

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Ninian

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 16

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IN BRIEF

Saint Ninian

British bishop, founder of the Candida Casa at Whithorn and first known evangelizer of Scotland.

Feast day	September 16
Born	c. 360
Died	c. 432, Whithorn, Scotland
Canonized	Venerated since ancient times
Era	5th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Ninian for Scotland and the Mission

Novena to Saint Ninian

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Ninian

Saint Ninian was a British bishop of the late Roman period, regarded as the first known evangelizer of what is now Scotland. According to Saint Bede the Venerable, he founded at Whithorn, in Galloway, a stone church called *Candida Casa*, the "White House," and preached the Gospel to the southern Picts. His life remains little known, but his cult is ancient, and for centuries Whithorn was one of the great pilgrimage sites of Scotland. His feast day is September 16.

Who was Saint Ninian?

Ninian, whom Bede calls Ninias, lived at a time when the Roman Empire was withdrawing from Britain. North of Hadrian's Wall lived British peoples and, farther on, the Picts, most of them still pagan. Christian communities already existed in southern Galloway, in the southwest of present-day Scotland, as shown by inscribed stones found at Whithorn. Ninian is the first name of an evangelizer that tradition links to this region, long before Saint Columba arrived on Iona in 563.

What we know about him is very slight. The oldest testimony is that of Saint Bede the Venerable, in the early eighth century, some three centuries after the events. In the twelfth century, Saint Aelred of Rievaulx wrote a *Life of Saint Ninian*, rich in miracles but poor in verifiable facts. Historians still debate his dates, which some place in the fifth century and others later.

Key dates

- **c. 360**: Born among the Britons, perhaps in the area of present-day Cumberland, according to tradition.
- **Youth**: Instructed in the faith in Rome, according to Bede.

- **Late 4th or 5th century**: As bishop, he establishes his see at Whithorn and builds a stone church there, the *Candida Casa*.
- **Afterward**: Preaches among the southern Picts.
- **c. 432**: Dies at Whithorn, according to tradition, and is buried in his church.

The witness of Bede

In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Book III, chapter 4), Bede writes that the southern Picts had abandoned idolatry and received the true faith through the preaching of Bishop Ninias, "a most reverend and holy man of the British nation, who had been regularly instructed at Rome in the faith and mysteries of the truth." He adds that his see, named after Saint Martin and known for its church, was commonly called the White House, because Ninian had built there a church of stone, which was not usual among the Britons.

This text is precious and cautious: Bede introduces his account with "it is said," a sign that he is reporting a tradition. The mention of Saint Martin gave rise to the idea that Ninian had met the bishop of Tours, who died in 397, and dedicated his church to him. That is possible, but nothing allows us to affirm it.

The White House of Whithorn

The name Whithorn comes from Old English and means precisely "white house." A stone church, perhaps coated with lime, must indeed have struck people amid buildings of wood. Archaeological excavations at Whithorn have uncovered traces of an early Christian community, as well as some of the oldest carved stones in Scotland, including the so-called Latinus Stone, from the fifth century. The site later became a renowned monastery and, in the Middle Ages, the seat of a priory and a diocese.

A great Scottish pilgrimage

In the Middle Ages, Ninian's tomb at Whithorn drew crowds of pilgrims, including the kings of Scotland: James IV came several times. A cave on the nearby coast, known as Saint Ninian's Cave, is said to have been his place of retreat and prayer; crosses carved in the early Middle Ages have been found there.

The Protestant Reformation banned these pilgrimages in the sixteenth century. They resumed in the twentieth century, and the Catholic Diocese of Galloway organizes a walk to the cave every year. When Pope Benedict XVI made his state visit to the United Kingdom, he arrived in Scotland on September 16, 2010, the feast of Saint Ninian.

Why pray to Saint Ninian?

Ninian is a pioneer. Before the great Irish monks, he carried the Gospel to the edges of the Roman world and set up, with his little white church, a visible sign of the faith. Even if his biography largely escapes us, the memory he left says what matters most: a pastor who came from afar, formed in communion with Rome, who sowed the faith among a new people. His white church, visible from afar, has become an image of every Christian life: a modest house of stone that lets the light of Christ be seen.

That is why he is invoked:

- for **Scotland** and the Church in Scotland, whose first known apostle he is;
- for **the beginnings of a mission**, a parish project or a new foundation;
- for **those who proclaim the Gospel without seeing the fruit**;
- for **pilgrims**, who still walk to his cave and to Whithorn.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Ninian in art

- **Bishop's vestments, with crozier**: he is shown as the bishop of Whithorn.

- **A book**, the Gospel he preached.
- **A model of a white church**, the *Candida Casa*, as in the stained glass window by William Burges.
- **The cave by the sea**, his traditional place of prayer.

Where to pray to Saint Ninian

- **Whithorn** (Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland): the ruins of the priory, the museum of early carved stones, and Saint Ninian's Cave on the coast.
- **Isle of Whithorn**: the small medieval Saint Ninian's Chapel, where pilgrims used to land.
- **Across Scotland**: the many Catholic churches dedicated to him.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Ninian, or the novena to Saint Ninian, which ends on his feast, September 16.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Ninian for Scotland and the Mission

There is no widely known traditional prayer to Saint Ninian, the first known evangelizer of Scotland. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by the witness of Saint Bede the Venerable about the bishop of the "White House" of Whithorn.

The builder of the White House

According to Bede, Ninian was a Briton instructed in the faith at Rome, who built at Whithorn a church of stone, something rare among his people, and preached the Gospel to the southern Picts. This white church, visible from afar, has become the image of his mission: a light set at the edge of the known world.

Prayer to Saint Ninian

Saint Ninian, you who set out toward a people who did not know Christ, give me the courage to cross the boundaries that separate me from others.

You who built a white church for the praise of God, make my life a bright house where others may find the light.

You who prayed in the solitude of a cave facing the sea, teach me to seek God in silence.

Watch over Scotland and the Church that lives there, over those who begin a mission and over those who sow without seeing the harvest. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Saint Ninian, pray for us. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Ninian is celebrated on September 16. You can pray to him:

- during a pilgrimage, especially to Whithorn and Saint Ninian's Cave;
- at the beginning of a missionary or parish project;
- for Scotland and for Scots living around the world;
- when you need silence and a time of retreat;
- when your efforts to share the faith seem to bear no fruit.

A short invocation

> *Saint Ninian, bishop of the White House and apostle of the Picts, pray for us.*

To learn more about him, read the life of Saint Ninian, or pray the novena to Saint Ninian in the nine days before his feast.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Ninian

This novena to Saint Ninian is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows what tradition tells of the first known evangelizer of Scotland: the Briton instructed at Rome, the builder of the White House of Whithorn, the preacher to the southern Picts and the man of prayer in a cave by the sea. To end on September 16, his feast day, begin it on September 8. You can also pray it at any time, especially before a pilgrimage or at the start of a mission.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Begin with the Sign of the Cross, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act suggested for the day. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust, not a test.

Day 1: A saint we barely know

We know very little for certain about Ninian. His memory comes to us mainly through a few lines of Bede, written some three centuries later. Yet his name has been honored for more than a thousand years. God does not need our biographies to make a life fruitful.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, teach me to serve God without seeking to be remembered. Amen.

Today: Do a good deed in secret.

Day 2: Formed in the faith

Bede says that Ninian had been "regularly instructed at Rome in the faith and mysteries of the truth." Before he could teach, he had to learn. A missionary first receives the faith of the Church before passing it on.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, give me a love for the faith of the Church and the desire to know it better. Amen.

Today: Read a page of the Gospel or of the Catechism slowly.

Day 3: In communion with the whole Church

Ninian came from the edge of the Roman world, yet he was formed in communion with Rome. Bede links his church to the name of Saint Martin of Tours. No mission is solitary: every missionary is sent by the Church and carries her with him.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, keep me united to the Church, and pray for the Pope and the bishops. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Pope and for your bishop.

Day 4: Going to a new people

North of Hadrian's Wall lived peoples who did not yet know Christ. Ninian went to them. Every age has its own frontiers to cross, sometimes very close to home: a neighbor, a colleague or a family member who has never really heard of Christ.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, give me the courage to go toward those who do not know Christ. Amen.

Today: Reach out to someone outside your usual circle.

Day 5: Building a white house

At Whithorn, Ninian built a church of stone, unusual among the Britons, so that it was called the White House. A visible sign can speak where words cannot yet be heard.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, make my life a bright house where others can see the light of Christ. Amen.

Today: Take care of your parish church in a small way, or visit it to pray.

Day 6: Preaching to the Picts

According to Bede, the southern Picts abandoned idolatry and received the faith through Ninian's preaching. The Word of God, patiently proclaimed, changes hearts and peoples.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, pray for all who proclaim the Gospel today, priests, catechists and missionaries. Amen.

Today: Pray for a priest or catechist you know.

Day 7: The cave by the sea

Tradition says that Ninian withdrew to pray in a cave on the coast near Whithorn. The apostle drew his strength from silence and solitude with God. Action without prayer soon runs dry; prayer gives the mission its source.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, teach me to seek God in silence. Amen.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in silence, away from screens and noise.

Day 8: Pilgrims on the way

For centuries, pilgrims, including the kings of Scotland, walked to Whithorn. The Reformation stopped these pilgrimages, but they have begun again. Every Christian life is a pilgrimage toward God.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, accompany me on my way, and lead me home to the Father. Amen.

Today: Make a short walk a prayer, offering each step to God.

Day 9: Sowing without seeing the harvest

Ninian died without seeing the full flowering of the faith in Scotland. Columba, Kentigern and many others came after him. He was a sower, and the harvest belonged to God. Our task is to be faithful; the fruit is his.

Prayer: Saint Ninian, present to the Lord the intention I have carried during this novena, and teach me to sow with trust. Amen.

Today: If you can, take part in Mass and pray for the Church in Scotland.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Ninian, bishop of the White House and apostle of the southern Picts, you who carried the Gospel to the edge of the known world, intercede for us. Teach us to remain rooted in the faith of the Church, to cross the boundaries that separate us from others, and to seek God in silence. Watch over Scotland and over all who begin a mission. Obtain for us the grace we ask during this novena, if it is the will of God. Amen.*

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

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