BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Cuthbert

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: March 20

IN BRIEF

Saint Cuthbert

7th-century Anglo-Saxon monk, hermit of the Farne Islands and Bishop of Lindisfarne.

Feast day	March 20
Born	c. 635, Northumbria (perhaps Lothian)
Died	March 20, 687, Inner Farne, Farne Islands (Northumberland)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Northumbria, Durham

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Cuthbert for the Unity of the Church and for Pastors

Novena to Saint Cuthbert

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Cuthbert

Saint Cuthbert was an Anglo-Saxon monk and bishop of the 7th century, born in Northumbria around 635 and died on March 20, 687, in his hermitage on the Farne Islands, off the north-east coast of England. Prior of Melrose and then of Lindisfarne, a hermit, and finally Bishop of Lindisfarne, he became the best-loved saint of northern England. His relics rest in Durham Cathedral. His feast day is March 20.

Who was Saint Cuthbert?

Cuthbert is better known than many saints of his time. Three Latin Lives were written soon after his death: the first by an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne, between 698 and 705, at the request of Bishop Eadfrith; then two more by Bede the Venerable, one in verse and one in prose, before 721. These texts, written by men who could question his companions, mix precise memories with miracle stories meant to edify. They draw the portrait of a tireless pastor, a man of prayer drawn to solitude, and a builder of the Church's unity in the England of his day.

Key dates in the life of Cuthbert

- **c. 635**: Born in Northumbria, perhaps in the Lothian region, in what is now southern Scotland.
- **651**: While keeping sheep, he sees in a vision the soul of Saint Aidan rising to heaven; he enters the abbey of Melrose.
- **Late 650s**: With Abbot Eata he helps found the monastery of Ripon, then returns to Melrose.
- **664**: He succeeds Boisil as prior of Melrose.

- **670s**: As prior of Lindisfarne, he helps the community adopt Roman customs.
- **676**: He withdraws as a hermit to the islet of Inner Farne.
- **March 26, 685**: He is consecrated Bishop of Lindisfarne.
- **March 20, 687**: Dies in his hermitage on the Farne Islands.
- **698**: When his tomb is opened, his body is found incorrupt.
- **995**: After more than a century of wandering, his relics are laid to rest at Durham.

The shepherd who became a monk

According to his biographers, Cuthbert was tending flocks in the hills when, one night in 651, he saw a light come down from heaven and angels carry a soul away. He then learned that Saint Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, had just died. This sign led him to become a monk. His first Life suggests, however, that he was no simple shepherd: he arrives at Melrose on horseback, carrying a spear, with a servant, and the text alludes to a time spent under arms. He probably came from a noble family.

At Melrose he was trained by the prior Boisil, whom he succeeded in 664. He then travelled through the hill villages, often on foot, to preach and baptize people still barely touched by the Gospel. Bede stresses his gentleness and the power of his words: those who came to confess to him went away, he says, at peace.

Prior of Lindisfarne and builder of unity

Also in 664, the Synod of Whitby had decided that the Church of Northumbria would follow the customs of Rome, notably for the date of Easter, rather than those inherited from the Irish monks. This change was painful for the community of Lindisfarne, founded by Aidan in the tradition of Iona. Called as prior by Abbot Eata, Cuthbert guided this transition with

patience. His biographers report that he bore the objections of the brothers without anger, closing the meeting when tempers rose and taking up the discussion again the next day.

The hermit of the Farne Islands

In 676, Cuthbert was allowed to live alone on Inner Farne, a rocky islet beaten by the North Sea, a few miles from Lindisfarne. He built himself a cell and a small oratory, grew a field of barley and received visitors who came for advice. Tradition says that he prayed at night in the icy water and that, when he came out, otters came to warm his feet. He protected the seabirds that nested on the island: the eider ducks of the Northumbrian coast are still locally called "Cuddy's ducks", after him. The rules he set for them are sometimes presented as one of the oldest known measures to protect birds.

A bishop in spite of himself

In 684, a synod held in the presence of King Ecgfrith elected him bishop. He refused at first, and the king himself had to come to the island to persuade him. Elected to the see of Hexham, he exchanged it with Eata to become Bishop of Lindisfarne, and he was consecrated at York on March 26, 685. For two years he visited his vast diocese, preaching, confirming and caring for the sick, while keeping the austere life of a monk. He was close to the royal family, especially to Abbess Ælfflæd of Whitby. Sensing his end was near, he laid down his office at the end of 686 and returned to his hermitage, where he died on March 20, 687, surrounded by a few brothers.

Devotion and art

Cuthbert had asked to be buried on his island, but the monks brought his body back to Lindisfarne. When they opened his tomb in 698, they found it incorrupt and placed it in a new carved wooden coffin, with a small book of

the Gospel of Saint John. It was also at Lindisfarne, around that time, that the famous Lindisfarne Gospels were made, in honor of God and Saint Cuthbert. In 875, fleeing the Vikings, the monks left their island, carrying his relics. After long wanderings, they settled at Durham in 995. The body was moved into the new Norman cathedral in 1104, an event once celebrated on September 4.

Durham became one of the great pilgrimages of medieval England. In the 12th century, Reginald of Durham counted him among the three most popular saints of the country, with Edmund the Martyr and Etheldreda of Ely. More than one hundred and thirty English churches are dedicated to him. He is shown as a bishop or a monk, often holding the crowned head of the holy king Oswald, which was placed with him in his coffin, or accompanied by seabirds and otters. He is listed in the Roman Martyrology on March 20.

What can we learn from Saint Cuthbert?

Cuthbert united two callings that are often thought to be opposed: the solitude of prayer and the service of others. He loved the silence of his island, but he left it every time the Church asked him to. He knew how to guide a difficult change without breaking a community. You can pray to him for Christian unity, for overburdened pastors, for those who seek God in creation, and for all who hesitate between rest and service.

Where to pray to Saint Cuthbert

- **Durham** (England): the cathedral, where his tomb lies behind the high altar.
- **Lindisfarne** or Holy Island (Northumberland): the island of the monastery where he was prior and bishop.
- **Inner Farne** (Northumberland): the islet of his hermitage, where a chapel keeps his memory.
- **Melrose** (Scotland): the area of the abbey where he became a monk.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Cuthbert for the Unity of the Church and for Pastors

Saint Cuthbert, a monk of Melrose and Lindisfarne, lived as a hermit on an island in the North Sea before accepting, out of obedience, the office of bishop. He died on March 20, 687, and rests at Durham. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him the unity of the Church, pastors, and all who seek God in silence and in creation.

Prayer to Saint Cuthbert

Saint Cuthbert,
you left your flocks
to follow Christ, the true Shepherd;
teach me to recognize the signs
by which God calls me.

On your wind-beaten island
you prayed by day and by night
and protected the birds of the sea.
Help me to love silence
and to respect the work of the Creator.

You left your solitude
when the Church needed you,
and kept peace in the midst of divisions.
Obtain for our pastors your gentleness and strength,
and for our communities unity in charity.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Cuthbert

- On his feast day, March 20, or on September 4, the anniversary of the translation of his relics.
- For the unity of the Church and reconciliation in a divided community.
- For bishops, priests and all who carry a heavy responsibility.
- When you are looking for a time of retreat and silence.
- For sailors, people of the sea and respect for creation.

A short invocation

> *Saint Cuthbert, shepherd who became a pastor,*
> *keep us united in the peace of Christ. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Cuthbert from March 12 to 20, and read the life of Saint Cuthbert.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Cuthbert

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint Cuthbert, monk and Bishop of Lindisfarne, as told by his first biographers. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, March 20, begin on March 12. 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 Cuthbert, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A light in the night

As a young shepherd, Cuthbert sees one night angels carrying a soul to heaven. He learns that Saint Aidan has just died and decides to become a monk. God sometimes speaks in the midst of the most ordinary tasks.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the signs you place in my daily life, and help me to answer without delay.

Act of the day: Take five minutes this evening to look back over the day and seek God's presence in it.

Day 2: Letting oneself be formed

At Melrose, Cuthbert learns monastic life from the prior Boisil. He will later succeed him. No one grows in faith without teachers and companions.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who handed on the faith to me. Make me open to those who guide me toward you.

Act of the day: Thank, with a word or a prayer, someone who helped you grow in faith.

Day 3: Walking toward those far away

As prior of Melrose, Cuthbert travels on foot through the remote hill villages to bring the Gospel to people no one visits.

Prayer: Lord, send me to those who are far away, and give me simple words to speak of you.

Act of the day: Get in touch with someone who is isolated or forgotten.

Day 4: Patience amid divisions

At Lindisfarne, Cuthbert guides a difficult change. He bears objections without anger and knows how to put off a discussion until the next day when tempers rise.

Prayer: Lord, make me a peacemaker. Give me the patience that calms instead of wounding.

Act of the day: Give up having the last word in a discussion today.

Day 5: The silence of the island

On Inner Farne, Cuthbert lives alone facing the sea. He prays, works with his hands and welcomes those who come to seek advice.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to make silence within me so that I may hear you, and to return to others more peaceful.

Act of the day: Turn off screens and noise for a quarter of an hour to pray in silence.

Day 6: Friend of creation

Tradition says that otters came to warm his feet and that he protected the seabirds nesting on his island. All creation praises God.

Prayer: Creator God, teach me to respect what you have made and to praise you for the beauty of the world.

Act of the day: Do something concrete to care for the natural world around you.

Day 7: Accepting the burden

Elected bishop, Cuthbert at first refuses. He accepts when the king himself comes to beg him. He leaves his island out of obedience, in order to serve.

Prayer: Lord, when you ask of me a service I did not choose, help me to say yes with trust.

Act of the day: Willingly accept a service someone asks of you.

Day 8: A pastor for all

As bishop, Cuthbert visits his diocese, preaches, confirms and cares for the sick, while keeping the poor life of a monk.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishops and priests. Give them strength, gentleness and joy in serving your people.

Act of the day: Pray by name for your bishop and for the priests of your parish.

Day 9: Returning to God

Sensing that his death is near, Cuthbert returns to his hermitage. He dies on March 20, 687, surrounded by a few brothers, after urging them to peace and humility.

Prayer: Lord, grant me to live and die in your peace. Through the intercession of Saint Cuthbert, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Pray for the departed members of your family and, if possible, attend Mass.

Closing prayer

Saint Cuthbert,
monk of Lindisfarne and hermit of the Farne Islands,
you sought God in silence
and served him in your brothers.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you,
and keep us in peace and unity.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Credits and sources

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