BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Swithbert

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: March 1

IN BRIEF

Saint Swithbert

Anglo-Saxon monk, missionary in Frisia and among the Bructeri, founder of the monastery of Kaiserswerth.

Feast day	March 1, September 4
Born	mid-7th century, England (probably Northumbria)
Died	March 713, Werth (Kaiserswerth, Düsseldorf, Germany)
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	8th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Swithbert for Missionaries and Those Who Start Again

Novena to Saint Swithbert

Basilica of Saint Suitbertus at Kaiserswerth

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

Saint Swithbert

Saint Swithbert (Suitbert or Suidbert) was an Anglo-Saxon monk who became a missionary on the Continent at the end of the 7th century. A companion of Saint Willibrord among the Frisians and consecrated bishop by Saint Wilfrid, he then evangelized the Bructeri, on the right bank of the Rhine, before founding a monastery on the island of Werth, today Kaiserswerth, a district of Düsseldorf. He died there in March 713. His feast day is March 1.

Who was Saint Swithbert?

Swithbert was one of those monks from England who carried the Gospel to the still pagan Germanic peoples, in what are now the Netherlands and western Germany. Our main source on him is the Ecclesiastical History of the English People by Saint Bede the Venerable, completed in 731, less than twenty years after his death. Bede devotes only a few lines to him, but they are precious and reliable. Later Lives, written centuries afterward, added many legendary stories that should be treated with caution. What we know for certain, however, gives the portrait of a courageous missionary, ready to start again elsewhere when his work was destroyed, who ended his life in prayer and austerity.

Key dates in the life of Swithbert

- **Mid-7th century**: Born in England, probably in Northumbria; he becomes a monk.
- **c. 690**: He is one of the twelve companions who go with Saint Willibrord to Frisia.
- **c. 692-693**: While Willibrord is in Rome, his companions choose him as bishop; he returns to Britain to be consecrated by Saint Wilfrid.

- **690s**: Back on the Continent, he preaches to the Bructeri, south of the Lippe.
- **Shortly after**: Driven out by the Saxon invasion, he finds refuge with Pepin of Herstal.
- **Late 7th century**: At the request of Plectrude, Pepin's wife, he receives the island of Werth, on the Rhine, and founds a monastery there.
- **March 713**: Dies at Werth, after a life of great austerity.
- **September 4**: Feast of the translation of his relics, kept at Kaiserswerth.

Companion of Willibrord in Frisia

At the end of the 7th century, several English monks, often trained in Ireland, dreamed of proclaiming Christ to the Germanic peoples, whom they knew to be their kin. Around 690, Willibrord left for Frisia with twelve companions; Swithbert was one of them. The group settled in the lower Rhine region, under the protection of Pepin of Herstal, mayor of the palace of Austrasia, who was then extending his authority over Frisia.

Bede tells us that Willibrord went to Rome to receive the blessing of Pope Sergius I. During his absence, his brothers chose Swithbert to be their bishop. He crossed the sea again and received episcopal ordination from Wilfrid, the former bishop of York, then in exile in Mercia. This was not rivalry with Willibrord: the mission needed a bishop, and Willibrord himself would be consecrated in Rome a few years later, in 695, as archbishop of the Frisians.

Apostle of the Bructeri

On his return, Swithbert did not stay in Frisia. He turned to the Bructeri, a people living south of the Lippe, in present-day Westphalia, and began to evangelize them. According to Bede, many were converted by his preaching. But the work was soon ruined: the Saxons, still pagan, invaded the land and scattered the new Christians. Swithbert had to flee.

The monastery on the island of Werth

Swithbert took refuge with Pepin of Herstal. At the request of his wife Plectrude, Pepin gave him an island in the Rhine, called Werth, so that he could found a monastery there. Swithbert settled there with monks and spent his last years there. Bede writes that he led "a life of great austerity" there until his death. The Annals of Saint-Amand date it to March 713. The monastery he founded later became a house of canons, and the place took the name Kaiserswerth when the emperors built a palace there.

Devotion and art

Swithbert was venerated as a saint soon after his death. He is celebrated on March 1, the traditional day of his death, and on September 4, the anniversary of the translation of his relics. These still rest at Kaiserswerth, in the church that bears his name, now a basilica, in a great shrine of medieval goldsmith's work. He is especially honored in the Düsseldorf area and the archdiocese of Cologne, as well as in the Netherlands. He is shown as a bishop, with miter and crozier, often with a book, as a missionary to the Germanic peoples.

What can we learn from Saint Swithbert?

Swithbert knew failure: the mission among the Bructeri, begun successfully, was swept away by war. He did not lose heart. He agreed to start again differently, by founding a place of prayer that has lasted through the centuries. His example speaks to those whose work has been destroyed, to missionaries who must change their field, and to all who discover that the prayer of a monastery can bear more fruit than visible activity. You can pray to him for the mission, for the Church in Germany and the Netherlands, and for those who must start over from scratch.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Swithbert and the novena to Saint Swithbert.

Where to pray to Saint Swithbert

- **Basilica of Saint Suitbertus** (Kaiserswerth, Düsseldorf, Germany): the church built on the site of his monastery, where his relics rest.
- **Churches of Saint Suitbertus** in the Rhineland and Westphalia, numerous in the lower Rhine region.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Swithbert for Missionaries and Those Who Start Again

Saint Swithbert, an Anglo-Saxon monk and companion of Saint Willibrord, evangelized the Frisians and the Bructeri before founding a monastery on the island of Werth, today Kaiserswerth, where he died in 713. Prayer composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It entrusts to him missionaries, those whose work has been destroyed and all who must start again.

Prayer to Saint Swithbert

Saint Swithbert,
you left your country and your language
to carry the Gospel across the sea,
with Willibrord and your companions.
Give me an open and generous heart,
ready to go wherever God sends me.

You saw your work among the Bructeri
scattered by war,
and you did not lose hope.
When my plans collapse,
teach me to start again with trust
and to place my work in God's hands.

On the island of Werth you built a house of prayer
and lived austerely to your last day.
Pray for today's missionaries,
for the Church in Germany and the Netherlands,
and for all who seek God.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

When to pray to Saint Swithbert

- On his feast day, March 1, or on September 4, the feast of the translation of his relics.
- For missionaries and those who proclaim the Gospel in difficult settings.
- When a project or a work has been destroyed and everything must begin again.
- For monastic communities and places of prayer.

- For the faith of Christians in the Rhineland, Westphalia and the Netherlands.

A short invocation

> *Saint Swithbert, apostle of the peoples of the Rhine,*
> *pray for us and for the mission of the Church. Amen.*

To prepare for his feast, you can pray the novena to Saint Swithbert from February 21 to March 1, and read the life of Saint Swithbert.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Swithbert

Novena composed for Saintspedia, in the spirit of Church tradition. It is inspired by the life of Saint Swithbert, Anglo-Saxon monk, missionary and founder of the monastery of Kaiserswerth. To finish it on his feast day, March 1, begin on February 21 (February 22 in leap years). You can also pray it at any other time of the year, for example for the feast of his translation, September 4.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Swithbert, pray for us." The act of the day helps you live the novena concretely.

Day 1: A monk of England

Swithbert grew up in a recently converted England and became a monk. He received the faith from a young and fervent Church.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who handed on the faith to me. Keep me faithful to what I have received.

Act of the day: Pray for the person who brought you to know Christ.

Day 2: Leaving with Willibrord

Around 690, Swithbert left for Frisia with Willibrord and a small band of companions. They crossed the sea to proclaim Christ.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to leave my habits behind in order to serve you.

Act of the day: Take the first step toward someone who has drifted away from the Church.

Day 3: Chosen by his brothers

During Willibrord's absence, the missionaries chose Swithbert as their bishop. He accepted this charge for the good of the mission.

Prayer: Lord, bless our bishops and priests. Give them strength to serve.

Act of the day: Pray for your bishop and the priests of your parish.

Day 4: Receiving the grace of ordination

Swithbert crossed the sea again to be consecrated by Saint Wilfrid. The mission did not rest on his own strength, but on grace received in the Church.

Prayer: Lord, remind me that everything comes from you and that I do not work alone.

Act of the day: Give thanks for the sacraments you have received.

Day 5: Among the Bructeri

Swithbert went to preach to the Bructeri, beyond the Rhine. Many welcomed the Gospel.

Prayer: Lord, open hearts to your Word, and make me a joyful witness.

Act of the day: Share a Gospel passage that gives you life.

Day 6: The work destroyed

The Saxons invaded the land and scattered the new Christians. Swithbert saw his work wiped out and had to flee.

Prayer: Lord, comfort those who have seen what they built collapse.

Act of the day: Entrust a failure in your life to God, without bitterness.

Day 7: Finding refuge

Pepin of Herstal and his wife Plectrude welcomed Swithbert and gave him the island of Werth. God uses benefactors to open a new path.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who welcome exiles and people in distress.

Act of the day: Give concrete help to someone who needs a roof or support.

Day 8: Building a monastery

On the island of Werth, Swithbert founded a monastery. Prayer became his way of continuing the mission.

Prayer: Lord, make my life a place of prayer, and bless the monasteries that pray for the world.

Act of the day: Pray an Office, or a psalm, in union with monks and nuns.

Day 9: An austere life to the end

Swithbert died in 713, after a life of great austerity, according to Bede. His relics are still venerated at Kaiserswerth.

Prayer: Lord, help me live simply and prepare to meet you. Through the intercession of Saint Swithbert, grant me the grace I ask in this novena, if it is your will.

Act of the day: Give up something superfluous and attend Mass if possible.

Closing prayer

Saint Swithbert,
missionary to the peoples of the Rhine,
you sowed the Gospel, saw your harvest destroyed,
and began again in prayer.
Present to the Lord the intention I have entrusted to you.
Give me a hope that does not lose heart.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Suitbertus at Kaiserswerth

The Basilica of Saint Suitbertus stands at Kaiserswerth, an old town now part of the city of Düsseldorf, in the Rhineland, on the right bank of the Rhine. It rises on the site where Saint Swithbert, an Anglo-Saxon missionary, founded a monastery at the end of the 7th century, on an island in the river given to him by Pepin of Herstal. His relics are still venerated there.

From the island of Werth to Kaiserswerth

According to Bede the Venerable, Swithbert, driven from the mission he had begun among the Bructeri, received from Pepin of Herstal, at the request of his wife Plectrude, an island in the Rhine called Werth. He built a monastery there and lived there until his death in 713. Over the centuries, the community he had founded became a house of canons.

The place grew in importance when rulers established a residence there: the name Kaiserswerth, "the emperor's island", comes from this imperial presence. The ruins of the imperial palace, on the bank of the Rhine, still recall this past. Over time, the arm of the river that surrounded the island silted up, and Kaiserswerth is now joined to the mainland.

What you can see

The present church is a Romanesque building, constructed in the Middle Ages on the site of the original monastic church and altered over the centuries. It has been raised to the rank of minor basilica, a sign of its importance in the life of the Church. Its chief treasure is the shrine of Saint Swithbert, a great

13th-century reliquary of goldsmith's work, decorated with gilded figures and ornaments, which holds the saint's relics. It is one of the fine examples of medieval goldsmith's work in the Rhine region.

Praying at Kaiserswerth

Before you come, you can read the life of Saint Swithbert. Before his shrine, entrust to him missionaries, those whose work has been destroyed and all who must start again, then say the prayer to Saint Swithbert. March 1, his feast day, and September 4, the anniversary of the translation of his relics, are special occasions for this pilgrimage. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Around the basilica

- **The ruins of the imperial palace** (Kaiserpfalz), on the bank of the Rhine, a few steps from the basilica.
- **The old town of Kaiserswerth**, with its old houses around the church square.
- **The banks of the Rhine**, which help you imagine the former island of Werth where the saint lived.

Practical information

Kaiserswerth lies north of central Düsseldorf and can be reached by the city's public transport or on foot along the Rhine. The basilica is a parish church where Mass is celebrated regularly: modest dress and silence are requested. Opening hours, service times and access to the shrine may vary: check with the parish of Saint Suitbertus or the Düsseldorf tourist office before you come.

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com