

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Richardis

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 18

IN BRIEF

Saint Richardis

Carolingian empress, wife of Charles the Fat, founder of the Abbey of Andlau in Alsace.

Feast day	September 18
Born	c. 840
Died	Andlau, Alsace, France
Canonized	1049, by Pope Leo IX
Era	9th century

In this booklet

Life

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Abbey Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Andlau

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Richardis

Saint Richardis (in French, Richarde) was a Carolingian empress of the ninth century, the wife of Emperor Charles the Fat. Accused of adultery and repudiated by a sick and badly advised husband, she withdrew to the Abbey of Andlau, in Alsace, which she had founded, and ended her days there in prayer. Pope Leo IX, himself from Alsace, proclaimed her a saint in 1049. Her feast day is September 18.

Who was Saint Richardis?

Richardis was born around 840 into a great family of the Swabian nobility, the Ahalolfings, who held lands along the upper Neckar and the upper Danube. Her father, Erchanger, was Count of the Nordgau, in Alsace, and she spent a happy childhood in the area of Andlau, at the foot of the Vosges mountains. Around 862 she married a young Carolingian prince, Charles, a great-grandson of Charlemagne, who had been promised the government of Alemannia.

Through the play of inheritances, Charles, whom history would call "the Fat," reunited almost the whole empire of Charlemagne. King of Alemannia, then of Italy, he was crowned emperor in Rome in 881, together with Richardis, by Pope John VIII. He then became king of West Francia as well. Richardis was thus Empress of the West and Queen of the Franks.



The abbey church of Andlau, founded by Saint Richardis.

Key dates

- **c. 840**: Born into a noble Swabian family.
- **862**: Marries Charles, the future Emperor Charles the Fat.
- **c. 880**: Founds the Abbey of Andlau on her family lands.
- **881**: The couple is crowned emperor and empress in Rome.
- **887**: Accused of adultery, she is repudiated and withdraws to Andlau.
- **Late ninth century**: Dies at Andlau, on a September 18.
- **1049**: Pope Leo IX proclaims her a saint.

An empress in troubled times

The reign of Charles the Fat was a time of great danger. The Vikings sailed up the rivers and plundered towns and monasteries, Saracens and Hungarians launched their raids, and the Carolingian empire was falling apart from within.

The chroniclers credit Richardis with a real part in her husband's early successes. But the emperor was ill and suffered increasingly serious attacks, and the court was full of suspicion.

In 887, urged on by some of his advisers, Charles accused his wife of adultery with his chancellor and repudiated her, claiming that their marriage had never been consummated. The couple had no children. According to religious chroniclers, Richardis offered to submit to an ordeal, the "judgment of God," and is said to have passed through the trial by fire without apparent harm. She was nevertheless sent away. That same year Charles was deposed, and he died early in 888.

Andlau, her foundation and her refuge

Around 880, Richardis had founded the Abbey of Andlau on her family lands, in a valley of the Vosges about twenty-five miles from Strasbourg, and had endowed it richly. It was there that she withdrew after her repudiation. She lived in prayer, surrounded by nuns, and died there at the end of the ninth century. She had also supported other monasteries, in Alemannia, in Zurich and in Italy.

Legend says that the site of the abbey was shown to her by a mother bear scratching at the ground with her cubs. The animal has remained the symbol of Andlau. For centuries a bear was kept at the abbey, and in the crypt of the church visitors are still shown a stone statue of a she-bear, worn smooth by the devotion of the faithful, along with the hole her claws are said to have dug.

The abbey became a powerful house of canonesses, answerable directly to the Empire. Its members, drawn from the greatest families, could leave the monastery to marry; only the abbess, heir of Richardis, took permanent vows and bore the title of Princess of the Holy Roman Empire.

A saint proclaimed by Pope Leo IX

Richardis was not honored for a spectacular achievement, but for the way she passed through humiliation. A woman of power, unjustly accused and cast aside, she did not seek revenge. She found in prayer and monastic life a path to peace. Devotion to her grew around her tomb at Andlau, and in 1049 Pope Leo IX, himself an Alsatian, proclaimed her a saint. At that time, before the formal canonization process of later centuries, popes recognized in this way a devotion that was already alive among the faithful.

Why do people pray to Saint Richardis?

Saint Richardis has no official patronage, but her story makes her a natural intercessor in certain trials. People pray to her:

- for those who are slandered or falsely accused, since she was publicly accused of a fault she had not committed;
- for wives and husbands who have been abandoned or betrayed, and for couples in difficulty;
- for divided families;
- for anyone who has lost position, reputation or security and must rebuild a life in God.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Richardis in art

- **A crown and an imperial mantle**, recalling that she was empress.
- **A bear**, often a she-bear with her cubs, from the legend of the founding of Andlau.
- **Flames**, in some images, recalling the ordeal by fire that tradition says she passed through unharmed.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Richardis and the novena to Saint Richardis, prayed from September 9 to 17.

Where to pray to Saint Richardis

- **Andlau** (Bas-Rhin, Alsace, France): the abbey church of Saints Peter and Paul, with her tomb and the crypt of the bear. The church, with its carved Romanesque frieze, is one of the jewels of Alsatian Romanesque art.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Richardis for Those Who Are Slandered and for Families

No ancient prayer of Saint Richardis has come down to us, and none of her writings survive. Here you will find an original prayer inspired by her life: an empress who was humiliated and cast aside, and who became, at Andlau, a woman of prayer.

Praying with a saint who was slandered

Richardis knew the height of power, then a public accusation, rejection by her husband and solitude. She is a companion in prayer for anyone going through a breakup, an injustice or a humiliation. She did not answer the accusation with bitterness or revenge, but withdrew to the abbey she had founded and gave her life to God.



Saint Richardis at prayer.

Prayer to Saint Richardis for those who are slandered and for families

Saint Richardis, you who were crowned empress and then rejected and unjustly accused, pray for those who are slandered, humiliated or abandoned.

You who did not seek revenge, teach me to hand over to God the wounds others have caused me, and not to let bitterness settle in my heart.

I entrust to you couples in difficulty, wives and husbands who have been abandoned, and families torn apart. Obtain for them truth, peace and, if God wills it, reconciliation.

You who found at Andlau the peace of prayer, lead me into the silence where God consoles. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Like you, may I pass through trials while keeping my trust in the One who judges with justice. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Richardis is celebrated on September 18, the anniversary of her death at Andlau. You can pray to her at any time:

- when you are the target of gossip, false accusations or a damaged reputation;
- during a separation, a divorce or a betrayal in marriage;
- when a family is divided and reconciliation seems out of reach;
- after losing a position or status, to find peace again in God.

A prayer from the Psalms

In times of unjust accusation, the Church has always prayed with the Psalms. These words fit the trial Richardis lived through:

> *"Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from deceitful and unjust men deliver me!" (Psalm 43:1, Revised Standard Version)*

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Richardis

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Richardis, empress and founder of the Abbey of Andlau. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of her feast, begin it on September 9 and pray the last day on September 17, so that you reach her feast on September 18. You can also pray it at any time of the year, especially in a time of injustice, separation or family conflict.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father and a Hail Mary. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into your daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: "Lord, through the intercession of Saint Richardis, who was humiliated and unjustly accused yet found her peace in you, I bring you this intention. Heal what is wounded, bring truth to light and keep my heart free from bitterness. Amen."

Each day follows a stage of her life, from her childhood in Alsace to her last years of prayer at Andlau.

Day 1: A childhood at the foot of the Vosges

Richardis spent a happy childhood near Andlau, in the Alsatian countryside. The places where we first received love and faith remain a source of strength all through life.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the people and places that gave me a happy start in life. Bless the children growing up today in families of every kind. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Give thanks for one good memory from your childhood, and pray for the person connected with it.

Day 2: The commitment of marriage

Around 862, Richardis married Charles, a young prince. Marriage is a promise made before God, with all its hopes and all its fragility.

Prayer: Lord, strengthen the bond of married couples, and give them patience, tenderness and faithfulness. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Pray by name for a couple you know, especially one going through a hard time.

Day 3: Power as a service

Crowned empress in Rome in 881, Richardis stood at the height of the Western world. The chroniclers say she truly helped her husband in his task. Power can be a way of serving others.

Prayer: Lord, guide all who hold authority, in nations, in businesses and in families, so that they serve the common good. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Use whatever influence you have today to help someone rather than to be noticed.

Day 4: Building for God

Around 880 she founded the Abbey of Andlau on her family lands and endowed it generously. She gave part of her wealth so that prayer could rise there for centuries.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to use my goods for what lasts, and to build something for you in my own life. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Make a gift, however small, to your parish or to a community of prayer.

Day 5: Living in times of fear

Richardis lived through Viking raids, the collapse of the empire and the illness of her husband. Her world was full of fear and uncertainty, as ours can be.

Prayer: Lord, when everything around me seems to fall apart, be my rock and my refuge. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Name one fear that weighs on you and place it in God's hands in prayer.

Day 6: Falsely accused

In 887, her own husband publicly accused her of adultery. Few wounds are deeper than a lie told about us by someone we love.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, falsely accused before your judges, stand beside all who are slandered today, and let the truth come to light. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Refuse to repeat a piece of gossip, and speak well of someone who is being criticized.

Day 7: The trial by fire

According to the chroniclers, she agreed to undergo an ordeal by fire and came through it unharmed. Whatever the details of this account, it speaks of a woman who placed her innocence in God's hands.

Prayer: Lord, you know the truth of my heart. Give me the courage to entrust my cause to you rather than to fight with the weapons of anger. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Let go of a desire for revenge, even a small one, and pray for the person who hurt you.

Day 8: Rejected, yet not alone

Repudiated and sent away, Richardis returned to Andlau. What looked like a defeat became the beginning of a new life of prayer among her sisters.

Prayer: Lord, comfort all who have been abandoned by a spouse, a family or a community. Open a new path for them, and surround them with true friends. Saint Richardis, pray for us.

Today: Reach out to someone who lives alone after a separation or a loss.

Day 9: The peace of the cloister

At Andlau, Richardis spent her last years in prayer, far from the court, and died there at the end of the ninth century. She found in God the peace that the world had not given her.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Richardis, grant me your peace, which surpasses all understanding. Amen.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes in silence before God, in a church if you can.

Closing prayer

Saint Richardis, empress and servant of God, at the end of these nine days I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for those who are slandered, for couples in difficulty and for divided families. Obtain for us the

grace to forgive, to wait for the truth with patience and to find our peace in God alone. Amen.

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

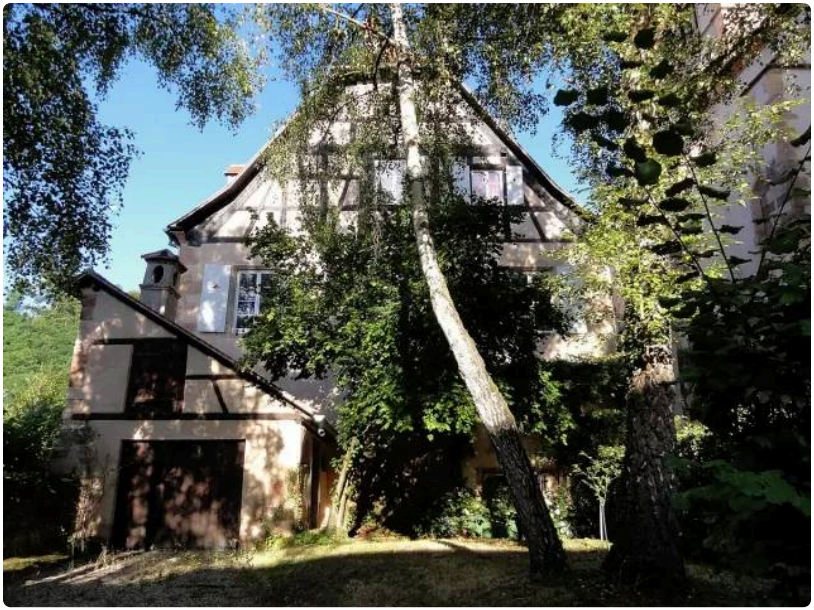
PILGRIMAGE

Abbey Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Andlau

The abbey church of Saints Peter and Paul in Andlau, in the Bas-Rhin, is the church of the abbey founded around 880 by Saint Richardis, Empress of the West. She spent her last years there and is buried there. At the foot of the Vosges, on the Alsace Wine Route, this great Romanesque building is the place where people come to pray to the saint and to discover the legend of the she-bear who is said to have shown her the site of the monastery.

From imperial abbey to parish church

Richardis founded the abbey on her family lands and withdrew there after her repudiation in 887. After her death, her tomb became a place of veneration, and Pope Leo IX proclaimed her a saint in 1049. The abbey became a powerful house of noble canonesses, whose abbess bore the title of princess of the Holy Roman Empire. The present church dates mostly from the 12th century, with later parts; its facade and portal are adorned with a famous Romanesque sculpted frieze. The abbey disappeared during the Revolution, and the church became a parish church.



The abbey church of Saints Peter and Paul in Andlau.

Visiting the abbey church

The visit begins outside: the sculpted frieze running across the facade, with its scenes of combat, hunting and fantastic animals, is among the finest Romanesque ensembles in Alsace. Inside, the tomb of Saint Richardis recalls the foundress. Beneath the choir, the crypt, one of the oldest parts of the building, holds the statue of the she-bear, polished by centuries of devotion, and the hollow that her claws are said to have dug according to the legend.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Richardis. Before her tomb, you can entrust to God people who have been slandered, couples in difficulty and divided families, then say the prayer to Saint Richardis. The crypt, quieter,

invites you to prolong this time of prayer. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places associated with Saint Richardis

- **Andlau**: the village itself, whose emblem remains the bear, in memory of the founding legend.
- **Mont Sainte-Odile**, very close by, another great Alsatian pilgrimage site of the early Middle Ages.
- **Rome**: Saint Peter's Basilica, where she was crowned empress with her husband in 881.

Practical information

Andlau is about forty kilometers southwest of Strasbourg, near Obernai and Barr. The abbey church is a parish church: visits are made outside services and with respect for the place. Opening hours for the church and the crypt vary by season: ask the parish or the tourist office before you come.

Credits and sources

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