

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Servatius

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: May 13

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IN BRIEF

Saint Servatius

First known bishop of Tongeren in the fourth century, defender of the faith of Nicaea, venerated in Maastricht.

Feast day	May 13
Died	Maastricht, Netherlands
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	Maastricht, Saint-Servan

In this booklet

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Basilica of Saint Servatius in Maastricht

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Servatius

Saint Servatius (Servais in French, Servaas in Dutch) is the first known bishop of Tongeren, in the fourth century, at the origin of the diocese that would later become the diocese of Liège. A defender of the faith of Nicaea alongside Saint Athanasius, he died in Maastricht, where his tomb became one of the great pilgrimages of northern Europe. Around his rather slender historical figure, a rich legend grew up. The last of the "Ice Saints," he is celebrated on May 13.

Who was Saint Servatius?

Servatius was bishop of the *civitas Tungrorum*, the Roman district whose capital was Tongeren and which stretched from the Campine to the Ardennes, in present-day Belgium. He is the first bishop of this region whose existence is certain. Rather than living in Tongeren itself, he preferred to reside in Maastricht, a town on the Meuse river at the crossing of the great Roman road from Bavay to Cologne.

What we know for certain about him fits in a few lines. He took part in the great controversies of his time over the divinity of Christ. At the Council of Serdica, around 343, he supported Athanasius of Alexandria, the champion of the faith of Nicaea. At the Council of Rimini, in 359, he again defended the doctrine of the Trinity under heavy imperial pressure in favor of Arianism. The historian Sulpicius Severus describes him as a tenacious and courageous man, yet simple and upright.

Key dates in the life of Servatius

- **Early fourth century**: Birth, in Armenia according to legend; his real origin is unknown.
- **c. 343**: He attends the Council of Serdica and supports Saint Athanasius.

- **359**: He attends the Council of Rimini.
- **384, according to tradition**: Dies in Maastricht and is buried near the town wall.
- **Sixth century**: Gregory of Tours tells his story under the name Aravatius.
- **Since 1359**: The great seven-yearly pilgrimage of the relics is held in Maastricht.

The legend of Saint Servatius

The silence of the historical sources was amply made up for by legend. It makes Servatius an Armenian, born in Penestria, related to Christ through Saint Anne, and ordained a priest in Jerusalem, where an angel told him to leave for Tongeren. Historians think this legend mixes several figures with similar names, such as Servatius and Aravatius.

In the sixth century, Saint Gregory of Tours, in his *History of the Franks*, tells the story of a holy bishop of Tongeren named Aravatius, who is identified with Servatius. Learning that the Huns were threatening Gaul, the bishop multiplied vigils and fasts. Understanding that his prayer would not be granted, he went to Rome to pray at the tomb of Saint Peter. There, according to the account, the apostle told him that the invasion would take place but that he would not see it, and that he should prepare his burial. Back in Tongeren, he said farewell to his weeping people, went to Maastricht, caught a fever there and died. He was buried near the public rampart.

Tradition adds that Saint Peter gave him a silver key containing a fragment of the chain that had held the apostle captive. This key became the saint's attribute. The story is chronologically impossible, since the Huns did not invade Gaul until 451, but it shows well the place Servatius held in the memory of northern Christians: that of a shepherd who prays for his people to the very end.

Maastricht, the city of Saint Servatius

A place of worship rose very early over the tomb of Servatius in Maastricht; it would become the Basilica of Saint Servatius. Its crypt holds his tomb, which several popes have visited. The treasury preserves objects that tradition links to his life, the *Servatiana*, including the silver key. The saint's great reliquary shrine, which local people call the *Noodkist*, is displayed in the church. Since 1359, every seven years, Maastricht has celebrated a great feast of the relics, the seven-yearly pilgrimage, which draws crowds from across the region.

Devotion to Servatius spread far beyond the Meuse valley. Nineteen churches in Belgium and several towns bear his name, and he is also the patron of the Breton town of Saint-Servan, near Saint-Malo, in France.

Why is Saint Servatius one of the Ice Saints?

Celebrated on May 13, Servatius closes the series of the "Ice Saints," with Saint Mamertus and Saint Pancras, whose feasts fall in the period of the last frosts in Europe. Many old farming sayings in France, Belgium and Germany recall this, such as "Servatius, Pancras and Mamertus, all three together make a little winter," or "Once Saint Servatius is past, you can sow." He was invoked against rheumatism and fevers, for the protection of livestock and for the success of undertakings. In some places, pilgrims touched his statue with a hazel rod at the place where they were in pain.

What can we learn from his holiness?

Servatius was a faithful bishop in a time of doctrinal confusion, when the emperors themselves supported Arianism. He held firm, with simplicity. Legend made him the image of the shepherd who intercedes for his people in the face of danger, and who accepts in peace the announcement of his own death. He can be invoked for bishops and pastors, for the sick and for those who fear the future.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Servatius and the novena to Saint Servatius, prayed from May 4 to 12.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Servatius in art

Servatius is shown as a bishop, with miter and crozier. His proper attribute is the key, recalling the silver key that, according to tradition, Saint Peter gave him in Rome. He can be seen this way in medieval manuscripts, on the bridge that bears his name in Maastricht and in many Belgian churches.

Where to pray to Saint Servatius

- **Maastricht** (Netherlands): the Basilica of Saint Servatius, with his tomb, his shrine and his treasury.
- **Tongeren** (Belgium): the ancient city of which he was bishop.
- **Belgium**: the many parish churches placed under his patronage.
- **Saint-Servan** (Saint-Malo, France): the Breton town that bears his name.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Servatius for the Sick and for Pastors

Saint Servatius left no writings, and no traditional prayer to him has spread beyond local devotions. The oldest spiritual portrait we have of him comes from Gregory of Tours. You will find it below, followed by an original prayer by Saintspedia for the sick and for pastors.

A portrait of Saint Servatius to meditate on

> *"There was at that time in the city of Tongeren a bishop of very great holiness named Aravatius. Given to vigils and fasting, often bathed in tears, he implored the mercy of God."*

Source: Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, Book II, chapter 5 (sixth century), free English rendering, slightly abridged. Aravatius is the name Gregory uses for Saint Servatius.

The same account reports that when Servatius left Tongeren, his faithful begged him: "Do not abandon us, holy father! Do not forget us, good shepherd!"

Prayer to Saint Servatius for the sick and for pastors

Saint Servatius, good shepherd of Tongeren and Maastricht, you kept vigil and fasted for your threatened people: pray for our cities, our families and our countries.

You stayed faithful to the faith of the Church when the powerful wanted to change it: give us the courage to hold to the truth with simplicity and uprightness.

You are invoked for the sick and for those who suffer in their bodies: I entrust to you those who are in pain, who have a fever or who can no longer walk, and my own intention: (name it in silence).

You welcomed in peace the announcement of your death: teach me to place my future in the hands of God, without fear.

Do not abandon us, holy father; do not forget us, good shepherd. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Servatius is celebrated on May 13, the last day of the "Ice Saints." In Maastricht, his relics are carried in procession during the great seven-yearly pilgrimage. You can also pray to him at the bedside of someone who is ill, for your bishop and parish priest, before a new undertaking, or in a season of worry about the future. Gardeners and farmers who still keep the old sayings may like to say it in mid-May, when the risk of frost has passed.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Servatius, and discover the life of Saint Servatius.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Servatius

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the history and tradition of Saint Servatius, bishop of Tongeren. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast day, May 13, begin it on May 4. You can also pray it at any other time, for a sick person, for the pastors of the Church or when you are afraid of what lies ahead.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day and then an Our Father. The small act proposed for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life. Several meditations draw on the legend of Saint Servatius: they keep its spiritual meaning, without presenting it as history. If you miss a day, simply continue: a novena is a path of trust.

Servatius lived in a troubled time, when the faith was disputed and the borders of the Roman world were threatened. Over these nine days, he can teach us faithfulness, intercession and peace in the face of the unknown.

Day 1: A shepherd for a region

Servatius is the first known bishop of Tongeren. He sowed the faith in a land where the Church was only beginning. Every Christian community rests on those who agreed to be its first servants. He chose to live in Maastricht, at the crossing of a great road and a river, where travelers passed and the Gospel could spread.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who passed on the faith in my region and in my family. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray for your bishop and your diocese.

Day 2: Standing firm

At Serdica and at Rimini, Servatius defended the faith of Nicaea against powerful currents. Faithfulness sometimes means going against the tide. In his day, even emperors favored Arianism, which denied that Christ is truly God. Servatius held to the faith we still profess every Sunday.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me the courage to remain faithful when it is hard. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Read the Creed slowly.

Day 3: Simple and upright

Sulpicius Severus describes him as tenacious, yet simple and upright. Christian firmness is neither harshness nor pride.

Prayer: Lord, make me firm in the truth and gentle in the way I speak it. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Say a necessary truth with kindness.

Day 4: Praying for one's people

According to Gregory of Tours, Servatius kept vigil and fasted so that his people might be spared. Interceding for others is one of the most beautiful services we can offer.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you my town, my neighborhood and all who live there. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray by name for three neighbors.

Day 5: When prayer seems unanswered

The legend tells that Servatius understood that his request would not be granted. Yet he did not stop praying, and went to seek strength from Saint Peter in Rome.

Prayer: Lord, even when I do not understand your answers, keep me in trust. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Entrust to God a prayer that seems to have gone unanswered.

Day 6: The key of Saint Peter

According to tradition, the apostle Peter gave him a key. It recalls the bond of each local Church with the Church of Rome and the communion of the whole Church.

Prayer: Lord, keep your Church in unity, around the successor of Peter. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Pray for the Pope.

Day 7: For those who suffer in their bodies

Saint Servatius is invoked against fevers and rheumatism. Pilgrims came to entrust their pains to him. Christ meets each person in their suffering. In some places, pilgrims touched his statue with a hazel rod at the very place where they were in pain, a simple gesture of trust.

Prayer: Lord, relieve the sick and give them peace. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Visit or call someone who is ill.

Day 8: Working the land

As the last of the Ice Saints, Servatius marked for our ancestors the end of the frosts and the time for sowing. Faith also lives in the rhythm of the seasons and of work.

Prayer: God our Creator, bless the work of farmers and the fruits of the earth. Saint Servatius, pray for us. Amen.

Today: Give thanks for a meal, thinking of those who produced it.

Day 9: Preparing to depart in peace

The legend shows Servatius saying farewell to his people and preparing calmly to die. A Christian death is prepared in trust, day after day. His tomb in Maastricht, visited by pilgrims for centuries, reminds us that those who die in Christ remain close to us in the communion of saints.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Servatius, grant me to live and to die in your peace. Amen.

Today: Pray for the dying and for those who accompany them.

Closing prayer

Saint Servatius, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have brought before you. Pray for the pastors of the Church, for the sick and for those who are afraid of the future. Do not abandon us, good shepherd. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Servatius and the prayer to Saint Servatius.

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Servatius in Maastricht

The Basilica of Saint Servatius in Maastricht, in the Netherlands, stands over the grave of Saint Servatius, the first attested bishop of Tongeren, who died in Maastricht in the 4th century. A great Romanesque church of the Meuse region, it preserves his tomb in the crypt, his shrine, and a treasury rich in mementos of the saint. It is the main pilgrimage site in his honor.

A church born of a tomb

According to Gregory of Tours, Servatius was buried in Maastricht near the public rampart. Over his grave rose first a small oratory, replaced several times by larger buildings as the pilgrimage grew. The present church, mostly Romanesque, dates from the High Middle Ages and was enlarged and transformed over the centuries. It bears the title of basilica and stands on the Vrijthof, the city's great square.

Since 1359, Maastricht has held a pilgrimage of relics every seven years, during which the shrine of Saint Servatius and other reliquaries are carried in procession through the city. The relics of Saint Lidwina were also carried there in 2018.



The Basilica of Saint Servatius on the Vrijthof, in Maastricht.

Visiting the basilica

In the crypt is the tomb of Saint Servatius, before which several popes have come to pray. In the church, visitors can see the saint's great shrine, which the locals call the *Noodkist*, the "shrine of distress," a masterpiece of Romanesque goldsmithing. The basilica's treasury gathers the *Servatiana*, objects that tradition connects with the saint, including the silver key he is said to have received from Saint Peter, as well as many reliquaries and ancient textiles.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you may wish to read the life of Saint Servatius. The crypt is the most fitting place for quiet reflection: you can entrust your intentions there, especially for the sick, and then say the prayer to Saint Servatius.

Coming around May 13, his feast day, lets you join in the prayer of the local community. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The Basilica of Saint Servatius in Maastricht, the crypt.

Other places connected with Saint Servatius

- **Tongeren** (Belgium): the ancient city of which he was bishop, about twelve miles from Maastricht.
- **Belgium**: many parish churches that bear his name.
- **Saint-Servan** (Saint-Malo, Brittany): the town that took him as its patron.

Practical information

The basilica is in the historic center of Maastricht, reachable on foot from the train station. Admission to the treasury is generally charged. Opening, Mass, and visiting hours, as well as the dates of the next seven-year pilgrimage, should

be checked on the official website of the Basilica of Saint Servatius before you come.

CREDITS

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