

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Odile of Hohenbourg

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 13

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IN BRIEF

Saint Odile of Hohenbourg

Merovingian abbess of Alsace, founder of the monastery of Mont Sainte-Odile and patron saint of Alsace.

Feast day	December 13
Born	c. 660, Obernai, Alsace (according to tradition)
Died	c. 720, Hohenbourg (Mont Sainte-Odile), Alsace
Canonized	Immemorial cult, confirmed in the 11th century
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	Alsace, the blind and visually impaired, eye diseases

In this booklet

Life

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Odile of Hohenbourg

Saint Odile was an abbess of Alsace in Merovingian times who died around 720 at the monastery of Hohenbourg, on the mountain that now bears her name. The daughter of a duke of Alsace, she was born blind according to her legend and received her sight on the day of her baptism. She became the patron saint of Alsace and of people who are blind or visually impaired. Her tomb on Mont Sainte-Odile draws tens of thousands of pilgrims every year, and her feast day is December 13.

Who was Saint Odile?

Odile was born around 660, perhaps at Obernai, at the foot of the Vosges mountains in eastern France. She was the daughter of Eticho-Adalric, Duke of Alsace, who died around 690, and of his wife Bereswinda, whom an old chronicle connects to the family of Saint Leger of Autun. Her family, the Etichonids, was one of the most powerful in the region. On the heights of Hohenbourg, Odile founded a monastery for women, and then, lower down, a second house to welcome the sick and pilgrims.

Most of what we know about her life comes from a *Life of Saint Odile* written in Latin around 950, more than two centuries after her death. This hagiographical text has limited historical value: most of the famous episodes, her blindness, the miraculous baptism and her father's anger, belong to tradition more than to history. What is certain is that the abbess existed, that she made her foundations, and that a very old cult grew around her and has never ceased in Alsace.

Key dates

- **c. 660**: Born, perhaps at Obernai, into the family of Duke Eticho-Adalric.

- **Childhood**: According to tradition, she is raised far from her father at the monastery of Palma, today Baume-les-Dames.
- **c. 675**: Baptized by Bishop Erhard, and, according to the story, she receives her sight.
- **Late 7th century**: Her father gives her the castle of Hohenbourg, which she turns into a monastery.
- **Early 8th century**: She founds Niedermünster, the "lower monastery," for the sick and pilgrims.
- **c. 720**: Dies at Hohenbourg, on a December 13 according to tradition.
- **11th century**: Her cult is confirmed; tradition credits her canonization to the Alsatian pope Leo IX.
- **1807**: Pope Pius VII proclaims her patron saint of Alsace.

The blind child and her baptism

The *Life* tells that Adalric, who had hoped for a son, discovered that the child was a girl and that she was blind. He wanted to get rid of her. Her mother first entrusted her to a nurse, then had her taken to the monastery of Palma, today Baume-les-Dames in the Doubs region, where a relative raised her in the faith, although she had not yet been baptized.

When she was about fifteen, Bishop Erhard, described as a missionary from Ireland traveling through the Rhine valley, received in a vision the command to go and baptize a blind girl. As he touched her eyes with holy chrism, she recovered her sight. She was then given the name Odile, which tradition interprets as "light of God," even though linguists link this Germanic name rather to the idea of wealth. This story is the source of her emblem, two eyes resting on a book, and of her patronage of the blind and of those who suffer from eye diseases.

Reconciliation with her father

Still according to the *Life*, Odile learned that she had brothers and a sister. One of them, Hugh, helped her return to the family, but their father, furious at being disobeyed, struck him so violently that he died. Overcome with remorse, Adalric slowly accepted his daughter and then gave her his castle of Hohenbourg, perched on a spur of the Vosges. The last pages of the story show Odile praying at length for her father's soul after his death, until she received the assurance of his salvation. This is the origin of devotion to Saint Odile for the souls of the dead.

Abbess of Hohenbourg

Odile turned the castle into a monastery for women, following the model she had known at Palma. Young women of noble families joined her, among them her sister and her nieces. She had chapels built there, one of them dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. Because the summit was hard to reach for the sick and the elderly, she founded a second monastery at the foot of the mountain, Niedermünster, with a hospice. Tradition shows her attentive to the poor, to lepers and to travelers.

She died around 720, surrounded by her sisters. Her body has rested ever since in the chapel that bears her name on Mont Sainte-Odile. During the French Revolution, in 1793, her relics were hidden at Ottrott, and they were brought back to the monastery in 1800. In the twelfth century the abbey of Hohenbourg shone brightly: the abbess Herrad of Landsberg composed there the *Hortus deliciarum*, a famous illustrated encyclopedia.

Why is Saint Odile the patron saint of Alsace and of the blind?

Her patronage of the blind and of eye diseases comes directly from the story of her baptism, when she received both the light of Christ and the light of her eyes. Her patronage of Alsace grew from thirteen centuries of local devotion and was made official in 1807 by Pope Pius VII. Through a history often torn between France and Germany, Alsatians have seen her as their protector.

Beyond the legendary details, the figure of Odile speaks of light received and of forgiveness. The rejected child became the one who welcomed others; the daughter of a violent father prayed for him to the end. She is invoked for the blind and visually impaired, for divided families, for the dead and for Alsace. In English-speaking countries she is less well known, but she is often invoked alongside Saint Lucy, who shares her feast day and is also prayed to for the eyes.

To pray with her, read the prayer to Saint Odile, or follow the novena to Saint Odile from December 4 to 12, so that it ends on the eve of her feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Odile in art

- **The book with two eyes**: her main emblem, recalling her healing at baptism.
- **The habit of an abbess**: she is shown as a Benedictine abbess, with veil and black habit.
- **The crozier**: the staff of an abbess, a sign of her authority over her community.
- **The monastery on the mountain**: sometimes she holds or stands near the abbey of Hohenbourg.

Where to pray to Saint Odile

- **Mont Sainte-Odile** (Ottrott, Alsace, France): the shrine with her tomb, the basilica and the chapel of adoration, where perpetual adoration has continued since 1931.
- **Baume-les-Dames** (Doubs, France): the former abbey where tradition places her childhood and baptism.
- **Paris**: the church of Sainte-Odile in the 17th arrondissement, built in the 1930s and decorated with stained glass in her honor.
- **Alsace**: many churches and chapels dedicated to her, such as the one at Lapoutroie.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Odile for the Eyes, Forgiveness and Alsace

Saint Odile left no writings. The faithful of Alsace have prayed to her for thirteen centuries, but the prayers in use vary from one parish and booklet to another. Saintspedia offers an original prayer drawn from what tradition remembers of her: the blind child who received light at her baptism, the abbess who welcomed the sick, the daughter who prayed for her father.

A saint of light and forgiveness

According to her *Life*, written in the tenth century, Odile was born blind and received her sight at the moment of her baptism. Rejected by her father, she forgave him and prayed for him even after his death. She founded a monastery on Mont Sainte-Odile and, at the foot of the mountain, a hospice for the sick. That is why she is invoked for the eyes, for wounded families and for the dead.

Prayer to Saint Odile

Saint Odile, you received the light of your eyes when you received the light of Christ: open also the eyes of my heart, so that I may see what God asks of me.

I entrust to you the blind and the visually impaired, those who fear losing their sight and those who care for them. Give them peace, courage and faithful friends along the way.

You forgave your father and prayed for him to the end: heal the wounds of our families. Teach us to take the first step toward those who have hurt us.

You opened your house to the poor and the sick: make us attentive to those who knock at our door. Watch over Alsace, your homeland, and over all who climb the mountain to your tomb. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Pray for our dead, that they may at last see the light of God face to face. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Odile's feast day is December 13, the traditional day of her death, which she shares with Saint Lucy, another saint of light. On Mont Sainte-Odile, a great summer pilgrimage is also held in early July. You can pray to her:

- before an eye examination or eye surgery;
- for a person who is blind or losing their sight;
- for a relative with whom you are estranged;
- for a loved one who has died.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Odile, and read the life of Saint Odile.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Odile

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and cult of Saint Odile, patron saint of Alsace. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on the eve of her feast, begin on December 4; it finishes on December 12. It is prayed in the heart of Advent, the season of waiting for the Light.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then one Our Father and one Hail Mary. The small act suggested helps carry the prayer into the day. The episodes recalled here come from the *Life of Saint Odile*, written in the tenth century, which mixes history and legend.

You can pray this novena for a personal intention, for someone facing an eye disease or blindness, for a family that needs reconciliation, or for a loved one who has died. It can also be prayed as a group, in a parish or a prayer circle, with one person reading the meditation and all saying the prayer together. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day: what matters is the faithfulness of the heart, not a perfect count.

Day 1: The Rejected Child

According to tradition, Odile was rejected by her father because she was a girl and because she was blind. God rejects no one. Every life is willed and loved, even the one the world considers imperfect. On this first day, place your own intention before God with the confidence of a child who knows she is loved.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you unwanted children, people with disabilities and all who feel they are in the way. Let them feel your love.

Today: Check in on someone around you who is isolated or living with a disability.

Day 2: Those Who Protect

Odile's mother, a nurse and then a relative at Baume-les-Dames protected the child. Odile's holiness owes much to these quiet women who took care of her.

Prayer: Lord, bless mothers, nannies, foster families and all who protect the most vulnerable.

Today: Thank someone who took care of you when you were a child.

Day 3: The Light of Baptism

Odile receives her sight at the moment Bishop Erhard baptizes her. The story tells a deep truth: baptism is an illumination that opens our eyes to the presence of God.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, light of the world, renew in me the grace of my baptism.

Today: Find out the date of your baptism, or light a candle and give thanks for this gift.

Day 4: Seeing Differently

Odile is the patron saint of the blind. Those who do not see with their eyes often teach us to see differently: to listen, to touch, to perceive what matters most.

Prayer: Saint Odile, pray for the blind and the visually impaired, and for those who walk with them. Open my eyes to what I do not want to see.

Today: Support an organization serving blind people, by prayer or by a gift.

Day 5: Forgiveness in the Family

Odile's father was violent, to the point of causing the death of his son Hugh. Yet Odile did not curse him. She sought reconciliation without denying the wrong that had been done. Forgiveness is not forgetting: it is refusing to let evil have the last word.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you divided families. Give me the strength to forgive and the humility to ask for forgiveness.

Today: Take a step, even a small one, toward a relative with whom things are difficult.

Day 6: A House for God

Odile turns her father's castle into a monastery. What was a place of power becomes a place of prayer. Our homes, too, can become places where God dwells.

Prayer: Lord, make my home a place of peace, prayer and welcome.

Today: Pray today, alone or with your family, in a corner of your home set apart for God.

Day 7: Going Down to the Sick

The summit was hard for the sick to reach, so Odile founded the monastery of Niedermünster for them at the foot of the mountain. Charity knows how to go toward those who cannot come.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the sick, the elderly and caregivers. Bring me close to those who suffer.

Today: Visit or call someone who is sick.

Day 8: Praying for the Dead

The *Life* shows Odile praying for her father's soul until she received the assurance of his salvation. The Church invites us to carry our dead in prayer, trusting in God's mercy.

Prayer: Lord, welcome our dead into your light, especially those who have hurt others and those who were hurt.

Today: Have a Mass offered or pray a decade of the Rosary for someone who has died.

Day 9: Watching Over a Land

Odile is the patron saint of Alsace, a border land often torn by war. On Mont Sainte-Odile, perpetual adoration entrusts this region and the whole world to God day and night.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Odile, give peace to our countries and light to our hearts. Amen.

Today: Spend time in adoration or in silence before the Blessed Sacrament, praying for peace.

Closing prayer

Saint Odile, patron of Alsace, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for those who cannot see, for wounded families, for the sick and for our dead. Obtain for us a gaze enlightened by faith and a heart quick to forgive. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Mont Sainte-Odile, Tomb of the Patron Saint of Alsace

Perched more than 760 meters above sea level on a rocky spur of the Vosges, above Obernai and Ottrott, Mont Sainte-Odile is the great shrine of Alsace. It was here, on the Hohenbourg, that Saint Odile founded her monastery in the late 7th century and where she has rested since her death, around 720. Each year the site welcomes tens of thousands of pilgrims and visitors.

From castle to monastery

According to tradition, Duke Etichon-Adalric gave his daughter Odile his castle of Hohenbourg, which she turned into a convent for women. The abbey reached its peak in the 12th century, under the abbesses Relinde and Herrad of Landsberg, author of the *Hortus deliciarum*, an illustrated encyclopedia meant for the instruction of the nuns. Ravaged by fires in the 16th century, the abbey was then taken over by Premonstratensian canons, who rebuilt the church in the 17th century. Sold as national property during the Revolution, the site was bought back by the Diocese of Strasbourg in the 19th century.

What you will see

The heart of the pilgrimage is the **Chapel of Saint Odile**, where a sarcophagus holds the saint's relics. The relics, hidden in Ottrott during the Revolution, were brought back here in 1800. Very close by, the Romanesque **Chapel of the Cross** keeps the sarcophagus traditionally attributed to her father, Duke Adalric.

The **abbey church**, rebuilt in the 17th century, was raised to the rank of minor basilica in 2006. Since 1931, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament has continued there day and night, kept in turn by groups from Alsatian parishes. At the edge of the cliff, the terrace offers a view over the Alsace plain and, on clear days, as far as the Black Forest. Other chapels, such as the Chapel of Tears and the Chapel of the Angels, are found within the grounds.

The spring and the Pagan Wall

Below the monastery, on the path that descends toward Niedermünster, the **Saint Odile spring** is linked by tradition to a miracle of the saint. Many pilgrims come to bathe their eyes there, praying for their sight. The mountain is also encircled by the **Pagan Wall**, a stone enclosure more than ten kilometers long, far older than Christianity, whose date and purpose are still debated.

Praying at Mont Sainte-Odile

Before you climb up, you can reread the life of Saint Odile. On site, a time of silence near her tomb, then a moment in the adoration chapel, is a good way to entrust an intention, for example for someone with an eye ailment or for a divided family. The prayer to Saint Odile can accompany this moment, and the novena to Saint Odile can prepare a pilgrimage in December. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Practical information

Mont Sainte-Odile is in the commune of Ottrott, in the Bas-Rhin, about forty kilometers southwest of Strasbourg. It is reached by car on the road from Obernai or Ottrott, or on foot by several marked trails, including the pilgrims' path. The monastery has a guesthouse and a restaurant. The main pilgrimage takes place around December 13, and a summer pilgrimage in early July. Check the times of services and visits with the shrine before you come.

Credits and sources

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