

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Swithun

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: July 2

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IN BRIEF

Saint Swithun

Anglo-Saxon bishop of Winchester in the ninth century, one of the most popular saints of medieval England.

Feast day	July 2, July 15 (translation, in England)
Died	July 2, 861, 862 or 863, Winchester, England
Era	9th century
Patron saint of	Winchester, drought

In this booklet

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Swithun

Saint Swithun, also spelled Swithin, was an Anglo-Saxon bishop of Winchester, the capital of the kingdom of Wessex, who died in 861, 862 or 863. Little known in his lifetime, he became one of the most popular saints of medieval England after the solemn transfer of his relics in 971 and the many miracles reported at his tomb. A famous English weather saying links his name to the rain of July 15. His feast day is July 2, and July 15 in England.

Who was Saint Swithun?

The documents of his own time say very little about Swithun. We know that he was ordained a priest by Bishop Helmstan of Winchester, whom he succeeded around 852 or 853, and that he signs royal charters as bishop from 854 onward. He lived under the kings Æthelwulf and Æthelbald of Wessex, at a time when Viking raids on England were multiplying. Winchester, the royal capital, was then a growing town.

Most of what is told about his life comes from hagiographers of the tenth and eleventh centuries, especially the monk Lantfred and the homilist Ælfric, who wrote more than a century after his death. They describe him as a humble bishop, a builder of churches and a friend of the poor. According to tradition, he asked to be buried humbly outside his cathedral, where passersby would walk over his grave and the rain would fall on it.

Key dates

- **Ninth century**: Priest of Winchester, ordained by Bishop Helmstan.
- **October 852 or 853**: Consecrated bishop of Winchester.
- **From 854**: Appears as a witness in the charters of the kings of Wessex.

- **July 2, 861, 862 or 863**: Dies at Winchester and is buried outside the cathedral.
- **July 15, 971**: His relics are moved inside the Old Minster under Bishop Æthelwold.
- **1093**: His relics are placed behind the high altar of the new Norman cathedral.
- **1538**: His shrine is destroyed during the English Reformation.

The miracle on the bridge

The hagiographers credit Swithun with building or restoring many churches, as well as a stone bridge on the east side of Winchester, over the River Itchen. A charming story is attached to it. A poor woman on her way to market was jostled on the bridge by workmen, and all her eggs were broken. Moved by her loss, Swithun made the sign of the cross over the eggs, and they became whole again.

The story is probably legendary, but it shows how he was remembered: a bishop close to ordinary people, attentive even to their smallest losses. For a poor market woman, a basket of eggs could mean a week's income, and the bishop did not treat it as a trifle.

The translation of 971

In the middle of the tenth century, England went through a great monastic reform led by Saint Dunstan, Saint Oswald and Saint Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester. Æthelwold decided to honor his distant predecessor. On July 15, 971, Swithun's remains were taken from their outdoor grave and carried solemnly into the cathedral, the Old Minster. The monk Lantfred describes the ceremony, which took place in pouring rain, and records a great number of healings. King Edgar then gave a rich reliquary.

Winchester became one of the great pilgrimage centers of England. In 1006, Saint Alphege, who had become archbishop of Canterbury, took Swithun's head with him. In 1093 the relics were installed in the new Norman cathedral. More than fifty churches were dedicated to him in England, and his cult spread to Scandinavia and France.

Saint Swithun's Day and the rain

An English saying, recorded as early as the fourteenth century, holds that if it rains on July 15, Saint Swithun's Day, it will rain for forty days more, and if the day is fair, fine weather will last just as long. Many people in Britain still know the rhyme:

> *St Swithin's day if thou dost rain,*
> *for forty days it will remain;*
> *St Swithin's day if thou be fair,*
> *for forty days 'twill rain nae mair.*

The proverb has been connected with the rain that fell during the translation of 971, or with the legend that the saint protested with downpours against the moving of his grave. It is a piece of folklore, much like the French sayings about Saint Medard, and not a teaching of the Church.

In 1538, under Henry VIII, Swithun's shrine was destroyed and his relics were scattered. A modern memorial was set up in Winchester Cathedral in 1962, on the site of the old shrine.

Why is Saint Swithun the patron saint of Winchester and of drought?

Swithun is the patron of Winchester because he was its bishop and because his tomb made the city a place of pilgrimage for centuries. His link with the weather comes from the rain of July 15 and the popular saying that grew from it. For this reason he is invoked against drought and by those whose work depends on the weather, especially farmers.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Swithun in art

Swithun is shown as a bishop, with miter and crosier, sometimes holding a book, as in the famous tenth-century Benedictional of Æthelwold. He also appears in English stained-glass windows, vested as a bishop. Nothing in his appearance is unique to him, so the inscription of his name, or a setting linked to Winchester, is usually what identifies him.

What can we learn from Saint Swithun?

Swithun is a saint of humility. Bishop of a royal capital, he wished to lie where people would pass by without noticing him. God made him known after his death, and the people adopted him. We can pray to him for bishops and pastors, for farmers who depend on the weather, and for all who have lost something precious, however small.

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

Where to pray to Saint Swithun

- **Winchester Cathedral** (Hampshire, England): the memorial on the site of his former shrine.

- **Winchester**: the Catholic church of Saint Peter and the parishes dedicated to him in the area.
- **Stavanger Cathedral** (Norway): the medieval cathedral, formerly placed under his patronage.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Swithun for Humility and Good Weather

There is no widely used traditional prayer to Saint Swithun in English. Saintspedia offers this original prayer, inspired by what the Anglo-Saxon hagiographers remember of him: a humble bishop and builder, close to ordinary people, whose grave became one of the great pilgrimage sites of England.

The humble bishop of Winchester

According to tradition, Swithun asked to be buried outdoors, where passersby would walk over his grave and the rain would fall on it. It is also told that he made whole the broken eggs of a poor woman on the bridge at Winchester. These stories paint a pastor who did not seek honors and who took the worries of the poorest seriously.

Prayer to Saint Swithun

Saint Swithun, you served your people without seeking honors: teach me the humility of those who work quietly.

You built churches and bridges: help me to build what brings people together and draws them to God.

You comforted a poor woman over a few broken eggs: take care of my small troubles as well as my great ones, and make me attentive to the losses of others.

Your name is linked with the rain: pray for farmers and for all whose work depends on the sky. Obtain for us good weather and a grateful heart.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Saint Swithun, pray for us. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Swithun's feast is July 2, and July 15, the anniversary of the translation of his relics, is kept in England. You can pray to him:

- in times of drought or of too much rain, especially for farmers and gardeners;
- at the start of a building project, or when repairing a church or a home;
- for your bishop and for the clergy of your diocese;
- when you are discouraged by a loss that others think small.

A short prayer for the weather

> *Lord, you send the rain and the sunshine on the just and the unjust. Through the prayers of Saint Swithun, give us weather favorable to the fruits of the earth, and teach us to receive your gifts with thanks. Amen.*

To learn more about him, read the life of Saint Swithun, or pray the novena to Saint Swithun.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Swithun

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Swithun, bishop of Winchester, as remembered by the Anglo-Saxon hagiographers. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, July 2, begin it on June 24. In England, where Saint Swithun's Day is kept on July 15, you can also pray it from July 7 to July 15. It suits any time of drought or bad weather, a building project, or a period of discouragement.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation, then say the prayer of the day followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you live in Swithun's spirit of humility and care for ordinary people. You can pray it alone, as a family or with a parish group.

Day 1: A priest of Winchester

Before he was a bishop, Swithun was a priest of Winchester, ordained by Bishop Helmstan. Almost nothing is known of those years. Most of a holy life is made of hidden faithfulness: daily prayer, ordinary service, a duty done well when no one is watching.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be faithful in small and hidden things, where you alone see me.

Today: Do one task carefully without mentioning it to anyone.

Day 2: A pastor in troubled times

Swithun became bishop around 852 or 853, at a time when Viking raids were multiplying in England. He did not choose an easy age. Every generation of Christians must keep the faith in its own storms, trusting that God does not abandon his people.

Prayer: Lord, give peace to our troubled times, and courage to all who lead your people through them.

Today: Pray for a country at war or a people living in fear.

Day 3: Builder of churches

The hagiographers remember Swithun as a builder and restorer of churches. Stones matter, because they shelter the prayer of a community and the celebration of the sacraments. But the living Church is built first of hearts gathered around Christ.

Prayer: Lord, make my life a living stone in your Church, and bless all who care for our places of worship.

Today: Offer some help to your parish, through a gift, an hour of service or a word of thanks to those who keep it.

Day 4: The bridge over the Itchen

Swithun is said to have built a stone bridge on the east side of Winchester. A bridge joins two banks that would otherwise stay apart. Christians are called to build bridges too: between neighbors, between generations, between those who have quarreled.

Prayer: Lord, make me a builder of bridges, where there are walls between people.

Today: Take a first step toward someone from whom you have grown distant.

Day 5: The broken eggs

On the bridge, a poor woman's eggs were broken, and Swithun, moved by her loss, made them whole with the sign of the cross. Whatever we think of the story, it tells us that God does not despise small sorrows. What seems trivial to others can be a heavy blow to the one who suffers it.

Prayer: Lord, you count every hair of our heads. Look kindly on my small troubles, and make me attentive to the troubles of others.

Today: Help someone with a practical problem, however modest.

Day 6: A humble grave

Tradition says Swithun asked to be buried outside his cathedral, where people would walk over his grave and the rain would fall on it. He did not want honors after death. Humility is not thinking badly of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less, and of God and others more.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the need to be noticed, and teach me the joy of serving in your name.

Today: Let someone else take the credit or the first place.

Day 7: Raised up by God

More than a century after his death, on July 15, 971, Bishop Æthelwold had Swithun's relics carried into the cathedral, and many healings were reported. The one who chose the lowest place was lifted up. "Whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

Prayer: Lord, you lift up the lowly. Heal the sick who turn to you through the prayers of Saint Swithun.

Today: Visit, call or write to someone who is ill.

Day 8: The rain and the harvest

The famous saying about Saint Swithun's Day reminds us how much human life depends on the weather. Farmers know this better than anyone. Rain and sun are gifts we do not control, and they invite us to trust and to gratitude.

Prayer: Lord of the seasons, give us weather favorable to the fruits of the earth, and bless all who work the land.

Today: Say grace with special attention before a meal, remembering those who grew the food.

Day 9: A saint for ordinary people

Swithun's shrine was destroyed in 1538, yet his memory survived in parishes, in place names and in a popular rhyme. Saints belong to the people of God. Swithun reminds us that holiness is not reserved for the famous, and that God remembers those the world forgets.

Prayer: Saint Swithun, humble bishop of Winchester, present our intentions to the Lord, and help us to live as faithful servants. Amen.

Today: Thank God for one person who passed on the faith to you without seeking any reward.

Closing prayer

> *Lord our God, you gave Saint Swithun to the Church of Winchester as a humble and caring pastor. Through his prayers, make us attentive to the needs of the poor, faithful in small things and grateful for the gifts of creation. Grant the intention I place before you in this novena, if it is according to your will. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To learn more about him, read the life of Saint Swithun or pray the prayer to Saint Swithun.

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