

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Genevieve of Paris

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 3

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IN BRIEF

Saint Genevieve of Paris

Gallo-Roman consecrated virgin who protected Paris from the Huns, patron saint of Paris and of the French Gendarmerie.

Feast day	January 3
Born	c. 420, Nanterre, France
Died	c. 502, Paris, France
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since the early Church)
Era	6th century
Patron saint of	Paris, French Gendarmerie, Diocese of Nanterre

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Genevieve, Patron Saint of Paris

Novena to Saint Genevieve

Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, Shrine of Saint Genevieve in Paris

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Genevieve of Paris

Saint Genevieve is the patron saint of Paris. Born in Nanterre around 420 and consecrated to God in her youth, she settled in Lutetia, the Paris of late antiquity, and stood by the city through two great trials: the approach of Attila's Huns in 451, and a long blockade of the city by the Franks. A friend of King Clovis and Queen Clotilde, she died around 502 and rests on the hill that now bears her name. Her feast day is January 3.

Who was Saint Genevieve?

Genevieve belonged to the Gallo-Roman world of the end of the Empire. Her parents, Severus and Gerontia according to tradition, were well-off landowners in Nanterre, a small town near Paris.

What we know of her comes mainly from a *Life of Saint Genevieve* (*Vita Genovefae*), written in Latin by an anonymous cleric who says he wrote it about eighteen years after her death. The text mixes plausible historical facts with miracle stories, but it gives a very concrete picture of a woman of authority, respected by bishops and kings alike, who devoted her life to prayer, fasting and the service of the people of Paris.

Key dates

- **c. 420**: Born in Nanterre.
- **c. 429**: According to her *Life*, Saint Germanus of Auxerre and Saint Lupus of Troyes, on their way to Britain, stop at Nanterre; Germanus notices the child and consecrates her to God.
- **c. 435-440**: She receives the veil of consecrated virgins, then settles in Paris after the death of her parents.

- **451**: As Attila approaches, she urges the Parisians to pray rather than flee; the Huns turn toward Orléans.
- **c. 470-480**: During the blockade of Paris by the Franks of Childeric, she leads boats along the Seine to bring back grain.
- **c. 475**: She has a first church built over the tomb of Saint Denis, north of Paris.
- **c. 502**: Dies in Paris, on a January 3 according to tradition; she is buried on the hill on the Left Bank.
- **c. 511**: Clovis is buried near her, in the Basilica of the Holy Apostles that he founded.
- **1129**: The "miracle of the Ardents" ends an epidemic after a procession with her reliquary.
- **1793**: Her relics are burned on the Place de Grève during the French Revolution.
- **1962**: She is proclaimed patron saint of the French Gendarmerie.

A young girl consecrated to God

The best-known story of her childhood is her meeting with Germanus of Auxerre. The bishop, passing through Nanterre, picked out the little girl in the crowd and asked her about her desire to give herself to God. According to the *Life*, he gave her a bronze coin marked with a cross, which she wore all her life in place of jewelry.

A few years later, Genevieve received the veil of consecrated virgins. She did not found a monastery: she lived in the world with a few companions, dividing her time between prayer, long fasts and works of charity.

Once she had settled in Paris with her godmother, she first met with suspicion. Her austerities, her visions and her plain speaking disturbed people, and some accused her of being a fraud. The support of Germanus of Auxerre, who

defended her on a second visit, helped to silence the critics.

Facing Attila: the strength of prayer

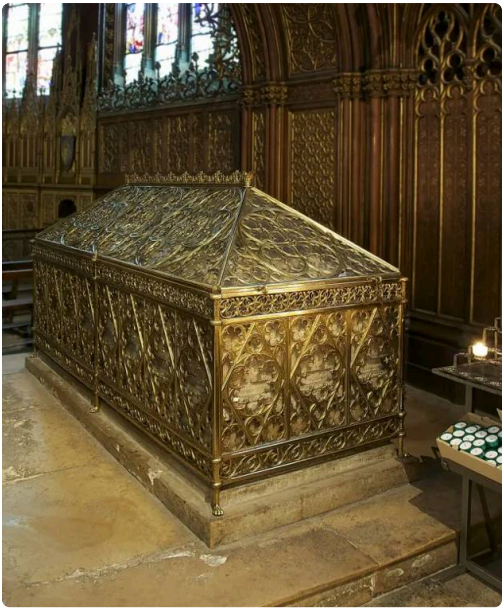
In the spring of 451, Attila's Huns were ravaging northern Gaul. Panic spread in Paris, and the inhabitants wanted to leave the city with their belongings. Genevieve gathered the women, invited them to pray and fast like Judith and Esther in the Bible, and begged the men not to abandon the city, assuring them that God would protect it. Part of the population, exasperated, even threatened to stone her.

In the end, Attila's army bypassed Paris and marched on Orléans, before being stopped at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains. From then on, for the Parisians, Genevieve was the protector of their city.

The woman who fed Paris

A few decades later, Paris was subjected to a long blockade by the Franks of Childeric, the father of Clovis. Famine threatened. Genevieve organized an expedition of boats that went up the Seine and the Aube as far as Arcis-sur-Aube and Troyes, and came back loaded with grain, which she had distributed to the hungry. She also interceded with Childeric for prisoners and obtained several pardons.

She later kept close ties with Clovis, who had become king of the Franks, and with Queen Clotilde. After the king's baptism at Reims by Saint Remigius, Clovis built on the Left Bank hill a basilica dedicated to the Holy Apostles, where Genevieve was buried and where the king and queen would also be laid to rest. She was also behind the first church built over the tomb of Saint Denis, the ancestor of today's Basilica of Saint-Denis.



The reliquary shrine of Saint Genevieve at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, Paris.

A cult at the heart of the history of Paris

Genevieve's tomb became a great place of pilgrimage, and an abbey grew up around the basilica, which took her name. In 1129, when an epidemic known as the "burning sickness" struck Paris, her reliquary was carried in procession to Notre-Dame, and tradition records the healing of many of the sick. For centuries, the reliquary was brought out in times of great calamity: droughts, floods and wars.

In the 18th century, King Louis XV, having recovered from a serious illness, had a new church built in her honor to designs by Soufflot. Completed at the time of the Revolution, it was turned into the Panthéon. In 1793, the saint's relics were burned on the Place de Grève and the ashes thrown into the Seine. A stone from her original tomb survives in the nearby church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, where devotion to her continues.

Why is Saint Genevieve the patron saint of Paris?

Parisians have honored her as their protector since the threat of Attila in 451: her prayer, her courage and her care for the hungry during the blockade made her the city's guardian. In 1962 she was also proclaimed patron saint of the French Gendarmerie, the national police force, and she is the patron of the Diocese of Nanterre, her birthplace.

Saint Genevieve shows that a life given entirely to God can also be a life at the service of the city. Her prayer was not an escape: it gave her the courage to stay, to resist panic and to feed the hungry. She is prayed to for Paris, for those responsible for public peace, for police officers and for anyone going through a shared ordeal.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Genevieve or follow the novena to Saint Genevieve, from December 25 to January 2, ending on the eve of her feast. At Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, a traditional novena is also celebrated starting on January 3.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Genevieve in art

- **The candle**: a frequent attribute, often shown with a small devil trying to blow it out and an angel relighting it.
- **The keys of Paris**: she sometimes holds them as protector of the city, as in a 17th-century painting showing her before the Hôtel de Ville and Notre-Dame.
- **The book**: a sign of her life of prayer and consecration.
- **The veil and the city**: a consecrated woman watching over Paris, as in the murals of the Panthéon.

Where to pray to Saint Genevieve

- **Paris**: the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, which houses her reliquary shrine and the stone from her tomb.
- **Paris**: the Panthéon, formerly the church of Sainte-Geneviève, whose murals tell the story of her life.
- **Nanterre**: the Cathedral of Sainte-Geneviève-et-Saint-Maurice and, nearby, the well known as Saint Genevieve's well.
- **Saint-Denis**: the basilica, heir to the church she had built over the tomb of Saint Denis.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Genevieve, Patron Saint of Paris

This page offers a prayer to Saint Genevieve, patron saint of Paris, preceded by the story that made her the city's protector. No prayer composed by Genevieve herself has come down to us: what we know of her prayer comes from her *Life*, written in the early 6th century.

Genevieve's prayer in the face of Attila

In 451, as the Huns approached Paris, her *Life* tells that Genevieve gathered the women of the city and led them in several days of prayer and fasting, following the example of Esther and Judith, two women of the Bible who saved their people through their trust in God. She also asked the men not to carry their goods out of the city, because it would be protected. Paris was spared. Since then, Parisians have turned to her in times of danger.

The Book of Esther preserves the queen's prayer before she risked her life for her people; it can be read again with Genevieve in mind (Esther 4:17, in the numbering of Catholic Bibles), as can the prayer of Judith (Judith 9).

Prayer to Saint Genevieve, patron saint of Paris

Saint Genevieve, you who gave your life to God from your childhood in Nanterre, teach me to belong to him entirely, in prayer as in service.

You who kept your trust when everyone wanted to flee, obtain for me the courage to stand firm in trials, without giving in to fear or panic.

You who led boats along the Seine to feed a starving city, make me attentive to those who hunger, for bread, for justice or for friendship.

I entrust to you Paris and its people, families, the sick, the homeless, and all who keep watch over public peace, especially police officers and gendarmes. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Watch over us as you watched over your city, and lead us to Christ, whom you loved above all things. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Genevieve is celebrated on January 3. In Paris, her feast opens a solemn novena at the church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, and the Diocese of Nanterre, of which she is patron, also keeps her feast. On November 26, a second feast recalls the miracle of the Ardents in 1129; the French Gendarmerie often honors its patron saint around that date.

You can pray this prayer for your own city, for those who protect it, or at any time a community faces fear together. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Genevieve, and read the life of Saint Genevieve.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Genevieve

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the *Life of Saint Genevieve*. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin on December 25; it ends on January 2, the day before her feast on January 3. You can also pray it from January 3 to 11, in union with the novena celebrated each year at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont in Paris, or at any time for your city and its people.

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 and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.



Saint Genevieve of Paris, in a church statue or stained glass window.

Day 1: A call in childhood

In Nanterre, a bishop passing through noticed a little girl and asked her whether she wanted to give herself to God. Genevieve said yes. God often calls in the simplicity of an encounter, through someone who takes the time to look and to ask.

Prayer: Lord, like Genevieve as a child, I want to hear you call me. Keep alive in me the answer of my baptism.

Today: Give thanks for the person who first helped you to know the faith.

Day 2: A cross instead of jewels

Germanus of Auxerre gave her a simple coin marked with a cross, which she wore instead of ornaments. What matters is not what glitters, but what binds us to Christ.

Prayer: Jesus, may your cross be my true wealth. Free me from whatever weighs me down and turns me away from you.

Today: Wear or look at a cross and pray for a moment before it.

Day 3: Prayer and fasting

All her life, Genevieve prayed at length and fasted strictly. It was not a feat of endurance: it was a way of giving God the first place, and of keeping her heart free for others.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to give you time, and to go without a little so as to welcome you better.

Today: Give up one small, unnecessary thing today.

Day 4: Bearing misunderstanding

In Paris, some mocked her and suspected her of being a fraud. Genevieve did not defend herself with bitterness; she kept on serving, and time proved her right.

Prayer: Lord, when I am misjudged, keep me from resentment. Give me the peace of those who rely on you.

Today: Pray for someone who has hurt you with their words.

Day 5: Not giving in to fear

When Attila approached, the Parisians wanted to flee. Genevieve invited them to pray and to stay. Her trust was not carelessness: it was the conviction that God does not abandon his people. Some threatened her, yet she held firm.

Prayer: Faithful God, when fear overwhelms me, give me back my trust. May I be a calming presence for others.

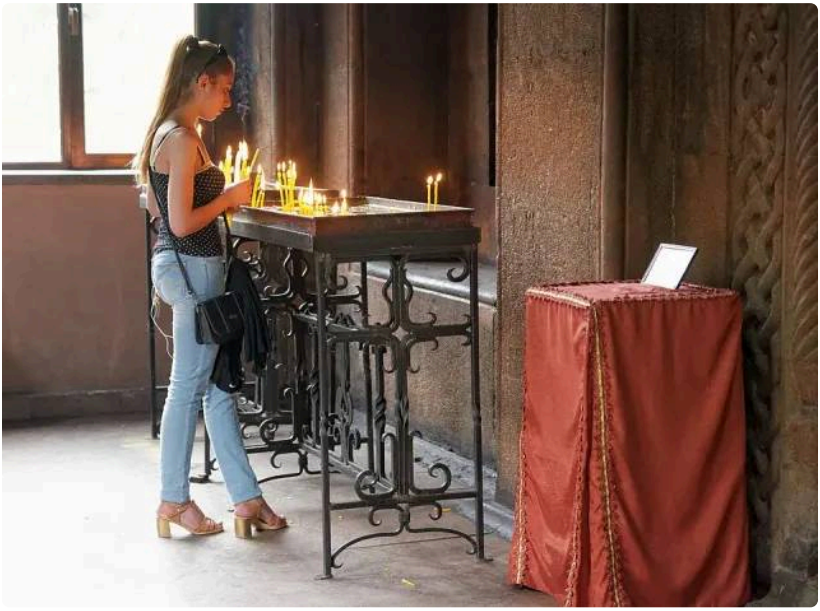
Today: Write down a worry that weighs on you and entrust it to God.

Day 6: Feeding the hungry

During the blockade, Genevieve went up the Seine with boats and brought back grain for the starving city. Prayer that never reaches our hands remains incomplete. Genevieve did not wait for someone else to solve the problem: she organized, traveled and shared.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to those who lack what they need, and give me the boldness to act.

Today: Give to a food bank or share a meal with someone.



Praying with Saint Genevieve of Paris.

Day 7: Pleading for captives

Genevieve pleaded with King Childeric to obtain pardon for prisoners. She dared to speak to the powerful on behalf of the weak, without fear of being turned away. Her holiness did not keep her at a distance from the hard realities

of war; it sent her right into them.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you prisoners, hostages and all who are deprived of freedom. Give them hope.

Today: Pray for those in prison and for those who visit them.

Day 8: Serving the city

A friend of Clovis and Clotilde, Genevieve used her influence for the good of the city and of the Church. She had a church built over the tomb of Saint Denis so that Parisians could come and pray there.

Prayer: Lord, bless our city and those who govern it. May they seek the common good and peace.

Today: Pray for your local officials and for the police and emergency services.

Day 9: Watching over her own

In old age, Genevieve kept watch over Paris. Since her death, Parisians have carried her reliquary in procession in days of trial. The saints never stop loving those they served. Through the centuries, in times of epidemic, flood or war, the people of Paris have asked for her help, and the Church has kept her memory alive on the hill where she rests.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Genevieve, watch over my family, my city and my country. Amen.

Today: Visit a church and light a candle for those you love.

Closing prayer

Saint Genevieve, patron saint of Paris, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. You who guarded your city by your prayer and fed its people by your charity, pray for us. Obtain for us a courageous faith, an active charity and peace. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

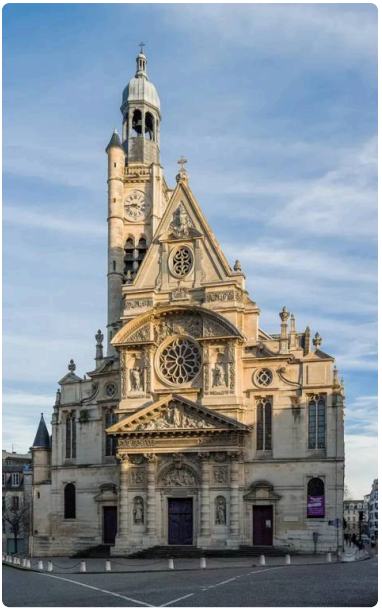
Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, Shrine of Saint Genevieve in Paris

The Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, at the top of the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, is the main place of worship of the city's patron saint. It preserves the stone of her original tomb and a shrine containing relics. It stands steps from the Panthéon, the former Church of Sainte-Geneviève, and from the site of the abbey where the saint was buried around 502.

From the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève to Saint-Étienne-du-Mont

Genevieve was buried on the hill of the Left Bank, in the Basilica of the Holy Apostles founded by Clovis. A prosperous abbey grew up there in the Middle Ages, and the church took the saint's name. Saint-Étienne-du-Mont was first the parish church built next to the abbey for the people of the neighborhood; the present building was constructed between the late 15th and the early 17th century.

During the Revolution, the abbey was suppressed and Genevieve's relics were burned in 1793. The old abbey church was demolished in the early 19th century; only its tower survives, called the Tour Clovis, now within the grounds of the Lycée Henri-IV. The stone of the saint's tomb was then moved to Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, which became the center of her cult.



Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, shrine of Saint Genevieve in Paris.

The shrine and tomb of Saint Genevieve

In a side chapel, the stone of Genevieve's sarcophagus is kept beneath a Gothic-style shrine, which holds the few relics gathered after the Revolution. The faithful come to pray there all year round, lighting candles and leaving intentions. The church also has the only rood screen still preserved in Paris, a Renaissance masterpiece, and holds the burials of Blaise Pascal and Jean Racine.

The novena of Saint Genevieve

Every year, beginning on January 3, her feast day, the parish celebrates a solemn novena in honor of Saint Genevieve. During these nine days, Masses and times of prayer are held, and many parishes and communities of the Paris region come on pilgrimage. The program is published each year by the parish.

Praying at Saint-Étienne-du-Mont

Before your visit, you may wish to reread the life of Saint Genevieve. On site, a time of silence before the shrine is a good moment to entrust an intention for the city, for your family, or for a trial you are going through. The prayer to Saint Genevieve can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia for a personal visit.



Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, shrine of Saint Genevieve in Paris, the interior.

Other places connected with Saint Genevieve

- **The Panthéon** (Paris): built in the 18th century as the Church of Sainte-Geneviève; the murals by Puvis de Chavannes tell her life.
- **Nanterre** (Hauts-de-Seine): her hometown, with the Cathedral of Sainte-Geneviève-et-Saint-Maurice and the well of Saint Genevieve.
- **Saint-Denis**: the basilica, heir to the first church she had built over the tomb of Saint Denis.

- **Notre-Dame de Paris**: the cathedral where her shrine was carried in procession during great calamities.
- **The Pont de la Tournelle** (Paris): a large statue of the saint by Paul Landowski watches over the Seine there.

Practical information

The Church of Saint-Étienne-du-Mont is on Place Sainte-Geneviève, in the 5th arrondissement of Paris, behind the Panthéon. It is accessible by public transit, notably by the RER B (Luxembourg station). Admission is free outside of services. For Mass times and the program of the January novena, check with the parish before you come.

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