

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Benedict Biscop

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 12

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IN BRIEF

Saint Benedict Biscop

Seventh-century Anglo-Saxon monk, founder of the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow and patron saint of Sunderland.

Feast day	January 12
Born	c. 628, Northumbria, England
Died	January 12, 689, Wearmouth, England
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Sunderland

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Benedict Biscop

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Benedict Biscop

Saint Benedict Biscop was an Anglo-Saxon nobleman of Northumbria who became a monk, a great traveler and the founder of the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow, in the north of England. Through his six journeys to Rome, he brought to England books, relics, craftsmen and liturgical customs from the Continent. It was in his monasteries that Saint Bede the Venerable grew up. He died on January 12, 689, and his feast is kept on that day.

Who was Saint Benedict Biscop?

Born around 628, Biscop belonged to the noble family of the Baducings. His name means "bishop" in Old English, which suggests that his parents were Christians. He first served at the court of King Oswiu of Northumbria as a *thegn*, a warrior attached to the king. In 653, at the age of twenty-five, he gave up this career to devote himself to God and set out on pilgrimage to Rome.

His life is well known thanks to Saint Bede, who was a monk in his monasteries and wrote the *Lives of the Abbots* of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Bede also composed a homily for the anniversary of his death, a sign that Benedict was venerated as a saint very soon after he died.

Key dates

- **c. 628**: Born in Northumbria, into the Baducing family.
- **653**: Leaves the king's service and sets out for Rome with Wilfrid.
- **c. 665-667**: Second journey to Rome, then two years of monastic life at Lérins, where he takes the name Benedict.
- **667-669**: At the request of Pope Vitalian, he accompanies Theodore of Tarsus, the new archbishop of Canterbury, to England.

- **669-671**: He governs the abbey of Saints Peter and Paul at Canterbury.
- **674**: Founds the monastery of Saint Peter at Wearmouth.
- **682**: Founds the monastery of Saint Paul at Jarrow.
- **January 12, 689**: Dies at Wearmouth after a long paralysis.

The pilgrim of Rome

Benedict Biscop made the journey to Rome six times, at a time when crossing Gaul and the Alps was a long and risky undertaking. He made the first, in 653, with the young Wilfrid, the future bishop of York, whom he had met at the court of Kent. Returning from his second journey, around 665, he stopped at the abbey of Lérins, in Provence. There he received the monastic tonsure and stayed for two years. It was then that he took the name Benedict, in honor of Saint Benedict of Nursia.

He would have liked to end his days at Lérins. But during his third stay in Rome, in 667, Pope Vitalian asked him to accompany to England the Greek monk Theodore of Tarsus, whom he had just named archbishop of Canterbury, and to serve as his interpreter. Benedict agreed. For two years he governed the monastery at Canterbury while awaiting the arrival of Abbot Hadrian, then left again for the Continent to buy books in Rome and Vienne.

Wearmouth and Jarrow

Back in Northumbria, he received from King Ecgfrith a large estate at the mouth of the River Wear, where in 674 he founded the monastery of Saint Peter at Wearmouth. He brought masons from Gaul to build a stone church, as well as glassmakers and other Frankish craftsmen to decorate it. These craftsmen in turn trained local workers.

From his travels Benedict brought back a great number of books, relics, other precious objects and a privilege from Pope Agatho guaranteeing the independence of the abbey. In 682 he founded a second monastery, Saint Paul's at Jarrow, with twenty monks led by Ceolfrith. Among them, probably, was the young Bede. The library Benedict assembled made Wearmouth-Jarrow one of the great cultural centers of Europe in its time.

An ending marked by trial

In 685 Benedict entrusted Wearmouth to his cousin Eosterwine and left for Rome one last time. On his return he learned that the plague had carried off Eosterwine, and he confirmed the election of Sigfrith as successor. Both men were then struck by paralysis. Sigfrith died in August 688, and Benedict on January 12, 689. Ceolfrith became abbot of both monasteries. Around 980, Saint Æthelwold of Winchester had his relics moved to Thorney Abbey, which helped spread his cult.

Why is Saint Benedict Biscop the patron saint of Sunderland?

Monkwearmouth, the site of his first monastery, lies in the city of Sunderland. In 2004 Sunderland chose him as its patron saint, honoring the man who brought stone building, glassmaking and a great library to the banks of the Wear. Because he gathered books and brought craftsmen to England, he is also a natural intercessor for librarians, teachers, scholars and artists who serve the beauty of worship.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Benedict Biscop in art

Benedict Biscop is usually shown as an abbot in a monk's habit, holding a book, as in English stained-glass windows. The book recalls the library he gathered on his journeys. Images of him are found above all in the North East

of England, in the churches of Wearmouth and Jarrow and in places linked to Bede. Without a name or an inscription, he can easily be confused with other abbots, so the setting is often the best clue.

What can we learn from Saint Benedict Biscop?

Benedict Biscop is a saint of handing on. He understood that faith is nourished by beauty, liturgy and books, and he spent his life carrying them from one world to another. Without him, Bede's work would probably not have been possible. We can pray to him for librarians, teachers, craftsmen of sacred art and monastic communities.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Benedict Biscop and the novena to Saint Benedict Biscop.

Where to pray to Saint Benedict Biscop

- **Sunderland** (England): Saint Peter's Church, Monkwearmouth, on the site of his first monastery.
- **Jarrow** (England): Saint Paul's Church, on the site of his second monastery.
- **Wombourne** (Staffordshire): the parish church dedicated to him.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Benedict Biscop for Study and Beautiful Worship

There is no widely used traditional prayer to Saint Benedict Biscop. Saintspedia offers this original prayer, inspired by what Saint Bede tells of him: the tireless pilgrim to Rome, the founder of Wearmouth and Jarrow, the lover of books and of beautiful worship.

The monk who brought back books

Benedict Biscop made the journey to Rome six times. He came back laden with manuscripts, relics and precious objects, and he brought masons and glassmakers from Gaul to build churches worthy of the worship of God. In the monasteries he founded, a generation of monks, among them Saint Bede, could study and pray. His life ended in paralysis, borne with patience.

Prayer to Saint Benedict Biscop

Saint Benedict Biscop, you left the king's court to seek God: help me to prefer Christ to every success.

You traveled the road to Rome so many times: teach me to keep walking, and to come back carrying what can nourish others.

You loved books, beautiful churches and the dignity of the liturgy: pray for those who teach, who study, and who serve beauty in the house of God.

You bore illness with patience at the end of your life: support the sick and those who can no longer act, and remind them that their prayer still bears fruit.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Saint Benedict Biscop, pray for us. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Benedict Biscop is celebrated on January 12. You can pray to him:

- at the start of a school or university year, or before an exam;
- for a library, a school or a monastic community;
- before a pilgrimage or a long journey;
- for someone who is paralyzed or living with a long illness;
- for artists and craftsmen who work for churches.

A short prayer before study

> *Lord, source of all wisdom, through the prayers of Saint Benedict Biscop, who gathered books so that others might learn, open my mind to the truth, keep my attention steady, and let all I learn lead me closer to you. Amen.*

To learn more about him, read the life of Saint Benedict Biscop, or pray the novena to Saint Benedict Biscop.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Benedict Biscop

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Benedict Biscop as told by Saint Bede the Venerable in his *Lives of the Abbots*. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, January 12, begin it on January 4. It can also be prayed at the start of a school year, before a pilgrimage, or for someone who is ill.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you live in Benedict Biscop's spirit of seeking, handing on and patience. You can pray it alone, as a family or with a parish group.

Day 1: Leaving the king's court

At twenty-five, Biscop gave up his place as a thegn at the court of King Oswiu to give himself to God. He had status, a future and the king's favor. He chose a different King. Every Christian must decide, again and again, whom he will serve first.

Prayer: Lord, be the first in my life, before every ambition and every comfort.

Today: Give God the first moments of your day in prayer.

Day 2: On the road to Rome

Benedict made the long and dangerous journey to Rome six times. He went to pray at the tombs of the apostles and to learn from the heart of the Church. Pilgrimage reminds us that we are always on the way, and that faith is received

from others.

Prayer: Lord, keep me faithful to the Church, and make my whole life a pilgrimage toward you.

Today: Pray for the pope and for the unity of the Church.

Day 3: A monk at Lérins

At Lérins, in Provence, he received the monastic tonsure and took the name of Saint Benedict of Nursia. He would gladly have stayed there for good, in prayer and community life. The heart of all his later work was this monastic life of prayer.

Prayer: Lord, give me a taste for prayer, and teach me to listen to you in silence.

Today: Read slowly a few verses of a psalm.

Day 4: Obedience to a new call

Pope Vitalian asked him to accompany Theodore of Tarsus to England as his interpreter. Benedict gave up his wish to stay at Lérins and obeyed. God's plans are often larger than our own, and they pass through the requests of others.

Prayer: Lord, make me ready to set aside my plans when you ask something else of me.

Today: Say yes, willingly, to a request you would rather refuse.

Day 5: Building in stone

At Wearmouth, Benedict brought masons from Gaul to build a stone church, and glassmakers to give it windows. He wanted the house of God to be worthy of him. Beauty in worship is not a luxury: it lifts the heart toward the One we adore.

Prayer: Lord, bless all who build, decorate and care for our churches.

Today: Take a moment to look attentively at a beautiful church, an icon or a window, and pray before it.

Day 6: Gathering books

Benedict brought back from his journeys a great number of books, and his library made Wearmouth-Jarrow a center of learning. Thanks to those books, Bede could become one of the most learned men of his age. To gather and hand on knowledge is a service to faith.

Prayer: Lord, bless teachers, students and librarians, and let our study lead us to you.

Today: Read a page of a good spiritual book.

Day 7: Forming the next generation

In 682 Benedict founded Jarrow, and the young Bede was probably among its first monks. Benedict did not only build for himself, but for those who would come after him. What we hand on outlives us.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to the young people you place on my path, and help me to hand on the faith to them.

Today: Share with a younger person something you love about the faith.

Day 8: Grief and paralysis

On his return from his last journey, Benedict learned that the plague had taken his cousin Eosterwine. Then he and his successor Sigfrith were both struck by paralysis. The man who had traveled so far could no longer move. Illness does not end a life of service: it can become an offering.

Prayer: Lord, comfort the sick and the paralyzed, and give them patience and peace.

Today: Visit or call someone who is ill or confined at home.

Day 9: A holy death

Benedict died at Wearmouth on January 12, 689. Bede composed a homily for the anniversary of his death, and the monks remembered him as a father. A life given to God continues to bear fruit long after death.

Prayer: Saint Benedict Biscop, present our intentions to the Lord, and help us to hand on faithfully what we have received. Amen.

Today: Pray for those who handed on the faith to you, living or dead.

Closing prayer

> *Lord our God, you led Saint Benedict Biscop from the king's court to the service of your Church, and you made him a builder of monasteries and a lover of books and beauty. Through his prayers, give us a love for your truth, faithfulness in prayer and patience in suffering. Grant the intention I place before you in this novena, if it is according to your will. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To learn more about him, read the life of Saint Benedict Biscop or pray the prayer to Saint Benedict Biscop.

Credits and sources

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