

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Bénézet of Avignon

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 14

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IN BRIEF

Saint Bénézet of Avignon

Young shepherd from the Vivarais credited by tradition with building the bridge of Avignon in the 12th century, patron saint of Avignon and of bridge builders.

Feast day	April 14
Born	c. 1165 (according to tradition), Burzet (Ardèche), France, according to tradition
Died	1184, Avignon, France
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (cult approved by Pope John XXII in 1331, according to Avignon tradition)
Era	12th century
Patron saint of	Avignon, engineers, bridge builders, porters, travelers

In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Bénézet

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Bénézet of Avignon

Saint Bénézet is the young shepherd from the Vivarais region of southern France whom tradition credits with building the famous bridge of Avignon in the twelfth century. Arriving in Avignon around 1177 and claiming to be sent by God, he launched, against all odds, the construction of a bridge over the Rhône. He died in 1184, a year before it was finished. Patron saint of Avignon and of bridge builders, he is celebrated on April 14.

Who was Saint Bénézet?

Bénézet is the Provençal form of Benedict: the name means "little Benedict," perhaps because of his youth. In English he is sometimes called Saint Benedict of the Bridge. On his tomb effigy in Avignon, a Latin inscription calls him *sancte Benedicte*.

His story mixes history and legend. The history rests on a few charters from the 1180s, which show a certain "Brother Benedict" at the head of the bridge works, and on the chronicle of Robert, a canon of Saint-Marien in Auxerre, written from 1190 onward. The legend, set down in the thirteenth century, turned him into a young shepherd moved by a voice from heaven.

Historians remain careful about his age. Several think that a teenager could not have signed contracts or directed such a project, and that Bénézet may have been an older man. An examination of his relics in 1980 showed a man who had died between the ages of 25 and 30. One thing remains: a humble layman, without wealth or power, managed to rally a whole city around a work of charity for travelers.

Key dates in the life of Saint Bénézet

- **c. 1165**: Born, according to tradition, at Alvillar, identified with the hamlet of Le Villard in Burzet (Ardèche).
- **1177**: According to Robert of Auxerre, a young man named Benedict arrives in Avignon and announces that God has sent him to build a bridge over the Rhône.
- **1177-1185**: The bridge is built, funded by alms collected throughout the region.
- **1181**: A hospital for poor travelers, linked to the bridge works, is founded in Avignon.
- **1184**: Bénézet dies and is buried in a chapel built on a pier of the bridge.
- **1185**: The bridge, about 900 meters long, is completed.
- **1331**: Pope John XXII, then living in Avignon, approves the popular devotion and sets his feast on April 14, according to Avignon tradition.
- **1670**: His relics are moved, threatened by the floods of the Rhône.
- **1854**: His relics, partly saved from the French Revolution, are solemnly placed in the collegiate church of Saint-Didier in Avignon.

The shepherd who wanted a bridge

According to the legend, Bénézet was tending his mother's sheep in the mountains of the Vivarais when he heard a voice telling him to go and build a bridge over the Rhône. He objected that he did not know the way and had no money. An angel, disguised as a pilgrim, led him to the river. In Avignon, the bishop, and then the city's provost, laughed at this boy who had come from nowhere.

Robert of Auxerre summed up the event in these words:

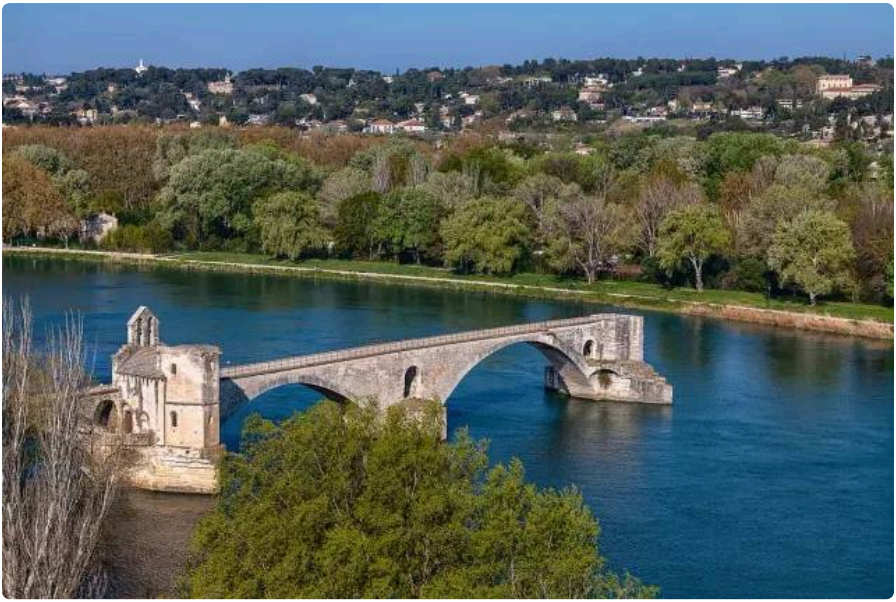
> *"In that same year a young man named Benedict came to Avignon, saying that he was sent by God to build a bridge over the Rhône. He was mocked, because he had no means of doing what he promised. But he insisted with such conviction, and the will of God showed itself so plainly, that the very difficult work was undertaken with enthusiasm."*

The most famous story says that, when challenged, Bénézet lifted an enormous stone, one "that thirty men could not have moved," and carried it to the riverbank to serve as the foundation of the first pier. The witnesses cried out at the miracle, and gifts began to pour in. This is the scene that artists remember: a young man carrying a large stone on his shoulder.

A work of charity

In the Middle Ages, building a bridge was seen as a work of mercy. Crossing the wide and violent Rhône was dangerous for merchants and above all for pilgrims on their way to Rome, Santiago de Compostela or the shrines of Provence. Bénézet traveled through the region collecting alms, preached the Gospel and showed great care for the poor who passed by. A confraternity of lay people and religious formed around the work, and it also ran a hospital for travelers, founded in 1181.

After his death, his companions carried on. Tradition links them with the "bridge brothers" (*frères pontifes*), hospitaller confraternities that built and maintained bridges and welcomed travelers. Completed in 1185, the bridge had more than twenty arches. Damaged many times by wars and floods, it was abandoned in the seventeenth century. Four arches remain today, made famous around the world by the children's song *Sur le pont d'Avignon*.



The Saint-Bénézet bridge in Avignon and its chapel.

The tomb on the bridge

Bénézet died in 1184. The bishop and canons wanted to bury him in the cathedral of Notre-Dame-des-Doms, but, according to tradition, he was laid to rest as he had wished, in a chapel built on the second pier of the bridge. His tomb at once became a place of pilgrimage. The legend tells of many healings of the blind, the deaf and the paralyzed. An inquiry gathered some twenty years after his death, kept in the Vaucluse archives, records the testimonies.

In 1670, as the bridge was falling into ruin, the archbishop had the body moved. After quarrels between parishes and the intervention of King Louis XIV, the relics were entrusted in 1674 to the Celestine monks of Avignon. During the Revolution they were hidden in the church of Saint-Didier, then partly desecrated when the church became a prison. The faithful saved a few

fragments, and his skull, hidden in a gilded wooden box, was found again in the nineteenth century. On January 1, 1854, the gathered relics were solemnly returned to Saint-Didier.

Why is Saint Bénézet the patron saint of bridge builders?

Because the bridge of Avignon is his life's work, Bénézet is the patron of engineers and bridge builders. He is one of the patron saints of Avignon, alongside Saint Martha and several holy bishops of the city. Since the late sixteenth century he has also been the patron of the Rhône porters, who formed a confraternity in his name. He is invoked for travelers and for anyone facing a task that seems beyond their strength. In Burzet, his home village according to tradition, a chapel has been dedicated to him since 1727.

Bénézet reminds us that God often chooses the little ones to do great things. Mocked, without money or support, he believed that charity could join two riverbanks. His bridge has become a symbol of bonds to be restored: between peoples, between persons, between earth and heaven.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Bénézet in art

- **A large stone on his shoulder**: the first stone of the bridge, his best-known attribute.
- **Shepherd's crook**: he is shown as a young shepherd, sometimes with a sheep or a fife.
- **A bridge over a river**: he often stands in front of a river spanned by a bridge.



Saint Bénézet carrying the first stone of the bridge, Avignon Cathedral.

Where to pray to Saint Bénézet

- **Avignon**: the collegiate church of Saint-Didier, which keeps his skull and his tomb effigy.
- **Avignon**: the cathedral of Notre-Dame-des-Doms, which holds other relics and a statue of the saint.
- **Avignon**: the Saint-Bénézet bridge and its chapel, on the pier where he was first buried.
- **Burzet** (Ardèche): the chapel of Saint-Bénézet in the hamlet of Le Villard, in his traditional homeland.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Bénézet or follow the novena to Saint Bénézet, from April 5 to 13, ending on the eve of his feast.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Bénézet for a Difficult Task

Saint Bénézet, the shepherd who built the bridge of Avignon, is invoked by people facing a difficult task, by engineers and construction workers, and by travelers. No widely known ancient prayer is attributed to him, so this page offers two original prayers by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Bénézet for a difficult task

Saint Bénézet, humble shepherd of the Vivarais, you heard the call of God and dared to set out, without money or support, toward a city that laughed at you.

You believed that charity could throw a bridge across a river everyone thought impossible to cross. Obtain for me that simple and stubborn faith that does not draw back before the size of the task.

When I doubt my strength, remind me that the first stone is not lifted alone, but with the grace of God. When others mock my plans, keep me in peace and humility.

I entrust to you the work I am carrying now: (name it in silence). May it serve the good of others and the glory of God. Amen.

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

Prayer for builders and travelers

> *Lord, through the intercession of Saint Bénézet, bless those who build bridges, roads and homes: engineers, architects, masons and all workers. Keep them safe from accidents and give them pride in work well done.*
>
> *Protect those who are on the road: pilgrims, migrants and travelers. Make us builders of bridges between persons, between peoples and between Churches, where so many walls divide. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Intentions to entrust to Saint Bénézet

- A work project or a building site that seems beyond our strength.
- The safety of construction and public works crews.
- Travelers, pilgrims and those who cross borders.
- Reconciliation in a divided family or community.
- The city of Avignon and the region of Provence.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Bénézet is celebrated on April 14. Pray to him before starting an important job, a building project or a journey, or when a task feels too heavy to carry. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Bénézet, and read the life of Saint Bénézet.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Bénézet

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and legend of Saint Bénézet, the shepherd who built the bridge of Avignon. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on April 14, begin on April 5; it ends on April 13. It can also be prayed at any time of year, before a journey, a building project or any task that seems too big for you.

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 Hail Mary. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day. The nine days follow the path of Bénézet, from the call he heard among his sheep to the bridge he did not live to see finished.

Day 1: The call among the flock

According to the legend, Bénézet was watching his sheep when he heard the voice of God. Nothing had prepared him for it: no school, no fortune, no title. God's call often comes in the middle of ordinary life, while we are busy with simple things.

Prayer: Lord, open my ears so that I may hear your call in the tasks of each day. Through the intercession of Saint Bénézet, make me ready to answer. Amen.

Today: Take ten minutes of silence to listen to what God is asking of me.

Day 2: Setting out without knowing

Bénézet knew neither the road nor the city. He objected that he had no money and did not know the way, yet he set out in trust. Faith sometimes moves forward in the dark, one step at a time, without seeing the end of the road.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to take the first step, even when I cannot see the whole way. Amen.

Today: Begin something I have been putting off for a long time.

Day 3: Bearing mockery

In Avignon, people laughed at the poor boy who talked about a bridge. The bishop and the city's officials did not take him seriously. Bénézet did not give up, and he did not answer with anger. Gentleness under contempt is a quiet form of strength.

Prayer: Lord, when I am looked down on, keep my heart in peace and gentleness. Help me to forgive those who mock me. Amen.

Today: Let a hurtful remark go unanswered, and pray for the person who made it.

Day 4: The first stone

Tradition says that Bénézet lifted an enormous stone, one that thirty men could not have moved, to lay the first pier. What is impossible for human beings is possible for God. Our own heavy stones may be a decision, an illness or a responsibility.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you what seems too heavy for me. Carry it with me, and give me the strength to do my part. Amen.

Today: Offer God a specific difficulty, naming it in prayer.

Day 5: Begging for others

Bénézet traveled through the region collecting alms. He was not asking for himself but for a work that would serve everyone. It takes humility to ask, and generosity to give.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to give, and also to ask humbly for help when I need it. Amen.

Today: Make a gift to a charity that helps travelers or homeless people.

Day 6: Serving travelers

The bridge, and the hospital founded alongside it, welcomed pilgrims and poor people passing through. For the people of the Middle Ages, building a bridge was a work of mercy. Charity becomes concrete when it makes someone's road safer.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to the stranger and to anyone far from home. Protect all who are traveling today. Amen.

Today: Welcome kindly someone I do not know.

Day 7: Working together

Bénézet did not build alone. Companions joined him, a confraternity formed, and the work went on after his death. Great works are born of communion, not of one person's pride.

Prayer: Lord, give me the humility to work with others without seeking my own glory. Amen.

Today: Thank someone who works alongside me.

Day 8: Building bridges

A bridge joins two banks that were separated. Christians are called to bring together those whom everything divides, starting with the people closest to them. Every reconciliation is a small bridge thrown across a river.

Prayer: Lord, make me a builder of reconciliation wherever there is division. Amen.

Today: Take a step toward someone with whom I have fallen out.

Day 9: Finishing the race

Bénézet died before the bridge was completed. He sowed without seeing the harvest, trusting that God would bring the work to its end. We too may not see the fruit of everything we begin.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Bénézet, help me to do my part faithfully and to leave the completion to you. Amen.

Today: Pray for those who will carry on, after me, the work I have started.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Bénézet, shepherd who became a builder, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for those who build, for those who travel, for those who seek to reconcile. Obtain for us a faith strong enough to lift stones and a charity that joins the riverbanks. Amen.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Bénézet and the prayer to Saint Bénézet.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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