

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Erkembode

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 12

IN BRIEF

Saint Erkembode

Monk from Ireland, abbot of Saint-Bertin and bishop of Thérouanne in the eighth century.

Feast day	April 12
Born	Ireland, according to tradition
Died	April 12, c. 742
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	children who have difficulty walking, people suffering from depression

In this booklet

Life

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Erkembode

Saint Erkembode was an eighth-century monk, said by tradition to have come from Ireland, who became abbot of Saint-Bertin, at Saint-Omer, and bishop of Thérouanne. A tireless pastor of an immense diocese, he died almost paralyzed on an April 12, around 742. His tomb, in the cathedral of Saint-Omer, is covered with small shoes left by parents who entrust their children to him: he is called "the saint who makes people walk." His feast day is April 12.

Who was Saint Erkembode?

Erkembode was one of the successors of Saint Omer, the founder of the town, and of Saint Bertin, the great abbot of Sithiu. His life is poorly known. A *Life* was written about him much later, at the abbey of Saint-Bertin in the Middle Ages, and the dates of his episcopate vary according to the authors. His name, of Germanic origin, is said to mean "recognized messenger." What is certain is the fervor that his tomb has inspired for more than twelve centuries, and the very special bond between this holy bishop and sick children and all who struggle to move forward.

Key dates

- **Late seventh century**: According to tradition, he comes from Ireland to the continent and enters the monastery of Sithiu, now the abbey of Saint-Bertin.
- **Early eighth century**: He becomes abbot of Saint-Bertin, fourth successor of Saint Bertin.
- **c. 716-723**: He is chosen as bishop of Thérouanne while remaining abbot, fourth successor of Saint Omer.

- **Following years**: He travels his vast diocese, from Ypres to the Somme valley, and helps the poor.
- **April 12, c. 742**: He dies almost paralyzed and is buried near the tomb of Saint Omer.
- **November 1, 1085**: At the request of the people, his body is placed in a shrine.
- **1902**: His relics, hidden after the Revolution and then forgotten, are restored to their place in the cathedral.

A monk from Ireland

In the seventh and eighth centuries, many Irish monks crossed the sea to proclaim the Gospel on the continent, in the wake of Saint Columbanus. According to tradition, Erkembode was one of them. He joined the monastery of Sithiu, founded a few decades earlier by Saint Omer and his companions and made famous by Saint Bertin. He lived the monastic life there so well that the monks, struck by the holiness of his life, chose him as their abbot.

Bishop of an immense diocese

Erkembode was then called to become bishop of Thérouanne, the see of Saint Omer, while keeping the leadership of the abbey. The diocese of Thérouanne was then immense: it stretched from Ypres, in present-day Belgium, to the Somme valley. Erkembode traveled it without rest. Tradition reports that he bought back land to redistribute to the poor.

These long journeys wore out his body. At the end of his life he found it harder and harder to walk, and he died almost paralyzed on an April 12, around 742. He was buried in the church of Sithiu where Saint Omer already lay, which over the centuries became the present Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Saint-Omer.

The saint who makes people walk

Very soon, pilgrims came to pray at his tomb. They left their worn-out shoes there, in memory of their long walk and in tribute to the man who had walked so much, and then suffered so much from no longer being able to walk. Today it is mostly children's shoes that cover the sarcophagus: parents come to entrust to the saint a child who is slow to walk, or who is disabled or ill. He is also invoked for people suffering from depression, when "nothing works anymore." The cathedral staff regularly remove the shoes to make room for new ones.

Devotion and relics

On November 1, 1085, at the request of the faithful, Erkembode's body was raised into a shrine. In 1466 the pope authorized his head to be placed in a precious reliquary of silver and gold. During the Revolution, in 1793, the church's caretaker saved the reliquary from looting, and the clergy recovered it intact in 1804. The relics, long hidden and then forgotten under the high altar, were restored to their place in 1902. The present tomb is a very ancient monolithic trough of dark gray porphyry, placed in the north ambulatory of the cathedral. Erkembode is honored on April 12, in the Roman Martyrology and in the diocese of Arras.

Why pray to Saint Erkembode?

Erkembode spent his strength walking toward others, until he could no longer walk himself. His final weakness became, for generations of pilgrims, a sign of hope. He speaks to all who are stopped in their tracks: by illness, disability, age or depression. He also reminds parents of sick children that they are not alone in carrying their worry.

Where to pray to Saint Erkembode

- **Saint-Omer** (Pas-de-Calais, France): the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, where his sarcophagus covered with shoes stands in the north ambulatory.
- **Saint-Omer**: the ruins of the abbey of Saint-Bertin, of which he was abbot.
- **Thérouanne** (Pas-de-Calais, France): the site of the former cathedral, seat of his diocese, destroyed in 1553.

To pray with him at home, you can use the prayer to Saint Erkembode or the novena to Saint Erkembode.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Erkembode for Children Who Cannot Walk

Saint Erkembode, a monk said by tradition to have come from Ireland, abbot of Saint-Bertin and bishop of Thérouanne, traveled his immense diocese tirelessly until he could no longer walk. For twelve centuries pilgrims have come to his tomb in Saint-Omer, and parents leave the small shoes of their children there. This prayer is an original composition inspired by his life, not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to him children who struggle to walk, people with disabilities and those who can no longer find the strength to go on.

Prayer to Saint Erkembode

Saint Erkembode,
you left your island to follow Christ,
and you walked every road of your diocese
to bring the Gospel and help the poor.
In the end your legs refused to serve you,
and you offered your weakness to God.

We entrust to you little children
who are slow to walk,
those who are sick or disabled,
and their anxious parents.
Obtain health for them, if God so wills,
and always strength and peace.

We entrust to you also those who are paralyzed within,
by sadness, fear or depression,
those for whom nothing works anymore.
Help them to rise again,
and help us to reach out a hand to them.

May Christ, who said, "Rise and walk,"
set us all on the road again toward him.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Erkembode

- On his feast day, April 12.
- For a child who is slow to walk, or who is sick or disabled.
- For a person suffering from depression or exhaustion.
- For an elderly or sick person who is losing mobility.

- Before a pilgrimage or a long walk.

An invocation for getting moving again

When everything seems stuck, within you or around you, you can simply say:

> *Lord, I cannot move forward anymore.*
> *Take me by the hand and set me on the road again.*
> *Saint Erkembode, pray for us. Amen.*

If you are suffering from depression, prayer can support you, but do not hesitate to ask for the help of a doctor or a loved one as well. To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Erkembode from April 4 to 12, and read about the life of Saint Erkembode.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Erkembode

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Erkembode, a monk said by tradition to have come from Ireland, abbot of Saint-Bertin and bishop of Thérouanne, invoked at Saint-Omer as "the saint who makes people walk." It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on his feast day, April 12, begin on April 4. It is particularly suited to parents of a sick or disabled child, and to anyone who struggles to move forward; you can pray it at any time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and present 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 Erkembode, pray for us." The small act of the day helps you live concretely what you have prayed.

Day 1: Setting out

According to tradition, Erkembode left Ireland for the continent, like so many monks of his time. Every Christian life begins with a departure: leaving oneself behind to follow Christ.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to set out toward you today.

Today: Take a prayer walk, even a short one, entrusting your intention to God.

Day 2: Life in the monastery

At Sithiu, Erkembode lived prayer, work and common life. There he took root. To walk well, one first needs solid roots.

Prayer: Lord, root me in prayer, so that I am not swept away by trials.

Today: Take ten minutes of silent prayer.

Day 3: Chosen by his brothers

His brothers, struck by his holiness, chose him as abbot. Erkembode did not seek honors; they came to find him. True authority is born of trust.

Prayer: Lord, make me worthy of the trust placed in me. Keep me humble.

Today: Thank someone who trusts you.

Day 4: The roads of the diocese

Once a bishop, he traveled an immense diocese, from Ypres to the Somme. He walked toward his people. A pastor does not stay shut away: he goes out to meet them.

Prayer: Lord, bless the bishops and priests who travel the roads for their people. Give them strength and joy.

Today: Visit someone who cannot get out.

Day 5: Care for the poor

Tradition reports that he bought back land to give to the poor. His walking was not only missionary; it was also charitable.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the poor who cross my path. May I not pass them by.

Today: Make a gift, or perform a concrete service for someone in need.

Day 6: When the body wears out

By dint of walking, Erkembode wore himself out. His legs grew weak. He knew the humiliation of depending on others. Christ too bore our weakness.

Prayer: Lord, be close to the sick, the elderly and those who are losing their strength. Give them your peace.

Today: Help an elderly or disabled person with a daily task.

Day 7: Children who do not walk

On his tomb, parents leave the shoes of children who are slow to walk. Jesus said: "Let the children come to me."

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you sick and disabled children, and their parents. Obtain healing for them, if it is your will, and always courage.

Today: Pray for a family living with a sick or disabled child, and offer them your help.

Day 8: When nothing works anymore

Erkembode is also invoked for those suffering from depression, when the soul is as if paralyzed. God never tires of lifting us up.

Prayer: Lord, lift up those who are crushed by sadness. Put people on their road who will help them get moving again.

Today: Check in on someone going through a dark time.

Day 9: Rise and walk

Erkembode died on April 12, around 742. Since then his tomb has been a place of hope. Christ said to the paralyzed man: "Rise and walk." He says the same word to us today.

Prayer: Lord, set me on my feet and on the road to you. Through the intercession of Saint Erkembode, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Today: If you can, go to Saint-Omer to pray at his tomb, or place before God, in your prayer, the small shoe of the child you are entrusting to him.

Living the novena with Saint Erkembode

You may be praying this novena for a child who worries you. Entrust the child to God each day, with Saint Erkembode, without losing heart if the answer is not the one you expected: prayer always obtains the strength to carry what comes. Or you may be praying it for yourself, because you are tired, sick or discouraged. Go forward one day at a time. Prayer does not replace medical care: do not hesitate to consult a doctor and to accept help. Saint Erkembode, who knew weakness, walks beside you.

Closing prayer

Saint Erkembode,
pilgrim monk and tireless pastor,
you who offered God both your strength and your weakness,
present to God the intention I have carried during these nine days.
Obtain for children the grace to walk,
for the sick to be relieved,
for downcast hearts to rise again,
and for all of us to walk toward Christ.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Credits and sources

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