

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Erkenwald of London

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 30

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IN BRIEF

Saint Erkenwald of London

Seventh-century Bishop of London, founder of the abbeys of Chertsey and Barking, long regarded as the patron saint of London.

Feast day	April 30
Born	c. 630, Lindsey or East Anglia, England
Died	c. 693, Barking, England (according to tradition)
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	London

In this booklet

Life

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Erkenwald of London

Saint Erkenwald (also spelled Earconwald) was a seventh-century Bishop of London and the founder of the abbeys of Chertsey and Barking. Born into a noble Anglo-Saxon family, he led the Church of London from about 675 until his death around 693. Venerated throughout the Middle Ages at Saint Paul's Cathedral, he was long regarded as the patron saint of London. His feast day is April 30.

Who was Saint Erkenwald?

Erkenwald belonged to the generation that rooted Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, a few decades after the mission of Saint Augustine of Canterbury. London had received its first bishop, Saint Mellitus, in 604, but the city later returned to paganism. In Erkenwald's time the Church there was reorganized on a lasting basis, and he became one of its great figures.

What we know of him comes mainly from Saint Bede the Venerable, writing around 731, and from later texts: a *Life of Saint Erkenwald* written between the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, and a collection of miracles composed around 1141 by a canon named Arcoid. These texts mix historical facts with stories of wonders.

Key dates

- **Around 630**: Born into a noble family, perhaps from Lindsey (in present-day Lincolnshire) or from East Anglia.
- **1660s**: He founds Chertsey Abbey in Surrey, which he leads himself, and Barking Abbey in Essex, entrusted to his sister Æthelburh.
- **675 or 676**: Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury appoints him Bishop of London.

- **Around 686**: He helps reconcile Theodore with Saint Wilfrid.
- **Around 690**: King Ine of Wessex names him among his advisers in the prologue to his law code.
- **Around 693**: He dies, according to tradition at Barking, and is buried in Saint Paul's Cathedral in London.
- **1148**: His relics are placed in a new silver shrine at Saint Paul's; the translation is celebrated on November 14.

Founder of Chertsey and Barking

Before he was a bishop, Erkenwald was a founder of monasteries. At Chertsey, on the banks of the Thames, he established a community of men which he led himself. At Barking, east of London, he founded a double monastery, where nuns and monks lived, and entrusted it to his sister, **Saint Æthelburh** (Ethelburga).

Bede describes the fervent life of the Barking community and the graces that accompanied it. The names of Erkenwald and his sister recall the royal family of Kent, which suggests an aristocratic background.

Bishop of London

In 675 or 676, Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus, the great reformer of the English Church, appointed Erkenwald Bishop of London, a see which then covered the kingdom of the East Saxons. He worked to organize the diocese and kept ties with several kingdoms.

He acted as a peacemaker in the conflict between Theodore and Saint Wilfrid, the Bishop of York who had been driven from his see. King Ine of Wessex named him among the advisers who helped him draw up his laws.

Already in Bede's time, a tradition reported that the horse litter in which the sick bishop used to be carried had been kept, and that sick people were healed by touching chips of its wood.

The saint of London

Erkenwald died around 693. Tradition says that the nuns of Barking, the monks of Chertsey and the people of London all claimed his body, which was finally carried to Saint Paul's Cathedral.

After the Norman Conquest his cult was revived: his *Life* and the account of his miracles were written. According to Arcoid, his relics escaped the fire that ravaged the cathedral in 1087. They were raised from the crypt in 1140 and placed in 1148 in a silver shrine behind the high altar. The historian Patrick Wormald could write that from the twelfth century Erkenwald was the nearest thing London had to a patron saint.

In the fourteenth century Bishop Robert Braybrooke revived his cult. It was in this period that a fine poem in Middle English, *Saint Erkenwald*, was composed. In it, the bishop discovers, during building work at the cathedral, the incorrupt body of a pagan judge who had been a man of great uprightness. As Erkenwald speaks the words of baptism, his tears fall on the dead man and open heaven to this just soul.

Erkenwald's shrine disappeared at the Reformation, and the old cathedral itself was destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Why is Saint Erkenwald the patron saint of London?

Erkenwald was not the first Bishop of London, but he was the bishop under whom the Church of London took lasting root, and his tomb in Saint Paul's became the city's great shrine. For centuries Londoners came to pray before his

relics for their city and their sick. That is why he came to be seen as London's own saint. He can still be invoked today for London and for all large cities, for bishops, and for reconciliation in the Church.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Erkenwald in art

- **Bishop's vestments, miter and crozier**: he is shown as Bishop of London.
- **Teaching monks**: as in the Chertsey Breviary, recalling his role as founder of monasteries.

What can we learn from Saint Erkenwald?

Erkenwald was a builder of the Church: founder of monasteries, pastor of a great city, and peacemaker between churchmen in conflict. His story reminds us that big cities have their saints too, and that faith is handed on there through communities of prayer and faithful pastors. The medieval poem that bears his name adds a note of hope: God's mercy is wider than our boundaries.

Where to pray to Saint Erkenwald

- **London**: Saint Paul's Cathedral, rebuilt after 1666 on the site of the church where his shrine stood.
- **Barking** (Greater London): the remains of the abbey founded for his sister, near Saint Margaret's Church.
- **Chertsey** (Surrey): the site of the abbey he led.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Erkenwald or the novena to Saint Erkenwald.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Erkenwald, Pastor of London

Saint Erkenwald, Bishop of London in the seventh century and founder of the abbeys of Chertsey and Barking, was venerated throughout the Middle Ages as the protector of London. The old Latin liturgical prayers in his honor are rarely used today. This page offers an original prayer by Saintspedia for great cities, for pastors and for reconciliation.

A prayer for the city

In the Middle Ages, Londoners came to pray before Erkenwald's shrine in Saint Paul's Cathedral for their city and for their sick. We can take up that spirit by entrusting to God, through his intercession, the city where we live, with its neighborhoods, its people and its poor.



Saint Paul's Cathedral, London, heir to the shrine of Saint Erkenwald.

Prayer to Saint Erkenwald, pastor of London

Saint Erkenwald, pastor of London, you founded houses of prayer on the banks of the Thames and watched over the people of a great city: pray for our cities and for all who live in them, so often alone in the middle of the crowd.

You helped divided bishops to be reconciled: obtain peace for families, communities and parishes torn apart. Give us hearts able to forgive and to rebuild.

You entrusted a monastery to your sister and supported nuns and monks in their life of prayer: watch over religious communities and over vocations.

Tradition says your tears opened heaven to a just man: teach us to hope in God's mercy for everyone. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may the Lord bless our city and keep it in his peace. Amen.

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

Intentions to entrust to Saint Erkenwald

- London and all great cities.
- Bishops and pastors of city dioceses and parishes.
- Reconciliation in the Church and in families.
- The sick, who were once brought to his shrine.
- Religious communities, especially those that live in the heart of cities.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Erkenwald's feast day is April 30, and the translation of his relics was celebrated on November 14. Pray to him for your city, for a conflict that needs healing or for a pastor. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Erkenwald, and read the life of Saint Erkenwald.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Erkenwald

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and memory of Saint Erkenwald, seventh-century Bishop of London and founder of the abbeys of Chertsey and Barking. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on his feast day, April 30, begin on April 22. You can also pray it in November, ending on November 14, the old feast of the translation of his relics, or at any time for your city.

How to pray this novena

Each day, 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. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day. You may pray it alone, with your family or with your parish.

Day 1: Building on what others began

London had received its first bishop, Mellitus, in 604, but the young Church there did not last. Decades later, Erkenwald took up the work again. Faith is often rebuilt patiently on ground where it seemed to have failed.

Prayer: Lord, give me patience and hope where faith seems weak, in my family, my parish or my city. Amen.

Today: Pray for a place where the faith has grown cold.

Day 2: Houses of prayer

Before he was a bishop, Erkenwald founded monasteries at Chertsey and Barking. He knew that a Church lives first of all from prayer. Communities of prayer are like wells in the middle of a city: people come to them thirsty, often without knowing what they are looking for.

Prayer: Lord, bless monasteries, convents and all communities of prayer, and draw me to pray more faithfully. Amen.

Today: Spend ten minutes in silent prayer, in a church if you can.

Day 3: A brother and a sister

Erkenwald entrusted the monastery of Barking to his sister Æthelburh. Brother and sister served God side by side, each in their own way. Holiness can grow within a family.

Prayer: Lord, bless my brothers and sisters and all my family. Help us to support one another on the way to you. Amen.

Today: Contact a brother, sister or relative you have not spoken to in a while.

Day 4: A pastor for a great city

In 675 or 676, Erkenwald became Bishop of London. He received the care of a city and of a whole kingdom. Every pastor carries many people in his heart and in his prayer.

Prayer: Lord, bless the bishop of my diocese and the priests of my city. Give them strength and wisdom. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for your bishop and your parish priest.

Day 5: Making peace

Erkenwald helped to reconcile Archbishop Theodore and Saint Wilfrid, two great churchmen in conflict. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

Prayer: Lord, make me an instrument of reconciliation in my family, my community and my Church. Amen.

Today: Take one step toward someone with whom you are in conflict.

Day 6: Serving the common good

King Ine of Wessex named Erkenwald among the advisers who helped him draw up his laws. Christians are called to contribute to just laws and to the good of society.

Prayer: Lord, guide those who govern our cities and nations, and give them a love of justice and of the poor. Amen.

Today: Pray for the mayor and leaders of your city.

Day 7: Carried in weakness

In his old age and illness, the bishop was carried in a horse litter, and tradition says the sick were healed by touching its wood. God can make our weakness a channel of his grace.

Prayer: Lord, comfort the sick and the elderly, and help me to offer my own weaknesses to you. Amen.

Today: Visit or call a sick or elderly person.

Day 8: The tears of a pastor

In the medieval poem *Saint Erkenwald*, the bishop's tears, falling on a just pagan judge, open heaven to him. It is a poem, not a chronicle, but it speaks of a pastor who longed for the salvation of all.

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart that desires the salvation of every person, and teach me to trust in your mercy. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who does not know God, and for those who have died without anyone to pray for them.

Day 9: What fire cannot destroy

Erkenwald's shrine disappeared at the Reformation, and Old Saint Paul's burned in 1666. Yet his memory remains, and a new cathedral stands on the same hill. What is given to God is never lost.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Erkenwald, bless our city, heal our divisions and keep us faithful. Amen.

Today: Walk or pray for a moment in your city, entrusting its people to God.

Closing prayer

Saint Erkenwald, founder of monasteries, Bishop of London and peacemaker, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for London and for all great cities, for our pastors, for the sick and for those who are divided. Obtain for us a faith that rebuilds, a love that reconciles and a hope that reaches everyone. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Erkenwald and pray the prayer to Saint Erkenwald.

CREDITS

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