

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Bede the Venerable

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: May 25

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Bede the Venerable

Monk of Jarrow, historian of Christian England and Doctor of the Church.

Feast day	May 25
Born	c. 672-673, Northumbria, on the lands of the monastery of Wearmouth, England
Died	May 26, 735, Monastery of Jarrow, Northumbria, England
Canonized	Immemorial cult; proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 1899 by Pope Leo XIII
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	historians, scholars

In this booklet

Life

Prayer of Saint Bede: "To You, the Fountain of All Wisdom"

Novena to Saint Bede the Venerable

Durham Cathedral, Tomb of Saint Bede the Venerable

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Bede the Venerable

Saint Bede the Venerable was an 8th-century English monk who hardly ever left his monastery of Jarrow, in the north of England, and whose work nonetheless spread throughout Europe. A Bible commentator, scholar and master of the reckoning of time, he is best known for his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which has earned him the title "Father of English History." He died in 735 and is celebrated on May 25. Pope Leo XIII proclaimed him a Doctor of the Church in 1899.

Who was Saint Bede the Venerable?

Bede was born around 672 or 673 in Northumbria, one of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms converted to Christianity a few decades earlier, on lands belonging to the monastery of Wearmouth. He tells us almost nothing about his family.

At the age of seven he was entrusted to Abbot Benedict Biscop, founder of Wearmouth, then moved to the twin monastery of Saint Paul at Jarrow, founded in 682 and led by Abbot Ceolfrith. He stayed there all his life. He sums it up himself at the end of his *History*: he devoted all his effort to meditating on the Scriptures, and between keeping the monastic rule and the daily singing in church, he always found his joy in learning, teaching or writing.

The title "Venerable," given to him from the 9th century, expresses the respect later generations had for him. A late legend explains it by an angel who completed an inscription on his tomb, but this is a pious story.

Key dates in the life of Saint Bede

- **Around 672-673**: Born in Northumbria.

- **Around 680**: Entrusted at the age of seven to the monastery of Wearmouth.
- **682**: Founding of the monastery of Jarrow, where he is sent.
- **686**: An epidemic devastates the community; according to an early account, only Abbot Ceolfrith and a young boy, probably Bede, are left to sing the Office.
- **Around 692**: Ordained a deacon at nineteen.
- **Around 702-703**: Ordained a priest at thirty by Saint John of Beverley.
- **725**: Writes his treatise *The Reckoning of Time* (*De temporum ratione*).
- **731**: Completes the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.
- **May 26, 735**: Dies at Jarrow, on the eve of the Ascension; liturgical tradition kept May 25.
- **Early 11th century**: His relics are moved to Durham.
- **1899**: Pope Leo XIII proclaims him a Doctor of the Church.

A monk at the service of the Word

Bede's life was first of all that of a Benedictine monk: the Liturgy of the Hours, work and community life. Benedict Biscop had brought back from his journeys to Rome a library that was exceptional for the time, and it was in these books that Bede was formed. He learned Latin, some Greek, grammar, poetry, astronomy and above all the Bible, which he read with the Fathers of the Church, especially Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome and Saint Gregory the Great.

Most of his work consists of commentaries on the Bible, written to help priests and monks to preach. Bede explains the text, looks for the literal sense and then the spiritual sense, and writes to be understood. His homilies on the Gospels were read for centuries in the monastic Office.

The historian of Christian England

In 731 Bede completed the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, in five books. It tells the story of the evangelization of Britain, from the mission sent by Gregory the Great with Saint Augustine of Canterbury in 597 down to his own day, by way of the Irish monks who came from Iona, such as Saint Aidan. It also includes the account of the martyrdom of Saint Alban, the first martyr of Britain.

What makes the work so valuable is its method. Bede names his informants, copies letters and documents, and distinguishes what he knows from what he has been told. His narrative is full of miracles, as the taste of the time required, but he always tries to support what he affirms. Without him, we would know little of the first Christian centuries of England.

The scholar of time

Bede was also interested in computus, the science of calculating the date of Easter. In *The Reckoning of Time* (725), he explains the movements of the moon and the sun, and even describes the link between the moon and the tides.

Above all, he helped spread the custom of counting years from the Incarnation, that is, "Anno Domini" (AD). This system, proposed in the 6th century by Dionysius Exiguus, became general in the West largely thanks to Bede's *History*.

The death of Bede

We know of his last days thanks to a letter from his disciple Cuthbert. Though ill, Bede went on teaching and dictating, in particular an English translation of the Gospel of Saint John.

On the evening of May 25, 735, the eve of the Ascension, he gave his brothers the few objects he owned, dictated the last sentence of his work and died singing the "Glory be to the Father." According to the medieval custom of counting the liturgical day from Vespers, his death already belonged to May 26.

His remains, first buried at Jarrow, were carried to Durham early in the 11th century, where they rest today in the Galilee Chapel of the cathedral.



The tomb of Saint Bede in the Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral.

Why is Saint Bede the patron saint of historians and scholars?

Saint Bede shows that a very simple life, spent almost entirely in one place, can bear immense fruit. He united prayer and study without setting them against each other, and he put his intelligence at the service of his brothers. His care

for sources and truth makes him a natural patron of historians and scholars, and he is gladly invoked for students, teachers, researchers and all who work with books.

To pray with him, read the prayer that closes his Ecclesiastical History, or follow the novena to Saint Bede the Venerable, from May 16 to 24, so that it ends on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Bede in art

- **The Benedictine habit**: he is shown as a monk, often elderly.
- **A book, a pen or a writing desk**: the scholar and historian at work.
- **A young monk taking dictation**: a reminder of his last days, when he dictated his translation of the Gospel of John.

Where to pray to Saint Bede

- **Durham** (England): Durham Cathedral, where his tomb lies in the Galilee Chapel.
- **Jarrow**: Saint Paul's Church, heir to his monastery, part of which dates from Anglo-Saxon times.
- **Sunderland**: Saint Peter's Church, Monkwearmouth, on the site of the monastery he entered as a child.

PRAYER

Prayer of Saint Bede: "To You, the Fountain of All Wisdom"

Saint Bede the Venerable ended his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, in 731, with a short prayer addressed to Christ. It sums up his whole life as a monk and scholar: study received as a gift, and the desire to reach one day the One who is the source of all wisdom. Below you will find this text, then an original prayer to Saint Bede.

"To you, the fountain of all wisdom" (Ecclesiastical History V, 24)

Bede addresses Jesus right after listing his own works. Translated from the Latin by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *I pray you, good Jesus: you who in your goodness have granted me to drink sweetly the words of your knowledge, grant me also in your kindness to come one day to you, the fountain of all wisdom, and to stand forever before your face.*

Source: Bede the Venerable, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, book V, chapter 24, completed in 731 ("Teque deprecor, bone Iesu...").

Bede's last song

According to the letter of his disciple Cuthbert, who describes his death, Bede died on the evening of May 25, 735, singing the doxology: "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit." You can end your prayer as he did, with these simple words, which are the heart of the Office he sang all his life.

Original prayer to Saint Bede the Venerable

Saint Bede, you spent your life between the choir and the library: teach me to unite prayer and work.

You read the Scriptures with patience and love: give me a taste for the Word of God. When I study, keep me from pride; when I teach, give me clarity and gentleness.

You told with care the story of those who handed on the faith to you: help me to receive with gratitude what I have been given, and to pass it on in my turn. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

And when the evening of my life comes, obtain for me the grace to fall asleep as you did, giving glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Bede is celebrated on May 25. You can pray to him at the start of a school year, before an exam, or when beginning a work of research or writing. Historians, teachers, librarians and students will find in him a friend who knows the joys and the labors of study.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Bede the Venerable, and discover the life of Saint Bede.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Bede the Venerable

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and writings of Saint Bede the Venerable. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on May 16; it then ends on May 24. It is also well suited to the start of a school year or to the weeks before exams.

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 and a "Glory be," the prayer Bede sang as he died. The suggested act helps you carry the prayer into your day. You can pray it alone, as a family, or with a class or study group.



Saint Bede the Venerable, church window or statue.

Day 1: A child entrusted to God

At the age of seven, Bede was entrusted to the monastery of Wearmouth. He would hardly ever leave it again. What could have been a narrow life became, by the grace of God, an immense one. God can make great things grow from circumstances we did not choose.

Prayer: Lord, I give you what I did not choose in my life. Make it a place where you can act.

Today: Thank God for someone who handed on the faith to you.

Day 2: Faithful to the Office

During the epidemic of 686, according to an early account, an abbot and a young boy went on singing the Office alone at Jarrow. The prayer of the Church does not stop, even when everything seems to collapse.

Prayer: Lord, give me faithfulness in prayer, even on days of weariness or trial.

Today: Pray one hour of the Liturgy of the Hours, for example Morning or Evening Prayer.

Day 3: Meditating on the Scriptures

Bede devoted his life to explaining the Bible. He read it slowly, seeking to understand it and to help others understand it. For him, Scripture was not a text to be mastered but a voice to be heard.

Prayer: Word of God, come and dwell in my memory and my heart. Give me the patience to listen to you.

Today: Read slowly the prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18).

Day 4: The joy of learning

Bede says that he always found his joy in learning, teaching or writing. For him, study was not a personal ambition but a way of serving God and his brothers.

Prayer: Lord, keep alive in me the desire to know, and purify it of all pride.

Today: Spend some time learning something new, with attention.

Day 5: Handing on

Bede formed generations of monks. He wrote for his students and for the priests who had to preach. What we have received is meant to be given.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you teachers, catechists and parents. Give them clarity and patience.

Today: Pray for a teacher who mattered in your life, or get in touch with them.

Day 6: Remembering those who went before us

In his *History*, Bede tells the lives of the missionaries, monks and bishops who brought the faith to his people. To remember is to give thanks. Our faith, too, comes to us through a long chain of witnesses.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for all who went before me in faith. Make me worthy of their legacy.

Today: Pray for the departed of your family or your parish.



The Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral, where Saint Bede rests.

Day 7: The love of truth

Bede cites his sources and distinguishes what he knows from what he has heard. This honesty is a form of charity toward his readers. In an age of rumors and quick judgments, his example remains timely.

Prayer: Spirit of truth, keep me from lies, gossip and hasty judgment.

Today: Before passing on a piece of news, take the time to check it.

Day 8: God's time

Bede calculated the dates of Easter and helped spread the custom of counting years from the birth of Christ. For him, all time belongs to the Lord, and every year is a "year of the Lord."

Prayer: Lord, master of time, teach me to live each day as a gift, and not to waste the hours you give me.

Today: Offer the beginning of your day to God, before any other task.

Day 9: Dying while giving glory

On the evening of May 25, 735, Bede finished a last sentence, gave away his few belongings and died singing "Glory be to the Father." He worked to the very end, without anxiety, at peace with God and his brothers.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Bede, grant me to come one day to you, the fountain of all wisdom. Amen.

Today: End the day by praying the "Glory be" slowly.

Closing prayer

Saint Bede the Venerable, you loved the Word of God and the truth: I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for students, researchers and all who teach. Obtain for us the grace to seek God in all that we learn, and to find him. Teach us to love the truth, to remember with gratitude those who handed on the faith to us, and to end each day, as you did, by giving glory to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Bede the Venerable and the prayer of Saint Bede to Jesus, the fountain of all wisdom.

PILGRIMAGE

Durham Cathedral, Tomb of Saint Bede the Venerable

Durham Cathedral, in northeast England, houses the tomb of Saint Bede the Venerable in the Galilee Chapel, at the west end of the building. It is the main place of pilgrimage dedicated to the monk of Jarrow, about twelve miles from the monastery where he spent his entire life.

How Bede's relics came to Durham

Bede died at Jarrow in 735 and was first buried there. In the early 11th century, a Durham priest, Alfred Westou, took his relics to place them beside those of Saint Cuthbert, the great saint of Northumbria. In the 14th century, they were installed in the Galilee Chapel. The medieval shrine was destroyed during the Reformation, in the 16th century, but the bones were buried on the spot. The present tomb, a simple stone slab bearing a Latin inscription in honor of Bede, dates from the 1830s.



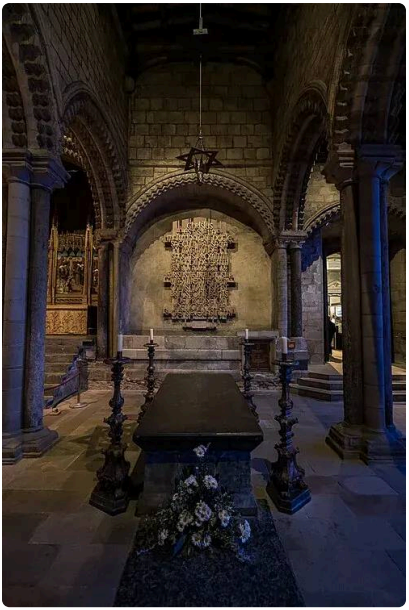
Durham Cathedral, above the River Wear.

The cathedral and the Galilee Chapel

Durham Cathedral, begun in 1093, is one of the masterpieces of Romanesque architecture in Europe, with its massive piers decorated with geometric patterns. Together with the neighboring castle, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Galilee Chapel, added in the late 12th century, is lighter, with its zigzag-carved arches. This is where Bede rests. At the other end of the building, behind the choir, is the tomb of Saint Cuthbert. The cathedral is now an Anglican church, but it welcomes pilgrims of all denominations.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Bede

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Bede, or a chapter of his *Ecclesiastical History*. On site, a time of silence before the slab lets you entrust an intention, for example for studies or intellectual work. The prayer that closes his History suits this moment well, as does the "Glory be to the Father" that he sang as he died. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The tomb of Saint Bede, Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral.

Other places of Saint Bede

- **Jarrow**: the Church of Saint Paul, whose chancel dates from the Anglo-Saxon monastery, and the neighboring monastic ruins. A dedication stone from 685 is preserved there.
- **Sunderland**: the Church of Saint Peter at Monkwearmouth, on the site of the monastery of Wearmouth, which Bede entered at age seven.
- **Jarrow Hall**: a museum devoted to Anglo-Saxon Northumbria and the age of Bede, near the Church of Saint Paul.
- **Holy Island (Lindisfarne)**: the island of the monastery of Saint Aidan and Saint Cuthbert, whose story Bede told.

Practical information

Durham is reached by train from London, Newcastle, or Edinburgh. The cathedral stands on a hill in the old town, a few minutes' walk from the station. Jarrow and Sunderland can be reached from Newcastle by the regional metro. Check the times of services and visits with the cathedral before you come; around May 25, celebrations in honor of Bede may be held.

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: anonymous, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The tomb of Saint Bede in the Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral.: Image: robert scarth, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Bede the Venerable, church window or statue.: Image: Unknown author, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral, where Saint Bede rests.: Image: Rob Farrow, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Durham Cathedral, above the River Wear.: Image: mattbuck (category), CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The tomb of Saint Bede, Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral.: Image: Brian Deegan, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com