

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Birinus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 3

IN BRIEF

Saint Birinus

Missionary sent from Rome, apostle of the West Saxons and first bishop of Dorchester in the seventh century.

Feast day	December 3
Died	c. 650, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire (England)
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Wessex

In this booklet

Life

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Birinus

Saint Birinus, called Birin in French, was a missionary bishop from the continent who brought the Gospel to the West Saxons, in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex, in the seventh century. Sent by Pope Honorius I, he baptized King Cynegils in 635 and founded the episcopal see of Dorchester, on the Thames, becoming its first bishop. He died around 650 and is remembered as the "Apostle of Wessex." His feast day is December 3.

Who was Saint Birinus?

Almost everything we know about Birinus comes from Saint Bede the Venerable, who devotes a chapter to him in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731. Bede presents him as a bishop sent to Britain by Pope Honorius, with the mission of preaching in the inland regions of the island, where no teacher of the faith had yet come.

Birinus is said to have been of Frankish origin, perhaps from northern Gaul or from Lombardy, but his birthplace is unknown. Nothing certain is known about his youth or his training before his mission. What Bede records is the essential: a man ready to leave everything to carry the Gospel to a people who had never heard it.

Before setting out, Birinus promised the pope that he would sow the seeds of the faith in these distant lands. He received episcopal ordination from Asterius, bishop of Genoa, around 634. He belonged to the second wave of missionaries sent from Rome to the English, after the mission of Saint Augustine of Canterbury, which had reached Kent in 597.

Key dates in the life of Saint Birinus

- **c. 634**: Sent by Pope Honorius I, he is ordained bishop in Genoa.

- **634**: He arrives among the West Saxons, in Wessex.
- **635**: King Cynegils is baptized, with King Oswald of Northumbria as his godfather.
- **Afterward**: The two kings give him Dorchester as his episcopal see.
- **640s**: He continues his work under King Cenwalh and baptizes several members of the royal family.
- **December 3, c. 650**: He dies and is buried at Dorchester.
- **Late 7th century**: His relics are moved to Winchester.

The Apostle of Wessex

A mission that changed course

When he landed in Britain, Birinus came to the land of the Gewisse, the West Saxons, and found, according to Bede, that they were still entirely pagan. His original instructions pointed him further inland, but rather than travel on, he decided it was better to begin his work right there. It is a striking choice: he let the real needs of the people in front of him shape his mission.

The baptism of King Cynegils

Birinus won the trust of King Cynegils and taught him the Christian faith. In 635 the king was baptized. King Oswald of Northumbria was present at the event. Oswald, a Christian formed by the Irish monks of Iona, had come to marry Cynegils's daughter, and he became the godfather of his future father-in-law. The scene brought together two strands of the conversion of England: the Roman mission represented by Birinus and the Irish tradition that had shaped Oswald.

Bishop of Dorchester

The two kings gave Birinus the town of Dorchester, on the Thames, as the seat of his diocese. From there he founded and dedicated churches, and, as Bede reports, many people were converted to the faith through his labors. After the death of Cynegils, his son Cenwalh at first remained pagan, but he too was eventually baptized. Tradition links Birinus to the founding of several churches in the Thames Valley.

Birinus worked patiently with the rulers of his time to root the faith in an entire kingdom. Baptizing a king was not an end in itself: it opened the way for priests to preach, churches to be built and families to receive the sacraments in peace.

His death and his relics

Birinus died around 650, on December 3, and was buried at Dorchester. Toward the end of the seventh century, Bishop Hedda moved his relics to Winchester, which had become the new center of the diocese of the West Saxons. They were venerated there in the cathedral.

In the thirteenth century, however, the canons of Dorchester claimed to possess the true body of the saint, which led to a long dispute with Winchester. A shrine was built at Dorchester at that time, and parts of it survive in the abbey church today.

Why is Saint Birinus the patron saint of Wessex?

Birinus is honored as the Apostle of Wessex because he was the first to preach the Gospel to the West Saxons and the first bishop of their kingdom. Wessex covered a large part of southern England, and the see he founded at Dorchester was the starting point of the diocese of the West Saxons, later centered at Winchester.

His feast is kept on December 3, and the translation of his relics was traditionally commemorated on September 4. His name remains attached to several churches in southern England.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Birinus in art

Birinus is usually shown as a bishop, with a miter and crosier. The best-known images of him are in the medieval stained glass of Dorchester Abbey, including a roundel showing his consecration by Bishop Asterius of Genoa. In scenes of his mission, look for a bishop preaching to the West Saxons or baptizing a crowned king, Cynegils.

What can we learn from Saint Birinus?

Birinus was a missionary who knew how to stop where the need was greatest. Sent toward a distant destination, he chose to begin with the first pagan people he met. He also worked with the Christian kings of his day, such as Oswald, to plant the faith in a whole kingdom.

His example speaks to anyone who has a plan for God and discovers that God's work is waiting right where they are. He can be invoked for missionaries, for the spreading of the Gospel in places where Christ is little known, and for the Church in England.

Where to pray to Saint Birinus

- **Dorchester-on-Thames** (Oxfordshire): the abbey church, on the site of his first episcopal see, with the remains of his medieval shrine.
- **Winchester**: the cathedral, where his relics were moved at the end of the seventh century.
- **Dorchester-on-Thames**: the Catholic church of Saint Birinus, which bears his name.

You can also pray to him anywhere with the prayer to Saint Birinus or the novena to Saint Birinus, which ends on his feast day.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Birinus for Missionaries

Saint Birinus left the continent to bring the Gospel to the West Saxons, a people who had never heard of Christ. Finding them still pagan, he chose to begin his work right where he landed. This prayer asks for his help for missionaries, for those who share their faith, and for the courage to serve God where we are. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Birinus for missionaries

Saint Birinus, Apostle of Wessex,
you promised the Successor of Peter to sow the faith in distant lands,
and you kept your word with courage and patience.

When you found a people who did not know Christ,
you did not pass them by:
you stayed, you taught, you baptized,
and you built the Church among them.

Pray for all missionaries,
for priests, religious and lay people
who carry the Gospel to places where Christ is little known.
Give them strength in weariness, wisdom in their words
and joy in their service.

Help me too to see the mission God gives me
in the people around me,
in my family, my parish and my place of work.
May I not look too far away for the good I can do today.

Pray for the Church in England and in every land,
that she may remain faithful to the faith she received,
and that leaders and peoples may welcome the light of Christ.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray this prayer

You can pray to Saint Birinus on his feast day, December 3, or during the nine days before it with the novena to Saint Birinus. This prayer is especially fitting:

- for a missionary you know, or before leaving on a mission trip;

- when you start a new ministry in your parish;
- when you are unsure where God wants you to serve;
- for the conversion of a friend or relative who does not know Christ;
- for the Church in England, and especially in the south of the country, once the kingdom of Wessex.

A short prayer for the day

> *Saint Birinus, you began your work where the need was greatest. Help me to recognize today the people God places on my path, and to bring them the light of Christ. Amen.*

To learn more about his life, read the page on Saint Birinus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Birinus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Birinus as told by Saint Bede the Venerable. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, December 3, begin it on November 25. It can also be prayed at any other time, for a missionary, for a new mission or for the spreading of the faith.

How to pray this novena

Each day, present your intention to 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 the missionary spirit of Birinus. You can pray it alone, with your family or with a parish group.

Day 1: Sent by the Church

Birinus did not set out on his own initiative. He was sent by Pope Honorius I, in communion with the whole Church. A mission is first a gift received: God calls, and the Church sends. Our own witness is also part of a larger work that does not belong to us.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for calling me through your Church. Keep me humble and faithful in the mission you entrust to me.

Today: Pray for the pope and for your bishop.

Day 2: A promise to keep

Before leaving, Birinus promised the pope that he would sow the faith in lands where no teacher had yet come. He kept that promise for the rest of his life. Faithfulness to our word, even in small things, is already a form of holiness.

Prayer: Lord, help me to keep the promises I have made, to you and to others, with patience and courage.

Today: Keep a small promise you have been putting off.

Day 3: Consecrated for service

Birinus received episcopal ordination from Asterius, bishop of Genoa, before crossing the sea. He did not go out with his own strength alone, but with the grace of the sacrament. Each of us has also received gifts in baptism and confirmation for the service of others.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, renew in me the grace of my baptism and my confirmation, and make me a faithful witness.

Today: Find out the date of your baptism and give thanks for it.

Day 4: Stopping where the need is

When he landed among the West Saxons, Birinus found that they were still entirely pagan. Rather than travel further, he decided to begin his work there. Sometimes our plans must give way to the needs right in front of us.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the needs around me, and give me the freedom to change my plans for the sake of others.

Today: Help someone close to you who needs it, even if it was not in your schedule.

Day 5: Patient teaching

Birinus won the trust of King Cynegils and taught him the faith step by step before baptizing him. Conversion takes time. The missionary does not force hearts; he explains, listens and waits for God's hour.

Prayer: Lord, give me patience with those who are searching, and the right words to speak of you simply.

Today: Answer a question about the faith with kindness and without hurry.

Day 6: A baptism that unites

In 635, King Cynegils was baptized, with King Oswald of Northumbria as his godfather. A Roman missionary and a king formed by the monks of Iona worked together on the same day for the same Lord. The Gospel brings together people of different backgrounds.

Prayer: Lord, make me an artisan of unity among Christians, and help me to welcome those who serve you differently from me.

Today: Pray for your godparents or for your godchildren.

Day 7: Building the Church

From Dorchester, Birinus founded and dedicated churches, and many people were converted. The faith needs places to gather, pray and receive the sacraments. Every parish church is the fruit of the work of those who came before us.

Prayer: Lord, bless my parish, its priests and all who serve it. Make it a living home of prayer and charity.

Today: Offer a little time or help to your parish.

Day 8: Perseverance

After the death of Cynegils, his son Cenwalh at first remained pagan. Birinus did not give up, and Cenwalh too was eventually baptized. The seeds we sow may take years to grow, but God brings them to life in his time.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you those I love who are far from you. Give me hope and perseverance in prayer for them.

Today: Pray by name for someone who does not know Christ.

Day 9: A life given to the end

Birinus died around 650, on December 3, in the land he had evangelized, and was buried at Dorchester. His whole life had become a gift for a people who had once been strangers to him. Today we ask him to intercede for all missionaries.

Prayer: Saint Birinus, Apostle of Wessex, pray for all who carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and help me to give my life generously where God has placed me.

Today: Support a missionary work by a prayer or a gift.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you sent Saint Birinus to the West Saxons to make your Son known to them, and you made him the father in faith of a whole people. Through his intercession, give your Church courageous missionaries, help each of us to bear witness to Christ where we live, and grant the intention I have entrusted to you during this novena. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can continue with the prayer to Saint Birinus or read more about his life.

Credits and sources

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