

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Quiteria

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 22

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IN BRIEF

Saint Quiteria

Virgin and martyr, beloved saint of Gascony, venerated at Aire-sur-l'Adour.

Feast day	May 22
Born	5th century (according to tradition), Visigothic Aquitaine (according to Gascon tradition)
Died	c. 477 according to tradition (uncertain date), Aire-sur-l'Adour, France (according to tradition)
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (venerated since the early Middle Ages)
Era	5th century
Patron saint of	Gascony, Aire-sur-l'Adour, people suffering from headaches, against rabies

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Quiteria, Virgin and Martyr

Novena to Saint Quiteria

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Quiteria

Saint Quiteria (*Quitterie* in French, *Quitèira* in Gascon) is a young virgin martyr honored since the early Middle Ages in Gascony, in southwestern France, and especially in Aire-sur-l'Adour, in the Landes, where her sarcophagus is venerated in the crypt of the church of Le Mas. According to tradition, this daughter of a noble Gothic family refused the marriage her family wanted to force on her in order to consecrate herself to Christ, and she was beheaded, perhaps toward the end of the fifth century. The Roman Martyrology celebrates her on May 22.

Who was Saint Quiteria?

Quiteria is one of the most popular saints of southwestern France. Her name became a typical girl's name in the Landes and Gascony, and dozens of springs, chapels and churches are dedicated to her, from the Landes to Béarn and from the Gers to the Charente. In Spain and Portugal she is also deeply venerated as *Santa Quitéria*.

Yet the story of her life is very poorly known. The accounts of her martyrdom are late and vary a great deal. Historians distinguish what is known with some certainty, the existence of a virgin named Quiteria honored in Aquitaine from the sixth century, from what belongs to legend, enriched over the centuries. This page presents both, keeping them honestly apart.



Saint Quiteria, statue in the treasury of Auch Cathedral (18th century).

Key dates in the life of Saint Quiteria

- **5th or 6th century**: Life of Quiteria, according to tradition the daughter of a Gothic chief settled in Aquitaine.
- **c. 477**: Date of her martyrdom according to a medieval manuscript collected by the Bollandists (uncertain).
- **c. 590**: Gregory of Tours mentions a virgin Quiteria of Aquitaine, the earliest known reference.
- **c. 1000**: A manuscript of the martyrology of Usuard presents her as a virgin and martyr.
- **Late 11th century**: First mention of her martyrdom at Aire, as the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela grows.
- **Middle Ages**: The church of Le Mas d'Aire, which keeps her sarcophagus, becomes a stop on the *Via Podiensis*.

- **1998**: The church of Sainte-Quitterie in Aire is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, among the Routes of Santiago de Compostela in France.

The Gascon legend

According to the tradition of the Landes, Quiteria was the daughter of Kathilius, a Gothic chief. At that time, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Aquitaine and Novempopulania (the old Gascony) were ruled by the Visigoths. They were Christians, but Arians, who did not fully recognize the divinity of Christ. Quiteria embraced the Catholic faith, the faith of the Council of Nicaea.

Her father wanted to marry her to a prince of his people. The girl, who had consecrated herself to Christ, refused and fled to take refuge with a small community of virgins. Her suitor, or her father in some versions, eventually found her and had her beheaded. The stories say she was about fifteen, a detail that recalls the stories of Saint Agnes or Saint Marina.

Oral tradition adds a famous episode: where her head touched the ground, a spring burst forth. The young martyr then took her head in her hands and carried it to the top of the hill of Le Mas, in Aire, where she was buried. This is why she is counted among the "cephalophore" saints, those shown carrying their own head, like Saint Denis.

The Iberian legend

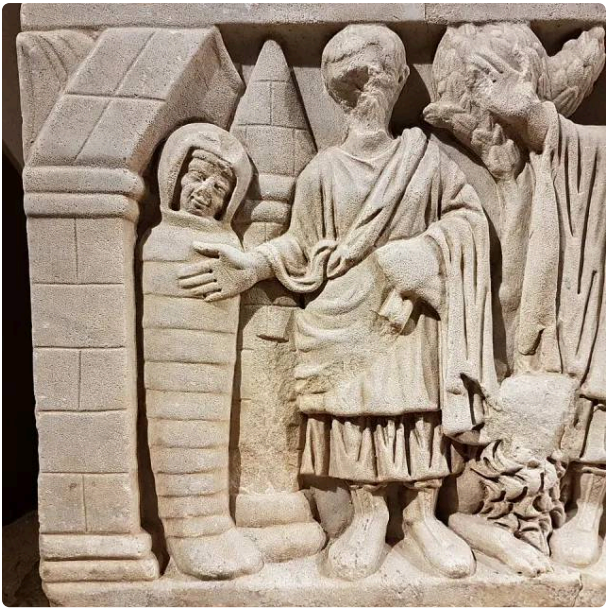
Another version, which spread from the late fourteenth century in Spain and Portugal, says she was born in Galicia, the daughter of a pagan governor named Catilius and his wife Calsia. Quiteria was supposedly one of nine sisters born on the same day, saved from death by a Christian servant and raised in the faith. All of them were said to have died as martyrs. This marvelous tale has no

historical basis, yet it did much to spread her cult in the Iberian Peninsula. Several of her "sisters," such as Saint Liberata and Saint Marina, have their own traditions.

What historians say

Scholars remain cautious. The earliest known mention comes from Gregory of Tours at the end of the sixth century, who knew Quiteria simply as a virgin of Aquitaine. Only around the year 1000 does a manuscript of the martyrology of Usuard call her a martyr, and the placing of her martyrdom at Aire appears only at the end of the eleventh century. Several researchers think the account of her martyrdom was developed at that time, notably around the abbey of Saint-Sever, to promote a shrine on the road to Compostela.

The marble sarcophagus kept in the crypt at Aire is older than the traditional date of her death: it dates from the fourth century, so it was reused, as was common. None of this prevents us from venerating Quiteria. The Church honors in her a Christian virgin whose memory has crossed fifteen centuries, even if the details of her life escape us.



The sarcophagus of Saint Quiteria, crypt of the church of Sainte-Quitterie, Aire-sur-l'Adour.

A devotion born on the Way of Saint James

Her relics were kept for centuries in the crypt of the church of Le Mas, in Aire, until the Wars of Religion of the sixteenth century. Pilgrims came in great numbers, following what were called in Gascon *lous camins de Sinte Quitèire*, "the roads of Saint Quiteria." The church became a stop on the *Via Podiensis*, the Camino route that starts at Le Puy-en-Velay. Pilgrims to Compostela then carried her cult far from the Landes, as far as the Limousin.

Why is Saint Quiteria the patron saint of headaches?

Because tradition says she was beheaded, Quiteria is invoked against headaches and nervous illnesses. She is also a patron of Gascony and of Aire-sur-l'Adour. People prayed to her against rabies, which is why she is sometimes shown with one or two dogs at her feet. Many springs in the Landes and Béarn, at Aire,

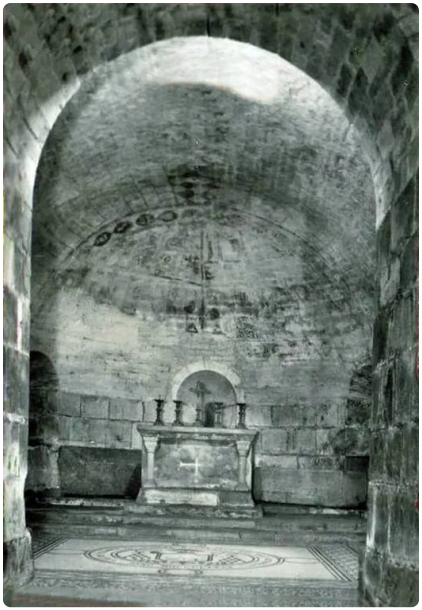
Gastes, Commensacq, Lucbardez and elsewhere, are placed under her patronage, and people came there to ask for healing, for themselves or for their children.

Quiteria speaks of the inner freedom of those who choose Christ, even when those around them want to decide in their place. Her legend tells of the courage of a girl who refused a life imposed on her, and of faithfulness to the true faith in the midst of division.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Quiteria in art

- **Palm of martyrdom**: her most common attribute.
- **Crown**: she is often shown as a young woman wearing a crown.
- **Dogs**: one or two dogs at her feet recall her protection against rabies.
- **Her head in her hands**: as a cephalophore saint, she is sometimes shown carrying her own head.

The oldest known images of her date from the fourteenth century.



The church of Sainte-Quitterie of Le Mas, Aire-sur-l'Adour.

Where to pray to Saint Quiteria

- **Aire-sur-l'Adour** (Landes, France): the church of Sainte-Quitterie of Le Mas, with her sarcophagus in the crypt and the nearby spring.
- **Auch** (Gers): the treasury of the cathedral of Sainte-Marie keeps a statue of the saint.
- **Mimizan** (Landes): a stained glass window of Saint Quiteria in the church of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption.
- **Gastes** (Landes): the devotional spring of Saint Quiteria.
- **Châlus** (Haute-Vienne): a statue of the saint in the church, a sign of the spread of her cult by pilgrims.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Quiteria or follow the novena to Saint Quiteria, from May 13 to 21, ending on the eve of her feast.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Quiteria, Virgin and Martyr

Saint Quiteria has been invoked for centuries in Gascony, especially against headaches, nervous disorders and rabies. She is also prayed to for young women, for the freedom to choose one's vocation and for faithfulness to the faith. As far as we know, no ancient prayer to her is widely used, so this page offers two original prayers by Saintspedia.

Prayer to Saint Quiteria, virgin and martyr

Saint Quiteria, young woman of Gascony, you preferred Christ to all the promises of the world: teach me to give him first place in my life.

You refused the life others wanted to force on you: help those who are seeking their vocation to listen to God's call with freedom and trust. Support young people under pressure, and those whose faith is mocked.

You are invoked at the springs of the Landes: look kindly on those who suffer in their head and in their mind, people with migraines, anxiety or exhaustion, and those going through depression. Obtain for them relief, peace and light.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Keep me faithful to the end, as you were, so that one day I may carry with you the palm of victory before Christ. Amen.

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

Short prayer for the sick

> *Saint Quiteria, according to tradition a spring burst forth where you died, and many came to it for healing. Pray for (name the person), who is suffering. May the Lord strengthen them in this trial and restore their health, if it is his will. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

Intentions to entrust to Saint Quiteria

- People suffering from migraines, headaches or neurological disorders.
- Young women and young people seeking their vocation.
- Those pressured into a way of life against their conscience.
- Families divided over questions of faith.
- Pilgrims on the Way of Saint James who pass through Aire-sur-l'Adour.
- Gascony and the Landes, where she is a beloved local saint.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Quiteria is celebrated on May 22. You can pray to her at any time, especially when a headache or migraine will not let go, before a decision about your vocation, or during a stop at Aire-sur-l'Adour on the Camino. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Quiteria from May 13 to 21, and read the life of Saint Quiteria.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Quiteria

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the tradition of Saint Quiteria, virgin and martyr venerated in Gascony. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast on May 22, begin on May 13; it ends on May 21. The meditations draw on her legend as handed down by tradition, whose historical details remain uncertain.

How to pray this novena

Each day, 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. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day. This novena is especially suited to people suffering from headaches or anxiety, to young people discerning their vocation, and to pilgrims on the Way of Saint James.

The nine days follow the story of Quiteria as the Gascon tradition tells it: a girl who chose the Catholic faith among the Arian Goths, refused a forced marriage, found refuge among consecrated women and gave her life for Christ. Even if history cannot confirm every detail, the Church has honored her memory for fifteen centuries, and her example still speaks of freedom, faithfulness and trust in God. If you pray for a sick person, name them at the start of each day.

Day 1: A faith received and chosen

According to tradition, Quiteria grew up among the Arian Goths but embraced the Catholic faith. Faith is a gift we receive, but it also asks for a personal choice, renewed again and again.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the faith I have received. Help me to choose it again today, freely and with all my heart. Amen.

Today: Pray the Creed slowly, pausing on each sentence.

Day 2: Christ in first place

Quiteria consecrated herself to Christ while still very young. She wanted him to come first in her life, before any other promise.

Prayer: Jesus, take first place in my heart, in my plans and in my time. Amen.

Today: Begin the day with five minutes of prayer before anything else.

Day 3: The freedom of God's children

Her family wanted to impose a marriage contrary to her calling. She refused, even at the price of running away. God calls each person in freedom, never by force.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give young people the inner freedom to answer their vocation, and give parents the wisdom to guide them without forcing them. Amen.

Today: Pray for a young person you know who is facing important choices.

Day 4: Finding refuge among sisters

Tradition says she took refuge with a small community of consecrated virgins. Faith is lived with others, and community protects the weak.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the brothers and sisters you have placed on my path. Make my community a place of welcome. Amen.

Today: Check in on someone who is isolated in your parish or neighborhood.

Day 5: Faithful to the end

When her pursuers found her, Quiteria did not deny her faith. Martyrdom is the highest witness of love, and the same faithfulness is asked of us in smaller trials.

Prayer: Lord, give me the strength to stay faithful in small trials as well as great ones. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians who are persecuted in the world today.

Day 6: A spring bursting forth

According to the legend, a spring burst forth where her head fell. God brings life where people have sown death.

Prayer: Lord, make the spring of your Spirit rise in me, and let my life refresh those who are thirsty. Amen.

Today: Make the sign of the cross with holy water and renew your baptismal promises.

Day 7: For those who suffer in their head

For centuries people have called on Saint Quiteria against headaches and troubles of the mind. Christ draws near to every kind of suffering, including the hidden ones.

Prayer: Saint Quiteria, pray for people with migraines, anxiety or depression, and for those who care for them. Amen.

Today: Offer time or attentive listening to someone going through a hard time.

Day 8: On the pilgrims' road

Thousands of pilgrims on their way to Compostela stopped at her tomb in Aire. Every Christian life is a pilgrimage toward God.

Prayer: Lord, guide my steps on the road of life, and protect the pilgrims who walk toward you. Amen.

Today: Walk for a while in silence, praying the Rosary or reflecting on the Gospel of the day.

Day 9: The palm of victory

Quiteria is shown with the palm of martyrdom, the sign of Christ's victory over death. At the end of this novena, we place our intention in her hands.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Quiteria, receive the intention I have entrusted to you for nine days. Give me a faithful and free heart, and lead me one day to the joy of your Kingdom. Amen.

Today: Give thanks for a grace received, and light a candle before an image of the Virgin Mary.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Quiteria, faithful virgin and witness to Christ, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for those who suffer in body and mind, for young people searching for their path, for pilgrims and for Gascony. Obtain for us a free faith, a pure heart and the courage to be faithful. Amen.*

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

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