

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Kilian

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: July 8

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IN BRIEF

Saint Kilian

Irish missionary bishop, Apostle of Franconia, martyred in Würzburg around 689.

Feast day	July 8
Born	c. 640, Ireland
Died	c. 689, Würzburg, Germany
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Franconia, diocese of Würzburg, rheumatism

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Kilian

Saint Kilian was an Irish missionary bishop of the late 7th century who came to proclaim the Gospel in Franconia, in the heart of present-day Germany. According to tradition, he was put to death in Würzburg around 689 with his companions Colman and Totnan, for having denounced the marriage of the local duke. Apostle of Franconia and patron of the diocese of Würzburg, he remains the object of lively popular devotion there, and he is also honored in his native Ireland. His feast day is July 8.

Who was Saint Kilian?

Kilian, also spelled Killian, or Cillian in Irish, belongs to the great line of Irish monks who left their island to become "pilgrims for Christ" on the Continent, following in the footsteps of Saint Columbanus. The oldest witnesses about him date from the 8th century: an entry in a necrology of Würzburg and a notice in the martyrology of Rabanus Maurus. Later accounts of his life enriched his story with details that are hard to verify.

An Irish tradition says he was born in Mullagh, in today's County Cavan, and also links him to the parish of Tuosist, near Kenmare, in County Kerry, where he is said to have stayed before setting out. He is said to have left with several companions, eleven according to Rabanus Maurus, for eastern Franconia and Thuringia, regions barely touched by Christianity at the time.

Key dates

- **c. 640**: Born in Ireland, according to tradition.
- **Late 7th century**: Arrives in Franconia with his companions and preaches in Würzburg.

- **c. 689**: Martyred in Würzburg with the priest Colman and the deacon Totnan, according to tradition.
- **742**: Saint Boniface founds the diocese of Würzburg and installs Saint Burchard as its first bishop.
- **752**: Burchard solemnly raises the relics of the three martyrs.

The evangelization of Würzburg

According to the early accounts, Kilian preached in Würzburg, then the residence of a Frankish duke named Gozbert. He succeeded in converting him, along with part of the population.

Kilian was accompanied by two close companions: Colman, also called Kolonat, a priest, and Totnan, a deacon. Their mission was part of a wider movement. In the same period, other missionaries from Ireland and England, such as Saint Willibrord in Frisia, were preparing the ground that Saint Boniface would organize a few decades later.

A martyr for the truth of marriage

According to tradition, Kilian reminded Duke Gozbert that his union with Geilana, his brother's widow, was contrary to the law of the Church. Geilana, who had remained pagan, never forgave him. Taking advantage of the duke's absence, she had the three missionaries killed; they were beheaded.

The account clearly draws a parallel between Kilian and Saint John the Baptist, who died for having rebuked Herod for taking his brother's wife. Gozbert and Geilana are known only from imprecise Church sources, so the exact date of the martyrdom remains uncertain; 689 is the traditional date.

The cult of the three martyrs took shape quickly. When Saint Boniface created the diocese of Würzburg, its first bishop, Saint Burchard, solemnly raised their relics in 752. Kilian then became the patron of the new local Church, and his

memory spread across the German lands.



Saint Kilian on the Old Main Bridge in Würzburg.

A devotion still alive

The skulls of the three martyrs, adorned with precious stones, have been preserved to this day. Every year, around July 8, the "Kilian Pilgrimage Week" (*Kiliani-Wallfahrtswoche*) gathers many pilgrims in Würzburg. The reliquary is carried in procession through the streets and displayed in the cathedral dedicated to him. This period is also the time of a large popular festival, the *Kiliani-Volksfest*. The statues of Kilian, Colman and Totnan are among those that line the Old Bridge over the Main river.

In Ireland, he appears in the liturgical calendar as Saint Cillian, and his feast is still marked at Tuosist with a traditional pilgrimage, the *pattern*, around a holy well that bears his name. The name Killian, very common in Ireland, keeps his memory alive.

Why is Saint Kilian the patron saint of Franconia?

Kilian is honored as the Apostle of Franconia because he was among the first to preach the Gospel in the region and gave his life there. The diocese of Würzburg, founded on the memory of the three martyrs, took him as its patron, and the cathedral of Würzburg bears his name. He is also invoked against rheumatism.

More broadly, he is a witness of missionary courage: he left his land to proclaim Christ to peoples who did not know him, and he was not afraid to speak the truth to the powerful, at the risk of his life. His story links Ireland and Germany and reminds us how much the faith of Europe owes to these traveling monks. Christians pray to him for missionaries, for families and for those who must speak frankly.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Kilian and the novena to Saint Kilian.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Kilian in art

Saint Kilian is usually shown as a bishop, with miter and crosier, and holding a sword, the instrument of his martyrdom. He is often depicted together with his companions Colman and Totnan.

Where to pray to Saint Kilian

- **Würzburg** (Bavaria, Germany): Saint Kilian's Cathedral, and nearby the Neumünster church, built according to tradition on the site of the martyrdom; its crypt, the *Kiliansgruft*, is a place of quiet prayer near the martyrs' memory.
- **Würzburg, Old Main Bridge**: the statues of the three martyrs above the river.
- **Tuosist** (County Kerry, Ireland): the church and the holy well that bear his name.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Kilian, Apostle of Franconia

The early sources have handed down no words of Saint Kilian, and no traditional prayer to him has come into common use in English. Saintspedia therefore offers an original prayer, inspired by his life as a missionary and martyr, to be prayed together with his companions Saint Colman and Saint Totnan.



Saint Kilian and his companions.

Prayer to Saint Kilian, Apostle of Franconia

Saint Kilian, you left Ireland to bring the Gospel to peoples who did not know Christ. Give me the courage to step out of my habits and to proclaim, where I live, the good news of God's love.

You spoke the truth to Duke Gozbert without fearing for your life. Help me to speak frankly and with charity, even when it is difficult.

With Saint Colman and Saint Totnan, your companions in mission and in martyrdom, pray for today's missionaries, for families, and for all who suffer because of their faith.

I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Keep the people of Franconia, the people of Ireland, and all who call on you faithful to Christ, for whom you gave your life. Amen.

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

A short invocation

> *Saint Kilian, Saint Colman and Saint Totnan, faithful witnesses of Christ, pray for us.*

When to pray this prayer

Saint Kilian is celebrated on July 8, together with his companions Colman and Totnan. In Würzburg, a week of pilgrimage is held every year around this date, and in Tuosist, County Kerry, his feast is marked by a traditional pattern at his holy well. You can pray to him:

- for missionaries, especially those who leave their own country to serve the Church;

- for Irish emigrants and their families, since Kilian himself left Ireland for good;
- for families and for the truth and faithfulness of marriage;
- when you must speak the truth to someone in authority;
- for Christians persecuted for their faith.

To go further, pray the novena to Saint Kilian from June 30 to July 8, or read the life of Saint Kilian.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Kilian

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Kilian, the Irish missionary bishop who, according to tradition, was martyred in Würzburg around 689 with his companions Colman and Totnan. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, begin on June 30; it ends on July 8. You can also pray it at any time for missionaries, for families, or when you need courage to speak the truth.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act proposed for each day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.

Because Kilian is honored both in Germany and in Ireland, this novena can be prayed by families with roots in either country, by parish groups, or by anyone with a heart for the missions. You may also remember each day the Irish missionaries, priests, sisters and lay people, who still serve the Church on every continent.

You may begin each day with this invocation:

> *Lord Jesus, you sent your disciples to all nations. Saint Kilian, with Saint Colman and Saint Totnan, pray for us. Amen.*

Day 1: A son of Ireland

Tradition places Kilian's birth in Ireland, at Mullagh in County Cavan. He grew up in a land where faith was alive and where monks prayed, studied and copied the Scriptures.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the land and the people through whom I received the faith.

Today: Pray for your parish, your family and the place where you were baptized.

Day 2: A pilgrim for Christ

Like many Irish monks, Kilian left his homeland to become a "pilgrim for Christ." He gave up what was familiar to follow God's call into the unknown.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to leave my comfort when you call me.

Today: Take one small step outside your routine to serve someone.

Day 3: Never alone

Kilian did not set out alone. Several companions went with him, among them the priest Colman and the deacon Totnan, who remained with him to the end.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the companions you give me on the road of faith. Make me a faithful friend.

Today: Contact a friend who helps you live your faith, and thank them.

Day 4: Proclaiming the Gospel

In Würzburg, Kilian preached to people who barely knew Christ. Many, including Duke Gozbert, received baptism. The Word he proclaimed bore fruit.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, make me a simple and joyful witness of the Gospel where I live.

Today: Speak of your faith, in a natural way, with someone who asks.

Day 5: For missionaries

Kilian belongs to the great movement of Irish and English missionaries, like Willibrord and later Boniface, who brought the faith to the Germanic peoples. Today, too, men and women leave everything to serve the Gospel far from home.

Prayer: Lord of the harvest, bless and protect all missionaries, and send new workers into your harvest.

Today: Pray for a missionary you know, or support a missionary work.

Day 6: The truth of marriage

Kilian reminded the duke that his union with his brother's widow was contrary to the law of the Church. He cared for the truth and holiness of marriage, even at great cost.

Prayer: Lord, bless married couples and families. Strengthen their love and their faithfulness.

Today: Pray for a couple going through difficulties, or do something kind for your spouse or family.

Day 7: Courage to speak the truth

Like John the Baptist before Herod, Kilian did not keep silent before the powerful. He spoke the truth with courage, knowing it could cost him his life.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to speak the truth with charity, without fear and without harshness.

Today: Say an honest word that you have been avoiding, gently and with respect.

Day 8: Faithful unto death

According to tradition, Kilian, Colman and Totnan were beheaded in Würzburg around 689. They gave their lives for Christ, and their witness became the foundation of a Church.

Prayer: Lord, strengthen the Christians who are persecuted today, and make me faithful in small trials.

Today: Pray for Christians who suffer for their faith in a country of your choice.

Day 9: A seed that bears fruit

More than thirteen centuries later, pilgrims still gather in Würzburg every July to honor Kilian, and his feast is still kept at Tuosist in Ireland. The seed he sowed has borne fruit.

Prayer: Saint Kilian, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Obtain for me the grace to remain faithful to Christ and to bear fruit for his Kingdom.

Today: Thank God for one good thing that has grown in your life from a small beginning.

Closing prayer

Saint Kilian, Apostle of Franconia, you left Ireland to bring Christ to those who did not know him. With your companions Colman and Totnan, you proclaimed the Gospel, defended the truth of marriage and gave your life as a witness. At the end of this novena, I entrust to you the intention I have carried

for nine days. Pray for missionaries, for families and for all who must speak the truth with courage. May we, like you, be faithful to Christ until the end. Amen.

PILGRIMAGE

Saint Kilian's Cathedral in Würzburg

Saint Kilian's Cathedral in Würzburg, Bavaria, is the heart of the devotion to the apostle of Franconia. Dedicated to the Irish missionary martyred in the city around 689, it hosts each summer the pilgrimage week in his honor, during which the relics of the three martyrs, Kilian, Colman and Totnan, are displayed for the veneration of the faithful.

A Cathedral for the Apostle of Franconia

The Diocese of Würzburg was founded in 742 by Saint Boniface, who installed Saint Burchard as its first bishop. As early as 752, Burchard solemnly raised the relics of Kilian and his companions, who became the patrons of the new Church. The present cathedral, one of the great Romanesque churches of Germany, was built beginning in the 11th century and transformed over the centuries. Severely damaged by the bombing of the city in March 1945, it was rebuilt after the war and remains the mother church of the diocese.



Saint Kilian's Cathedral in Würzburg.

Visiting the Cathedral and the Neumünster

The cathedral can be visited freely outside services. A few steps away stands the Neumünster, a church built, according to tradition, on the spot where the three missionaries were put to death. Its crypt, called the Kiliansgruft, is a place of prayer dedicated to the martyrs. In the city you can also walk to the old bridge over the Main, the Alte Mainbrücke, whose Baroque statues include Kilian, Colman and Totnan.

The high point of the year is Saint Kilian's week, around July 8: the skulls of the martyrs, kept in a reliquary, are carried in procession through the streets and then displayed in the cathedral, and many parish pilgrimages from all over Franconia come in succession.

Praying on the Spot

Before your visit, you might read the life of Saint Kilian. In the cathedral or in the crypt of the Neumünster, take time to entrust to God missionaries and those who suffer for their faith, then say the prayer to Saint Kilian. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The crypt of Saint Kilian at the Neumünster in Würzburg.

Other Places Associated with Saint Kilian

- **Würzburg, Neumünster**: the church and crypt built, according to tradition, on the site of the martyrdom.
- **Würzburg, old bridge over the Main**: the statues of the three martyrs, above the river.
- **Tuosist** (County Kerry, Ireland): Saint Kilian's church and well, where a pilgrimage takes place on July 8.

- **Mullagh** (County Cavan, Ireland): his birthplace according to Irish tradition.

Practical Information

The cathedral is in the historic center of Würzburg, a few minutes' walk from the old bridge and the Neumünster. It is a place of worship: silence and modest dress are requested, and visits are limited during celebrations. For times, the program of Saint Kilian's week and group arrangements, consult the official website of the Diocese of Würzburg before you come.

Credits and sources

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