

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Pharaildis

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: January 4

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IN BRIEF

Saint Pharaildis

Woman consecrated to God, married against her will, then a charitable widow, patroness of Ghent.

Feast day	January 4
Born	c. 650, Ghent, according to her Life
Died	c. 740, Bruay-sur-l'Escaut (Nord, France), according to tradition
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	Ghent, Bruay-sur-l'Escaut

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Pharaildis for Wives in Trial

Novena to Saint Pharaildis

Church of Saint-Pharaïlde at Bruay-sur-l'Escaut

Credits and sources

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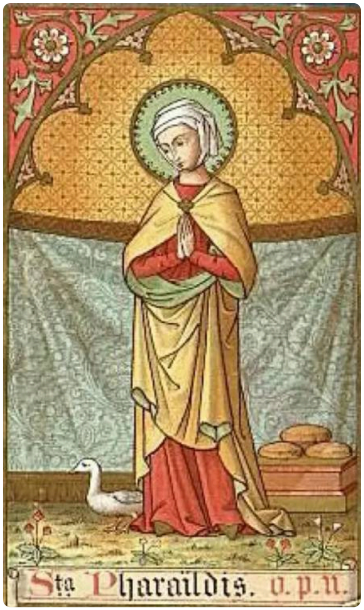
LIFE

Saint Pharaildis

Saint Pharaildis, called Veerle in Dutch, was a noblewoman of the seventh and eighth centuries, born around 650 and died around 740, in what is now Belgium and northern France. Consecrated to God in her heart, she was married against her will to a man who mistreated her, and she devoted her widowhood to serving the poor. She is the patroness of Ghent and is also honored at Bruay-sur-l'Escaut, near Valenciennes. Her feast day is January 4.

Who was Saint Pharaildis?

Pharaildis is one of those saints of the early Middle Ages whose memory has reached us through a late *Life*, miracles handed down by popular devotion, and a very old cult. Her *Vita Pharaildis* and the tradition of the southern Low Countries link her to a family of saints: she is said to be the daughter of Saint Amalberga and the sister of Saint Gudula, the patroness of Brussels, and of Saint Reineldis. The Bollandists have already questioned these family ties. What is certain is that her cult is attested very early, and that Ghent has honored her for more than a thousand years.



Saint Pharaildis (Veerle), patroness of Ghent.

Key dates

- **c. 650**: Born, in Ghent according to her *Life*, into a noble family with lands in Hainaut and Brabant.
- **Youth**: According to tradition, she is educated at the monastery of Nivelles and makes a private vow to consecrate herself to God.
- **Late 7th century**: She is married to Guy, son of a chieftain settled at Bruay-sur-l'Escaut, who mistreats her.
- **After her husband's death**: A widow, she devotes her goods and her life to serving the people.
- **c. 740**: Dies at a very advanced age and is buried in a chapel dedicated to Saint John the Baptist that she had built.
- **c. 754**: Her relics are moved to Ghent, to the abbey of Saint Bavo.
- **1073**: Her relics are placed in a new shrine in Ghent.

- **1892**: At Bruay-sur-l'Escaut, the demolition of the old church uncovers a Romanesque cenotaph of the 12th century in her memory.

A forced marriage

According to her *Life*, Pharaildis was the daughter of a nobleman named Theodoric, who followed the king on his campaigns and lived on his estates in times of peace. She received a careful Christian education, at the monastery of Nivelles according to tradition. While still young, she vowed to give herself to God alone.

But her family decided otherwise. As was common at the time, she was married to a man chosen for her: Guy, son of Otto, a chieftain settled at Bruay, on the Scheldt. Pharaildis remained faithful to her promise, and married life became a trial. Her husband, irritated, mistreated her.

One day Guy was seriously injured during a hunt on horseback. Pharaildis, far from rejoicing in the suffering of the man who had made her suffer, nursed him devotedly. He recovered slowly, but died of illness soon afterward. This episode, at the heart of her story, shows a charity that does not take revenge.

A widow serving all

Once widowed, Pharaildis was free to dispose of her goods. She put them at the service of the people: the poor, the sick, the field workers. She had a chapel built in honor of Saint John the Baptist, where she would be buried. She died around 740, at the age of ninety according to tradition.

Popular devotion attributes several miracles to her. At Bruay, seeing thirsty farm workers, she is said to have struck the ground with her spindle to make a spring gush forth. Another time, a servant had caught and eaten a wild goose;

she is said to have asked for the bones to be brought to her and to have given the bird back its life. These stories, which belong to legend, tell in their own way of her kindness to the humble and to all creation.



The church of Saint-Pharaïlde at Bruay-sur-l'Escaut, in northern France.

Devotion and iconography

The cult of Pharaildis began right after her death. Around 754 her relics were taken to Ghent, to the abbey of Saint Bavo, and with Saint Bavo she became the patroness of the city. In the 13th century Ghent dedicated a church to her, the *Sint-Veerlekerk*, the court church of the counts of Flanders, demolished in 1581; the square next to the Castle of the Counts is still called *Sint-Veerleplein*. At Bruay-sur-l'Escaut, a basilica in her honor is attested before it was destroyed by the Normans around 880. The present church keeps a Romanesque cenotaph of the 12th century and a reliquary of the 15th century, and a novena is celebrated there every year in early September.

A posthumous miracle is venerated at Steenokkerzeel, near Brussels: around 1300, a woman who had refused bread to her neighbor, swearing by God and Saint Pharaildis that she had none, is said to have found her loaves turned to stone. Pharaildis is therefore shown with a goose, loaves of bread, and sometimes a spindle. She appears in the Roman Martyrology on January 4.

What can we learn from Saint Pharaildis?

Pharaildis knew what many women still live through: a forced marriage, the violence of a spouse, the impossibility of living according to her heart. She did not answer harshness with harshness. She cared for the one who hurt her, and then she made her regained freedom a gift to others. She can be asked for help by women who suffer in their marriage, by widows, and by all who want to make their goods an instrument of charity.

Where to pray to Saint Pharaildis

- **Bruay-sur-l'Escaut** (Nord, France): the church of Saint-Pharaïlde, with its Romanesque cenotaph, its reliquary and, very close by, the site of the saint's spring.
- **Ghent** (Belgium): *Sint-Veerleplein*, at the foot of the Castle of the Counts, and Saint Bavo's Cathedral, the mother church of the city of which she is patroness.
- **Steenokkerzeel** (Flemish Brabant): the parish church, where the "stone loaves" linked to the miracle of 1300 are said to be kept.

To pray with her at home, you can use the prayer to Saint Pharaildis or the novena to Saint Pharaildis.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Pharaildis for Wives in Trial

Saint Pharaildis, patroness of Ghent, wanted to give herself to God alone, but was married against her will to a man who mistreated her. She nursed him nonetheless when he was injured, and, once widowed, she devoted her goods to serving the poor. This prayer is an original composition inspired by her life; it is not an official liturgical text. It entrusts to the saint troubled wives, women who suffer violence, and all who serve the least among us.

Prayer to Saint Pharaildis

Saint Pharaildis,
you who wanted to belong to God alone,
you knew a forced marriage,
reproaches, blows and misunderstanding.
You did not answer evil with evil,
and you cared for the one who made you suffer.

Pray for unhappy wives,
for women who are humiliated or beaten,
for those who are not listened to.
Obtain for them protection, courage and peace,
and faithful friends to support them.
Touch the hearts of those who harm their loved ones.

You who, as a widow, gave your goods to the poor,
teach us to share what we have,
to give drink to those who are thirsty,
and never to refuse our bread.

Watch over Ghent, over Bruay and over our cities,
and keep our families in true love.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Pharaildis

- On her feast day, January 4, or during the novena at Bruay, in early September.
- For a woman who suffers in her marriage or endures violence.
- For widows and for people beginning a new life after a bereavement.
- When it is hard to forgive a loved one who has hurt you.

- For people engaged in serving the poor.

An invocation for wounded homes

If you are praying for a person in danger, remember that prayer goes hand in hand with concrete help: in France, the number 3919 listens to women who are victims of violence. You can add this short invocation:

> *Lord, protect wounded homes,*
> *and let everyone find respect and peace in them.*
> *Saint Pharaildis, pray for us. Amen.*

To prepare for her feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Pharaildis from December 27 to January 4, and discover the life of Saint Pharaildis.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Pharaildis

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Pharaildis, patroness of Ghent, a wife in trial and then a charitable widow, who died around 740. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on her feast day, January 4, begin on December 27. At Bruay-sur-l'Escaut, a traditional novena is also held in her honor every year in early September. You can pray this one at any time of the year, especially for a couple in difficulty or a person who suffers in their home.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and present 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 Pharaildis, pray for us." The small act proposed each day helps you live out concretely what you have prayed.

Day 1: A childhood in the faith

According to her *Life*, Pharaildis was born around 650 into a noble family and received a solid Christian education. Tradition links her to a family of holy women, such as Gudula and Reineldis. Faith is often handed on first in the family.

Prayer: Lord, bless Christian families. Make our homes places where people learn to know you.

Today: Pray together as a family, or call a brother, a sister or a parent to see how they are.

Day 2: A heart given to God

While still young, Pharaildis promised God to belong to him entirely. It was the deepest desire of her heart, and she kept it all her life, even when circumstances ran against it.

Prayer: Lord, let my heart be yours first of all. Keep me faithful to what I have promised you.

Today: Reread an important promise of your life (baptism, marriage, a commitment) and renew it in prayer.

Day 3: A broken will

Her family married her against her will. Pharaildis knew the helplessness of those who have a life imposed on them that they did not choose. Even today, women and girls are forced into marriage.

Prayer: Lord, take care of those whose freedom is taken away. Let them find help and a path to deliverance.

Today: Find out about an organization that defends women against forced marriage, and support it if you can.

Day 4: Suffering at home

Her husband, Guy, mistreated her. Pharaildis suffered where she should have been safe. Christ knows these wounds hidden behind the doors of homes, and he does not want them.

Prayer: Lord, protect people who suffer violence in their homes. Give them the courage to ask for help, and place trustworthy people on their path.

Today: Be attentive to someone around you who seems withdrawn or frightened, and offer to listen.

Day 5: Caring for the one who hurts

When Guy was seriously injured on a hunt, Pharaildis nursed him devotedly. She did not take revenge. This is not accepting evil; it is refusing to let evil change her into what she opposes.

Prayer: Lord, heal my heart of resentment. Let me do good even to those who have done me harm, without putting myself in danger.

Today: Pray by name for a person who has hurt you.

Day 6: Grief and freedom

Her husband died of illness. Pharaildis entered widowhood, a time of mourning but also of new freedom. She chose to put it at the service of God and of others.

Prayer: Lord, console widows and widowers. Help them find a way of life after their loss.

Today: Visit or phone a person who is widowed.

Day 7: Giving drink

Tradition tells that she made a spring gush forth for thirsty workers. Beyond the legend, Pharaildis was a spring for those around her: she gave her goods, her time and her kindness.

Prayer: Lord, make me a spring for those who thirst: for bread, for attention, for hope.

Today: Offer a meal, a drink or a gift to someone in need.

Day 8: Bread shared

The miracle of the "stone loaves" recalls a simple lesson: refusing to share hardens the heart. What we keep for ourselves turns to stone; what we give becomes life.

Prayer: Lord, keep me from greed and from lies. Give me a generous heart that does not refuse its bread.

Today: Give to a food bank or to a charity in your neighborhood.

Day 9: A long life offered

Pharaildis died around 740, after a long life. Her relics were taken to Ghent, which made her its patroness. What she sowed in suffering and charity still bears fruit today.

Prayer: Lord, make my life bear fruit, even through my trials. Through the intercession of Saint Pharaildis, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Today: Thank God for a trial that, with time, has become a source of good.

Living the novena with Saint Pharaildis

This novena falls in the heart of the Christmas season, the feast of the Holy Family of Nazareth. It can be an occasion to pray for real families, with their joys and their wounds. If you pray it for a person who suffers violence, prayer does not replace concrete help: encourage them to turn to qualified people, such as the number 3919 in France. And if you pray it for yourself, know that Saint Pharaildis does not ask you to bear everything: she shows you a free heart, which violence did not succeed in hardening.

Closing prayer

Saint Pharaildis,
wife in trial and charitable widow,
present to God the intention I have carried during these nine days.
Obtain peace for wounded homes,
protection for those who are afraid,
conversion for those who cause suffering,
and for all of us a generous heart toward the poor.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Church of Saint-Pharaïlde at Bruay-sur-l'Escaut

At Bruay-sur-l'Escaut, in the Nord department of France, near Valenciennes, the church of Saint-Pharaïlde has kept alive for centuries the memory of the saint who, according to tradition, lived and died here around 740. Under its porch, an inscription sums up the town's attachment: "Sainte Pharaïlde, protégez Bruay" (Saint Pharaildis, protect Bruay). The church now belongs to the parish of Saint-Jacques-du-Val-d'Escaut, in the diocese of Cambrai.



The church of Saint-Pharaïlde at Bruay-sur-l'Escaut.

A very old sanctuary

According to her *Life*, Pharaildis was married to Guy, son of a chieftain settled at Bruay, and spent a large part of her life here. As a widow, she devoted herself to serving the people and had a chapel built in honor of Saint John the Baptist, where she was buried. Her relics were later moved to Ghent, around 754, but Bruay never forgot her.

A charter of King Robert, from 914, mentions a *basilica beatae Pharaildis*, which was destroyed by the Normans between 879 and 883. A new church was built in the 10th century and altered over the ages. The present building, in the neo-Gothic style, dates from 1891-1893. During the demolition of the old choir, a Romanesque cenotaph of the 12th century in memory of the saint was discovered; it was listed as a historic monument in 1896. Damaged in 1918, the church was restored in 1921.

Visiting the church

The church, of brick with parts in stone, has a porch tower flanked by turrets and topped by a tall slate spire, in the style of the region. Inside, you can see the saint's Romanesque cenotaph and a chased silver reliquary of the 15th century, the work of the goldsmith Gilles Steclin, listed as a historic monument in 1934. The high altar and its candle-bearing angels are the work of the sculptor Modeste Verlinden, and several side altars are by Gustave Pattein.

Not far away, in front of number 199 rue Ledru-Rollin, a small monument marks the site of the Sainte-Pharaïlde spring. According to tradition, the saint made it gush forth to quench the thirst of workers. It ran dry in the 20th century because of the mines, and was rediscovered and marked in 1990, for the 1250th anniversary of the saint's death.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Pharaildis. Before her reliquary, entrust to her troubled couples, women who suffer in their homes, widows and the families of Bruay, then recite the prayer to Saint Pharaildis. Every year in early September, the parish celebrates a novena in her honor: this is the best time for a pilgrimage. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Pharaildis

- **Ghent** (Belgium): the city of which she is patroness, where her relics were taken around 754; *Sint-Veerleplein* recalls the church that was dedicated to her.
- **Steenokkerzeel** (Flemish Brabant): the place of the miracle of the "stone loaves," around 1300.

Practical information

Bruay-sur-l'Escaut is very close to Valenciennes, in the Nord department. The church is a working parish church: modest dress and silence are requested, especially during services. Opening hours, Mass times and the dates of the September novena may vary: check with the parish of Saint-Jacques-du-Val-d'Escaut or the Valenciennes tourist office before you come.

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