BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Frideswide of Oxford

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: October 19

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IN BRIEF

Saint Frideswide of Oxford

Anglo-Saxon nun, founder and first abbess of a monastery in Oxford, patron of the city and university.

Feast day	October 19
Born	late 7th century, Oxford area (according to tradition)
Died	October 19, 727 (according to tradition), Oxford
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	the city of Oxford, the University of Oxford

In this booklet

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Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Frideswide of Oxford

Saint Frideswide, also called Frithuswith, was an Anglo-Saxon nun of the late 7th and early 8th centuries. Founder and first abbess of a monastery in Oxford, she is said to have died there on October 19, 727. Patron saint of the city and University of Oxford, she is celebrated on October 19. Her relics are believed to rest still in Christ Church Cathedral, the former church of the priory that bore her name.

Who was Saint Frideswide?

Frideswide is one of those Anglo-Saxon princesses who, in the first centuries of English Christianity, founded and governed monasteries. Her story is known to us only through late texts: two Latin Lives of the 12th century, the first anonymous, the second written by Robert of Cricklade, prior of St Frideswide's, as well as a few lines by the chronicler William of Malmesbury. These accounts mix legend freely with history. Historians nevertheless think they preserve the memory of a real abbess at the head of a community in Oxford, in the Thames valley, at a time when the region was disputed between several kingdoms.

Key dates in the life of Frideswide

- **Late 7th century**: Born, according to legend, into the family of a local king named Didan.
- **Early 8th century**: Her father founds a monastery for her in Oxford.
- **Shortly after**: To escape King Algar, who wants to marry her, she flees to Bampton and then hides at Binsey, near Oxford.
- **Afterwards**: According to the Life, Algar is struck blind at the gates of Oxford and lets her go; she returns to lead her monastery.

- **October 19, 727**: Dies in Oxford, according to tradition; she is buried in the church of St Mary.
- **1002**: The church is burned, then rebuilt by King Æthelred.
- **Early 12th century**: Augustinian canons settle there and found the priory of St Frideswide.
- **1180 and 1289**: Solemn translations of her relics; in 1289, they are placed in a new shrine.
- **1562**: After the upheavals of the Reformation, her remains are buried again in the church, which has become Oxford's cathedral.

The princess who refused the king

According to her Life, Frideswide was the daughter of Didan, a king who ruled the Oxford area, and of his wife Safrida. Drawn to prayer from an early age, she obtained from her father the foundation of a monastery, where she lived with other consecrated young women. But a neighboring king, Algar, fell in love with her and wanted to marry her by force. Frideswide refused: she had given her life to Christ. Warned that the king was coming for her, she fled with a few companions. Legend says a boat took them along the Thames to Bampton, and that she then hid in the woods of Binsey.

When Algar reached Oxford to seize her, he was struck blind as he tried to enter the town. He recovered his sight only by giving her up. This episode gave rise to a curious superstition: for centuries, several kings of England avoided entering Oxford for fear of suffering the same fate. At Binsey, tradition links the saint to a spring said to have welled up at her prayer, which became a place of pilgrimage.

The abbess of Oxford

Back in Oxford, Frideswide led her monastery until her death. It was probably a double monastery, where nuns and monks lived under the authority of an abbess, as at Whitby with Saint Hilda or at Ely with Saint Etheldreda. The historian John Blair links her name with that of Frithuwold, a prince of the Thames region connected with Chertsey Abbey, which suggests she belonged to a powerful family. According to tradition, she died on October 19, 727, and was buried in the church of St Mary in her monastery.

The cult of Saint Frideswide

Her tomb became a place of prayer. After the church burned in 1002, King Æthelred had it rebuilt. In the early 12th century, Augustinian canons founded the priory of St Frideswide there, which developed her cult. Her relics were solemnly translated in 1180, then in 1289 into a richly carved shrine. From the 12th century she was honored as the patron saint of the town and of the young University of Oxford. Her cult even reached the continent: it is recorded at Bomy, in Artois.

In the 16th century, the priory was suppressed and its church became Christ Church Cathedral. The shrine was destroyed during the Reformation. In 1562, the Protestant authorities had her remains buried again in the church, mixed, according to a well-known account, with those of the wife of a Reformer, to discourage any veneration. She is most often depicted as an abbess, with crozier and book, and the windows of Oxford tell the episodes of her flight.

What can we learn from Saint Frideswide?

Beneath the features of legend, Frideswide is a woman who chose Christ against the will of the powerful. She fled violence rather than give in, then built a community of prayer at the heart of what would become a great city of

learning. We can pray to her for students and teachers, for the freedom of young people to choose their vocation, and for women who are victims of pressure or violence.

Where to pray to Saint Frideswide

- **Oxford** (England): Christ Church Cathedral, former church of the priory of St Frideswide, which keeps her reconstructed shrine and her windows.
- **Binsey**, near Oxford: St Margaret's church and the spring that tradition links to the saint.
- **Bampton** (Oxfordshire): the place where, according to the Life, she found refuge.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Frideswide for Oxford, Students and Free Hearts

Saint Frideswide, an Anglo-Saxon princess, refused the marriage a king wanted to force on her so as to remain consecrated to Christ, then founded a monastery in Oxford which she led until her death in 727. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to her the city and University of Oxford, students, and all who must defend their inner freedom.

Prayer to Saint Frideswide

Saint Frideswide,
you chose Christ as your only spouse
and did not give in to the will of a king.
Give me a free and faithful heart,
that cannot be bought or intimidated.

You who fled in the night
and found refuge in the woods of Binsey,
protect those who are threatened,
women who suffer violence
and young people on whom others want to impose their path.

Patron of Oxford,
watch over students and those who teach them.
May their learning lead them to the truth
and may their hearts remain open to God.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Frideswide

- On her feast day, October 19, or during a visit to Oxford.
- At the start of an academic year, for students and teachers.
- For a young person discerning a vocation or under pressure.
- For women who are victims of violence or forced marriage.
- For the city of Oxford and for Christian unity in England.

A short invocation

> *Lord, keep my whole heart for you.*
> *Saint Frideswide, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Frideswide from October 11 to 19, and discover the life of Saint Frideswide.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Frideswide of Oxford

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint Frideswide, also called Frithuswith, abbess of Oxford and patron saint of the city. To finish it on her feast day, October 19, begin on October 11. You can also pray it at any other time of the year, for example at the start of the academic 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 Frideswide, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recounted come from the Lives written in the 12th century, which mix history and legend.

Day 1: A childhood turned towards God

According to her Life, Frideswide, a king's daughter, was drawn to prayer from her youth. She asked her father to allow her to consecrate herself to God.

Prayer: Lord, awaken the desire for you in the hearts of children and young people.

Act of the day: Pray for a child or young person you know.

Day 2: A father who gives

King Didan founded a monastery in Oxford for his daughter. He accepted that his child should belong first to God.

Prayer: Lord, bless parents who support their children's vocation without taking it over.

Act of the day: Thank God for your parents, or pray for them.

Day 3: Saying no to the powerful

King Algar wanted to marry her by force. Frideswide refused: she had given her life to Christ and would not take it back.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to say no to what takes me away from you, even when it is costly.

Act of the day: Refuse a small compromise today.

Day 4: Flight in the night

With a few companions, Frideswide fled along the Thames to Bampton. She trusted God in uncertainty.

Prayer: Lord, protect those who must flee violence, refugees and women under threat.

Act of the day: Support by a gift or by prayer an organization that helps women or refugees.

Day 5: Hidden in the woods

At Binsey, Frideswide lived in hiding, in prayer and poverty. Tradition links to her a spring that welled up at her prayer.

Prayer: Lord, be my spring in times of loneliness and dryness.

Act of the day: Take a time of silence, away from screens, to pray.

Day 6: Violence disarmed

According to the Life, Algar was struck blind at the gates of Oxford and recovered his sight only by giving her up. God protects those who trust in him.

Prayer: Lord, open the eyes of those who want to dominate others, and convert violent hearts.

Act of the day: Pray for someone who has frightened or hurt you.

Day 7: Building a community

Back in Oxford, Frideswide led her monastery. She guided sisters and brothers in prayer and community life.

Prayer: Lord, bless religious communities and those who lead them.

Act of the day: Do a service for someone in your community, parish or family.

Day 8: Patron of a city of learning

Oxford, where she prayed, became a great university city. Since the 12th century, students have looked on her as their patron.

Prayer: Lord, bless students and their teachers. May the search for knowledge lead them to the truth.

Act of the day: Pray for a student or teacher you know.

Day 9: A memory across the centuries

Frideswide died in 727. Wars, fires and the Reformation have not erased her memory: people still pray near her tomb in Oxford.

Prayer: Lord, grant unity to Christians. Through the intercession of Saint Frideswide, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Pray for Christian unity and, if possible, attend Mass.

Closing prayer

Saint Frideswide,
abbess of Oxford and bride of Christ,
you preferred God to the crowns of the earth.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Keep my heart free and faithful,
and watch over those who seek the truth.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford

Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford is both the cathedral of the Anglican diocese of Oxford and the chapel of Christ Church college. It stands in the former church of the priory of St Frideswide, built on the site where, according to tradition, the saint founded her monastery in the early 8th century and was buried in 727. It is the main place of memory of Oxford's patron saint.

From Frideswide's monastery to the cathedral

According to her Life, Frideswide was buried in the church of St Mary in her monastery. Burned in 1002, the church was rebuilt by King Æthelred. In the early 12th century, Augustinian canons founded the priory of St Frideswide there and raised the Romanesque church whose main structure survives today. The saint's relics were solemnly translated there in 1180, then placed in 1289 in a new shrine, which drew many pilgrims.

In the 16th century, the priory was suppressed to make way for a great college, and the church became the cathedral of the new diocese of Oxford. The shrine was destroyed during the Reformation. In 1562, the saint's remains were buried again in the church, mixed, according to a famous account, with those of the wife of a Protestant Reformer.

What you can see

The cathedral, one of the smallest in England, preserves fine Romanesque and Gothic architecture and a remarkable vault over the choir. Inside the church you can see the shrine of Saint Frideswide, reconstructed from fragments of

the medieval shrine found in the 19th century. Several windows recall the saint, in particular a large 19th-century window designed by Edward Burne-Jones, which tells her life and flight in several scenes.

Praying there

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Frideswide. Before her shrine, entrust to her the city of Oxford, students and those who seek the truth, then say the prayer to Saint Frideswide. The cathedral is an Anglican place of worship: Catholics are welcome there as visitors and pilgrims, and may pray there especially for Christian unity. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Frideswide

- **Binsey**, a few kilometers from Oxford: St Margaret's church and the spring that tradition associates with the saint.
- **Bampton** (Oxfordshire): the place of her refuge according to the Life.

Practical information

The cathedral is in the heart of Oxford, within the precincts of Christ Church college, within walking distance of the city center. Visitor admission is generally charged, but services are open to all. Opening hours and service times vary with the time of year and the life of the college: check with Christ Church before your visit.

Credits and sources

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