara, virgin and martyr, you who preferred Christ to your own life, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Protect those who face danger, comfort those who have lost a loved one, and obtain for us a peaceful death in the friendship of God. Amen.

Saint Barbara, pray for us, for our firefighters, our miners and our soldiers, and for all who will die today. Amen.

To go further, read the life and legend of Saint Barbara and the prayer to Saint Barbara for those who face danger.

PILGRIMAGE

Chapel of Saint Barbara in Le Faouët, Brittany

The Chapel of Saint Barbara in Le Faouët, in Morbihan, is one of the most spectacular shrines dedicated to the saint. Built in the late 15th century, it clings to the side of a rocky hill overlooking the Ellé valley. It has been a place of Breton pilgrimage and "pardon" for more than five centuries.

A chapel born of a storm

According to tradition, a local lord, caught in a violent storm while hunting on the hill, called upon Saint Barbara, protector against lightning, and vowed to build her a chapel if he was spared. Construction ran from 1489 to about 1512. The choice of site, on the rock face, makes the building astonishing: it is built lengthwise, parallel to the slope, and seems to be set in balance above the valley.



The Chapel of Saint Barbara in Le Faouët, in Morbihan.

The staircase, the bell, and the Chapel of Saint Michael

The chapel is reached by a great stone staircase, added in the 18th century, which descends from the plateau in several flights. Near the staircase, a small chapel dedicated to Saint Michael is perched on a rock. A bell, which pilgrims customarily ring, recalls the popular character of the pilgrimage. A fountain flows below. The whole ensemble, in Flamboyant Gothic style, is protected as a historic monument.

The interior and the pardon

Inside, the old stained glass, statues, and woodwork evoke the life of Saint Barbara and the piety of generations of pilgrims. Each year a pardon gathers the faithful there, with Mass and a procession, in the Breton tradition. The

chapel also remains a place of silent prayer for those who come to entrust a loved one who is exposed to danger.



The Chapel of Saint Barbara in Le Faouët, the interior.

Praying at the Chapel of Saint Barbara

Before your visit, you may wish to reread the life and legend of Saint Barbara. The climb up the staircase can become a prayer: at each flight, entrust a person whose work puts their life at risk. On site, the prayer to Saint Barbara lends itself well to a time of quiet reflection. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places connected with Saint Barbara

- **Le Faouët**: the nearby Chapel of Saint Fiacre, famous for its carved wooden rood screen from the late 15th century.

- **Kutná Hora** (Czech Republic): the Church of Saint Barbara, a Gothic masterpiece raised by the silver-mining town and now a World Heritage Site.
- **Kyiv** (Ukraine): Saint Volodymyr's Cathedral, which preserves relics attributed to her.
- **The mining basins** of Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Lorraine, where many churches and chapels are dedicated to her.

Practical information

The chapel is a few kilometers from the town of Le Faouët, in west-central Brittany, between Quimperlé and Gourin. A parking lot gives access to the top of the staircase; going down and climbing back up takes some effort. Check the date of the pardon, opening hours, and Mass times with the parish or the tourist office before you come.

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