

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Maurice

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 22

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IN BRIEF

Saint Maurice

Christian officer of the Theban Legion, martyred with his companions at Agaunum, in the Swiss Valais, at the end of the third century.

Feast day	September 22
Born	Upper Egypt (region of Thebes), according to tradition
Died	late 3rd century (c. 285-305), Agaunum (now Saint-Maurice, Valais, Switzerland)
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	3rd century
Patron saint of	soldiers, infantrymen, Valais

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Maurice: "We Are Your Soldiers, but Servants of God"

Novena to Saint Maurice

Abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, in Valais

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Maurice

Saint Maurice was, according to tradition, the Christian officer who commanded the Theban Legion, a body of soldiers from Egypt who were massacred at Agaunum, in what is now the Swiss canton of Valais, for refusing to obey an order contrary to their faith. The account of their martyrdom, written down in the fifth century by Saint Eucherius of Lyon, made Maurice one of the most venerated soldier saints in Europe, patron of the Holy Roman Empire and of the House of Savoy. The Abbey of Saint-Maurice has stood over his tomb since 515. He is celebrated on September 22.

Who was Saint Maurice?

Everything we know about Maurice comes from the account of Eucherius, Bishop of Lyon, written around 430-450, about a century and a half after the events. According to this text, Maurice, whose Latin name *Mauricius* may suggest an African origin, was the *primicerius*, the senior officer, of a legion raised in the Thebaid, the region of Thebes in Upper Egypt. His men were Christians. At the end of the third century, the emperor Maximian, who ruled the West alongside Diocletian, brought them into the Alps for a campaign in Gaul.

Eucherius takes care to name his sources: he had the story from Isaac, Bishop of Geneva, who had it from Theodore, Bishop of Octodurum, present-day Martigny. It was this Theodore who, toward the end of the fourth century, found the remains of the martyrs and built a first church for them at the foot of the cliff of Agaunum. This shrine, whose remains have been uncovered by excavation, is the historical anchor of the whole tradition.

Key dates

- **Third century**: Born in Upper Egypt, according to tradition.
- **c. 285-305**: Under the emperor Maximian, martyrdom of Maurice and his companions at Agaunum, according to the account of Eucherius.
- **Late fourth century**: Theodore, Bishop of Octodurum, finds their remains and builds a shrine at Agaunum.
- **c. 430-450**: Eucherius of Lyon writes the *Passion of the Martyrs of Agaunum*.
- **September 22, 515**: The Burgundian prince Sigismund founds the Abbey of Saint-Maurice.
- **Tenth century**: The Ottonian emperors make Maurice a patron of the Empire; Otto I dedicates his foundation at Magdeburg to him.
- **1128**: Canons Regular of Saint Augustine take charge of the abbey, which they still serve.
- **1572**: Creation of the Order of Saints Maurice and Lazarus, an order of chivalry of the House of Savoy.
- **2015**: The abbey celebrates fifteen centuries of uninterrupted community life.

The account of the martyrdom

According to Eucherius, the emperor ordered his troops to take part in acts no Christian could accept: depending on the reading, persecuting Christians or sacrificing to the gods. The Thebans refused and withdrew to Agaunum. Maximian then had one soldier in ten executed and, when they refused again, ordered a second decimation.

Encouraged by Maurice and two other officers, Exuperius and Candidus, the survivors sent the emperor a reply that the account reports at length: they called themselves his soldiers, ready to fight any enemy, but servants of God

first, and they refused to turn their weapons against the innocent.

Enraged, the emperor had the whole legion massacred. The soldiers, Eucherius writes, laid down their arms and let themselves be killed without resistance. A veteran named Victor, passing by and refusing to rejoice at the slaughter, was killed in his turn. The account numbers the men at about six thousand six hundred, the theoretical strength of a Roman legion.



The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice, by El Greco (1580-1582), Royal Monastery of El Escorial.

History and legend

Historians have long debated this account. The massacre of a whole legion, at a date when Diocletian's Great Persecution had not yet begun, is hard to accept as it stands, and the figure of six thousand six hundred men is probably an exaggeration. On the other hand, the existence of a group of Christian soldiers put to death at Agaunum, and venerated there from the end of the fourth century, is well attested by Theodore's shrine and by the memory of the

neighboring Churches. The historical core is therefore probable, even if the details of the account, written more than a century later, belong to edifying tradition.

The cult later spread to other martyrs linked to the Theban Legion: Ursus and Victor at Solothurn, Felix and Regula at Zurich, Gereon at Cologne. These traditions, often even later, bear witness above all to the prestige of the model of Agaunum.

The soldier saint of Europe

In 515, Sigismund, son of the King of the Burgundians, who had converted from Arianism to the Catholic faith, founded an abbey over the tomb of the martyrs and established the *laus perennis* there: choirs of monks taking turns to sing the psalms day and night.

In the Middle Ages, Maurice became the patron of the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. Otto I dedicated Magdeburg to him; the imperial lance now kept in Vienna is called the "Lance of Saint Maurice"; and emperors were anointed in Rome before the altar dedicated to him. The House of Savoy made the ring of Saint Maurice a sign of investiture.

In Magdeburg Cathedral, a thirteenth-century statue shows him as an African: one of the oldest depictions of a Black saint in Europe.

Why is Saint Maurice the patron saint of soldiers?

Because he was a soldier and an officer, and because he and his men died for refusing an unjust order. He is the patron of soldiers, and in particular of infantrymen: in the United States, the infantry's professional association awards an honor called the Order of Saint Maurice. He is also the patron of the Valais, the Swiss canton where he died.

His example does not glorify war. On the contrary, it says that obedience has a limit: a soldier may serve his country loyally, but must never turn his weapons against the innocent or deny his conscience. The martyrs of Agaunum died without resisting, refusing both injustice and violence. They are invoked for soldiers, for those who must say no to an unjust order, and for faithfulness in times of trial.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Maurice in art

- **Armor**, as a Roman soldier or a medieval knight.
- **A lance and a banner**, often with a cross.
- **A shield**, sometimes marked with a cross.
- **Dark skin**, especially in German art from the thirteenth century onward.
- **The palm of martyrdom**.

Where to pray to Saint Maurice

- **Saint-Maurice** (Valais, Switzerland): the Abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, built over the tomb of the martyrs.
- **Vérolliez**, just outside Saint-Maurice: the chapel built, according to local tradition, on the site of the martyrdom.
- **Magdeburg** (Germany): the Cathedral of Saints Maurice and Catherine.
- **Angers** (France): the Cathedral of Saint-Maurice, whose facade shows the saint and his companions.
- **Vienne** (France): the Cathedral of Saint-Maurice, on the banks of the Rhône.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Maurice, or follow the novena to Saint Maurice from September 13 to 21, ending on the eve of his feast.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Maurice: "We Are Your Soldiers, but Servants of God"

Saint Maurice left no prayer of his own. But the account of his martyrdom, written in the fifth century by Saint Eucherius of Lyon, puts into the mouths of the Theban soldiers a reply to the emperor that can be meditated on as a profession of faith. This page presents an extract from that text, followed by an original prayer to Saint Maurice and his companions for soldiers and for courage of conscience.

The Thebans' reply to the emperor

According to Eucherius, after two decimations, Maurice and his officers sent a message to the emperor Maximian in the name of the whole legion. The translation from the Latin is by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *We are your soldiers, emperor, but we are also, as we freely confess, the servants of God.*
>
> *To you we owe military service, to him the innocence of our lives. From you we receive the wages of our labor, from him we have received life itself.*

Source: Saint Eucherius of Lyon, *Passion of the Martyrs of Agaunum* (*Passio Acaunensium martyrum*), c. 430-450: "Milites sumus, imperator, tui, sed tamen servi, quod libere confitemur, Dei. Tibi militiam debemus, illi innocentiam; a te stipendium laboris accepimus, ab illo vitae exordium." These words belong to the account of Eucherius, written more than a century after the events; they express the faith of the martyrs as the Church of his time handed it on.



Saint Maurice of Agaunum, martyr, in prayer.

Prayer to Saint Maurice for soldiers and for courage

Saint Maurice, you served loyally without ever forgetting that you belonged first to God: pray for me.

Help me fulfill honestly the duties of my state in life, toward my country, my work and those who have authority over me. But if I am ever asked to betray my conscience or to harm an innocent person, obtain for me the courage to say no, calmly and without hatred.

You encouraged your companions in their trial: teach me to support those who waver and not to give in to the fear of the crowd.

I entrust to you soldiers, those who are deployed and those who come home wounded in body or in spirit, and their families. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Holy martyrs of Agaunum, who laid down your arms rather than shed innocent blood, pray for peace among the nations. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Maurice and his companions are celebrated on September 22. On that day the Abbey of Saint-Maurice, in the Valais, keeps its patronal feast, as do many parishes that bear his name. You can also pray to him when a family member or friend in the military is deployed, on Veterans Day or Remembrance Day, or whenever you face a choice between fear and conscience.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Maurice, and discover the life of Saint Maurice.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Maurice

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the account of the martyrdom of Saint Maurice and the Theban Legion handed down by Saint Eucherius of Lyon. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on September 13: it ends on September 21, the day before his feast on September 22. You can also pray it at any time of year, for a soldier, for someone facing a hard decision of conscience, or for peace.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act suggested for the day helps you live the faithfulness of Saint Maurice in the ordinary choices of daily life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow the story told by Eucherius: soldiers far from home, loyal in their service, who discovered the limit of obedience, refused an unjust order without hatred, encouraged one another, and laid down their arms rather than shed innocent blood. Their tomb became a place of unceasing prayer.



Saint Maurice of Agaunum, martyr, in a church window or statue.

Day 1: From far away

According to tradition, the Theban soldiers came from Egypt, thousands of miles from the Alps. Their faith traveled with them. It is possible to stay faithful to Christ far from home. Soldiers, migrants, students and workers abroad know how easily faith can loosen when familiar landmarks disappear.

Prayer: Lord, keep my faith alive wherever life takes me, and watch over those who live far from their own country.

Today: Pray for someone who is living in exile, working abroad, or deployed with the military.

Day 2: Serving loyally

Maurice and his men were not rebels: they had served the Empire loyally. Holiness also passes through doing one's duty honestly. Their later refusal carries weight precisely because they had been faithful in everything else.

Prayer: Lord, help me do my work well and serve faithfully those who rely on me.

Today: Do carefully a task you usually rush through.

Day 3: Conscience

One day, the order they received came into conflict with their faith. The Thebans discovered that obedience has a limit: conscience, where God speaks. Conscience is not a matter of preference or mood; it must be formed by prayer, by the Word of God and by the teaching of the Church.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, enlighten my conscience and help me listen to it, even when it is hard.

Today: Take a moment of silence to reflect on a decision you are facing.

Day 4: Saying no without hatred

The soldiers refused the order, but without insulting the emperor or taking up arms against him. The Christian refusal of injustice is not a violent revolt. It is a calm and firm witness that leaves the door open to the conversion of the other.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to refuse evil, and the gentleness to do it without hatred.

Today: Politely decline to take part in mockery or in an injustice.

Day 5: Encouraging one another

After the first decimation, Maurice, Exuperius and Candidus strengthened their companions. Faithfulness is lived together: no one holds firm alone.

Prayer: Lord, make me a support for those who are weakening, and give me brothers and sisters to support me.

Today: Send a message of encouragement to someone going through a hard time.

Day 6: To Caesar and to God

"To you we owe military service, to him the innocence of our lives." The Thebans distinguished what belonged to the emperor and what belonged to God, as Jesus had taught.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to give each one what is due, and to give you the first place.

Today: Pray for the political leaders of your country.



Praying with Saint Maurice of Agaunum, martyr.

Day 7: Laying down arms

According to the account, the soldiers laid down their weapons and let themselves be killed without resistance. Their strength was in refusing to answer violence with violence. In this they followed Christ, who told Peter to put away his sword.

Prayer: Lord, disarm my heart of anger and resentment, and make me a peacemaker.

Today: Hold back a hurtful word you had prepared.

Day 8: A tomb become prayer

Over the tomb of the martyrs, monks and canons have sung God's praise since 515. The place of the massacre has become a place of praise. God can bring life where everything seemed finished.

Prayer: Lord, turn my wounds into places of prayer and of life.

Today: Pray a psalm, for example Psalm 34 (33).

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Maurice and his companions kept their faith until death. Their example crosses the centuries and reminds us that faithfulness is the true victory. Those who seemed defeated at Agaunum are the ones the Church still remembers.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Maurice and the martyrs of Agaunum, keep me faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray for soldiers who have died in service and for their families.

Closing prayer

Saint Maurice, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for me, for soldiers and for all who must choose between fear and conscience. Obtain for us loyalty, courage and peace. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Maurice and the prayer to Saint Maurice.

PILGRIMAGE

Abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, in Valais

The Abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, in the Swiss canton of Valais, rises at the foot of a cliff, on the spot where tradition has venerated the tomb of Saint Maurice and the martyrs of the Theban Legion since the late 4th century. Founded in 515, it is often described as the oldest abbey in the West whose community life has never been interrupted. It is the great pilgrimage site of Saint Maurice.

From Theodore's shrine to Sigismund's abbey

Agaune, the present town of Saint-Maurice, occupies a narrow passage between the Rhône valley and Lake Geneva, on a heavily traveled Roman road. Toward the end of the 4th century, Theodore, Bishop of Octodurum, the present Martigny, found the martyrs' remains there and built them a first church, set against the rock. In 515, the Burgundian prince Sigismund, recently converted from Arianism to Catholicism, founded a monastery on the spot where he established perpetual praise: choirs of monks took turns without interruption, day and night, to sing the Divine Office. Since 1128, the abbey has been served by canons regular of Saint Augustine.



Abbey of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, in Valais.

The basilica and the Martolet site

Wedged against the cliff, the abbey has been damaged several times by rockfalls, most recently and severely in 1942. The present basilica dates mostly from the 17th century and was restored in the 20th; its Romanesque bell tower goes back to the 11th century. Next to it, the archaeological site of the Martolet reveals the foundations of the successive churches built since the 4th century over the martyrs' tomb, as well as galleries cut into the rock.

The abbey treasury

The abbey preserves one of the richest treasuries of religious goldwork in Europe, accumulated over fifteen centuries of pilgrimages. Among its pieces are an ancient sardonyx vase, an enameled ewer known as "Charlemagne's," the

Merovingian casket of Teudericus, and the great shrines that house the relics of Saint Maurice and his companions. These are not ordinary museum pieces: they are still carried in procession on the great feasts.

Praying at Saint-Maurice

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Maurice. In the basilica, a time of silence before the relics lets you entrust an intention, for example for a loved one in the military or for someone facing a decision of conscience. Taking part in the canons' office continues the tradition of praise begun in 515. The prayer to Saint Maurice can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Maurice

- **Vérolliez**, at the southern edge of Saint-Maurice: the Chapel of the Martyrs, on the spot where local tradition places the massacre.
- **Notre-Dame du Scex**: a chapel clinging to the cliff above the abbey, a Marian pilgrimage site.
- **Magdeburg** (Germany): the Cathedral of Saints Maurice and Catherine and its famous statue of the saint.
- **Angers**: the Cathedral of Saint-Maurice, whose facade bears statues of the saint and his companions.
- **Vienne** (Isère): the former Cathedral of Saint-Maurice, one of the great Gothic churches of the Rhône valley.

Practical information

Saint-Maurice is on the Simplon rail line, between Lausanne and Brig; the abbey is a few minutes' walk from the station. The feast of Saint Maurice, September 22, is the abbey's patronal feast and is marked by major

celebrations. Service times, as well as the conditions for visiting the basilica, the treasury, and the archaeological site, should be checked with the abbey before you come.

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