BOOKLET TO PRINT

# Saint Ghislain

*Life, prayer and novena*

Feast day: October 9

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IN BRIEF

## Saint Ghislain

*7th-century monk, founder of the abbey of Saint-Ghislain in Hainaut, patron of pregnant women.*

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| **Feast day** | October 9 |
| **Born** | early 7th century |
| **Died** | c. 680, Saint-Ghislain (Hainaut, Belgium) |
| **Canonized** | immemorial cult |
| **Era** | 7th century |
| **Patron saint of** | pregnant women, early childhood, town of Saint-Ghislain |

## In this booklet

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Novena to Saint Ghislain

Credits and sources

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LIFE

# Saint Ghislain

Saint Ghislain (in Latin *Gislenus*) was a 7th-century monk who founded a monastery in Hainaut, near Mons, around which the Belgian town of Saint-Ghislain grew up. A friend of Saint Amand and spiritual guide of Saint Waltrude (Waudru), he died around 680. Called upon for centuries by expectant mothers and for small children, he is celebrated on October 9.

## Who was Saint Ghislain?

Ghislain belongs to the great generation of missionary monks who, in the 7th century, planted Christianity in the countryside of northern Gaul, between the Scheldt and the Meuse. Around Saint Amand, the apostle of Belgium, and Bishop Aubert of Cambrai, monasteries sprang up throughout Hainaut: Saint-Ghislain, Mons, Maubeuge, Soignies, Lobbes.

What we know of him comes from accounts written in the 9th and 10th centuries, then embellished over time. The latest make him a Greek, born in Athens, a monk under the rule of Saint Basil, even archbishop of Athens; the Bollandists, specialists in the history of the saints, give little credit to this origin. His name, of Germanic origin (*gisel*, meaning "hostage"), suggests rather a Frankish origin. So we must distinguish, in his life, the historical core (a founding monk, linked to Amand, Aubert and Waltrude) from the many legends that grew around him.

## Key dates in the life of Ghislain

- **Early 7th century**: Born; late sources say he was born in Athens, but his origin is uncertain.
- **c. 648**: According to tradition, pilgrimage to Rome, where he feels called to evangelize Belgic Gaul.

- **c. 650**: With a few companions, he settles in a forest of Hainaut, at the place called *Ursidongus*, and founds a monastery there.
- **653**: According to tradition, Saint Aubert, bishop of Cambrai, together with Saint Amand, consecrates his church to the apostles Peter and Paul; the place is called the Cell of Saint Peter.
- **650s-670s**: He is the spiritual guide of Saint Waltrude and her husband Madelgarius, the future Saint Vincent of Soignies.
- **c. 680**: Dies in his monastery, surrounded by his brothers; other sources suggest 681 or 685.
- **808-822**: A new church is built over his tomb.
- **1796**: The abbey of Saint-Ghislain is suppressed under French rule.

## The she-bear and the founding of the monastery

Tradition tells that Ghislain, after a pilgrimage to Rome, felt called by Saint Peter to bring the Gospel to Belgic Gaul and to build a church there in honor of the apostles Peter and Paul. With two disciples, Lambert and Bellerus, he reached Hainaut and became friends with Saint Amand.

The most famous story of his life is that of the she-bear. Ghislain had first settled near the present town of Mons. One day, a she-bear pursued by King Dagobert's hunters came to take refuge under his cloak. The king, struck by the scene, came to greet the monk and asked for his blessing. After he left, the bear ran off carrying the bag in which Ghislain kept what he needed to celebrate Mass. The saint followed her to the edge of a great forest; an eagle, it is said, showed him the way, and he found the bear suckling her cubs, near his bag. He understood that this was where he was to build his church. The place took the name *Ursidongus*, "the bear's refuge".

Beyond the legend, the monastery is well attested. The king is said to have given the land, and the community, at first a few cells and an oratory, soon attracted disciples and people from the whole region, whom Ghislain taught

the faith.

## The miracle of Roisin and the protector of mothers

On his way to meet Bishop Aubert of Cambrai, Ghislain received hospitality from a lord of Roisin. On his return, he found his host in tears: his wife, about to give birth, was in danger of death. Ghislain gave him his belt to tie around the mother-to-be; according to the account, mother and child were saved. The saint baptized the child, who was given the name Baudry. A chapel was built at Roisin in memory of this miracle, and the custom arose among expectant mothers of asking for his protection for a safe delivery. That is why Saint Ghislain is, still today, the patron of pregnant women and of early childhood.

## The friend of Saint Waltrude

At the consecration of his church by Saint Aubert and Saint Amand, Count Madelgarius, husband of Saint Waltrude, is said to have resolved to leave the world; he would become Saint Vincent of Soignies. Waltrude, under Ghislain's guidance, founded a monastery of her own at Mons, and her sister Aldegund founded that of Maubeuge. Ghislain and Waltrude remained bound by a deep spiritual friendship. In old age, no longer able to travel between their two monasteries, they met, tradition says, in a small oratory dedicated to Saint Quentin, at Quaregnon, halfway between them.

Sensing that death was near, Ghislain prepared for it by receiving Communion. Seized by fever, he died in the arms of his brothers, around 680, and was buried in the church of his monastery.

## Devotion, relics and art

His tomb immediately became a place of pilgrimage. In the early 9th century, a new church was built over his grave, and the monastery took the name of the abbey of Saint-Ghislain. Ravaged by the Normans in 881, the abbey was

restored and adopted the Rule of Saint Benedict in the 10th century. A Romanesque shrine made around 1180 was destroyed when the Huguenots sacked the abbey in 1581; the present shrine, assembled in the early 17th century, may reuse some of its fragments. The abbey was suppressed in 1796, but the town that grew up around it still bears the saint's name.

Saint Ghislain is listed in the Roman Martyrology on October 9. His shrine is carried each year in Mons during the Car d'Or procession. Many traditional prayers call on him for pregnant women, for sick or weak children, and against epilepsy. He is shown as an abbot, sometimes carrying a church, and often with the bear of the legend, which became the emblem of the town of Saint-Ghislain.

## What can we learn from Saint Ghislain?

Ghislain was a quiet builder. He obeyed a call that led him far from home, founded a place of prayer, and accompanied other souls toward God, such as Waltrude and Madelgarius. His legends, the protected bear, the belt that saves a mother and her child, all say the same thing: a man of God who protects fragile life. You can pray to him for pregnant women, for difficult births, for small children and for friendships that lead to God.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Ghislain and the novena to Saint Ghislain.

## Where to pray to Saint Ghislain

- **Saint-Ghislain** (Hainaut, Belgium): the town that grew up around his abbey, where his shrine is venerated.
- **Mons** (Hainaut): the Car d'Or procession, in which his shrine is carried every year.
- **Roisin** (Hainaut): the church of Saint-Brice, whose stained glass recalls the miracle of the belt.

- **Hellemmes** (near Lille): a church that received part of his relics.

PRAYER

# Prayer to Saint Ghislain for Pregnant Women and Children

Saint Ghislain, a 7th-century monk and founder of the monastery around which the town of Saint-Ghislain grew up, in Hainaut, has been called upon for centuries by expectant mothers and for small children. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him pregnant women, unborn children and families.

## Prayer to Saint Ghislain

*Saint Ghislain,*
*you left your homeland to proclaim the Gospel*
*and to build a house of prayer in the forest of Hainaut:*
*teach me to answer God's calls with trust.*

*You who, it is said, saved a mother and her child*
*by giving them your belt,*
*watch over women who are expecting a child.*
*Keep them in peace and in health,*
*grant them a safe delivery,*
*and lead their children to baptism.*

*Protect small children, the sick and the most fragile.*
*Bless our families,*
*and give us friendships that lead us to God,*
*like the one that united you with Saint Waltrude.*
*Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## When to pray to Saint Ghislain

- On his feast day, October 9.
- During pregnancy, and especially as the birth approaches.
- For a child who is sick, weak or struggling to grow.
- For couples hoping for a child.
- For spiritual friendships and those who accompany others in faith.

## A short invocation

> *Saint Ghislain, protector of mothers and small children, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Ghislain from October 1 to 9, and read the life of Saint Ghislain.

NOVENA

# Novena to Saint Ghislain

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint Ghislain, a 7th-century monk, founder of a monastery in Hainaut and traditional protector of mothers and small children. To finish it on his feast day, October 9, begin on October 1. It is also very fitting during a pregnancy, at any 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 short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Ghislain, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recounted come from his early Lives, which mix history and legend.

## Day 1: Setting out at God's call

According to tradition, Ghislain went on pilgrimage to Rome, to the tomb of the apostles, and understood there that he must go and proclaim the Gospel in northern Gaul.

**Prayer:** Lord, help me to hear your call and to commit myself to it without fear.

**Act of the day:** Entrust to God a decision you have to make.

## Day 2: Traveling companions

Ghislain did not set out alone: he was accompanied by Lambert and Bellerus, and he became friends with Saint Amand. Mission is a shared work.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for those who walk with me in faith. Bless my friends.

**Act of the day:** Thank a friend who helps you grow in faith.

## Day 3: The protected bear

Legend says that a she-bear pursued by the king's hunters took refuge under Ghislain's cloak. The saint shelters what is threatened.

**Prayer:** Lord, make me a refuge for those who are hunted and defenseless.

**Act of the day:** Stand up for a vulnerable person.

## Day 4: Following God's signs

Following the bear, guided by an eagle, Ghislain found the place to build his church. God uses simple signs to guide those who seek him.

**Prayer:** Lord, make me attentive to the signs you place on my path.

**Act of the day:** Look back over your day in the evening and seek God's presence in it.

## Day 5: Building a house of prayer

In the forest, Ghislain built a few cells and an oratory. Disciples and local people came to learn the faith from him.

**Prayer:** Lord, make our homes and parishes places where people learn to know you.

**Act of the day:** Pray as a family, or set up a prayer corner at home.

## Day 6: The belt of Roisin

At Roisin, a mother was in danger as she was about to give birth. Ghislain gave his belt, and mother and child were saved, according to the account.

**Prayer:** Lord, protect pregnant women and unborn children. Grant them a safe birth.

**Act of the day:** Pray for a pregnant woman you know, or support a charity that helps mothers.

## Day 7: Leading to baptism

Ghislain baptized the child who had been saved, who was given the name Baudry. The life received opens onto the life of God.

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for my baptism. Bless the children about to be baptized and their godparents.

**Act of the day:** Remember your baptism by blessing yourself with holy water.

## Day 8: A friendship in God

Ghislain and Waltrude remained united all their lives by a spiritual friendship. In old age, they met halfway to pray together.

**Prayer:** Lord, bless the friendships that lead to you, and make me faithful to my friends.

**Act of the day:** Visit or write to an elderly friend.

## Day 9: Dying in the arms of his brothers

Sensing death approaching, Ghislain received Communion, then died surrounded by his brothers. His tomb became a place of prayer for all Hainaut.

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

**Act of the day:** Attend Mass if you can, and pray for the mothers and children around you.

## Closing prayer

*Saint Ghislain,*
*missionary monk and father of Hainaut,*
*protector of mothers and small children,*
*present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
*Watch over life at its beginning*
*and keep our families in the faith.*
*Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

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