

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Boniface

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: June 5

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IN BRIEF

Saint Boniface

English monk, Apostle of Germany and archbishop of Mainz, martyred in Frisia in 754, patron saint of Germany.

Feast day	June 5
Born	c. 675, Crediton (Devon, England)
Died	June 5, 754, Dokkum (Frisia, Netherlands)
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	Germany

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Boniface

Saint Boniface, born Wynfrith in the English kingdom of Wessex around 675, was an Anglo-Saxon monk who became the "Apostle of Germany." Sent by the pope as a missionary, he evangelized Hesse and Thuringia, organized the dioceses of Bavaria and Germany, founded monasteries such as Fulda and reformed the Frankish Church with the support of the Carolingian rulers. Already an archbishop and nearly eighty years old, he set out once more for Frisia, where he was killed with his companions near Dokkum on June 5, 754. The patron saint of Germany, he is celebrated on June 5.

Who was Saint Boniface?

Wynfrith was born around 675 into a landowning family of Wessex, probably at Crediton in Devon. Entrusted as a small boy to the monastery at Exeter, he later moved to the abbey of Nursling, near Winchester. There he received a solid training in Scripture and letters, was ordained a priest and became a teacher himself: he wrote a Latin grammar and composed poems. King Ine of Wessex even sent him on a delicate mission to the archbishop of Canterbury. A fine career as a scholarly monk lay ahead of him.

But Wynfrith wanted to leave everything for the Lord, following the ideal of *peregrinatio*, the voluntary exile that had already sent so many monks from Britain and Ireland to the continent. He longed to bring the Gospel to the Germanic peoples who were still pagan, the cousins of the Anglo-Saxons. Boniface is one of the best documented saints of the early Middle Ages: a large collection of his letters, gathered by his disciple Lull, has survived, along with a *Life* written shortly after his death by the priest Willibald.



Saint Boniface, engraving by Cornelis Bloemaert.

Key dates in the life of Saint Boniface

- **c. 675**: Born in Wessex, probably at Crediton.
- **716**: First missionary journey to Frisia, without success.
- **May 15, 719**: Pope Gregory II entrusts him with the mission to the pagans and gives him the name Boniface.
- **719-722**: Mission in Frisia alongside Saint Willibrord, then in Hesse.
- **November 30, 722**: Ordained a bishop in Rome.
- **c. 723**: Fells the oak of Donar at Geismar.
- **c. 732**: Pope Gregory III grants him the pallium and makes him an archbishop.
- **738-739**: Organizes the dioceses of Bavaria.
- **742-743**: First council of the German Church, under the authority of the mayor of the palace Carloman.

- **744**: Foundation of the abbey of Fulda, entrusted to his disciple Sturm.
- **751 or 752**: According to tradition, anoints Pepin the Short as king.
- **June 5, 754**: Martyred near Dokkum, in Frisia, with fifty-two companions.

A missionary sent by Rome

In 716 Wynfrith left for Frisia, but the pagan duke Radbod blocked any mission. Wynfrith understood that evangelization was impossible without political support. Back at Nursling, where the monks elected him abbot, he nevertheless set out again in 718, this time for Rome. On May 15, 719, Pope Gregory II entrusted him with the mission of proclaiming the faith to the pagans, in constant union with the Apostolic See. It is in this papal letter that he appears for the first time under the name Boniface.

After Radbod's death, he worked for a few years in Frisia alongside Saint Willibrord, then moved on to Hesse, where conversions multiplied. Ordained a bishop in Rome in 722, he received the protection of Charles Martel. Near Geismar he had a sacred oak dedicated to the god Donar (Thor) cut down, to show that the idols were powerless. According to his *Life*, the wood of the tree was used to build a chapel. This famous episode later inspired a popular legend linking Boniface to the Christmas tree, though that story does not come from the early sources. He founded monasteries in Hesse and Thuringia and brought over many monks and nuns from England, among them Saint Walburga.

The organizer of the Church in Germany

An archbishop from around 732, Boniface did not stop at baptizing. He wanted a Church that would last, with dioceses, well-trained bishops and monasteries following the Rule of Saint Benedict. In 738-739 he organized the Church of Bavaria into four dioceses: Salzburg, Regensburg, Freising and Passau. He then founded the sees of Würzburg, Erfurt and Büraburg and

placed his disciples at their head. In 744, at his request, his disciple Sturm founded the abbey of Fulda, which became one of the great cultural centers of Carolingian Europe.

After the death of Charles Martel, Boniface found an ally in Carloman for the reform of the Frankish Church. The *Concilium Germanicum* of 742 or 743, followed by the synods of Les Estinnes and Soissons, provided for regular meetings of bishops, the restoration of clerical discipline and the struggle against pagan practices. Boniface also kept an eye on his homeland: in 746 he sent a stern letter of rebuke to King Æthelbald of Mercia. Nor was he afraid to clash with bishops and nobles who resisted his reforms.



The tomb of Saint Boniface in the crypt of Fulda Cathedral.

How did Saint Boniface die?

Nearly eighty years old, Boniface handed over the see of Mainz to his disciple Lull and set out again for Frisia, the land of his first mission. On June 5, 754, near Dokkum, on the banks of the river Boorne, he was waiting for newly baptized Christians who were coming to be confirmed when a band of pagans attacked the camp. According to his *Life*, he forbade his companions to defend themselves. He was killed together with fifty-two of them. His body was carried by way of Utrecht and Mainz to Fulda, where he had chosen to be buried. A slashed book kept at Fulda is said by tradition to be the one he raised above his head when the fatal blow fell.

Why is Saint Boniface the patron saint of Germany?

Boniface did not bring Christianity to German lands for the very first time: Irish, Frankish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries had worked there before him. But he gave the Church in Germany its lasting shape, with its dioceses, its monasteries, its councils and its bond with Rome. That is why he is honored as the Apostle of Germany and its patron saint. He is also remembered in England, especially in Devon, where Crediton honors him as its most famous son, and he is a natural patron for all who bring the Gospel to new peoples.

What can we learn from his holiness?

Saint Boniface combined qualities that are rarely found together: the daring of a missionary, the patience of an organizer and fidelity to the universal Church. He understood that faith needs to take root in stable communities, trained pastors and praying monasteries. To the very end, he preferred proclaiming the Gospel to his own safety. Catholics pray to him for Germany and for Europe, for missionaries, for bishops and for all who must build for the long term.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Boniface and the novena to Saint Boniface, prayed from May 27 to June 4.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Boniface in art

- **Bishop's vestments**: miter, crozier and pallium, recalling his rank as archbishop.
- **A book pierced by a sword**: the Gospel book he is said to have raised to shield himself at his martyrdom.
- **An axe or a felled oak**: a reminder of the oak of Donar at Geismar.
- **A cross**: as in the bronze monument in Fulda, where he holds it high.



The Saint Boniface chapel in Dokkum, near the place of his martyrdom.

Where to pray to Saint Boniface

- **Fulda** (Hesse, Germany): his tomb in the crypt of the cathedral.
- **Mainz** (Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany): the cathedral of the see he held.
- **Dokkum** (Friesland, Netherlands): the place of his martyrdom and its chapel.

- **Crediton** (Devon, England): his probable birthplace, which honors his memory.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Boniface for the Church and the Missions

Saint Boniface left behind a large collection of letters in which we hear the voice of a pastor who worried for the Church and refused to keep silent. Here is a passage from one of his letters, with its source, followed by an original prayer to Saint Boniface.

A word from Saint Boniface

> *"Let us not be dumb dogs, silent sentinels, hirelings who flee before the wolf, but watchful shepherds who keep guard over the flock of Christ."*

Source: Saint Boniface, letter to Cuthbert, archbishop of Canterbury (c. 747), in a free English rendering. In this letter, where he also compares the Church to a ship tossed by the storm, Boniface speaks to fellow bishops. A passage from it is read in the Liturgy of the Hours on his feast day.

Prayer to Saint Boniface

Saint Boniface, you left your homeland and your monastery to bring the Gospel to peoples who had never heard it. Give me the courage to speak of God where I live, gently and without fear.

You patiently built up churches, dioceses and monasteries. Teach me to serve for the long haul, without losing heart when the fruit is slow to come.

You remained faithful to the successor of Peter and wanted watchful shepherds for the Church. Pray for the pope, for our bishops and for all who are entrusted with a flock.

I entrust to you Germany and all of Europe, today's missionaries and those who suffer for their faith, and also my own intention: (name it in silence).

You accepted death without taking up arms. Obtain for me a heart that is peaceful and strong, ready to give everything for Christ. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Boniface is celebrated on June 5, the anniversary of his martyrdom at Dokkum in 754. You can pray to him on his feast day, when praying for missionaries and for the Church in Europe, for bishops and priests, or whenever you need courage to bear witness to your faith at work, at school or in your family.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Boniface, and read the life of Saint Boniface.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Boniface

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and letters of Saint Boniface. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on June 5, begin on May 27; it then ends on June 4. You can also pray it at any time of the year, for a mission, a new beginning or a difficult task.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life.

Day 1: Study and prayer

At the monastery of Nursling, Wynfrith studied, taught and prayed. Long before he became a missionary, he nourished his faith on Scripture. Every mission begins in silence, in a heart that listens to the Word of God before speaking it to others. Boniface also became a teacher, and he knew that a faith which is understood is a faith that can be passed on.

Prayer: Lord, give me a love for your Word, so that my life may be rooted in you.

Today: Read a chapter of the Gospel slowly.

Day 2: Leaving everything for the Lord

A fine career lay ahead of him in England. He chose instead to leave for good and proclaim Christ to peoples he did not know. Following Jesus always asks us to let go of something, even when what we leave behind is good.

Prayer: Lord, free me from whatever holds me back, so that I may follow you wherever you call me.

Today: Give up a comfort in order to do someone a service.

Day 3: Starting again after failure

His first mission in Frisia failed. Boniface did not give up: he went home, reflected, then set out again in a different way, asking for the support of Rome. Failure is not the end of a calling; it can be the place where God teaches us a better path.

Prayer: Lord, when my efforts seem useless, give me perseverance and the wisdom to look for another way.

Today: Take up again a task you had abandoned.

Day 4: Receiving a mission from the Church

In Rome, Pope Gregory II entrusted him with his mission and gave him a new name. Boniface did not work for himself but in the name of the Church. His strength came from knowing that he was sent. Throughout his life he wrote to the popes for advice and stayed in close union with the successor of Peter.

Prayer: Lord, keep me united to your Church, and make me a willing servant of your mission.

Today: Pray for the pope and for the bishop of your diocese.



The Saint Boniface monument in Fulda.

Day 5: The oak of Geismar

By felling the sacred oak of Donar, Boniface showed that the idols had no power. According to his *Life*, the wood of the tree was used to build a chapel. What once held people in fear became a place to praise the true God.

Prayer: Lord, show me the idols in my life and give me the courage to bring them down, to make more room for you.

Today: Name one thing that takes the place of God in your days.

Day 6: Building to last

Dioceses, monasteries, councils: Boniface patiently organized a Church able to live on after him. Fulda became a center of prayer and learning. Holiness is also found in patient, faithful work that others will carry on.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to build for the long term, in my family, my work and my community.

Today: Support a parish work or a monastery.

Day 7: Watchful shepherds

"Let us not be dumb dogs," Boniface wrote. He refused complacency and dared to warn the powerful, even the king of Mercia. Speaking the truth with charity is a form of love. Silence, when it leaves others in error or in danger, can be a failure of love.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give the shepherds of your Church vigilance and courage, and help me to speak the truth with love.

Today: Say a just and kind word you have been hesitating to say.

Day 8: A family of missionaries

Boniface was not alone: monks, nuns and priests who came from England surrounded him, among them Saint Walburga. Mission is a shared work, carried by many hands and many prayers. Some taught, some built, some copied books, some simply prayed: each had a share in the harvest.

Prayer: Lord, bless today's missionaries, priests, religious and lay people, and raise up new vocations.

Today: Pray for, or give to, a missionary work.

Day 9: Giving everything to the end

Nearly eighty years old, Boniface set out once more for Frisia. Attacked near Dokkum, he asked his companions not to defend themselves and died with them. His last journey was the same as his first: a journey toward those who did not yet know Christ.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Boniface, grant that I may be faithful to you to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray for persecuted Christians.

Closing prayer

Saint Boniface, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have presented. Pray for the Church, for Germany and for Europe, and for all who proclaim the Gospel. Obtain for us the grace to be courageous and faithful witnesses, rooted in your Word, united to the Church and generous to the end. Amen.

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be.

To go further: the life of Saint Boniface and the prayer to Saint Boniface.

PILGRIMAGE

Fulda Cathedral and the Tomb of Saint Boniface

Saint Boniface rests in Fulda, in Hesse, in central Germany. He had chosen to be buried there himself, in the abbey founded at his request by his disciple Sturm in 744. His tomb is now in the crypt of the Baroque Cathedral of the Holy Savior, and for twelve centuries Fulda has remained the heart of the veneration of the Apostle of Germany.

From abbey to cathedral

After his martyrdom near Dokkum on June 5, 754, Boniface's body was brought back through Utrecht and Mainz to Fulda, as he had wished. The saint's tomb made the abbey famous, and it became one of the greatest monasteries of the Carolingian Empire, renowned for its school and library; Saint Rabanus Maurus was its abbot. The abbey church was rebuilt several times. The present building, erected in the early 18th century in the Baroque style, became a cathedral when Fulda was made a diocese in the 18th century.



The Cathedral of the Holy Savior in Fulda.

The crypt of Saint Boniface

The tomb is in the crypt, beneath the western choir of the cathedral. A Baroque altar stands above it, decorated with a relief of the saint. Pilgrims come here to pray, alone or in groups. Every year, the bishops of Germany hold their autumn plenary assembly in Fulda and gather at his tomb, a sign of the bond that unites the German Church with its apostle.

The cathedral museum keeps mementos linked to the saint, including a slashed manuscript that tradition presents as the book he raised to protect himself at the moment of his martyrdom.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Boniface. In the crypt, you can entrust to the saint the Church in Germany and in Europe, missionaries and bishops, then say the prayer to Saint Boniface. Around his feast, on June 5, Fulda traditionally welcomes pilgrimages; the novena to Saint Boniface can prepare for this visit. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Boniface

- **Mainz** (Rhineland-Palatinate): the cathedral of the episcopal see he held.
- **Dokkum** (Friesland, Netherlands): the place of his martyrdom, with the chapel and park dedicated to him.
- **Utrecht** (Netherlands): a stop on the return of his body, and the city of his friend Saint Willibrord.
- **Crediton** (Devon, England): his probable birthplace.
- **Geismar**, near Fritzlar (Hesse): the place where he felled the oak of Donar.

Practical information

Fulda is served by Germany's high-speed trains, and the cathedral is a few minutes' walk from the station, next to the Baroque palace of the prince-abbots. The cathedral is a place of worship: visit outside of services and in silence. Check the opening hours of the cathedral, the crypt, and the museum on the official website of the Diocese of Fulda before you come.

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