

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Hervé

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: June 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint Hervé

Sixth-century Breton hermit, blind from birth, singer and exorcist, patron saint of bards.

Feast day	June 17
Born	c. 520, Plouzévédé, Léon (Brittany), according to tradition
Died	c. 568, Lanhouarneau, Finistère (France)
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	6th century
Patron saint of	Breton bards and singers, the blind and eye diseases, against fear and anxiety, horses

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Hervé

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Hervé

Saint Hervé, also known by the old names Houarneau or Hoarvian, and sometimes called Harvey in English, was a sixth-century Breton hermit, blind from birth, a singer and spiritual master who died around 568 at Lanhouarneau, in the Léon region of Brittany. Tradition shows him led by a child and accompanied by a tame wolf. Much loved in Lower Brittany, he is the patron of bards and singers, invoked for diseases of the eyes, against fear and anxiety, and for the protection of horses. His feast day is June 17.

Who was Saint Hervé?

Hervé belongs to the great family of early medieval Breton saints, who came from the island of Britain or were born to those immigrants in Armorica, today's Brittany. As with most of them, no contemporary document survives. His life is known through a Latin *Vita* of the thirteenth century, copied in several manuscripts, and taken up in the seventeenth century by the Dominican Albert Le Grand in his *Lives of the Saints of Armorican Brittany*. These accounts mix a few historical memories with many wondrous episodes, and historians also recognize in them motifs inherited from Celtic culture.

But the Bretons' attachment to Saint Hervé is very real: four parish churches and some twenty chapels bear his name, and his *pardons*, the traditional Breton pilgrimage festivals, still gather the faithful every year around June 17.

Key dates in the life of Saint Hervé

- **c. 520**: Born, according to tradition, at the manor of Lanrioul, in Plouzévédé, in the Léon; he is blind from birth.
- **Childhood**: After the death of his father, the bard Hyvarnion, he is raised by his mother, Rivanone, at Tréflaouénan.

- **Youth**: He is trained by his uncle, the hermit Urfold, at Bourg-Blanc.
- **Adulthood**: He lives as a hermit, receives minor orders from the bishop of Léon, and becomes an exorcist and guide to many disciples.
- **c. 568**: He dies at Lanhouarneau, surrounded by his disciples, and is buried there.
- **878**: In the face of Viking raids, his relics are taken to safety in Brest and then moved to the cathedral of Nantes.

A blind child and a singer

According to his *Life*, Hervé was the son of Hyvarnion, a bard from the island of Britain who is said to have stayed at the court of the Frankish king Childebert, and of Rivanone. He was born blind. His father died when he was still small, and his mother raised him alone. From childhood he showed great piety and a gift for song: tradition attributes hymns to him and makes him the patron of Breton bards and singers.

He was entrusted to his uncle Urfold, a hermit at Bourg-Blanc, who taught him the faith. The legend tells that one day, as he was plowing his master's field, a wolf devoured the donkey pulling the plow. Hervé prayed, and the wolf came of its own accord to take the donkey's place. Ever since, the saint has been shown with a tame wolf.

Hermit, teacher and exorcist

Returning to his dying mother at Lanhouarneau, Hervé settled there and then led the life of a hermit, attracting disciples. The bishop of Léon gave him minor orders, but out of humility he refused to be ordained a priest and accepted only the ministry of exorcist. He also refused the title of abbot, while guiding a small community.

He traveled through the country, taught children and welcomed the poor, and tradition places him on the heights of Menez Bré, where a chapel is dedicated to him. His *Life* attributes many miracles to him: a spring gushing out under his staff, healings, demons driven out, and even the frogs of a pond silenced so that people could sleep. Blind in body, he was said to see clearly into souls.



The chapel of Saint Hervé on the summit of Menez Bré.

His death at Lanhouarneau

Hervé died around 568 at Lanhouarneau, surrounded by his disciples and by his kinswoman Saint Christine. According to tradition, Saint Paul Aurelian, bishop of Léon, attended his funeral. He was buried on the spot. The name of the village itself, *Lan-Houarneau*, means "Hervé's hermitage."

In 878, under the threat of the Vikings, his body was taken to safety in the chapel of the castle of Brest, and then moved to the cathedral of Nantes. His relics were later divided: his skull is venerated in the cathedral of Rennes, and

Lanhouarneau keeps bones in a silver arm reliquary from the early sixteenth century.

Why is Saint Hervé the patron saint of the blind, singers and horses?

In Brittany, Saint Hervé is one of the great healing saints. He is invoked for eye diseases, in memory of his own blindness. Because he sang God's praises and was the son of a bard, Breton singers and musicians took him as their patron. He is also invoked against fears, anxiety and depression, and to drive away evil, in memory of his ministry as an exorcist. Finally, the story of the wolf made him a protector of horses and herds against wolves. Farmers used to offer him wool. A popular Breton hymn asks him to protect the faithful "and our horses."

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Hervé in art

Statues show Hervé with his eyes closed, holding his staff, led by a young boy and followed by his wolf. These three elements, the closed eyes, the child guide and the wolf, make him easy to recognize in the chapels and altarpieces of Brittany. A large granite statue of him stands in the Valley of the Saints (*Vallée des Saints*) at Carnoët.



The church of Saint Hervé in Lanhouarneau, where the saint died.

What can we learn from Saint Hervé?

Hervé shows that a disability does not prevent a fully fruitful life. Blind, he sang to God, taught, guided disciples and comforted the poor. His humility, which led him to refuse the priesthood and the title of abbot, and his gentleness, symbolized by the tame wolf, make him a saint who feels very close. We can pray to him for the blind and visually impaired, for those suffering from anxiety or depression, for singers and musicians, and for Brittany.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Hervé and the novena to Saint Hervé, from June 9 to his feast on June 17.

Where to pray to Saint Hervé

- **Lanhouarneau** (Finistère, France): the church of Saint Hervé, at the place of his death, with his silver arm reliquary and his annual pardon.

- **Pédernec** (Côtes-d'Armor): the chapel of Saint Hervé on the summit of Menez Bré.
- **Bourbriac** (Côtes-d'Armor): the chapel of Saint Houarneau.
- **Gourin** (Morbihan): the chapel of Saint Hervé and its bust of the saint.
- **Rennes**: the cathedral of Saint Peter, which keeps his skull.
- **Carnoët** (Côtes-d'Armor): his granite statue in the Valley of the Saints.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Hervé, the Blind Hermit

Saint Hervé, the blind hermit of sixth-century Brittany, is one of the best-loved saints of Lower Brittany. He is invoked for diseases of the eyes, against fear and anxiety, for singers and for the protection of animals. Breton hymns in his honor are many; this page quotes a traditional refrain, then offers an original prayer by Saintspedia.

A refrain from a Breton hymn

Popular piety has sung Saint Hervé in many hymns, in Breton and in French. A traditional refrain, quoted by authors who have studied his cult, sums up what the faithful ask of him:

> *O Saint Hervé, blessed saint, from evil and sickness protect us, and our horses.*

Source: refrain of a popular Breton hymn in honor of Saint Hervé, translated into English from its French version.

Prayer to Saint Hervé

Saint Hervé, you were born blind, yet you saw clearly into souls. Teach me to look with the eyes of the heart, and to recognize God present in my life.

You sang the praises of the Lord. Put in my mouth words and songs that give him glory. Watch over singers, musicians and all who serve beauty.

You drove out evil and calmed troubled hearts. Free me from my fears and anxieties. Support those who suffer from depression and those who can no longer find peace.

You tamed the wolf. Make me gentle and patient. Protect the blind and visually impaired, animals and those who care for them. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Through your intercession, may the light of Christ shine in my eyes and in my heart. Amen.

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

Intentions to entrust to Saint Hervé

- People who are blind or visually impaired, and those with eye problems.
- People living with anxiety, depression or inner turmoil.
- Singers, musicians and songwriters.
- Farmers, riders and their animals, especially horses.
- Brittany and its parishes.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Hervé's feast day is June 17, and his pardons take place in Brittany around that date. You can pray to him before an eye examination or operation, in a moment of anxiety, or before singing in church. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Hervé, and read the life of Saint Hervé.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Hervé

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and legend of Saint Hervé, the blind hermit of Brittany. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, June 17, begin it on June 9. You can also pray it at any time, for someone with an eye disease, for a person struggling with anxiety, or for a singer or musician.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. You may also sing a hymn, in memory of the saint who loved to sing God's praises. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into your life.

Day 1: Born in darkness

Hervé was born blind. His life began with a trial, but God would make it a source of light for many. What seems like a limit can become, in God's hands, a path of grace. Hervé never saw the fields of Léon, yet he became a light for those around him.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you my limits and my wounds. Make them a way toward you.

Today: Pray for a person who is blind or visually impaired.

Day 2: A mother's love

After his father's death, Hervé was raised by his mother, Rivanone. The love we receive in childhood bears fruit for a whole lifetime. At the end of her life, he came back to Lanhouarneau to care for her, and the place of her last days

became his own hermitage.

Prayer: Lord, bless mothers who raise their children alone, and all who care for aging parents.

Today: Thank or help a mother you know.

Day 3: Learning from a master

With his uncle Urfold, the hermit of Bourg-Blanc, Hervé learned prayer and the faith. No one becomes a disciple without being taught, and every teacher in the faith shares in God's work. Urfold could not give Hervé his sight, but he gave him something greater: a living faith and the habit of prayer.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for those who taught me to know you.

Today: Pray for a catechist, a teacher or a godparent.

Day 4: The tamed wolf

The legend says that the wolf that had devoured the donkey came to take its place at the plow. The saint's gentleness transformed violence into service. Gentleness is stronger than we think. It does not deny the wolf's strength; it puts that strength to work for good.

Prayer: Lord, tame what is wild and violent in me.

Today: Answer a hurtful word with gentleness.

Day 5: Singing to God

Hervé was a singer, and Brittany made him the patron of bards. Song is a prayer that rises from the heart; as the saying attributed to Saint Augustine goes, whoever sings prays twice.

Prayer: Lord, may my whole life become a song of praise.

Today: Sing or listen to a sacred song, taking time to pray with it.

Day 6: Humility

Hervé refused the priesthood and the title of abbot, judging himself unworthy. He served without seeking honors, content to guide others quietly as an exorcist and a teacher. Those who knew him remembered not titles, but a heart given to God.

Prayer: Lord, give me a humble heart that does not seek the first place.

Today: Do someone a service without letting it be known.

Day 7: Driving out fear

Saint Hervé is invoked against fear and anxiety. He drove out evil by prayer and by trust in God. Many people today live with heavy anxiety; Christ wants to give them his peace. Fear does not have the last word for those who place their trust in him.

Prayer: Lord, free me from my fears, and give your peace to those who are anxious or depressed.

Today: Visit or call a person who is going through worry or loneliness.

Day 8: Welcoming the poor

Tradition shows Hervé teaching children and welcoming the poor. His holiness took the form of hospitality, open to all who came to his door. A blind man, who himself needed a child to guide him, became a guide and a refuge for others.

Prayer: Lord, open my door and my heart to those who need me.

Today: Share a meal or a gift with someone in need.

Day 9: Seeing with the heart

Blind in body, Hervé saw clearly into souls. At the end of his life, around 568, he entered the light that never fades. His memory still gathers the people of Brittany at his pardons each June.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Hervé, open the eyes of my heart, heal what needs healing in me, and lead me into your light. Amen.

Today: Take part in a pardon or a Mass, or light a candle before an image of the saint.

Closing prayer

Saint Hervé, blind hermit and singer of God, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for the blind and those with eye diseases, for those who are afraid, for singers and for Brittany. Obtain for us gentleness, humility and the joy of praising the Lord. Amen.

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

CREDITS

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