

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Giles

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 1

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IN BRIEF

Saint Giles

Hermit and abbot in Provence, one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, honored on the road to Compostela, patron saint of Edinburgh.

Feast day	September 1
Born	7th century, Athens, according to tradition
Died	early 8th century, Saint-Gilles (Gard, France)
Canonized	pre-congregation (venerated since time immemorial)
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	the disabled, cripples, nursing mothers, Edinburgh

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Giles for the Sick and the Injured

Novena to Saint Giles

Abbey Church of Saint-Gilles and the Tomb of Saint Giles (Gard)

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Giles

Saint Giles, called Aegidius in Latin, was a hermit who lived in Provence, near the mouth of the Rhône, at the end of the 7th century and the beginning of the 8th. His life is known mainly through a later legend, that of the deer that fed him in his solitude. Around his tomb grew the abbey of Saint-Gilles, in the south of France, which became in the Middle Ages one of the great pilgrimages of the West and a major stop on the way to Santiago de Compostela. Counted among the Fourteen Holy Helpers and patron saint of Edinburgh, he is celebrated on September 1.

Who was Saint Giles?

The history of Saint Giles is hard to establish. The main account of his life, the *Vita sancti Aegidii*, was written around the 10th century, more than two hundred years after his death, and mixes historical elements with marvelous or anachronistic episodes. What can be held with reasonable likelihood is that a hermit named Giles settled in the lower Rhône region, gathered disciples, and that a monastery grew up on the spot where he was buried. The rest belongs to tradition, which the Church has handed down without claiming to guarantee every detail.

According to this tradition, Giles was born in Athens into a noble Christian family. While still young, he gave his goods to the poor; then, to escape the fame his healings had brought him, he sailed for the West. He landed in Provence, stayed for a time with the bishop of Arles, then went deep into a forest near the Rhône to live alone in a cave, in prayer and penance.



Saint Giles and the Hind, by the Master of Saint Giles (c. 1500, National Gallery, London).

Key dates

- **7th century**: Born, in Athens according to tradition.
- **Late 7th century**: Arrives in Provence and lives as a hermit near the Rhône.
- **Around the same time**: The episode of the deer and the meeting with a hunting king; founding of a monastery.
- **Early 8th century**: Death of Giles, buried in his monastery.
- **Around the 10th century**: The *Life of Saint Giles* is written.
- **1116**: Construction of the great Romanesque abbey church begins, according to an inscription in the building.
- **12th century**: Saint-Gilles becomes one of the busiest pilgrimages in Christendom, on the road to Compostela.

- **1209**: Count Raymond VI of Toulouse does public penance in front of the abbey church.
- **1562**: During the French Wars of Religion, the abbey church is badly damaged.
- **1865**: The saint's tomb is rediscovered in the crypt.
- **1998**: The abbey church is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site as part of the Routes of Santiago de Compostela in France.

The deer and the arrow

The most famous episode of his legend is that of the deer. In his solitude, Giles lived on the milk of a hind that God sent him. One day a king was hunting in the forest; his hounds chased the animal, which took refuge with the hermit. A hunter shot an arrow into the thicket: it wounded Giles, who was shielding the animal. The king, finding the old man wounded and at prayer, begged his forgiveness and offered him care and riches. Giles refused the remedies and chose to keep his wound, but he agreed that the king should found a monastery, of which he became abbot. Later versions call the king Flavius or identify him with the Visigoth Wamba, who ruled the region at the end of the 7th century.

This story explains how Saint Giles is shown in art, and also his patronages, as explained below.

The pardon granted to a king

The *Life* also tells that a king of the Franks, often called Charles, did not dare to confess a very grave sin. While Giles was celebrating Mass for him, an angel is said to have placed on the altar a note bearing the king's sin, with the announcement of his pardon. Tradition long identified this king with

Charlemagne, which is chronologically impossible. The episode, often depicted in the Middle Ages, nonetheless did much for Giles's reputation as an intercessor for sinners who do not dare to confess their sins.

A great medieval pilgrimage

In the 12th century, the tomb of Saint Giles drew crowds from all over Europe. The town, then a busy port on a branch of the Rhône, lay on the Arles road, one of the four great French routes to Santiago de Compostela. The 12th-century Pilgrim's Guide to Santiago strongly recommends praying at the saint's tomb. The monks built a huge abbey church whose facade, with three portals carved with scenes from the life of Christ, is one of the masterpieces of Romanesque art.

Devotion to Saint Giles then spread very far: more than a thousand churches are dedicated to him in Europe. In Edinburgh, the city's great church bears his name, and he is the patron of the city. In England too, many medieval churches were placed under his protection. In Germany and Central Europe, he became one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, invoked together in the troubles of life, with Saint Christopher, Saint Barbara and Saint Margaret of Antioch, among others.

Why is Saint Giles the patron saint of the disabled and of nursing mothers?

Because he preferred his wound to honors, Saint Giles is invoked for the disabled, the crippled and the injured: he chose to remain one of them. He is also the patron of nursing mothers, in memory of the milk of the hind that fed him in the forest. More broadly, he has become the saint of the weak and of those whom life has made fragile. People pray to him for the sick, for people with disabilities, for children and mothers, and for those who do not dare to ask for forgiveness.

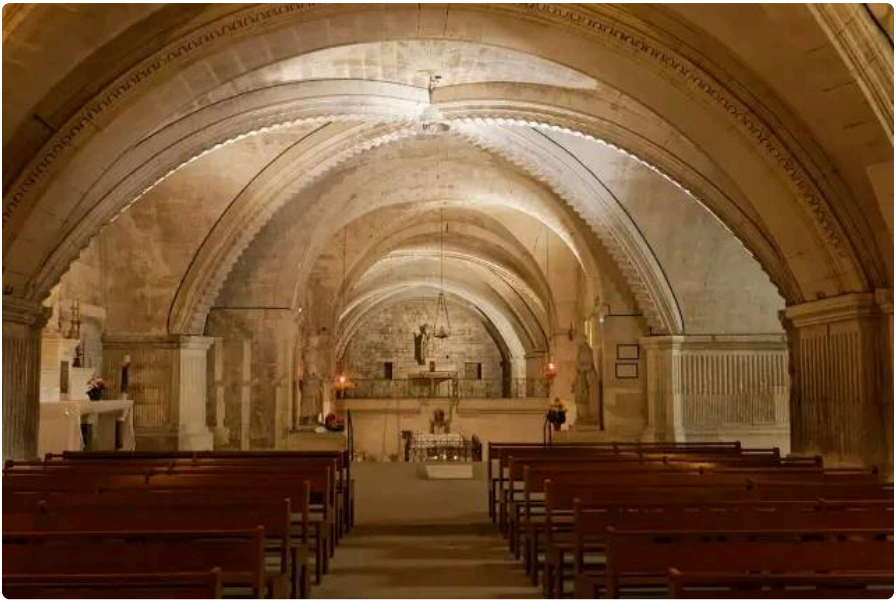
Above all, Giles was a man of silence and prayer who sought God far from noise and glory. His gesture of standing between the hunter and the defenseless animal remains the heart of his legend.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Giles in art

- **An elderly monk or abbot**, in a monastic habit, sometimes with an abbot's crosier.
- **A hind (female deer)** at his side or nestled against him.
- **An arrow** piercing his hand or his leg.
- **The Mass of Saint Giles**: the saint at the altar before a kneeling king, while an angel brings a note.

How to pray with Saint Giles

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Giles, or follow the novena to Saint Giles from August 23 to 31, so that it ends on the eve of his feast.



The tomb of Saint Giles in the crypt of the abbey church.

Where to pray to Saint Giles

- **Saint-Gilles** (Gard, France): the abbey church, between Nîmes and Arles, with its vast crypt and the saint's tomb, rediscovered in 1865.
- **Toulouse**: the Basilica of Saint-Sernin, which has claimed part of his relics since the Middle Ages.
- **Edinburgh** (Scotland): St Giles' Cathedral, now a Presbyterian church, which has borne his name since the Middle Ages.
- **Saint-Gilles** (Belgium): the Brussels municipality and its Church of Saint-Gilles, witnesses to the age of his cult in Brabant.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Giles for the Sick and the Injured

There is no prayer composed by Saint Giles himself: we have nothing written by his hand, and his life has come down to us through a legend written long after his death. This page therefore offers an original prayer inspired by that tradition, to entrust to Saint Giles the sick, the injured and all who feel fragile.

Saint Giles in the prayer of the Church

In the Middle Ages, Saint Giles was invoked with the other Holy Helpers, the fourteen intercessors prayed to together in sickness, danger and anguish. People also came to his tomb to entrust a sin they found hard to confess, in memory of the pardon that, according to his *Life*, he obtained for a king. His name appears in the Roman Martyrology on September 1.



The Mass of Saint Giles, by the Master of Saint Giles (c. 1500, National Gallery, London).

Prayer to Saint Giles for the Sick and the Injured

Saint Giles, you left honors behind to seek God in the silence of the forest: teach me to make a little silence in my life, so that I may listen to the One who calls me.

You protected the hunted deer and took the hunter's arrow in its place: make me attentive to the weakest, to those who have no one to defend them.

You kept your wound without complaint: I entrust to you the sick, the injured, people with disabilities and all who carry a hidden suffering. I also entrust to you mothers and little children, who need care and tenderness.

Through you, tradition says, a king received pardon for a sin he did not dare to confess: give me the confidence to hand over to God whatever weighs on me. I also entrust to you my intention (name it in silence).

Obtain for me peace of heart, patience in trials and the joy of serving. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Giles is celebrated on September 1. You can pray to him at the bedside of a sick person, before surgery, after an accident or for a fragile child. Nursing mothers and parents of newborns can also confide their little ones to him, in memory of the hind that fed him.

He is a good companion, too, when you need courage to go to confession, or when you are setting out on a pilgrimage, as countless pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela did at his tomb.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Giles, and read the life of Saint Giles.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Giles

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and legend of Saint Giles. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin it on August 23; it ends on August 31, and September 1 can be lived as a day of thanksgiving.

You can pray it for a sick or injured person, for someone living with a disability, for a mother and her child, or for your own intention. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

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. The episodes recalled here come from tradition and from the *Life of Saint Giles*, written around the 10th century; the small act suggested for each day helps you carry your prayer into daily life.

Day 1: Giving everything

According to tradition, young Giles gave his goods to the poor before leaving his homeland. He made himself free for God. We are not all asked to leave everything, but we are asked not to let what we own end up owning us.

Prayer: Lord, free me from what weighs me down and make my heart free for you and for my brothers and sisters.

Today: Give a useful item or some money to someone in need.

Day 2: Fleeing glory

Giles moved away because his healings were making him famous. He did not want people to look at him, but at God. Humility does not despise the gifts we have received: it gives them back to the One who gave them.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from seeking admiration. May the good I do give glory to you.

Today: Do someone a favor without telling anyone.

Day 3: The silence of the forest

In his cave near the Rhône, Giles lived on prayer. Silence is not emptiness: it is the space where we can finally hear God. Even a few minutes of silence a day can change the way we see everything else.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be quiet so that I can listen to you, even in the middle of my busy days.

Today: Turn off screens and music for fifteen minutes, and pray in silence.

Day 4: The deer, a gift from God

The legend tells that a hind came to feed the hermit with her milk. God takes care of those who trust in him, often in humble and unexpected ways: a friend's call, a kind word, a door that opens.

Prayer: Father, thank you for everything that keeps me alive and that I receive without noticing. Teach me to trust you.

Today: Write down three gifts you received today and give thanks for them.

Day 5: Protecting the weakest

When the hunters chased the deer, Giles hid it against himself and took the arrow. He stood on the side of the one who could not defend itself. Real compassion is not only a feeling: sometimes it costs us something.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to stand up for those who are hurt or forgotten.

Today: Check in on someone who is isolated or fragile.



The central portal of the abbey church of Saint-Gilles.

Day 6: Keeping the wound

Giles refused the remedies the king offered and kept his wound. Tradition sees in this a way of uniting himself to the suffering of Christ. Without seeking pain, we can offer the pain we cannot avoid.

Prayer: Crucified Jesus, I offer you my wounds, visible or hidden. Unite them to your cross and give me peace.

Today: Pray for a particular sick person, or visit them.

Day 7: Welcoming brothers

The hermit became an abbot: disciples joined him, and a monastery was born. Giles's solitude opened into communion. God does not save us alone, but together.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family, my community and my parish. Make us brothers and sisters who help one another.

Today: Share a meal or some time with someone you rarely see.

Day 8: Daring to ask forgiveness

According to the *Life*, a king did not dare to confess a sin; at Giles's Mass he received the assurance of pardon. No sin is too heavy for the mercy of God, and no one is beyond his reach.

Prayer: God of mercy, you know what I do not dare to say. Give me the confidence to rely on your forgiveness.

Today: Prepare for the sacrament of Reconciliation, or go to confession.

Day 9: On the road to God

For centuries, pilgrims on their way to Compostela stopped at the tomb of Saint Giles. Every Christian life is a pilgrimage, and the saints are resting places where we regain our strength before setting out again.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Giles, keep me on the road that leads to you. Amen.

Today: Take a short walk while praying, alone or with others.

Closing prayer

Saint Giles, friend of the poor and protector of the weak, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I carry. Pray for the sick, for those wounded by life and for those who do not dare to ask forgiveness. Obtain for us a humble, gentle and courageous heart. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Abbey Church of Saint-Gilles and the Tomb of Saint Giles (Gard)

The abbey church of Saint-Gilles, in the Gard between Nîmes and Arles, at the gateway to the Camargue, stands where tradition places the monastery founded by Saint Giles and his tomb. A great pilgrimage destination of the Middle Ages and a stage on the Via Arlesiana toward Santiago de Compostela, it has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1998 as part of the Routes of Santiago de Compostela.

History of a pilgrimage

The monastery that guards the body of Saint Giles prospered from the early Middle Ages. In the 11th and 12th centuries the town was a crossroads: a port on an arm of the Rhône, a passage for crusaders and merchants, and above all a stop for pilgrims heading for Spain. An inscription on the building records the start of construction of the great church in 1116. In the early 13th century, it was before its doors that Count Raymond VI of Toulouse did public penance, in 1209. Pope Clement IV, elected in 1265, was himself a native of Saint-Gilles.

The Wars of Religion dealt the abbey church a terrible blow: in 1562 it was sacked, and much of the upper parts was destroyed afterward. The church visitors see today is smaller than the medieval building, but it keeps its facade and its vast crypt.



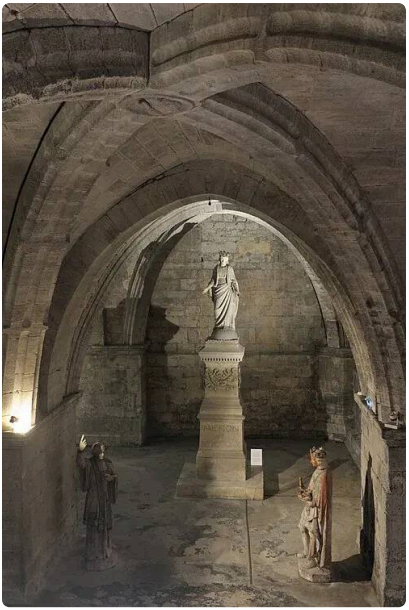
The facade of the abbey church of Saint-Gilles, in the Gard.

The Romanesque facade

The facade, with its three portals, is one of the masterpieces of Romanesque sculpture in France. Inspired by the ancient arches of Provence, it unfolds the life of Christ, from the entry into Jerusalem to the Resurrection, surrounded by the apostles. Taking time to contemplate it from the forecourt is already a way of praying: it is a Gospel in stone for pilgrims who could not read.

The crypt and the tomb of Saint Giles

Beneath the church lies an immense crypt, a true lower church, where the saint's tomb is found. Hidden or forgotten after the destruction, it was rediscovered in 1865. It is here, in the half-light of these vaults, that pilgrims come to pray. The relics of Saint Giles were partly scattered over the centuries, and the Basilica of Saint-Sernin in Toulouse also claims a share.



The crypt of the abbey church of Saint-Gilles and the saint's tomb.

Praying at Saint-Gilles

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Giles. Once there, a time of silence in the crypt, before the tomb, lets you entrust a sick person, a fragile person or a hard-to-bear fault. The prayer to Saint Giles can accompany this moment. Pilgrims bound for Compostela can ask for a blessing on their journey here. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places connected with Saint Giles

- **Toulouse**: the Basilica of Saint-Sernin, another great pilgrimage stop, which keeps relics attributed to Saint Giles.
- **Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert** (Hérault): the Abbey of Gellone, another stage on the Via Arlesiana, founded by Saint William.

- **Arles**: the Church of Saint-Trophime and the Alyscamps, starting point of the route that passes through Saint-Gilles.
- **Edinburgh** (Scotland): Saint Giles' Cathedral, of which he is the patron saint.

Practical information

Saint-Gilles is about twelve miles south of Nîmes and ten miles from Arles. The church stands in the heart of the old town. The crypt and some parts of the building can be visited at times that vary with the season. Around September 1, the feast of Saint Giles, special celebrations are held. Check with the parish or the tourist office before you come.

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