

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Mellitus

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: April 24

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IN BRIEF

Saint Mellitus

Missionary of the Gregorian mission, first Bishop of London and third Archbishop of Canterbury.

Feast day	April 24
Died	April 24, 624, Canterbury, England
Era	7th century

In this booklet

Life

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Credits and sources

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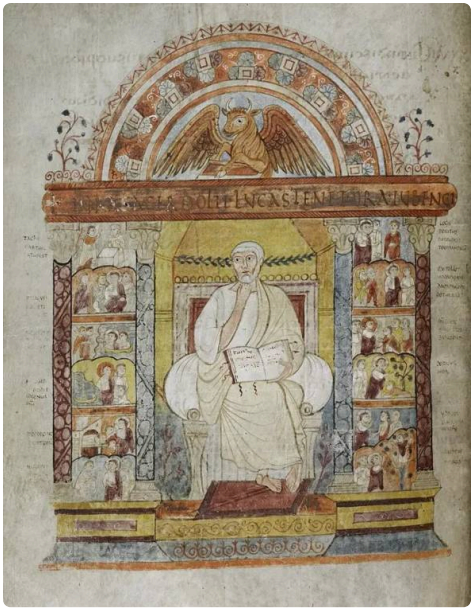
LIFE

Saint Mellitus

Saint Mellitus was one of the missionaries sent by Pope Gregory the Great to bring the Gospel to England. He arrived in 601 at the head of the second group of the mission, became the first Bishop of London in 604, was driven out by pagan princes, and later succeeded Saint Laurence as the third Archbishop of Canterbury. One of the most famous letters in the history of Christian mission was addressed to him. He died on April 24, 624, and his feast day is April 24.

Who was Saint Mellitus?

Nothing is known of Mellitus's origins. He was probably Italian, like the other bishops consecrated by Augustine, and Saint Bede the Venerable says only that he was "of noble birth." Pope Gregory the Great calls him "father abbot," and the register of papal letters names him "abbot in Francia." We do not know whether he actually led a monastery, in Rome or elsewhere, or whether the title was given to him to strengthen his authority.



The St Augustine Gospels, a manuscript that Mellitus may have brought to England.

Key dates in the life of Saint Mellitus

- **June 601**: Leaves Rome at the head of the second group of the Gregorian mission.
- **604**: Consecrated Bishop of London by Augustine; baptism of Sæberht, king of the East Saxons.
- **February 610**: Attends a council in Italy called by Pope Boniface IV.
- **c. 617**: Driven out of London by the pagan sons of Sæberht; exile in Gaul.
- **619**: Becomes Archbishop of Canterbury after the death of Laurence.
- **623**: According to Bede, a fire in Canterbury spares the church through his prayer.
- **April 24, 624**: Dies and is buried in Canterbury.

Leader of the second mission

In 597, Saint Augustine and his companions had won the conversion of Æthelberht, king of Kent. Augustine asked for reinforcements, and in 601 Gregory sent a new group led by Mellitus, together with Laurence.

According to Bede, the missionaries brought everything needed for worship: sacred vessels, altar cloths, vestments, relics and many books. A fifteenth-century chronicler states that some of these books were still kept at Canterbury in his day; the famous St Augustine Gospels, now at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, may be one of them.

Gregory's letter to Mellitus

On the way, probably passing through several great cities of Gaul, Mellitus received a letter from the pope that became famous. In it Gregory gave up the idea of destroying the temples of the English: he asked that they be purified and turned into churches, and that pagan festivals be replaced by Christian feasts.

> *"He who endeavors to ascend to the highest place rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps."*

This letter, which Bede reproduces in his *Ecclesiastical History*, marks a turning point: patient persuasion takes the place of force.

First Bishop of London

In 604 Augustine consecrated Mellitus bishop of the East Saxons, with London as his see. The old Roman city, at the crossroads of the roads of southern England, was a natural choice. Mellitus baptized King Sæberht, Æthelberht's nephew, and a cathedral church was founded, the ancestor of St Paul's Cathedral.

In 610 he traveled to Italy for a council called by Pope Boniface IV and brought back letters from the pope to the king and the archbishop. With Laurence and Justus, he signed a letter to the bishops of Ireland about the date of Easter.



St Paul's Cathedral, London, whose first bishop was Mellitus.

Exile and return

The deaths of Sæberht and Æthelberht, between 616 and 618, left the mission without protectors. Bede tells how Sæberht's sons, who had remained pagan, demanded to receive the consecrated bread without being baptized. When the bishop refused, they drove him out of London.

Mellitus took refuge in Canterbury and then, since the new king of Kent was also a pagan, in Gaul with Justus. Recalled after the conversion of King Eadbald, he was never able to return to his see: the East Saxons remained attached to their old gods.

In 619, on the death of Laurence, he became Archbishop of Canterbury. Bede praises his lively mind and his virtue, and notes that he suffered from gout. He records only one event of his time as archbishop: in 623, when a fire threatened the city, Mellitus had himself carried toward the flames, and the wind turned, sparing the church. He died on April 24, 624, and was buried the same day in the monastery of Saints Peter and Paul in Canterbury.

Why is Saint Mellitus invoked by the sick?

Mellitus is not the official patron of any group, but his cult is attested from the early Middle Ages, both in Canterbury and at St Paul's in London. Because Bede says he suffered from gout, the hagiographer Goscelin invited those afflicted with gout to pray at his tomb.

His life also speaks to anyone who has known failure. He was the first bishop of a city that rejected him, and he served without bitterness wherever the Church sent him next. His name remains linked to a missionary method of respect and patience. To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Mellitus and the novena to Saint Mellitus.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Mellitus in art

Images of Saint Mellitus are uncommon. He is generally shown as a bishop, with miter and crosier, the signs of his office as Bishop of London and Archbishop of Canterbury. The story of the fire of Canterbury, turned back by his prayer, is the episode of his life most suited to illustration.



The gravestone of Saint Mellitus at St Augustine's Abbey.

Where to pray to Saint Mellitus

- **St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury**: his gravestone among the ruins, beside those of Laurence and Justus.
- **St Paul's Cathedral, London**: heir to the episcopal see he inaugurated in 604.

PRAYER

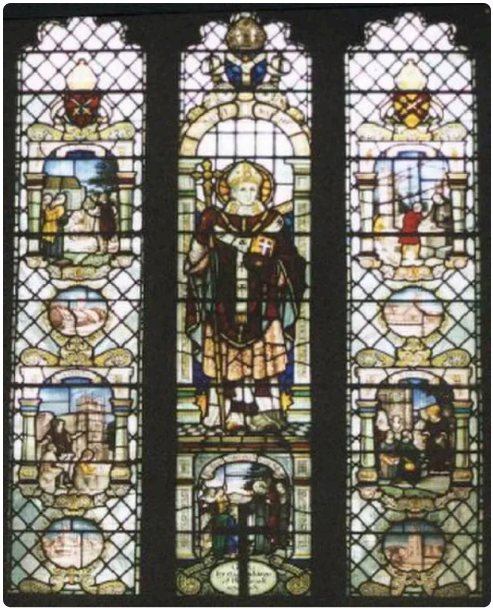
Prayer to Saint Mellitus for Missionaries and Exiles

There is no traditional prayer to Saint Mellitus, and no writing from his own hand has come down to us. Yet his name is tied to a famous letter of Pope Gregory the Great, sent to him while he was traveling to England. Here is a passage from it, with its source, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia.

A word from the letter to Mellitus

> *"He who endeavors to ascend to the highest place rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps."*

Source: letter of Pope Gregory the Great to the abbot Mellitus, 601, reproduced by Bede the Venerable in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book I, chapter 30. In it the pope explains why he prefers to turn the temples of the English into churches rather than destroy them.



Saint Mellitus in prayer.

Prayer to Saint Mellitus for missionaries and exiles

Saint Mellitus, you left Rome to bring the Gospel to the English people: pray for all who proclaim Christ in lands that do not know him, or that have forgotten him.

The pope urged you to lead hearts step by step, with patience and respect: teach me to bear witness to my faith without forcing, to recognize what is good in others, and to walk with them on their way.

You were driven out of the city whose bishop you were, and you knew exile: support those who are rejected because of their faith, and those who must start all over again somewhere else.

You suffered in your body, and your prayer, Bede tells us, protected your city from fire: I entrust to you the sick and those who are afraid, and my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Mellitus's feast day is April 24, the anniversary of his death in Canterbury in 624. This prayer is especially fitting:

- for missionaries and for those who share their faith with patience;
- for Christians who are exiled or rejected because of their faith;
- for the sick, especially those with chronic pain such as gout;
- for the Church in London, whose first bishop he was;
- when a project fails and you must begin again elsewhere.

You can also pray the novena to Saint Mellitus from April 16 to 24, and read the life of Saint Mellitus. His gravestone can still be seen in the ruins of St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Mellitus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Mellitus, first Bishop of London and Archbishop of Canterbury, as told by Saint Bede the Venerable. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, April 24, begin it on April 16. It can also be prayed at any time: for a mission, for someone in exile, for a sick person, or when you have to begin again after a failure.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you live in the spirit of Mellitus: patience, perseverance and trust. You can pray it alone, as a family, or with a parish group.



St Paul's Cathedral, London, successor to the church of Mellitus.

Day 1: Sent

In 601 Mellitus left Rome at the head of a group of missionaries, sent by Pope Gregory the Great to help Augustine in England. He did not choose his mission: he received it. Every Christian is sent, not always far away, but always to someone.

Prayer: Lord, show me where you are sending me today, and give me the courage to go.

Today: Ask yourself to whom God is sending you this week, and take one step toward that person.

Day 2: Carrying what is needed

Bede tells us that the missionaries brought sacred vessels, vestments, relics and many books. The faith is passed on through the liturgy and through the Word, kept and handed down with care. What we have received, we are called to pass on in our turn.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the books, the prayers and the sacraments through which the faith reached me.

Today: Read a page of the Gospel with attention, as a treasure received.

Day 3: Step by step

On his journey, Mellitus received the pope's famous letter: "He who endeavors to ascend to the highest place rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps." Conversion is a path, not a leap. God is patient with us; we must be patient with others.

Prayer: Lord, give me patience with myself and with others, and teach me to take the next small step toward you.

Today: Choose one small, realistic resolution and keep it.

Day 4: Seeing what is good

Gregory asked that temples be purified and turned into churches rather than destroyed. The Gospel does not erase everything that came before it: it purifies and fulfills what is good in a people.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to the good in people who do not share my faith.

Today: Recognize sincerely, in word or in thought, a quality in someone who thinks differently from you.

Day 5: Bishop of London

In 604 Mellitus became the first Bishop of London and baptized King Sæberht. In a great city at the crossroads of roads, he planted the Church. Cities today still need witnesses of Christ in their streets, offices and homes.

Prayer: Lord, bless the cities of our world and those who proclaim your Gospel there. Bless the Church in London.

Today: Pray for your city or town and for its leaders.

Day 6: Faithful in refusal

The pagan sons of Sæberht demanded the consecrated bread without being baptized. Mellitus refused and was driven out. Faithfulness sometimes has a cost, and love for the sacraments is also respect for what they are.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to remain faithful, even when it costs me, and keep me from treating holy things lightly.

Today: Prepare carefully for your next Mass or confession.

Day 7: In exile

Mellitus fled to Gaul with Justus. He knew what it means to lose one's place and to wait without knowing what comes next. Many Christians today live this exile because of persecution or war.

Prayer: Lord, protect persecuted and exiled Christians, and give them a home in your Church.

Today: Learn about a persecuted Christian community and pray for it by name.

Day 8: Beginning again

Mellitus never recovered his see of London. Instead of giving up, he served where he was called and became Archbishop of Canterbury in 619. A failure is not the end of a vocation.

Prayer: Lord, when my plans fail, help me to begin again where you place me, without bitterness.

Today: Offer to God a failure that still hurts, and take one step forward.

Day 9: A prayer stronger than fire

Suffering from gout, Mellitus had himself carried toward the fire that threatened Canterbury, and, Bede says, the wind turned and spared the church. He died on April 24, 624. His weakness did not stop him from praying for his people.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Mellitus, protect the sick and those who are afraid, and hear the intention of this novena.

Today: Visit or call a sick person.

Closing prayer

Saint Mellitus, missionary, Bishop of London and Archbishop of Canterbury, you knew success, rejection and exile, and you served faithfully to the end. Pray for missionaries, for exiles, for the sick, and for all who must begin again. Teach us to lead hearts to God step by step, with patience and respect. I entrust to you the intention of this novena: (name it in silence). Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Mellitus and the prayer to Saint Mellitus.

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