BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Bilhild of Altmünster

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: November 27

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IN BRIEF

Saint Bilhild of Altmünster

Frankish noblewoman, founder and first abbess of the monastery of Altmünster in Mainz, who died in 734.

Feast day	November 27
Born	7th century, Hocheim, most often identified with Veitshöchheim, near Würzburg
Died	November 27, 734, Altmünster, Mainz (Germany)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	8th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Bilhild to Keep the Faith in the Family

Novena to Saint Bilhild of Altmünster

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Bilhild of Altmünster

Saint Bilhild (also spelled Bilihilt, Bilhildis or Bilehild) was a Frankish noblewoman of the 7th and early 8th centuries, founder and first abbess of the monastery of Altmünster, in Mainz, Germany. She died on November 27, 734. Her life is known only through accounts written several centuries later, but her relics are still venerated in Mainz. Her feast day is November 27.

Who was Saint Bilhild?

Bilhild lived at the time when the Christian faith was taking root in the Main valley and the Rhineland, a few years before the great mission of Saint Boniface. Historians urge caution: the Lives of the saint date from after 1060, there are five different versions, and solid evidence of her cult goes back only to the 12th century. A Mainz charter concerning her turned out to be a medieval forgery. The accounts also follow a common pattern in Frankish hagiography: a pious young girl, married against her will, who flees to found a monastery. Yet the Roman Martyrology commemorates her, and her existence as founder of Altmünster is not called into question.

Key dates in the life of Bilhild

- **7th century**: Born at Hocheim, most often identified with Veitshöchheim, near Würzburg; her parents, according to her Life, are named Iberin and Mathilda.
- **Youth**: She is brought up as a Christian in Würzburg and wishes to consecrate herself to Christ.
- **c. 672**: According to her Life, her parents marry her to a Frankish duke who is still pagan, Hetan.

- **Shortly after**: While her husband is away at war, she travels by boat to Mainz to her uncle, Bishop Rigibert.
- **In Mainz**: She devotes herself to prayer and works of charity.
- **After her husband's death**: With the bishop's agreement, she sells her property at Veitshöchheim and founds the monastery of Altmünster, of which she becomes the first abbess.
- **November 27, 734**: Dies at Altmünster; she is buried in the abbey church.
- **1991**: A scientific examination of her skull, kept in Mainz, concludes that the relic is authentic.

A young girl married against her will

According to her Life, Bilhild was born into a noble family at Hocheim. The place is debated: tradition identifies it with Veitshöchheim, on the Main, near Würzburg, but some historians think rather of Hochheim am Main, not far from Mainz. Brought up in the Christian faith, she wished to consecrate her life to Christ. Her parents nevertheless gave her in marriage to a Frankish duke named Hetan, still a pagan, who is sometimes identified with Hedan I, duke of Thuringia. She is said to have wanted to convert him, without success.

The flight to Mainz

When her husband left for war, Bilhild seized the chance to live according to her vocation. She went down the Main by boat to Mainz, where her uncle Rigibert was bishop. There she gave herself entirely to the service of God and to works of charity, renouncing the honors and pleasures of her rank. When her husband died, she asked the bishop for permission to found a religious community. She sold her property at Veitshöchheim and, with her fortune, founded the monastery of Altmünster, in Mainz, of which she became the first abbess.

An older document, however, casts doubt on this account: according to the Benedictine scholar Jean Mabillon, a 9th-century calendar of Fulda, now lost, called her a "virgin". It is therefore possible that she was never married, and that the story of the forced marriage was added by the hagiographers.

Death and cult

Bilhild died on November 27, 734, and was buried in the church of her abbey. According to tradition, a sweet fragrance soon rose from her tomb, and many miracles were reported there. The monastery of Altmünster kept her memory for centuries; from the 15th century, a cloth presented as the veil that had covered the face of Christ was also venerated there, which tradition said had been given to the saint by a queen.

Her main relics are now kept in the church of Saint Emmeram in Mainz. Her skull was examined scientifically in 1991, and the study concluded that it was authentic. A 16th-century Mainz missal contains a Mass for her feast. A statue of the saint stands in a square in Mainz. Her liturgical memorial is celebrated on November 27, especially in the diocese of Mainz.

What can we learn from Saint Bilhild?

Whether we follow the account of her Life or the hypothesis of a consecrated virgin, Saint Bilhild appears as a woman who put her fortune and her life at the service of God and the poor, and who founded a community where women prayed for centuries. Her story, as tradition has handed it down, also speaks to people living through difficult family situations who are looking for ways to stay faithful to their faith. You can pray to her for consecrated women, for wives who carry the faith alone in their homes, and for those who want to make their wealth an instrument of charity.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Bilhild and the novena to Saint Bilhild.

Where to pray to Saint Bilhild

- **Mainz** (Germany): the church of Saint Emmeram, where her main relics are kept.
- **Mainz**: the statue of the saint in a square of the city, and the area of the former monastery of Altmünster.
- **Veitshöchheim** (Bavaria): the traditional place of her birth.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Bilhild to Keep the Faith in the Family

Saint Bilhild, a Frankish noblewoman, consecrated her life and her fortune to God and founded in Mainz the monastery of Altmünster, of which she was the first abbess; she died in 734. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to her consecrated women, wives who carry the faith of their homes alone, and those who want to serve the poor.

Prayer to Saint Bilhild

Saint Bilhild,
from your youth you longed to belong to Christ.
Amid constraints and trials,
you kept your heart turned toward him.
Teach me to remain faithful
when my life does not look like what I hoped for.

You who put your goods at the service of God
and founded a house of prayer,
make me generous toward the poor
and detached from what I own.

Watch over consecrated women,
over wives and mothers
who carry the faith of their homes alone,
and over the Church of Mainz that keeps your memory.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Bilhild

- On her feast day, November 27.
- For a wife or husband whose spouse does not share the faith.
- For nuns and vocations to women's religious life.
- When you want to make a gift or put your goods at the service of a good work.
- In a difficult family situation, to keep peace and faith.

A short invocation

> *Saint Bilhild, abbess of Altmünster, friend of the poor,*
> *pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Bilhild from November 19 to 27, and read the life of Saint Bilhild.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Bilhild of Altmünster

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint Bilhild, founder and first abbess of the monastery of Altmünster in Mainz, who died in 734. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, November 27, begin on November 19. You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Bilhild, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recalled come from Lives written several centuries after her, not all of whose details are certain.

Day 1: A Christian childhood

Bilhild was brought up in the faith at Würzburg. Very early, she longed to give her life to Christ.

Prayer: Lord, make the desire to know and love you grow in the hearts of children.

Act of the day: Pray for a child or a young person around you.

Day 2: A will thwarted

According to her Life, Bilhild was married against her will to a pagan duke. Her plans seemed shattered.

Prayer: Lord, when my desires are thwarted, help me to trust you.

Act of the day: Offer a disappointment to God, asking him to bring some good out of it.

Day 3: Carrying the faith of the home alone

Bilhild wanted to lead her husband to the faith, without success. Yet she kept praying for him.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those in my family who do not know you. Keep me patient and loving.

Act of the day: Pray by name for a loved one who is far from the faith.

Day 4: The courage to leave

Bilhild went down the Main by boat to Mainz, to her uncle the bishop. She chose to follow God's call.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to make the choices that bring me closer to you.

Act of the day: Make a concrete resolution to live your faith better.

Day 5: Serving the poor

In Mainz, Bilhild devoted herself to prayer and works of charity. She gave up the honors of her rank.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve you in the poor, with humility.

Act of the day: Do something concrete for a person in need.

Day 6: Giving away her goods

Bilhild sold her lands to found a monastery. Her wealth became a house of prayer.

Prayer: Lord, show me how to put what I own at the service of your Kingdom.

Act of the day: Make a gift to a religious community or a charity.

Day 7: A mother to her sisters

As the first abbess of Altmünster, Bilhild guided a community of women in prayer and fraternal life.

Prayer: Lord, bless abbesses, superiors and all who are responsible for a community.

Act of the day: Pray for a community of nuns.

Day 8: A life offered to the end

Bilhild died on November 27, 734. According to tradition, a sweet fragrance rose from her tomb: her life had been an offering pleasing to God.

Prayer: Lord, make my life an offering that pleases you, day after day.

Act of the day: Offer your whole day to God in the morning.

Day 9: The memory of a Church

For centuries, the Church of Mainz has venerated the relics of Saint Bilhild. The saints remain present in the life of their Church.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the saints who built your Church. Through the intercession of Saint Bilhild, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass if you can, and pray for your diocese.

Closing prayer

Saint Bilhild,
founder of Altmünster and friend of the poor,
you gave everything to belong to Christ.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Give me a faithful and generous heart,
and keep my family in peace.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Bilhild at any time, and read the life of Saint Bilhild.

Credits and sources

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