BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint James the Deacon

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: August 17

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IN BRIEF

Saint James the Deacon

Deacon of the Roman mission to England, companion of Saint Paulinus of York (7th century).

Feast day	August 17
Born	late 6th century, probably Italy
Died	after 671, Northumbria, probably near Catterick
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	7th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint James the Deacon to Stay Faithful in Trial

Novena to Saint James the Deacon

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint James the Deacon

Saint James the Deacon (Jacques le Diacre in French) was a cleric, probably Italian, who came to England with the mission sent by Pope Saint Gregory the Great to bring the Gospel to the Anglo-Saxons. A companion of Saint Paulinus of York in Northumbria, he stayed on when everything seemed lost, in 633, and carried on the missionary work alone. He died at a great age, after 671. His feast day is August 17.

Who was Saint James the Deacon?

What we know of James comes almost entirely from Saint Bede the Venerable, who wrote the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* early in the 8th century. Bede mentions him several times, with visible admiration. He gives neither his date of birth, nor the date of his arrival in Britain, nor that of his death. Historians think he was Italian, like most members of the Gregorian mission. He was not a priest but a deacon, that is, ordained for the service of the liturgy, the Word and charity. The historian Frank Stenton called him "the one heroic figure of the Roman mission", because he did not run away when persecution returned.

Key dates in the life of James

- **Late 6th century**: Born, probably in Italy; the exact date and place are unknown.
- **Early 7th century**: He joins the Roman mission in England sent by Pope Gregory the Great.
- **c. 625**: He goes with Paulinus to Northumbria, where Princess Æthelburh of Kent comes to marry King Edwin; some historians date this journey before 619.

- **633**: King Edwin is killed at the battle of Hatfield Chase; Paulinus returns to Kent, but James stays in the North.
- **Following years**: He continues the work of evangelization; Bede places him in a village near Catterick that bears his name.
- **Reign of Oswiu**: He celebrates Easter on the Roman date with Queen Eanflæd, Edwin's daughter.
- **664**: According to Bede, he attends the Synod of Whitby, which adopts the Roman reckoning of Easter for Northumbria.
- **After 664**: He teaches liturgical chant in the Roman manner.
- **After 671**: He dies at a very great age; Bede suggests he was still alive in Bede's own childhood.

A companion of Saint Paulinus

In 597, Pope Gregory the Great had sent the monk Augustine and his companions to the kingdom of Kent. A few years later, other missionaries joined them, among them Paulinus. When the Christian princess Æthelburh, sister of King Eadbald of Kent, left to marry Edwin, the pagan king of Northumbria, Paulinus went with her as bishop. James was part of this small group. The traditional date of this departure is 625, but some historians, such as David Kirby, think it took place a few years earlier.

The mission met with real success. Edwin eventually received baptism, and Paulinus baptized many Northumbrians. He also preached further south, in the small kingdom of Lindsey, around Lincoln, where he had a stone church built. James, as deacon, helped him in catechesis, baptism and the liturgy.

Staying when everything collapses

In 633, Edwin was killed at the battle of Hatfield Chase, fighting Penda of Mercia and the British king Cadwallon. The death of the Christian king brought a strong return of paganism. Paulinus fled by sea to Kent with Queen

Æthelburh and her daughter Eanflæd. James stayed. Bede tells that he remained a long time in the Church of York, teaching and baptizing, and won many souls from the old worship. He lived in a village near Catterick which, in Bede's time, still bore his name.

This choice is what makes James great. He had neither the dignity of a bishop nor the protection of a king. He was a foreigner in a land that had gone back to its old gods. Yet he held firm, for years, until Christian kings, Oswald and then Oswiu, regained power and the Gospel could again be preached freely.

A witness for Rome at the Synod of Whitby

Under King Oswiu, the Church of Northumbria was divided between two traditions. The monks from Iona, trained by the Irish, calculated the date of Easter in their own way, while the Churches linked to Rome followed another reckoning. At the court itself, King Oswiu kept Easter in the Irish way, and Queen Eanflæd, raised in Kent, kept it in the Roman way, with James. So it could happen that the king was celebrating the Resurrection while the queen was still fasting for Palm Sunday.

To end this division, Oswiu gathered the Synod of Whitby in 664. Bede names James among those who took part, alongside Saint Wilfrid, who defended the Roman usage. The king chose Rome. James, who according to Bede was a master of church singing, then taught many people liturgical chant according to the usage of Rome and Kent.

Death and devotion

James died "old and full of days", in the biblical phrase Bede applies to him. The exact date is unknown. Bede suggests he was still living in his own time; he would therefore have died after 671, at over seventy years of age. Several historians even think he was one of Bede's informants about King Edwin and

the mission of Paulinus. The Catholic Church honors him as a saint on August 17; the Anglican Communion also commemorates him on October 11. No particular attribute is known for him: he is simply shown as a deacon.

What can we learn from Saint James the Deacon?

James is the saint of quiet faithfulness. He founded no diocese and left no writings. He simply went on serving where he had been sent, when others were leaving. He reminds us of the greatness of the ministry of deacons and of the place of song in the prayer of the Church. You can pray to him for missionaries, for deacons, for cantors and choirs, and for all who must hold firm in surroundings that have become indifferent or hostile to the faith.

Where to pray to Saint James the Deacon

- **York** (England): the city where Paulinus baptized King Edwin and whose Church James served.
- **Catterick** (North Yorkshire): the area where, according to Bede, he lived and where a village bore his name.
- **Whitby** (North Yorkshire): the place of the synod of 664, in which he took part.
- Wherever the liturgy is sung: he is a model for cantors and deacons.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint James the Deacon to Stay Faithful in Trial

Saint James the Deacon, a companion of Saint Paulinus of York, stayed alone in Northumbria when the mission seemed lost, in 633, and went on baptizing, teaching and singing the praise of God until a very great age. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him missionaries, deacons, cantors and all who must remain faithful in times of trial.

Prayer to Saint James the Deacon

Saint James,
deacon who came from afar to proclaim Christ,
you left your homeland
to serve a people who did not know you.
Teach me to serve without seeking the first place.

When the Christian king fell
and the others went away,
you stayed, poor and alone,
to baptize and to teach.
Give me your faithfulness in difficult times,
and your courage when faith declines around me.

You who taught the faithful to sing God's praise,
bless our deacons, our cantors and our choirs.
Keep the Church in unity
and make us patient witnesses of the Gospel.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint James the Deacon

- On his feast day, August 17.
- For deacons and those preparing to become deacons.
- For missionaries, especially those who work alone or far from home.
- For cantors, organists and parish choirs.
- When you are tempted to give up a mission that has become difficult.

A short invocation

> *Saint James, faithful servant,*
> *you who stayed when everything was collapsing,*
> *keep me steadfast in the service of God. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint James the Deacon from August 9 to 17, and read the life of Saint James the Deacon.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint James the Deacon

This novena is an original composition inspired by the life of Saint James the Deacon, a member of the Roman mission to England and a companion of Saint Paulinus of York. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, August 17, begin on August 9. 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 James the Deacon, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. What we know of James comes mainly from Saint Bede the Venerable.

Day 1: Leaving one's homeland

James was probably Italian. He left his land to join the mission sent by Pope Gregory the Great to the Anglo-Saxons, a people whose language and customs he did not know.

Prayer: Lord, help me to answer your call even when it leads me far from what I know.

Act of the day: Pray for a missionary or support a missionary work.

Day 2: The service of a deacon

James was not a bishop, nor even a priest. He was a deacon, that is, a servant. All his life he helped, taught and baptized, without seeking honors.

Prayer: Jesus, you who came to serve, teach me to love the last place.

Act of the day: Do a discreet service without letting anyone know.

Day 3: Accompanying a shepherd

With Paulinus, James set out for the North, to Northumbria. He was the faithful helper of a bishop, in the service of a mission that was not his own but the Church's.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishops and our priests, and give them faithful co-workers.

Act of the day: Pray for your bishop and for the priests of your parish.

Day 4: The joy of baptisms

The mission of Paulinus bore fruit: King Edwin and many of his subjects received baptism. James witnessed this harvest and took part in it.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for my baptism. Help me to live as a child of God.

Act of the day: Find the date of your baptism and thank God for it.

Day 5: Staying in the storm

In 633, King Edwin was killed and paganism returned. Paulinus left for Kent. James stayed, alone, to go on teaching and baptizing.

Prayer: Lord, when everything seems to collapse, help me not to run away and to remain faithful to what you have entrusted to me.

Act of the day: Keep a commitment that costs you something today.

Day 6: Sowing without seeing the harvest

For years James worked in a land that had become pagan again, without knowing whether the Gospel would take root there once more. He sowed, and others would reap.

Prayer: Lord, give me the patience of the sower and trust in your grace, even when I see no fruit.

Act of the day: Speak of God, simply, to someone who does not know him.

Day 7: Singing God's praise

Bede says that James was a master of church singing. After the Synod of Whitby, he taught many people liturgical chant according to the usage of Rome.

Prayer: Lord, may my life and my voice sing your glory. Bless all who serve the liturgy through song.

Act of the day: Sing a hymn or a psalm, alone or with your family.

Day 8: Serving unity

At the court of Northumbria, the king and the queen did not keep Easter on the same day. James took part in the Synod of Whitby, gathered in 664 to restore unity.

Prayer: Lord, heal the divisions of your Church and make me a builder of peace and unity.

Act of the day: Take a step toward reconciliation with someone you disagree with.

Day 9: A long life given

James died at a great age, after 671, "full of days", in the land he had served all his life. He gave all his years to Christ, to the very last.

Prayer: Lord, grant me to persevere to the end. Through the intercession of Saint James the Deacon, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Visit an elderly person, or pray for the elders of your family.

Closing prayer

> *Saint James the Deacon,*
> *faithful servant of the Gospel,*
> *you stayed when others left,*
> *and you sang God's praise into your old age.*
> *Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.*
> *Keep me faithful in trial*
> *and joyful in service.*
> *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Credits and sources

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