

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Godelieve of Gistel

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: July 6

Saintspedia · saintspedia.com

IN BRIEF

Saint Godelieve of Gistel

Young noblewoman from the Boulonnais, abused wife murdered at Gistel, patron saint of unhappily married women and victims of domestic violence.

Feast day	July 6
Born	c. 1049, Wierre-Effroy, Pas-de-Calais, France
Died	July 6, 1070, Gistel, West Flanders, Belgium
Canonized	elevation of her relics on July 30, 1084, by Bishop Radbod II of Tournai
Era	11th century
Patron saint of	unhappily married women, victims of domestic violence, sore throats, Gistel

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Godelieve for Wounded Homes

Novena to Saint Godelieve of Gistel

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Godelieve of Gistel

Saint Godelieve of Gistel, also known as Godeleva or Godeleine, was a young noblewoman born around 1049 at Wierre-Effroy, near Boulogne-sur-Mer, and murdered on her husband's orders on July 6, 1070, at Gistel, near Ostend, in Flanders. Mistreated by her husband and her mother-in-law, she endured everything without hatred and prayed for those who persecuted her. Venerated as a martyr from the time of her death, she is the patron saint of unhappily married women and of victims of domestic violence. Her feast day is July 6.

Who was Saint Godelieve?

Godelieve (in Latin *Godeleva*) is one of the most popular saints of Flanders. Her story is known from a *Life* written about fifteen years after her death by Drogo, a monk of Bergues-Saint-Winoc, who gathered the testimony of people who had known her. It is therefore a fairly early account, even if it includes some legendary elements.

The Bollandists, the Jesuit scholars who study the lives of the saints, have pointed out that, strictly speaking, Godelieve was not killed for refusing to deny her faith: she was a victim of domestic violence. Her holiness lies in the way she lived through it, with patience, forgiveness and unfailing charity. Her story, strikingly relevant today, speaks to everyone who suffers violence within their own home.

Key dates in the life of Saint Godelieve

- **Around 1049**: Born at the castle of Londefort, at Wierre-Effroy, in the Boulonnais region of northern France, daughter of the lord Hemfrid and his wife Ogiva.

- **Around 1068**: Through Count Eustace of Boulogne, she is married to Bertolf, lord of Gistel, in Flanders.
- **Soon after the wedding**: Neglected by her husband and mistreated by her mother-in-law, she is shut away and deprived of food.
- **Around 1069**: She flees to her father, who appeals to the bishop and the count of Flanders; Bertolf promises to treat her well and she returns to Gistel.
- **July 6, 1070**: On Bertolf's orders, two servants strangle her and plunge her into a pond to make her death look natural.
- **Around 1084**: The monk Drogo writes her *Life*.
- **July 30, 1084**: Bishop Radbod II of Tournai and Noyon solemnly raises her relics, a form of canonization at the time.
- **Since 1459**: A great procession in her honor winds through the streets of Gistel every year.

An unhappy marriage

Godelieve was born into a noble family of the Boulonnais. Beautiful, gentle and devout, she would have liked, according to tradition, to enter religious life. But a Flemish lord, Bertolf of Gistel, asked for her hand and won the support of the count of Boulogne, her father's overlord, who could not be refused.

From the wedding onward, Bertolf's attitude changed: he became cold and contemptuous. His mother, who disliked this daughter-in-law from elsewhere, encouraged his hostility. At Gistel, Godelieve was confined to a small cell, watched and given too little to eat. Even so, she shared the little she received with the poor. Bertolf spread slander about her. She did not complain; she prayed and went on loving her husband.

Exhausted, she finally fled and returned to her father's house. Her father appealed to the bishop of Tournai and to the count of Flanders. Publicly called to account, Bertolf promised to treat his wife with respect from then on. Godelieve, ready to forgive, agreed to go back.

The murder at Gistel

But Bertolf had decided to be rid of her. He made her believe that a woman knew a secret way to reconcile husband and wife, and that she must meet her alone, at night. On July 6, 1070, before dawn, two servants came to fetch her. Outside the castle, they strangled her and then plunged her into a pond so that her death would seem natural. Her body was carried back to her bed. Bertolf, who had gone away to Bruges, returned as a grieving widower. Godelieve was buried the next day.

Very soon, miracles were reported at her tomb and near the water where she had been killed. Tradition says that Bertolf remarried and had a blind daughter, Edith, who was healed through Godelieve's intercession. Shaken, he is said to have repented, done penance in Rome and the Holy Land, and become a monk at the abbey of Bergues-Saint-Winoc. Edith is said to have founded at Gistel, near the well, a Benedictine monastery dedicated to Saint Godelieve.

Devotion through the centuries

In 1084, Bishop Radbod II solemnly raised her relics, the official recognition of holiness at the time. The Roman Martyrology lists her on July 6, the day of her death; some places also celebrate July 30, the anniversary of the elevation. Her relics, examined several times over the centuries, are kept in part in the church of Gistel, and fragments have been given to other churches in Flanders.

Every year, the procession of Saint Godelieve winds through Gistel on the Sunday after July 5. At Wierre-Effroy, an eighteenth-century chapel built near a spring draws pilgrims: tradition says that when Godelieve left her father's

house, she planted her distaff in the ground and a spring burst forth.

Why is Saint Godelieve the patron saint of abused wives?

Because she herself was an abused wife. She is invoked by unhappily married women and by victims of domestic violence, and also, by a link with her strangling, for sore throats, as well as for eye diseases. She is the patron saint of the town of Gistel.

Godelieve is not a model of submission to violence: the Church asks no one to remain in danger. She herself fled and sought justice. But she refused to let hatred take hold of her heart, and her forgiveness, to the very end, eventually touched the man who had her killed. Catholics pray to her for women who suffer violence, for couples in crisis, for divided families, and for those who must forgive a deep wound.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Godelieve and the novena to Saint Godelieve, prayed from June 28 to July 6.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Godelieve in art

Saint Godelieve is shown wearing a crown, with a cord or a scarf around her neck, recalling her strangling. She is sometimes surrounded by birds. Paintings and stained glass also show the scene of her death, with two servants near a pool of water.



The chapel of Saint Godeleine at Wierre-Effroy, her native village.

Where to pray to Saint Godelieve

- **Gistel** (West Flanders, Belgium): the abbey of Saint Godelieve, known as Ten Putte ("at the well"), built around the well, and the parish church that keeps her relics.
- **Wierre-Effroy** (Pas-de-Calais, France): the chapel of Saint Godeleine and its spring, in the hamlet of Londefort.
- **Bergues** (Nord, France): the town of the abbey of Saint Winoc, where the monk Drogo, her biographer, lived.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Godelieve for Wounded Homes

Saint Godelieve of Gistel, mistreated and then murdered in 1070, has been invoked for centuries by unhappily married women and wounded families. Saintspedia offers here an original prayer, inspired by her life, for victims of violence, couples in difficulty and the grace of forgiveness, followed by a short invocation.

Prayer to Saint Godelieve for wounded homes

Saint Godelieve, you knew contempt, confinement and hunger in your own home: look tenderly on all who suffer in their homes today.

Protect the women, men and children who are victims of violence. Give them the courage to ask for help and to get to safety, as you fled to your father's house. Place on their path trustworthy people who will listen to them and stand up for them.

You went on loving and praying for those who hurt you: obtain for us the grace not to let hatred destroy us. Be with those who must forgive a deep wound, without ever giving up on justice and truth.

Watch over couples in difficulty: may they find the path of respect, dialogue and reconciliation. Touch the hearts of those who make their own families suffer, as you touched the heart of Bertolf.

I entrust to you this intention: (name it in silence). Through your intercession, may the Lord make our homes places of peace and tenderness. Amen.

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

Short invocation

> *Saint Godelieve, martyr of forgiveness, protect our homes and pray for us.*

Original invocation by Saintspedia.

If you are in danger

If you are a victim of violence, do not hesitate to contact emergency services or a domestic violence helpline in your country. Prayer goes hand in hand with getting to safety; it does not replace it. Saint Godelieve herself fled and asked for help.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Godelieve is celebrated on July 6, the anniversary of her death at Gistel in 1070. You can pray to her in a marriage crisis, for someone who is being mistreated, before a difficult act of forgiveness, or for sore throats, for which she is traditionally invoked. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Godelieve, and read the life of Saint Godelieve.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Godelieve of Gistel

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Godelieve of Gistel. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on July 6, her feast day, begin it on June 28. You can also pray it at any time, for yourself or for someone who is suffering at home. Over nine days, it follows Godelieve from her childhood at Wierre-Effroy to her death at Gistel, and asks for peace in wounded homes and healing for wounded hearts.

Godelieve's story is hard to read: a young wife despised, starved, slandered and finally murdered by those who should have loved her. Yet the people of Flanders did not remember her as a victim only. They remembered a woman who kept her heart free, who shared her bread with the poor, who asked for justice and who never stopped praying for her husband. That is why, for more than nine centuries, people have turned to her in their darkest family situations.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for the day carries the prayer into daily life. This novena can be prayed for yourself or for a person who is suffering in their home. If you or someone you love is in danger, seek help first: prayer goes hand in hand with getting to safety.



Saint Arnold of Soissons and Saint Godelieve, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent.

Day 1: A childhood in faith

At Wierre-Effroy, Godelieve grew up in a Christian family, where she learned to pray and to give to the poor. Those early years gave her the inner strength she would need later.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for those who passed the faith on to me. Bless the families who raise their children in your love. Saint Godelieve, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray for your parents and for those who helped you to know God.

Day 2: A marriage she did not choose

Godelieve did not choose her husband. Even so, she agreed to love and serve him with loyalty, hoping to build a Christian home.

Prayer: Lord, help me to live faithfully the commitments I have made, and give light to those who must make choices about their life. Saint Godelieve, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray for engaged couples and newlyweds.

Day 3: Contempt and loneliness

Neglected by her husband and rejected by her mother-in-law, Godelieve knew loneliness within her own home. She was shut away, watched and slandered.

Prayer: Lord, stay close to those who feel alone and despised in their own family. Saint Godelieve, pray for them. Amen.

Today: Check in on someone who lives in isolation.

Day 4: Sharing in spite of everything

Deprived of food, Godelieve still shared the little she had with the poor. Charity does not depend on abundance.

Prayer: Lord, open my heart and my hands, even when I think I have nothing to give. Saint Godelieve, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Make a donation or share a meal with someone.

Day 5: Daring to flee and ask for justice

Exhausted, Godelieve fled to her father, who asked the bishop and the count for justice. Protecting oneself is not a lack of faith.

Prayer: Lord, give victims of violence the courage to speak up and get to safety, and send people to welcome them. Saint Godelieve, pray for them. Amen.

Today: Find out which organizations help victims of domestic violence near you.



The death of Saint Godelieve, stained glass in the chapel of Wierre-Effroy.

Day 6: Choosing forgiveness

When Bertolf promised to change, Godelieve agreed to trust him. She chose to forgive, in spite of her fear.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to forgive with wisdom, without naivety and without resentment. Saint Godelieve, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Entrust to God someone who has hurt you.

Day 7: The night of July 6

Deceived by a false hope of reconciliation, Godelieve was killed before dawn. She died as she had lived, without hatred.

Prayer: Lord, welcome into your peace all victims of violence, and comfort their loved ones. Saint Godelieve, pray for them. Amen.

Today: Pray for those who have died at the hands of someone close to them.

Day 8: The conversion of the guilty

According to tradition, Bertolf, moved by the healing of his daughter Edith, repented and ended his life as a monk. No heart is beyond God's reach.

Prayer: Lord, touch the hearts of those who make their families suffer, and lead them to conversion. Saint Godelieve, pray for them. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone you have given up on.

Day 9: A spring of grace

At Gistel as at Wierre-Effroy, water linked to Godelieve became a sign of healing. Her wounded life became a source of life for others. Pilgrims still come to pray at the well of the abbey of Ten Putte, at Gistel.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Godelieve, let peace spring up in our homes and healing in our wounded hearts. Amen.

Today: Make the Sign of the Cross with holy water and renew your baptismal promises.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Godelieve, faithful wife and martyr of forgiveness, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for couples, for divided families and for all victims of violence. Obtain for us a heart that is gentle and strong, that gives in neither to hatred nor to fear. Amen.*

To go further, read the life of Saint Godelieve and pray the prayer to Saint Godelieve.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Unknown author, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source
- The chapel of Saint Godeleine at Wierre-Effroy, her native village.: Image: Thadée Szalamacha, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Arnold of Soissons and Saint Godelieve, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent.: Image: anonymous, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The death of Saint Godelieve, stained glass in the chapel of Wierre-Effroy.: Image: Naddoddr, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License

More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com