

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Meinrad of Einsiedeln

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 21

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IN BRIEF

Saint Meinrad of Einsiedeln

Monk of Reichenau who became a hermit, martyr of hospitality, at the origin of the Abbey of Einsiedeln.

Feast day	January 21
Born	c. 797, Rottenburg am Neckar region, Swabia (Germany)
Died	January 21, 861, Einsiedeln, Switzerland
Canonized	immemorial cult; relics solemnly translated in 1039
Era	9th century
Patron saint of	Einsiedeln Abbey

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Meinrad of Einsiedeln

Saint Meinrad was a Benedictine monk of Reichenau who became a hermit in the "dark forest" of central Switzerland in the ninth century. He was murdered on January 21, 861, by two robbers he had welcomed into his hermitage, which is why he is called the "martyr of hospitality." On the site of his cell rose the Abbey of Einsiedeln, one of the great Marian pilgrimage shrines of Europe. The Church celebrates him on January 21, and English-speaking Catholics know his name through Saint Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana.

Who was Saint Meinrad?

Meinrad (in Latin *Meginratus*) founded neither an order nor a monastery during his lifetime. He simply wanted to live alone with God, in prayer, deep in the woods. Yet his life, and above all his death, turned that remote place into a spiritual home: the Benedictine Abbey of Einsiedeln, whose name means "the hermitage."

His oldest biography was written at Reichenau shortly after his death. This gives his story a fairly solid basis, even if later legend embellished it.

Key dates in the life of Meinrad

- **c. 797**: Born into a noble family in the region of Rottenburg am Neckar, in Swabia.
- **Early 9th century**: Educated at the school of Reichenau Abbey, on Lake Constance, he becomes a monk and a priest.
- **820s**: He teaches in a small priory dependent on Reichenau, at Benken, near Lake Zurich.
- **828**: He withdraws as a hermit to the Etzel Pass.

- **c. 835**: He moves deeper into the forest and builds a cell and a chapel on the site of present-day Einsiedeln.
- **January 21, 861**: He is killed by two robbers to whom he had offered hospitality.
- **934**: A monastery is founded at Einsiedeln on the site of his hermitage.
- **1039**: His relics are solemnly translated from Reichenau to Einsiedeln.

A monk of Reichenau

Meinrad grew up in a family of the Swabian nobility. A late tradition links him to the counts of Hohenzollern, but this genealogy has no historical foundation.

As a boy he was entrusted to the school of Reichenau Abbey, one of the great cultural centers of the Carolingian Empire, where Abbot Heito and his relative Erlebald were teaching. There he received the Benedictine habit and was ordained a priest. His superiors then sent him to teach in a small community on the shore of Lake Zurich.

The hermit of the dark forest

The mountains above the lake drew him. In 828 he obtained permission to live as a hermit on the Etzel Pass. Abbess Hildegard of Zurich gave him a small statue of the Virgin Mary, which stayed with him for the rest of his life.

But visitors, drawn by his reputation, became too many. Around 835 Meinrad went further into the forest, then known as the *Finsterwald*, the dark forest. There he built a cell and a small chapel for the statue of Mary. He lived there for about twenty-five years in prayer, fasting and work, while still receiving with kindness the pilgrims who found their way to him.

The martyr of hospitality

On January 21, 861, two men came to his hermitage. They believed the hermit was keeping treasures left by pilgrims. According to his *Life*, Meinrad was inwardly warned of their intentions but welcomed them anyway. He offered them bread and something to drink, then let himself be killed without resisting, after asking them to light candles beside his body. The murderers found nothing.

Legend tells that two ravens, which the hermit used to feed, pursued the killers with their cries all the way to Zurich, where their behavior drew attention. The two men were arrested, confessed and were condemned. This is why two ravens appear today on the coat of arms of both the abbey and the town of Einsiedeln.

From hermitage to abbey

Meinrad's body was carried back to Reichenau. But other hermits came to live where his cell had stood. At the beginning of the tenth century, Benno, a former canon of Strasbourg, and then Eberhard settled there. In 934 Eberhard founded a true Benedictine monastery, which soon received the protection of the emperors.

Meinrad's chapel was preserved at the heart of the church: it is today's Chapel of Grace, where the Black Madonna of Einsiedeln is venerated. In 1039 the saint's relics returned solemnly from Reichenau to Einsiedeln, and that date is taken as the official recognition of his cult.

A devotion that crossed the Atlantic

At the end of the Middle Ages, printed editions of his legend published in Basel made it popular throughout the German-speaking world. In 1854, monks from Einsiedeln founded a monastery in Indiana, in the United States,

that bears his name: Saint Meinrad Abbey, now an archabbey. Through it, many American Catholics, priests and seminarians have come to know the hermit of the dark forest.

Why is Saint Meinrad invoked?

Saint Meinrad is the patron of the Abbey of Einsiedeln, which grew out of his hermitage. He sought God in silence and never separated God from his neighbor: even before those who came to kill him, he did not close his door. That is why he is invoked:

- for hermits, monks and nuns;
- for those who welcome strangers and offer hospitality;
- for victims of violence and robbery, and for the conversion of those who commit it;
- for pilgrims, especially those passing through Einsiedeln on the way to Santiago de Compostela.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Meinrad in art

Saint Meinrad is shown as a Benedictine monk in a black habit, accompanied by **two ravens**, the birds of the legend that pursued his murderers. He often holds a **cup** or a **loaf of bread**, a reminder of the hospitality he offered to his killers. The two ravens are also found on the coat of arms of Einsiedeln.

Where to pray to Saint Meinrad

- **Einsiedeln** (canton of Schwyz, Switzerland): the Abbey of Einsiedeln, where his relics are venerated and where the Chapel of Grace marks the site of his hermitage.
- **Etzel Pass** (Switzerland): the chapel of Saint Meinrad, on the site of his first hermitage.

- **Reichenau** (Germany): the monastic island on Lake Constance where he was trained.
- **Bollingen**, on Lake Zurich: a chapel dedicated to Saint Meinrad.
- **Saint Meinrad, Indiana** (United States): the archabbey that bears his name.



The Chapel of Grace and the Black Madonna, on the site of Saint Meinrad's cell.

What can we learn from Saint Meinrad?

Meinrad's life is a call to hospitality without calculation, to forgiveness and to trust in Mary. He shows that silence and prayer do not make us strangers to others: the one who seeks God keeps an open door.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Meinrad, or follow the novena to Saint Meinrad, from January 12 to 20, so that it ends on the eve of his feast.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Meinrad, Martyr of Hospitality

Saint Meinrad, the hermit of the Einsiedeln forest, lived in silence and prayer under the gaze of the Virgin Mary, and he died welcoming the men who had come to kill him. At Einsiedeln, the monks traditionally sing the *Salve Regina* every evening before the Chapel of Grace. This page offers an original prayer to Saint Meinrad, followed by the *Salve Regina*, so closely tied to his hermitage.

Prayer to Saint Meinrad, martyr of hospitality

Saint Meinrad, you left the world to seek God in the depths of the forest: teach me to quiet my heart so that I may hear his voice.

You kept close to you the image of the Virgin Mary: lead me to her, and give me the trust of a child toward his mother.

You opened your door to those who meant you harm, and offered them bread and drink: teach me hospitality without calculation and forgiveness without conditions.

Protect hermits, monks and nuns, pilgrims on the road, families who welcome others, and all victims of violence. I entrust to you this intention: (name your intention).

Obtain for me the grace to live and to die in the peace of Christ, so that my life, like yours, may become a light for those who seek God. Amen.

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

The Salve Regina of Einsiedeln

Every evening the monks of Einsiedeln go before the Chapel of Grace, built on the site of Meinrad's cell, to sing the Marian antiphon *Salve Regina*. Here is its traditional English translation:

> *Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.*

Source: the antiphon *Salve Regina*, attributed to the 11th century, traditional English translation.

Intentions to entrust to Saint Meinrad

- For hermits, monks and nuns.
- For pilgrims, especially those on the roads to Santiago de Compostela that pass through Einsiedeln.
- For those who welcome strangers.
- For victims of theft and assault, and for the conversion of those who attack them.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Meinrad is celebrated on January 21, the anniversary of his death in 861. You can pray to him on his feast, before welcoming a guest, or when you need the courage to forgive. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Meinrad, and discover the life of Saint Meinrad.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Meinrad

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Meinrad, hermit and martyr of hospitality, whose cell gave rise to the Abbey of Einsiedeln. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on January 12; it ends on January 20, the day before his feast on January 21. You can also pray it at any time of the year, for any intention.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. You may close with the *Salve Regina* (Hail, Holy Queen), which the monks of Einsiedeln sing every evening. The small act suggested for each day helps you carry the prayer into daily life.

Day 1: A child entrusted to God

Meinrad was entrusted as a young boy to the school of Reichenau. There he learned the psalms, study and community life. What we receive in childhood can bear fruit for a whole lifetime. Let us give thanks today for the people and places where faith was first planted in us.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for those who handed on the faith to me. Bless parents, teachers and all who educate the young.

Today: Thank, with a message or a prayer, someone who helped you come to know God.

Day 2: The obedient monk

As a monk and priest, Meinrad was sent to teach in a small priory. He accepted this mission before following his own desire for solitude. Obedience prepares the heart for deeper calls. God often leads us through ordinary duties before he reveals what he truly asks of us.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to serve wherever I am sent, without impatience.

Today: Carry out, without complaining, a task someone has asked of you.

Day 3: The call of the desert

In 828 Meinrad climbed to the Etzel Pass to live alone with God. Silence is not an escape: it is a space where God can speak. In a noisy world, even a few minutes of stillness can become a small hermitage.

Prayer: Lord, deepen in me a love for silence and prayer.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in silence before God, with no screen.

Day 4: With Mary

The abbess of Zurich gave him a small statue of the Virgin, which he kept all his life. Wherever he lived, Mary was present. Even today, his cell has become the chapel of the Black Madonna.

Prayer: Virgin Mary, you watched over the hermit Meinrad: watch over my home and over those I love.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary before an image of Mary.

Day 5: The dark forest

To escape the crowds, Meinrad went deeper into the *Finsterwald*, the dark forest. The spiritual life also has its dark forests: times of darkness when we must keep walking in faith.

Prayer: Lord, when I can no longer see your path, keep me in trust.

Today: Write down and entrust to God a situation in which you see no way out.

Day 6: The open door

Pilgrims discovered the hermitage, and Meinrad received them. He shared the little he had. Whoever seeks God does not close the door on people. His solitude made him more attentive, not less, to those who came to him in need.

Prayer: Lord, make me welcoming to those who knock at my door, even when they disturb me.

Today: Invite someone who is alone to share a meal or a coffee.

Day 7: Bread offered to the murderers

Meinrad knew that his visitors had come to kill him, and yet he gave them food. He imitated Christ, who at the Last Supper shared bread with the one who would betray him.

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart able to love even those who hurt me.

Today: Pray by name for someone who has wounded you.

Day 8: The ravens and justice

The ravens pursued the murderers all the way to Zurich. The legend tells us that evil does not stay hidden and that God cares for victims. Forgiveness does not erase justice. Meinrad forgave, and the truth still came to light.

Prayer: Lord, comfort the victims of violence, and convert the hearts of those who commit it.

Today: Support, with a gift or a prayer, an organization that helps victims of crime.

Day 9: A place where people pray

Meinrad died alone, but where he had prayed, generations of pilgrims came to pray after him. A life given to God becomes a spring for many. The hidden prayer of one hermit became, over the centuries, a great shrine where countless people have found comfort.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Meinrad, make my life a place where others meet you, a home that is open and prayerful. Amen.

Today: Light a candle and sing or say the *Salve Regina*.

Closing prayer

Saint Meinrad, hermit of the dark forest, friend of Mary and martyr of hospitality, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Teach me the silence that listens, the welcome that does not calculate and the forgiveness that sets free. Lead me, with all pilgrims, to Christ, our peace. Amen.

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

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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