

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Sunniva of Selje

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: July 8

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IN BRIEF

Saint Sunniva of Selje

Irish princess who took refuge in Norway according to legend, patron saint of western Norway.

Feast day	July 8
Died	Selja island, Norway
Era	10th century
Patron saint of	western Norway

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Sunniva for Those Who Seek Refuge

Novena to Saint Sunniva of Selje

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Sunniva of Selje

Saint Sunniva of Selje is the patron saint of western Norway. According to her legend, this tenth-century Irish princess fled her homeland by sea to escape a forced marriage to a pagan king, and died with her companions in a cave on the island of Selja. Her story belongs largely to tradition, but it gave birth to a monastery and to one of the oldest cults of a saint in Scandinavia. Her feast day is July 8.

Who was Saint Sunniva?

Almost everything told about Sunniva comes from a Latin hagiographical text, the *Acta sanctorum in Selio* ("Acts of the Saints of Selja"), written around 1170, nearly two centuries after the events it describes. No contemporary document mentions her name. Historians therefore read it above all as the witness of an old local devotion, put into writing at a time when the Church in Norway was taking shape and wished to honor its own saints.

According to this account, Sunniva was the heiress of a kingdom in Ireland. When a pagan king who wanted to marry her invaded her country, she put out to sea with a group of men and women who chose to follow her, abandoning themselves to Providence. Their boats are said to have come ashore on the Norwegian coast, on the island of Selja in the Nordfjord, where they took refuge in a cave.

Reading her story honestly means holding two things together: we cannot be certain of the historical details, and yet the faith of the Christians who kept her memory is very real. For centuries, the people of the Norwegian coast saw in Sunniva a woman who trusted God completely.



The ruins of Selja monastery, Norway.

Key dates

- **Tenth century**: According to tradition, she flees Ireland and lands on the island of Selja.
- **Around the mid-tenth century**: Sunniva and her companions die in a cave on the island, in the time of King Håkon according to the legend.
- **996**: King Olaf Tryggvason has the cave opened, and her body is said to have been found incorrupt.
- **c. 1170**: The *Acta sanctorum in Selio* are written.
- **1198**: According to tradition, her relics are carried before the great fire of Bergen, which stops.

The cave of Selja

The legend says that the people of the area, seeing these strangers arrive, suspected them of stealing their livestock. King Håkon came to the island to deliver justice. Sunniva, fearing to fall into the hands of the pagans, prayed with all her heart. Rocks then broke away from the mountain and closed the entrance of the cave. She died there with her companions, unable to come out again.

The story does not present this as a defeat. In the eyes of the medieval writer, God answered her prayer by keeping her and her companions from violence and taking them to himself. Sunniva is therefore honored as a virgin who gave her life to remain faithful to Christ.

The discovery of 996

Some years later, extraordinary signs were reported on the island. King Olaf Tryggvason, who was then leading the Christianization of Norway, had the cave cleared in 996. According to tradition, Sunniva's body was found there without corruption. This discovery marks the beginning of her public cult.



Saint Sunniva, patron saint of western Norway.

A cult born on an island

On the site of the discovery, a Benedictine monastery was built in the Middle Ages. Its ruins can still be seen today on the island of Selja, near the village of Selje. Sunniva's relics were later moved to Bergen, the great city of the western coast. Tradition says that during the great fire of 1198, her remains were carried before the flames and the fire stopped.

Sunniva is celebrated on July 8 in both Catholic and Orthodox calendars. Her figure recalls the many monks and Christians from Ireland who, in the early Middle Ages, put out to sea for the love of Christ, often without knowing where they would land.

Why is Saint Sunniva the patron saint of western Norway?

Her cult grew along the western coast of Norway, around two places: the island of Selja, where tradition places her death and where the monastery stood, and Bergen, where her relics were kept. The story of the fire of 1198 tied her even more closely to the city and to the whole region. Over the centuries, she became the patron saint of all western Norway.

Today she is also invoked by those who have to flee their country and by those who seek refuge, since her own story is that of a young woman who chose exile rather than a marriage imposed on her.

What her story teaches

We cannot say with certainty what the real life of Sunniva was. But the account handed down by the Christians of Norway tells us something about their faith: a woman who prefers exile to a forced marriage, who entrusts her life to God on an unknown sea and who, in distress, turns to prayer. Her story speaks to anyone who has had to leave everything behind, and to anyone who needs to trust God when the way ahead is hidden.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Sunniva and the novena to Saint Sunniva.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Sunniva in art

Sunniva is usually shown as a young princess wearing a crown, a sign of her royal birth according to the legend. She often holds a stone or a rock, which recalls the rocks that closed the cave of Selja.

Where to pray to Saint Sunniva

- **Selja island** (near Selje, Norway): the ruins of the monastery and the cave associated with her legend.

- **Bergen** (Norway): the city where her relics were moved in the Middle Ages.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Sunniva for Those Who Seek Refuge

No ancient prayer to Saint Sunniva has come down to us in a form we can quote. Saintspedia offers an original prayer, inspired by her legend as the Christians of Norway have handed it down: a young woman who chose exile rather than a forced marriage, who entrusted herself to God on an unknown sea, and who turned to prayer in her hour of danger.

Prayer to Saint Sunniva for those who seek refuge

Saint Sunniva, you left your homeland rather than give up your freedom and your faith. You put out to sea without knowing where the waves would take you, trusting only in the Providence of God.

Look with kindness on all who must flee their country: refugees, migrants, families driven from their homes by war or violence. Guide them to a safe shore and to people who will welcome them.

Watch over young women who are pressured or forced into a marriage they have not chosen. Give them courage, protection and friends who will stand by them.

When I am afraid and the way ahead is hidden, teach me to pray as you prayed in the cave of Selja, placing my whole life in the hands of the Lord.

Intercede for the people of Norway and for all who honor your memory, and present to God my intention (name it in silence).

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Sunniva's feast day is July 8, celebrated in both Catholic and Orthodox calendars. It is the natural day to pray to her, especially in Norway and among Norwegian Catholics abroad.

Her story also makes this prayer fitting at other moments:

- when you pray for refugees and migrants, or work with them;
- before a journey by sea or a move to a new country;
- for a young woman facing pressure to marry against her will;
- in a moment of fear, when you feel trapped and can only pray;
- for the Church in Scandinavia and for Christians who live as a small minority.

A short prayer for travelers by sea

> *Saint Sunniva, who crossed the sea trusting in God alone, pray for all who travel on the waters and for all who have no safe harbor. Lead us to the shore of the Father's house. Amen.*

Original text by Saintspedia.

To learn more about her legend and her cult, read the life of Saint Sunniva of Selje, or pray the novena to Saint Sunniva.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Sunniva of Selje

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the legend of Saint Sunniva of Selje as it was written down around 1170 and handed on by the Christians of Norway. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on her feast day, July 8, begin on June 30. It can also be prayed at any time of year: for refugees and migrants, before a journey, or in a time of fear when you need to trust God with an uncertain future.

We know Sunniva mainly through tradition, and these nine days do not claim more than that. They follow the great steps of her story, from Ireland to the island of Selja and from the cave to the city of Bergen, as a path of trust.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. 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.

Day 1: A heart given to God

According to the legend, Sunniva was a princess, heiress of a kingdom in Ireland. She could have lived in comfort and honor. Yet what mattered most to her was her faith and her freedom to belong to Christ.

Prayer: Lord, you know what I hold most dear. Through the intercession of Saint Sunniva, help me to place you first in my life, above comfort, reputation and the opinion of others. Amen.

Today: Take ten minutes of silence before God, with no phone and no distraction.

Day 2: Freedom to say no

A pagan king wanted to marry Sunniva and invaded her country. She refused a marriage imposed on her. Her story reminds us that every person has the right to choose their vocation freely, before God.

Prayer: Lord, protect all those who are forced into choices they have not made: young women married against their will, people under pressure or control. Give them courage and send them help. Amen.

Today: Learn about an organization that helps victims of forced marriage or trafficking, and pray for its work.

Day 3: Leaving everything behind

Sunniva put out to sea with those who chose to follow her. She left her homeland, her rank and everything familiar, without knowing where she would arrive.

Prayer: Lord, you called Abraham to leave his country for a land you would show him. Give me the courage to leave behind what keeps me from you, and to follow you even when I cannot see the way. Amen.

Today: Give away something you do not need, or let go of a habit that weighs you down.

Day 4: Trusting Providence on the sea

The legend says that Sunniva and her companions abandoned themselves to Providence on the open sea. Their safety was in God's hands, not in their own skill.

Prayer: Lord, in the storms of my life, teach me to trust you. When I cannot control what happens, let me rest in your care, as Sunniva did on the waves. Amen.

Today: Name one worry you cannot solve, and hand it over to God in a short prayer each time it returns.

Day 5: Strangers on a foreign shore

On Selja, the local people saw the newcomers as a threat and accused them of stealing their livestock. Sunniva knew what it is to be a stranger, misunderstood and suspected.

Prayer: Lord, open my heart to the stranger. Free me from suspicion and fear of those who are different, and make me a person who welcomes. Through Saint Sunniva, protect all refugees and migrants. Amen.

Today: Greet or help a newcomer in your parish, your neighborhood or your workplace.

Day 6: Prayer in the cave

When the king came with his men, Sunniva did not reach for a weapon. She prayed. According to the legend, rocks fell and closed the cave, and she died there with her companions, kept from violence and given to God.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel trapped and without a way out, teach me to pray with my whole heart. Be my refuge and my rock, today and at the hour of my death. Amen.

Today: Pray Psalm 91 ("He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High") slowly.

Day 7: Faithful to the end

Sunniva and her companions chose to remain faithful to Christ, whatever the cost. The Church honors her as a virgin who gave her life rather than betray her faith.

Prayer: Lord, I pray for Christians who suffer for their faith today. Give them strength, and give me the courage to be faithful to you in small things, so that I may be faithful in great ones. Amen.

Today: Pray for persecuted Christians, or read the story of a modern martyr.

Day 8: A light found again

Years later, signs were seen on the island. In 996, King Olaf Tryggvason had the cave opened, and tradition says her body was found incorrupt. What seemed hidden and forgotten was brought to light.

Prayer: Lord, nothing given to you is ever lost. Bring to light the good that is hidden in my life and in the lives of those I love, and give hope to all who feel forgotten. Amen.

Today: Write a note of thanks to someone whose quiet goodness often goes unnoticed.

Day 9: Protector of a people

Sunniva's relics were taken to Bergen, and tradition says that in 1198 the city's great fire stopped before them. She became the patron saint of all western Norway, a friend and protector for generations of Christians.

Prayer: Lord, through Saint Sunniva, protect our homes, our cities and our countries. Bless the Church in Norway and in all of Scandinavia, and make us, wherever we live, a people of faith and welcome. Amen.

Today: Pray for your city or town, and for those who keep it safe: firefighters, police and emergency workers.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Sunniva, princess of Ireland and patron of western Norway, you chose exile rather than a forced marriage and crossed the sea trusting in God alone. You prayed in the cave of Selja and remained faithful to the end. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days. Obtain for me a heart that trusts, that welcomes and that perseveres, and pray for all who seek a safe shore. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

This novena is an original text by Saintspedia. To learn more, read the life of Saint Sunniva of Selje or pray the prayer to Saint Sunniva.

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