BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Livinus

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: November 12

IN BRIEF

Saint Livinus

Missionary bishop of the 7th century from the British Isles, martyr in Flanders and patron of Ghent.

Feast day	November 12
Born	late 6th or early 7th century (according to tradition), Ireland, according to tradition
Died	November 12, c. 657 (633 or 663 according to other authors), Esse, today Sint-Lievens-Esse (Belgium)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	7th century
Patron saint of	Ghent, Ledeberg

In this booklet

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Sint-Lievens-Houtem, Tomb of Saint Livinus

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Livinus

Saint Livinus (Liévin in French, Lieven in Dutch) was a missionary bishop of the 7th century who came from the British Isles to proclaim the Gospel in northern Gaul and Flanders. According to tradition, he was martyred around 657 at Esse, near Aalst, and buried at Houtem, today Sint-Lievens-Houtem, in Belgium. His relics were taken to Ghent in 1007, and he has been the city's patron ever since. His feast is kept on November 12.

Who was Saint Livinus?

Livinus is one of the missionaries from Ireland or Britain who evangelized the regions of northern Europe in the early Middle Ages. His life is known to us through a Passion written long after his death, which mixes historical memories with many legendary elements. Historians even think that his story may have borrowed features from other saints of the same name, in particular the English missionary Saint Lebuin, also celebrated on November 12. Even the date of his death varies among authors: 633, 657 or 663. What is certain is that a very ancient cult surrounds his tomb at Houtem and his relics in Ghent.

Key dates in the life of Livinus

- **Late 6th or early 7th century**: Born in Ireland, according to tradition, to a Scottish nobleman and a mother of Irish royal family.
- **Youth**: He is ordained a priest, then called to be a bishop; tradition links him with Saint Augustine of Canterbury.
- **Later**: With three companions, he crosses the sea to evangelize the still pagan regions of the continent.
- **On the continent**: He travels through the land of the Morini, prays in Ghent at the tomb of Saint Bavo, then preaches in the region of Aalst.

- **November 12, c. 657**: He is put to death at Esse (today Sint-Lievens-Esse); his disciples bury him at Houtem.
- **June 28, 842**: Solemn elevation of his relics.
- **June 27, 1007**: His relics are transferred to Ghent, which takes him as its patron.
- **1083**: A new elevation of the relics, placed in a new shrine by Bishop Radbod II of Noyon-Tournai.
- **1578**: The Ghent shrine disappears; fragments of the relics remain at Esse and Houtem.

A missionary bishop

According to his Passion, Livinus was born in Ireland into a noble family and showed fine qualities from childhood. Ordained a priest very young, he was then chosen as bishop by the king and the people. The story claims that Saint Augustine of Canterbury gave him, on the day of his ordination, a chasuble embroidered with gold and precious stones. This detail raises a problem of dates, since Augustine died at the very beginning of the 7th century: it should probably be read above all as a wish to link Livinus with the great Roman mission to England.

After several years of ministry, driven by the desire to make Christ known, Livinus left his diocese with three companions and crossed to the continent. He passed through the land of the Morini, around Thérouanne and Saint-Omer, stopped in Ghent to pray at the tomb of Saint Bavo, then reached the region of Aalst, still largely pagan. There he preached the Gospel, at the cost of his life.

The martyrdom

According to tradition, Livinus was put to death on November 12 at Esse, in the former duchy of Brabant. His executioners tore out his tongue, which legend says was miraculously restored, then cut his body to pieces. His disciples gathered his remains and buried them at Houtem. The popular piety of the Aalst region kept a wondrous story: the martyr is said to have walked to his own grave, carrying his head in his hands, and in the 19th century people still pointed out, at Herzele, Esse and Houtem, paths called "Saint Livinus's ways". At Houtem, he is said to have thrust his staff into the ground, causing a spring to gush out that was believed to heal.

Patron of Ghent

The cult of Saint Livinus grew quickly around his tomb. His relics were solemnly elevated on June 28, 842, then transferred on June 27, 1007 to the abbey of Saint Bavo in Ghent. Since then the city has honored him as its patron. In 1083 Bishop Radbod II of Noyon-Tournai placed them in a new shrine, which disappeared in 1578, during the religious troubles. The churches of Esse and Houtem, Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent and several churches in northern France keep fragments of his relics. In Ghent, during the octave of his feast, a richly bound manuscript called the "Book of Saint Livinus", which tradition said was partly written in his hand, used to be displayed.

For centuries, a great procession went from Ghent to Houtem in memory of the translation of the relics. The pilgrims brought horses and cattle with them, which gave rise to the great winter fair of Houtem, held every year on November 11 and 12 and inscribed in 2010 on the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Saint Livinus is also the patron of Ledeberg, near Ghent. He is depicted as a bishop, sometimes holding his tongue in pincers, a reminder of his martyrdom; Rubens painted his martyrdom in a large canvas.

What can we learn from Saint Livinus?

Behind the legends, Livinus is a missionary who left his homeland to proclaim Christ to peoples who did not know him, and who paid for this witness with his life. The tongue torn out in his martyrdom speaks of the power of the Word he proclaimed: a man can be silenced, but not the Gospel. We can pray to him for missionaries, for those who must speak of their faith in a hostile setting, for Flanders and for the city of Ghent.

Where to pray to Saint Livinus

- **Sint-Lievens-Houtem** (East Flanders, Belgium): the church of Saint Michael, with his tomb, and the chapel of Saint Livinus, near the spring.
- **Sint-Lievens-Esse** (Herzele, Belgium): the place of his martyrdom, where a chapel is dedicated to him.
- **Ghent** (Belgium): Saint Bavo's Cathedral, which has a chapel of Saint Livinus and relics.
- **Merck-Saint-Liévin** (Pas-de-Calais, France): a village that bears his name, with a bust of the saint in the church.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Livinus for Missionaries and for Flanders

Saint Livinus, a missionary bishop from the British Isles, proclaimed the Gospel in Flanders and was martyred there around 657. Buried at Houtem, he has been the patron of Ghent since 1007, when his relics were taken there. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him missionaries, those who must bear witness to their faith, and the land of Flanders.

Prayer to Saint Livinus

Saint Livinus,
you left your land and your family
to carry the name of Jesus
to peoples who did not know him.
Give me a missionary heart,
ready to share the joy of the Gospel.

They tore out your tongue
to silence your word,
but the Word of God is not chained.
When I am afraid to speak of my faith,
give me the courage to bear witness
and the gentleness of charity.

Patron of Ghent and of Flanders,
watch over those who live in the land you loved,
over missionaries who go far away
and over persecuted Christians.
May your blood, once shed, still bear fruit.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Livinus

- On his feast day, November 12, or during a pilgrimage to Sint-Lievens-Houtem.
- For missionaries and for those who proclaim the Gospel in difficult settings.
- When you hesitate to bear witness to your faith.
- For the city of Ghent, for Flanders and for Belgium.
- For Christians who suffer persecution.

A short invocation

> *Saint Livinus, witness to the Gospel even to the shedding of blood,*
> *open my lips to proclaim the praise of God. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Livinus from November 4 to 12, and read the life of Saint Livinus.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Livinus

This novena follows the life of Saint Livinus, missionary bishop and martyr of the 7th century, patron of Ghent. Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. To finish it on his feast day, November 12, begin on November 4. You can also pray it at any other time of the year. The episodes recalled come from his Passion, written long after his death, which mixes history and legend.

How to pray this novena

Each day, make 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 Livinus, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A child of Ireland

According to tradition, Livinus was born in Ireland into a noble family. From childhood he showed an upright and generous heart.

Prayer: Lord, bless children and make the desire for good grow in them.

Act of the day: Pray for a child you know.

Day 2: Called to serve

Ordained a priest and then a bishop, Livinus received the task of guiding a people. He carried it out with prudence and kindness.

Prayer: Lord, give your Church good and wise shepherds.

Act of the day: Thank a priest for his ministry.

Day 3: Going far away

Driven by the desire to make Christ known, Livinus left his diocese and crossed the sea with three companions.

Prayer: Lord, bless the missionaries who have left everything for you.

Act of the day: Support a missionary work with a gift or a prayer.

Day 4: Praying at a saint's tomb

In Ghent, Livinus stopped to pray at the tomb of Saint Bavo. Before proclaiming the Gospel, he placed himself under the protection of those who had gone before him.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the communion of saints. May their prayer go with me.

Act of the day: Entrust your day to your patron saint.

Day 5: Proclaiming the Gospel

In the region of Aalst, Livinus preached to people who were still pagan. He proclaimed God's love to those who did not know him.

Prayer: Lord, put words in my mouth that lead to you.

Act of the day: Speak simply about your faith to someone, if the occasion arises.

Day 6: The tongue torn out

His executioners tore out the tongue of Livinus to silence his word. But a martyr's witness speaks louder than words.

Prayer: Lord, may my life speak of you, even when I am silent.

Act of the day: Avoid today any hurtful word or gossip.

Day 7: Giving his life

On November 12, around 657, Livinus was put to death at Esse. He gave his life for the Gospel he had proclaimed.

Prayer: Lord, support persecuted Christians and give them your strength.

Act of the day: Pray for a country where Christians are persecuted.

Day 8: A spring at Houtem

His disciples buried him at Houtem. Tradition tells that a spring gushed out where he had planted his staff, and pilgrims have come there for centuries.

Prayer: Lord, spring of living water, quench the thirst of those who long for you.

Act of the day: Make the Sign of the Cross with holy water in memory of your baptism.

Day 9: Patron of Ghent

In 1007 his relics were carried to Ghent, which chose him as its patron. The foreign missionary became the protector of a whole city.

Prayer: Lord, bless our cities and those who live in them. Through the intercession of Saint Livinus, grant me the grace I ask of you in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass if you can, and pray for your city.

Living the novena with Saint Livinus

Saint Livinus made his life a road toward others, to the point of total self-giving. During these nine days, you can carry in prayer missionaries, persecuted Christians, Flanders and the city of Ghent. If you can, go to Sint-Lievens-Houtem or to Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent.

Closing prayer

Saint Livinus,
missionary and martyr,
you gave your life so that Christ might be known.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you,
and obtain for me the courage to bear witness to my faith.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Sint-Lievens-Houtem, Tomb of Saint Livinus

Sint-Lievens-Houtem (Hautem-Saint-Liévin in French) is a municipality in East Flanders, Belgium, between Ghent and Aalst. According to tradition, it was here that the disciples of Saint Livinus buried their master after his martyrdom around 657. The village bears his name and keeps two places of pilgrimage: the church of Saint Michael, with his tomb, and the chapel of Saint Livinus, near a spring.

The martyr's tomb

Tradition relates that Livinus was put to death at Esse, a few kilometers away, and that his body was carried to Houtem. A cult developed around his tomb. His relics were elevated in 842, then transferred in 1007 to the abbey of Saint Bavo in Ghent. In the Middle Ages Houtem remained a great place of pilgrimage: a procession came from Ghent in memory of this translation. The pilgrims brought horses and cattle with them, which were sold along the way, and this is how the great winter fair of Houtem was born.

What you can see

The church of Saint Michael, a protected monument since 1942, combines a Romanesque choir of the 11th and 12th centuries, built of sandstone, with a classical nave of the 18th century and a bell tower of 1776. Inside is the funerary monument of Saint Livinus, in marble and stone, with an effigy and 15th-century frescoes. The treasury keeps a shrine of Saint Livinus in painted wood, from the 15th and 16th centuries.

Some distance from the church stands the chapel of Saint Livinus, built in 1640, restored in 1702 and 1953, and remodeled in a neo-Gothic style. It is said to have been built where the saint once came. Right next to it, a well with a round curb covers the spring that, according to tradition, Livinus made gush out by striking the ground with his staff. Pilgrims come especially around November 12.

Praying there

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Livinus. At his tomb or near the spring, entrust to him missionaries, persecuted Christians and your own intentions, then say the prayer to Saint Livinus. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Livinus

- **Sint-Lievens-Esse** (Herzele): the place of his martyrdom, with a chapel dedicated to him.
- **Ghent**: Saint Bavo's Cathedral, which has a chapel of Saint Livinus and relics.

Practical information

Sint-Lievens-Houtem lies southeast of Ghent, in the Dender region. The great annual fair is held there on November 11 and 12, around the saint's feast; since 2010 it has been inscribed on the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The church is a place of worship: appropriate dress and silence are expected. Opening hours and Mass times may vary: check with the parish before your visit.

Credits and sources

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