BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Gunther

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: October 9

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IN BRIEF

Saint Gunther

Converted Thuringian nobleman, monk of Niederaltaich and hermit founder of Rinchnach (c. 955-1045).

Feast day	October 9
Born	c. 955, Thuringia
Died	October 9, 1045, Hartmanice (Bohemia)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	11th century

In this booklet

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Former Abbey Church of Rinchnach

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Gunther

Saint Gunther (Günther) was a Thuringian nobleman who became a monk and then a hermit in the Bavarian Forest at the beginning of the 11th century. Converted at about fifty by Saint Godehard, he founded around 1011 the hermitage of Rinchnach, which later became an abbey, and lived there for more than thirty years in great poverty. He died on October 9, 1045, at Hartmanice, in Bohemia. His feast day is October 9.

Who was Saint Gunther?

Gunther belongs to the generation of monks who, around the year 1000, cleared and evangelized the great forests of Central Europe. Born into a noble family, related according to the sources to King Saint Stephen of Hungary, he first lived at court. His late conversion, his life as a hermit and his role as an adviser to princes make him a figure both austere and deeply involved in his time. What we know of him comes mainly from Wolfher, the biographer of Saint Godehard, who says he knew him well, and from a few charters. Some dates therefore remain approximate.

Key dates in the life of Gunther

- **c. 955**: Born into a noble family of Thuringia, which tradition links to the ancestors of the house of Schwarzburg.
- **c. 1005**: At about fifty, he is converted under the influence of Saint Godehard, then abbot of Hersfeld.
- **1006**: He makes the pilgrimage to Rome.
- **1007**: He takes his vows as a brother at the abbey of Niederaltaich.
- **1008**: After a short and difficult time at the head of the abbey of Göllingen, he withdraws as a hermit near Lalling.

- **c. 1011**: He settles further north, at Rinchnach, with a few companions, and builds cells and a church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist.
- **1029**: Emperor Conrad II endows the foundation of Rinchnach.
- **1040**: Henry III attaches Rinchnach to the abbey of Niederaltaich.
- **October 9, 1045**: He dies at Hartmanice, in Bohemia, and is buried at the monastery of Břevnov, near Prague.
- **1420**: His remains are destroyed during the Hussite wars.

From the castle to the monastery

Gunther spent the first half of his life in the world, as a lord of his rank. Around 1005 he met Godehard, abbot of Hersfeld and future bishop of Hildesheim, who urged him to change his life. Gunther then wished to do penance for his past faults. With the agreement of his heirs, he gave his property to the abbey of Hersfeld, but kept ownership of the monastery of Göllingen, which he wanted to endow richly. After a pilgrimage to Rome in 1006, he made his profession the following year as a brother at Niederaltaich, in Bavaria, under Godehard.

The new monk had not yet learned obedience. He insisted on obtaining the leadership of Göllingen, despite Godehard's reservations. The experience went badly: Gunther fell ill, got on poorly with the monks, and the house was badly managed. Through his advice and reproaches, Godehard helped him repair his mistakes, and Gunther humbly returned to Niederaltaich. This failure was a turning point: he understood that God was calling him to a more hidden life.

The hermit of Rinchnach

In 1008 Gunther withdrew to a cliff near Lalling, then, around 1011, he went further north into the forest with a few companions. At Rinchnach he built cells and a church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, his patron. It was the

first great religious foundation of the Bavarian Forest. He lived there some thirty-four years in extreme poverty: even water was rationed for the brothers, and only guests could use it freely.

Gunther had learned little more than the psalter. His contemporaries nonetheless report that he acquired a deep knowledge of the Scriptures and that his words moved his visitors. Wolfher says he often heard him preach on Saint John the Baptist, moving his listeners to tears. The hermit did not cut himself off from the world: he visited his family and King Stephen of Hungary, from whom he obtained alms for the poor and whom he encouraged to build churches and monasteries. He was also in contact with the dukes of Bohemia, the land bordering his forest.

Death and cult

Gunther died on October 9, 1045, at Hartmanice (Hartmanitz), in Bohemia, attended according to the accounts by Duke Břetislav and by the bishop of Prague. He was buried at the Benedictine monastery of Břevnov, near Prague. His remains were venerated there until 1420, when they were destroyed during the Hussite wars. He was never canonized by the modern procedure: his cult is immemorial, and he is listed in the Roman Martyrology on October 9. He is honored in Bavaria and Bohemia, especially at Rinchnach, whose Baroque church tells his life in frescoes.

What can we learn from Saint Gunther?

Saint Gunther shows that it is never too late to be converted, and that failure can become a path. Rich and powerful, he gave everything away; too eager to command, he learned humility. In the silence of the forest he became a man of prayer and counsel, who forgot neither the poor nor the leaders of his time.

Where to pray to Saint Gunther

- At Rinchnach, in Bavaria, in the former abbey church of Saint John the Baptist, born from his hermitage.
- At the abbey of Niederaltaich, where he made his profession.
- At Břevnov, near Prague, where he was buried.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Gunther for Conversion and Humility

Saint Gunther, a lord converted at about fifty, left everything to live as a hermit in the Bavarian Forest, at Rinchnach. He knew failure before finding peace in humility and prayer. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him those who convert late, those who have failed and those who seek silence.

Prayer to Saint Gunther

Saint Gunther,
you heard the call of God in the middle of your life,
and you left your riches to follow him.
Help me believe that it is never too late
to return to him with all my heart.

You wanted to command too soon
and learned obedience through failure:
help me accept my mistakes
and begin again humbly.

Hermit of the forest, friend of the poor,
teach me the silence where God speaks
and the generosity that keeps nothing for itself.
Pray for us to Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Gunther

- On his feast day, October 9.

- When a conversion seems late or difficult.
- After a failure, to recover peace and humility.
- For hermits, monks and those who seek a life of prayer.
- For Bavaria and Bohemia, where he is honored.

An invocation to begin again

> *Lord, I come back to you as I am.*
> *Saint Gunther, pray for me. Amen.*

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Gunther

This novena follows step by step Saint Gunther, a converted nobleman who became a hermit at Rinchnach, in the Bavarian Forest. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To end it on his feast day, October 9, begin it on October 1. 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 Gunther, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A life in the world

Gunther spent nearly fifty years at court, as a lord of his rank. God knows each of our years, even those when we sought him little.

Prayer: Lord, I give you my whole past life, with what is beautiful and what is wounded in it.

Act of the day: Review your day in the evening and thank God for one gift received.

Day 2: The meeting that changes everything

Around 1005, Gunther met Abbot Godehard. This meeting opened him to conversion. God often uses a friend or a guide to call us.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for those who helped me return to you.

Act of the day: Pray for a priest or a spiritual director.

Day 3: Giving everything

Gunther gave his property to the abbey of Hersfeld. Detachment makes room for God and for others.

Prayer: Lord, free my heart from what weighs it down.

Act of the day: Give a useful object or some money to a work for the poor.

Day 4: The pilgrim of Rome

In 1006 the novice went on pilgrimage to Rome, to the tombs of the apostles. He wanted to root his conversion in the faith of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, keep me faithful to the faith of the apostles and united to the pope.

Act of the day: Pray the Creed slowly.

Day 5: The failure at Göllingen

Too eager to lead, Gunther failed as abbot of Göllingen and humbly returned to Niederaltaich. Failure, once accepted, becomes a school of humility.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to accept my failures without bitterness.

Act of the day: Simply acknowledge a mistake to the person concerned.

Day 6: The silence of the forest

At Lalling, then at Rinchnach, Gunther chose the solitude of the forest. In silence, God speaks to the heart.

Prayer: Lord, quiet the noise within me so that I may hear your voice.

Act of the day: Take ten minutes of complete silence, without screens.

Day 7: With Saint John the Baptist

Gunther dedicated his church to Saint John the Baptist and preached about him with emotion. Like the Forerunner, he wanted Christ to increase and himself to decrease.

Prayer: Saint John the Baptist, help me point to Christ rather than to myself.

Act of the day: Read John 3:22-30.

Day 8: The hermit, friend of the poor

Gunther visited the king of Hungary and obtained alms from him for the poor. Solitude did not cut him off from charity.

Prayer: Lord, may my prayer make me more attentive to those who lack everything.

Act of the day: Do a concrete service for someone in need.

Day 9: A death in peace

On October 9, 1045, Gunther died in Bohemia, surrounded, according to the accounts, by the duke and the bishop of Prague. His life given to God ended in hope.

Prayer: Saint Gunther, obtain for us the grace we entrust to you, and an end of life in the peace of Christ.

Act of the day: Pray for an elderly person or someone at the end of life.

PILGRIMAGE

Former Abbey Church of Rinchnach

The former abbey church of Rinchnach, in the Bavarian Forest, grew out of the hermitage founded around 1011 by Saint Gunther. Today a parish church of the diocese of Passau, it keeps the memory of its founder, whose life is set alongside that of Saint John the Baptist in its Baroque frescoes.

A hermitage that became an abbey

Around 1011, Gunther, a monk of Niederaltaich, went deep into the forest with a few companions and settled at Rinchnach. There he built cells and a church dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. It was the first great religious foundation of the Bavarian Forest. A first church was consecrated in 1019. In 1029 Emperor Conrad II endowed the foundation with land, and in 1040 Rinchnach became a priory of the abbey of Niederaltaich.

The history of the place is eventful. The priory burned in 1243, was rebuilt, and the church reopened in 1255. In 1488 the Hussites set it on fire. Other fires followed, in 1597 and 1693, and the monks suffered harsh treatment during the Thirty Years' War. From 1708, Niederaltaich rebuilt the monastery. In 1803, secularization put an end to monastic life: the lands were sold, and the abbey church became the parish church of Rinchnach.

What you can see

The present church owes much to the great Baroque architect Johann Michael Fischer, who entirely remodeled it in 1727. The bell tower, raised in 1721, is topped by a lantern. The interior, organized around an oval form, is decorated with stucco and frescoes. These frescoes, painted by Wolfgang Andreas Heindl,

set side by side the life of Saint John the Baptist, patron of the church, and that of Saint Gunther, its founder. The high altar, made around 1770, bears a painting of the baptism of Christ.

The relics of Saint Gunther are not at Rinchnach: he was buried at Břevnov, near Prague, and his remains were destroyed in 1420 during the Hussite wars. It is here, on the very site of his hermitage, that his memory is most alive.

Praying at Rinchnach

Rinchnach lies in Lower Bavaria, in the district of Regen, in the heart of the Bavarian Forest, not far from the Czech border. As a parish church, it welcomes the faithful for Mass and prayer; it is best to check with the parish before a visit. Here you can entrust to Saint Gunther a conversion, a new beginning after a failure, or the desire for a simpler life, while meditating before the frescoes that tell his story. October 9, his feast day, is a special time to come.

Credits and sources

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