BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Godehard of Hildesheim

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: May 5

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IN BRIEF

Saint Godehard of Hildesheim

Bavarian Benedictine monk, reformer of abbeys and bishop of Hildesheim from 1022 to 1038.

Feast day	May 5
Born	c. 960, Reichersdorf, near Niederaltaich (Bavaria)
Died	May 5, 1038, Monastery of Saint Maurice, near Hildesheim (Saxony)
Canonized	1131 by Pope Innocent II
Era	11th century
Patron saint of	the town of Gotha, traveling merchants

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Godehard of Hildesheim

Saint Godehard (also known as Gotthard or Gothard) was a Bavarian Benedictine monk, born around 960 near the abbey of Niederaltaich, who reformed several great monasteries before becoming bishop of Hildesheim, in Saxony, from 1022 until his death on May 5, 1038. Canonized in 1131, he gave his name to the famous Gotthard Pass in the Swiss Alps. His feast day is May 5.

Who was Saint Godehard?

Godehard lived in the time of the Ottonian emperors, when bishops and abbots were among the great figures of the Holy Roman Empire. His life is well documented: his disciple Wolfhere wrote two successive biographies of his master. They describe a rigorous monk, a demanding reformer and a building bishop, close to Emperor Saint Henry II but concerned above all with the Christian life of his people. Legends soon gathered around this portrait, a sign of the veneration he inspired. His cult spread from Scandinavia to Italy, and his name remains attached to one of the best-known passes of the Alps.

Key dates in the life of Godehard

- **c. 960**: Born at Reichersdorf, now part of Hengersberg, near the abbey of Niederaltaich, in Bavaria.
- **Youth**: He studies at the school of the abbey of Niederaltaich, where his father serves the monastery.
- **984**: Having become a monk, he is named provost of Niederaltaich.
- **996**: With the support of Duke Henry of Bavaria, the future Emperor Henry II, he becomes abbot of Niederaltaich.
- **1001 - 1012**: He also leads and reforms the abbeys of Tegernsee, Hersfeld and Kremsmünster.

- **December 2, 1022**: Chosen by Henry II to succeed Saint Bernward, he is consecrated bishop of Hildesheim by Archbishop Aribo of Mainz.
- **May 5, 1038**: He dies near Hildesheim, at the monastery of Saint Maurice that he had founded.
- **1131**: Pope Innocent II canonizes him; he is the first Bavarian raised to the altars.
- **1133**: Construction begins on the church of Saint Godehard in Hildesheim, dedicated in his honor.

The monk of Niederaltaich

Godehard grew up in the shadow of the Benedictine abbey of Niederaltaich, on the Danube. There he studied, took his vows and became provost in 984, that is, the person responsible for the material life of the community. In 996 he became its abbot, with the support of Duke Henry of Bavaria, who would later be Emperor Saint Henry II. Godehard was a convinced supporter of the monastic renewal inspired by Cluny: a return to strict observance of the Rule of Saint Benedict, carefully celebrated liturgical prayer, and a poor and regular common life.

The reformer of abbeys

His reputation led to his being called to head other monasteries: Tegernsee in 1001-1002, Hersfeld from 1005 to 1012, Kremsmünster from 1007 to 1012. Everywhere he restored discipline. Reform did not come without resistance: at Hersfeld, some fifty monks preferred to leave the abbey rather than accept his demands. Godehard held firm, convinced that a monastery bears fruit only if it is faithful to its rule. From 1012 onward, he devoted himself again mainly to Niederaltaich.

The bishop of Hildesheim

On the death of Saint Bernward, bishop of Hildesheim, Emperor Henry II chose Godehard to succeed him. He was consecrated on December 2, 1022. The monk who had become bishop continued the work of his predecessors: he had some thirty churches built in his diocese, completed the abbey church of Saint Michael in Hildesheim and rebuilt the westwork of the cathedral. But his biographers stress above all his visits and synods, through which he sought to make the faith more alive in the parishes. His monk's rigor and his quiet frankness struck his contemporaries. He died on May 5, 1038, at the monastery of Saint Maurice, which he had founded near Hildesheim.

Devotion and art

The chronicler Hermann of Reichenau already mentions his veneration in the 11th century. In 1131, Pope Innocent II canonized him. From 1133, a great Romanesque church dedicated to him began to be built in Hildesheim: today's Basilica of Saint Godehard. Relics were sent to many monasteries, especially in Swabia. A chapel was dedicated to him at the top of the Alpine pass that would take his name, consecrated according to some sources around 1230 by the archbishop of Milan. His cult then spread into northern Italy. Godehard is also the patron of the town of Gotha, in Thuringia, which shows him on its coat of arms.

He is shown as a bishop, with miter and crozier, and sometimes with burning coals in a fold of his cloak. This image refers to a legend: as an altar boy, he is said to have carried embers for the censer in his garment without burning himself or the cloth.

What can we learn from Saint Godehard?

Godehard united two vocations: that of the monk who seeks God in faithfulness to a rule, and that of the bishop who builds, visits and teaches. He knew how to be demanding without ceasing to be a pastor. His name, given to a pass in the Alps, also links him to the travelers who cross it. We can pray to him for religious communities, for bishops, for travelers and for all who must carry out a reform with patience and firmness.

Where to pray to Saint Godehard

- **Basilica of Saint Godehard, Hildesheim** (Lower Saxony, Germany): the great Romanesque church built in his honor after his canonization.
- **Hildesheim Cathedral**: the cathedral of his diocese, whose westwork he rebuilt, and which keeps a medieval reliquary bearing his name.
- **Niederaltaich Abbey** (Bavaria): the monastery where he was a pupil, a monk and abbot.
- **Gotthard Pass** (Switzerland): the Alpine pass that bears his name.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Godehard for Travelers and Communities

Saint Godehard, a Benedictine monk from Bavaria, reformed several abbeys before becoming bishop of Hildesheim, where he built churches and tirelessly visited his diocese. His name has remained attached to the Gotthard Pass, crossed by travelers. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him religious communities, pastors and those on the road.

Prayer to Saint Godehard

Saint Godehard,
monk faithful to the Rule of Saint Benedict,
you loved the prayer of the Hours
and the simple life of your brothers.
Teach me to give God
first place in my days.

You knew how to reform with patience and firmness,
without giving up what was right.
Give me the courage to change what must change in my life,
and the gentleness not to wound my brothers and sisters.

Building bishop and tireless shepherd,
watch over our parishes and communities.
You whose name guides travelers through the mountains,
protect those who are on the road
and lead us safely to the Father.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Godehard

- On his feast day, May 5.
- Before a journey, especially a crossing of the mountains.
- For monks, nuns and religious communities.
- When you must undertake a reform or a difficult change.
- For bishops and for those who build or care for churches.

A short invocation for the road

> *Lord, keep us on the road and bring us home in peace. Saint Godehard, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Godehard from April 27 to May 5, and read the life of Saint Godehard.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Godehard of Hildesheim

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It follows the life of Saint Godehard, a Benedictine monk of Niederaltaich who became bishop of Hildesheim. To finish it on his feast day, May 5, begin on April 27. You can also pray it at any other 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 meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Godehard, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: In the shadow of an abbey

Godehard grew up near the abbey of Niederaltaich and studied there. Living close to a praying community shaped his childhood.

Prayer: Lord, bless the places where children discover prayer, and make our families schools of faith.

Act of the day: Pray with a child, or for a child you know.

Day 2: Embers in his cloak

According to legend, Godehard as a boy carried embers for the censer in his garment without being burned. The story speaks of the fervor of one who serves at the altar.

Prayer: Lord, kindle in me the fire of your love, and bless the altar servers of our parishes.

Act of the day: Attend Mass paying special attention to the liturgy.

Day 3: Taking his vows

Godehard became a monk at Niederaltaich. He gave his life to God in stability, obedience and conversion of life.

Prayer: Lord, keep faithful those who have committed themselves to you, and help me keep my promises.

Act of the day: Pray for monks and nuns.

Day 4: Serving his brothers

As provost, then abbot, Godehard was responsible for the life of a whole community. He learned to govern by serving.

Prayer: Lord, teach those who hold responsibility to serve rather than to dominate.

Act of the day: Take on a thankless task at home or at work.

Day 5: Reforming with courage

At Hersfeld, Godehard's reform led some fifty monks to leave. He did not give up what he believed was right.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to change what must change, beginning with myself.

Act of the day: Choose a bad habit and give it up today.

Day 6: Called to be a bishop

In 1022, the monk became bishop of Hildesheim. He left the peace of his abbey to serve a whole diocese.

Prayer: Lord, make me ready for the call you give me, even if it costs me.

Act of the day: Pray for your bishop.

Day 7: Building churches

Godehard had some thirty churches built and completed Saint Michael's in Hildesheim. He wanted everyone to be able to pray near home.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who build and care for our churches, and make me a living stone of your Church.

Act of the day: Make an offering for the upkeep of your parish church.

Day 8: Visiting his people

Through his journeys and synods, Godehard made the faith more alive in his diocese. The shepherd goes out to his sheep.

Prayer: Lord, protect those who travel, and make me a witness of your presence wherever I go.

Act of the day: Visit someone you have not seen for a long time.

Day 9: The death of the shepherd

Godehard died on May 5, 1038, at the monastery he had founded. The Church recognized him as a saint in 1131.

Prayer: Lord, grant me to finish my journey in your peace. Through the intercession of Saint Godehard, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Pray for the departed members of your family and, if possible, attend Mass.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Godehard,*
> *faithful monk and building bishop,*
> *you served God in the cloister and on the roads.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me faithful to prayer*
> *and protect me on the road of life.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Godehard, Hildesheim

The Basilica of Saint Godehard (Basilika St. Godehard) stands in the town of Hildesheim, in Lower Saxony, in northern Germany. This great Romanesque church was built in honor of Saint Godehard, bishop of Hildesheim from 1022 to 1038, shortly after his canonization in 1131. It has kept almost entirely its original form and is among the finest examples of Romanesque art in Germany. Today it is a minor basilica of the Catholic Church.

An abbey born of a canonization

At the start of his episcopate, Bishop Bernhard of Hildesheim decided to found a second Benedictine monastery in the town, in honor of Godehard, whom Pope Innocent II had just canonized. The first stone was laid in 1133. In 1136, a community of monks from the abbey of Fulda settled there. Bishop Bernhard, who died in 1153, was buried in the choir of the still unfinished church. Construction was completed around 1172, and the towers were finished in the 13th century.

In the 15th century the abbey joined the reformed Bursfelde Congregation, and it lasted through the centuries until its suppression in 1803. The church was used for a time as a barn before becoming a place of worship again in 1815. It is now a Catholic parish church.

What you can see

The church has three naves, a transept and an ambulatory opening onto three radiating chapels. A great octagonal tower rises over the crossing, and the west front is framed by two smaller towers. The outer walls are punctuated by blind arcades and pilasters. The northwest portal is the most remarkable: on its tympanum, Christ welcomes the faithful between Saint Godehard and Saint

Epiphanius of Pavia, whose relics were venerated in Hildesheim. Inside, note the sober Romanesque volumes, the great chandelier of the choir and the former chapter house.

According to several sources, relics of Saint Godehard are kept in the crypt of the church. Hildesheim Cathedral, close by, keeps for its part a medieval reliquary dedicated to him.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Godehard. In the basilica, entrust to him religious communities, the pastors of the Church and those who travel, then say the prayer to Saint Godehard. May 5, his feast day, is a special time to come and pray in the church that bears his name. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Hildesheim lies about thirty kilometers southeast of Hanover and can be reached by train. The Basilica of Saint Godehard is in the town, not far from the cathedral and the church of Saint Michael, both UNESCO World Heritage sites. It is a working parish church: respect the silence and prayer of the faithful, especially during Mass. Opening hours and service times may vary: check with the parish before your visit.

Credits and sources

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