BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Non

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: March 3

IN BRIEF

Saint Non

Welsh saint of the 5th and 6th centuries, mother of Saint David, honored at Dirinon in Brittany.

Feast day	March 3
Born	5th century, Wales
Died	6th century, Dirinon (Finistère), according to Breton tradition
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	6th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Non for Mothers and Unborn Children

Novena to Saint Non

Dirinon Parish Close

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Non

Saint Non (Nonne in French, Nonna in Cornwall), sometimes called Melaria, is a Welsh saint of the late 5th and 6th centuries, honored as the mother of Saint David, patron of Wales. Breton tradition holds that she spent the end of her life at Dirinon, in Finistère, where her tomb is still venerated. Her life is known mainly through late and legendary accounts. Her feast day is March 3.

Who was Saint Non?

Non belongs to the great movement of saints from Wales and Cornwall who left their mark on Brittany in the 5th and 6th centuries. The Welsh genealogies of the saints, the *Bonedd y Saint*, make her the daughter of a certain Cynyr of Mynyw, the area of present-day St Davids. She is known above all as the mother of Saint David (Dewi in Welsh, Divy in Breton). The accounts about her were written long after her death, and they do not agree with one another. Yet they keep the memory of a woman who was sorely tried, who raised her son in the faith, and whose cult is attested since the Middle Ages on both sides of the Channel.

According to an old explanation, her name Nonne comes from the fact that she entered a community of consecrated women at a young age; her baptismal name is said to have been Melaria. She should not be confused with Saint Nonna, a male saint honored at Penmarc'h and in several parishes of Finistère.

Key dates in the life of Non

- **5th century**: Born in Wales, into the family of Cynyr of Mynyw according to the Welsh genealogies.
- **Youth**: According to one tradition, she enters a community of consecrated women, hence her name.

- **Late 5th or early 6th century**: A victim of violence at the hands of a chieftain named Ceredig, she becomes pregnant.
- **Shortly after**: Birth of her son David, future bishop and patron of Wales; Welsh tradition places the birth near St Davids, Breton tradition in the forest near Landerneau.
- **6th century**: According to Breton tradition, she ends her life at Dirinon, in Armorica.
- **c. 1450**: A recumbent effigy is carved for her tomb in the chapel of Saint Non at Dirinon.
- **16th century**: The manuscript of the *Life of Saint Non* (*Buhez santez Nonn*), a mystery play in Breton, is copied.
- **1834**: The manuscript is discovered at Dirinon; it is published in 1837.

A mother sorely tried

The accounts say that Non suffered violence at the hands of a chieftain named Ceredig and found herself pregnant. Another, later version makes her the wife of a Cornish chieftain who was driven out for conceiving a child outside marriage. All the traditions agree on one point: Non welcomed this child, brought him into the world in difficult conditions and raised him in the faith. This child would become Saint David, monk, bishop and one of the greatest saints of Wales.

The place of David's birth is disputed. Welsh tradition places it near St Davids, where a ruined chapel and a holy well bear Non's name. Breton tradition tells that Non had taken refuge in Armorica, in the forest that then covered the area of Landerneau, and that she gave birth on a rock which softened like wax to serve as a cradle for the newborn. These wonderful stories speak above all of God's tenderness for a mother who was alone and rejected.

The Life of Saint Non, a Breton mystery play

Saint Non gave her name to one of the oldest works of literature in the Breton language: the *Life of Saint Non*, or *Buhez santez Nonn*. It is a religious play, a "mystery", whose manuscript, copied in the 16th century, was discovered at Dirinon in 1834 by Father Marzin, then published in 1837 with a translation by Le Gonidec. The text itself may be older. It tells the life of Non, the miracles that occurred at her tomb, and then the episcopate and death of her son. The anonymous author takes great liberties with history, setting the story in the feudal society of his own time.

Devotion and art

Saint Non is celebrated on March 3, close to her son Saint David, whose feast falls on March 1. Her cult does not come from a canonization but from a very ancient veneration, as with most Breton and Welsh saints. At Dirinon, the parish church bears her name and the neighboring chapel shelters her tomb, topped by an effigy carved around 1450 by the ducal workshop of Le Folgoët. The church keeps a silver reliquary and stained-glass windows from 1903 telling her life and that of Saint Divy. In Cornwall, the church of Altarnun is dedicated to her, and in Wales several places bear her name.

She is shown as a nun or a mother, sometimes with her child, sometimes lying on her tomb with joined hands.

What can we learn from Saint Non?

Saint Non is the saint of mothers in hardship. Wounded, rejected, forced into exile according to some accounts, she did not refuse the life she carried. She raised a son who became a great saint. Her story touches every woman expecting a child in loneliness or difficulty, and all those who have suffered

violence. You can pray to her for single mothers, for pregnant women in distress, for unborn children, and for the bonds of faith between Brittany and Wales.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Non and the novena to Saint Non.

Where to pray to Saint Non

- **Dirinon** (Finistère): the church of Saint Non and the neighboring chapel, where her tomb lies.
- **St Davids** (Pembrokeshire, Wales): the chapel and holy well that bear her name, near the place where Welsh tradition places the birth of her son.
- **Altarnun** (Cornwall, England): the church dedicated to her.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Non for Mothers and Unborn Children

Saint Non, a Welsh saint of the 5th and 6th centuries, is honored as the mother of Saint David. Sorely tried by violence and exile according to the accounts, she welcomed her child and raised him in the faith, and Breton tradition says she died at Dirinon. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to her mothers, pregnant women in difficulty and unborn children.

Prayer to Saint Non

Saint Non,
mother of Saint David,
you knew wounds, shame and exile,
and you did not refuse the life you carried.
Watch over women expecting a child
in fear or in loneliness.

You who brought your son into the world
far from your home,
and raised him in the love of God,
help mothers to hand on the faith
and to keep trusting in times of trial.

Comfort those who have been wounded,
obtain for them peace and healing of heart.
Bless Brittany and Wales,
which have honored you for so many centuries.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Non

- On her feast day, March 3, or at her tomb in Dirinon.
- During a difficult or unexpected pregnancy.
- For a mother raising her children alone.
- For women who have suffered violence.
- To hand on the faith to your children.

A short invocation

> *Saint Non, mother of Saint David,*
> *watch over mothers and unborn children. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Non from February 23 to March 3, and read the life of Saint Non.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Non

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It draws on the life of Saint Non, mother of Saint David, as told by Welsh and Breton tradition. To finish it on her feast day, March 3, begin on February 23 (February 24 in leap years). You can also pray it at any other time of the year.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with 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 Non, pray for us." The act suggested each day helps you live the novena concretely. The episodes recalled come from late accounts that mix memory and legend.

Day 1: A consecrated woman

According to one tradition, Non entered a community of consecrated women at a young age, hence her name. Her heart was turned toward God.

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart wholly turned toward you.

Act of the day: Pray for the religious sisters you know.

Day 2: The wound

The accounts say that Non suffered violence from a powerful man. Her life was turned upside down.

Prayer: Lord, comfort women wounded in body and in dignity. Do them justice.

Act of the day: Pray for, or support, an organization that helps victims of violence.

Day 3: Welcoming life

Pregnant in painful circumstances, Non welcomed the child she was carrying.

Prayer: Lord, support women who are expecting a child in fear. Give them the help they need.

Act of the day: Pray for a pregnant woman you know.

Day 4: Exile

According to Breton tradition, Non crossed the sea and took refuge in Armorica, in a great forest.

Prayer: Lord, be with those who must flee their country. Help us to welcome them.

Act of the day: Make a gesture of welcome toward a foreigner.

Day 5: The rock that became a cradle

Legend says that David was born on a rock which softened to form a cradle for him. God takes care of the little ones.

Prayer: Lord, soften what is hard in my life, and make my trials a place where your tenderness is shown.

Act of the day: Do a quiet favor for a young mother.

Day 6: Raising a saint

Non raised her son in the faith. David became a monk, a bishop and the patron of Wales.

Prayer: Lord, bless parents who hand on the faith. Make our children grow in your love.

Act of the day: Pray with a child, or for one.

Day 7: A hidden life at Dirinon

Breton tradition says that Non ended her life at Dirinon, in prayer and discretion.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to live humbly, under your gaze.

Act of the day: Do an act of kindness without telling anyone.

Day 8: A tomb where people pray

At Dirinon, her tomb has been venerated for centuries. The Breton mystery play of her life tells of the miracles attributed to it.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the saints who go before us. Make us trusting pilgrims.

Act of the day: Visit a nearby church or chapel and pray there for a few minutes.

Day 9: Mother and son in glory

Non is celebrated on March 3, two days after her son Saint David. Mother and son are united in the prayer of the Church.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Non and Saint David, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Attend Mass if possible, and entrust to God all the mothers in your family.

Closing prayer

Saint Non,
mother tried and faithful,
you welcomed life in the midst of trial.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Watch over mothers and children,
and keep us in trust.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Dirinon Parish Close

The parish close of Dirinon lies in Finistère, not far from Landerneau and the Bay of Brest. It brings together the church of Saint Non and, close by, the small chapel of Saint Non, which shelters the saint's tomb. According to Breton tradition, the mother of Saint David spent the end of her life here. It is the main place in Brittany where people come to pray to her.

A parish close dedicated to the mother of Saint David

The present church dates mostly from the late 16th century. It is placed under the protection of Saint Non and was listed as a historic monument in 1916. It was at Dirinon that the manuscript of the *Life of Saint Non*, one of the oldest plays in the Breton language, was discovered in 1834. The chapel, built in the 16th century in the churchyard, was listed in 1960. It keeps the saint's effigy, carved around 1450 by the ducal workshop of Le Folgoët.

What you can see

The church's galleried bell tower is dated 1588. Under the porch stand statues of the apostles and a representation of the Holy Trinity. Inside, the choir windows, installed in 1903, tell the life of Saint Non and of her son Saint David (Divy). Visitors can also admire 19th-century paintings on the wooden vaults, altarpieces, old banners and a display of church silverware, including the saint's silver reliquary.

In the neighboring chapel, with its paneled ceiling and carved beams, lies the effigy of Saint Non: the saint is shown lying on her tomb, hands joined. This is where pilgrims stop to pray to her.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Non. At her tomb, entrust to her mothers, pregnant women in difficulty and unborn children, then say the prayer to Saint Non. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Dirinon is a village in Finistère, near Landerneau, and can be reached by car. The church is a place of worship: modest dress and silence are requested. Opening times for the church and the chapel, as well as Mass times and any pardons, may vary: check with the parish or the Landerneau area tourist office before you come.

Credits and sources

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