

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Thomas Becket

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: December 29

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IN BRIEF

Saint Thomas Becket

Lord Chancellor of England, then Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered in his cathedral in 1170.

Feast day	December 29
Born	December 21, c. 1120, London, England
Died	December 29, 1170, Canterbury, England
Canonized	February 21, 1173, by Pope Alexander III
Era	12th century
Patron saint of	secular clergy

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Thomas Becket for the Freedom of the Church

Novena to Saint Thomas Becket

Canterbury Cathedral, Site of the Martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Thomas Becket

Saint Thomas Becket was an Archbishop of Canterbury murdered in his own cathedral on December 29, 1170, by four knights of King Henry II. A former Lord Chancellor and close friend of the king, once he became archbishop he turned into the uncompromising defender of the freedom of the Church against royal power, at the cost of six years of exile in France and then of his life. Canonized barely two years after his death, he is celebrated on December 29, within the octave of Christmas.

Who was Saint Thomas Becket?

Thomas was born in London on a December 21, around 1120, into a merchant family of Norman origin. His father, Gilbert, had been sheriff of the city. Thomas studied at Merton Priory, near London, then in Paris, and around 1145 entered the service of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. Intelligent, efficient and charming, he was sent on missions to Rome, studied law at Bologna and Auxerre, and became Archdeacon of Canterbury. At that point he was only a deacon.

In 1155, on Theobald's recommendation, the young King Henry II Plantagenet made him his chancellor. The two men became inseparable. Thomas lived in grand style, entertained magnificently and even led troops in the Toulouse campaign of 1159. Chroniclers nevertheless note that his private life remained beyond reproach.

Key dates

- **December 21, c. 1120**: Born in London.
- **c. 1145**: Enters the household of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury.
- **1155**: Lord Chancellor of England under Henry II.

- **June 1162**: Ordained a priest, then consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury the next day.
- **January 1164**: Refuses to seal the Constitutions of Clarendon.
- **October-November 1164**: After the Council of Northampton, flees to France.
- **1164-1166**: Stays at the Cistercian abbey of Pontigny.
- **1166-1170**: Stays at the abbey of Sainte-Colombe near Sens, under the protection of King Louis VII of France.
- **July 22, 1170**: Apparent reconciliation with Henry II at Fréteval.
- **Early December 1170**: Returns to England and receives a triumphant welcome in Canterbury.
- **December 29, 1170**: Murdered in the cathedral.
- **February 21, 1173**: Canonized by Pope Alexander III.
- **July 1174**: Henry II does public penance at his tomb.
- **July 7, 1220**: His relics are moved to a shrine behind the high altar.
- **1538**: Henry VIII has the shrine destroyed.

From chancellor to archbishop

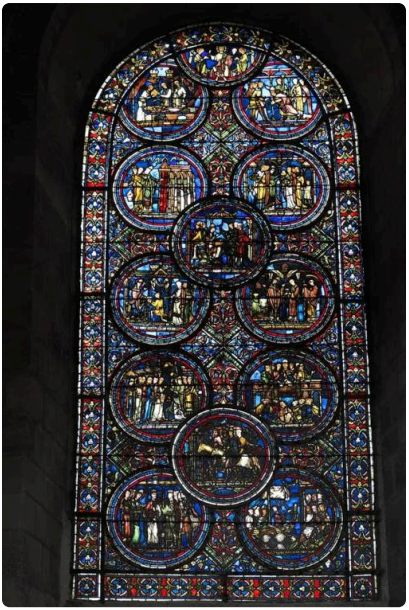
When Theobald died in 1161, Henry II thought he had found the way to control the Church in England: name his friend to Canterbury. Thomas is said to have warned him that their friendship would not survive the choice. Ordained a priest in June 1162, he was consecrated archbishop the next day.

The change was radical. He resigned the chancellorship, took up a life of prayer and penance, secretly wore a hair shirt, and every day washed the feet of poor people and fed them at his table.

Conflict with Henry II and exile in France

The quarrel broke out over clerics accused of crimes. The king wanted them tried in his courts; Thomas defended the privilege of Church courts and the right of appeal to Rome. In January 1164, Henry had the Constitutions of Clarendon drawn up, codifying the rights of the crown over the Church. Thomas at first gave way orally, then withdrew his consent and refused to set his seal to them. Accused of financial wrongdoing at the Council of Northampton, he fled in disguise and crossed to France.

He stayed there six years: first at the Cistercian abbey of Pontigny, in Burgundy, where he shared the life of the monks, and then, when Henry threatened the Cistercian Order, at the abbey of Sainte-Colombe in Sens, under the protection of Louis VII. Pope Alexander III, himself in difficulty with the emperor, tried to keep both sides on board. In July 1170 a reconciliation was reached at Fréteval, though the underlying questions were not settled.



The Saint Thomas Becket window in Sens Cathedral (thirteenth century).

Martyrdom in the cathedral

Back in Canterbury in early December 1170, Thomas was cheered by the people, but he refused to lift the excommunications he had pronounced against the bishops who had crowned the king's son in his absence. In Normandy, Henry II, furious, let slip angry words against this priest who defied him. They are popularly remembered as "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?", though that exact phrasing comes from later tradition.

Four knights, Reginald FitzUrse, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy and Richard le Breton, crossed the Channel. On December 29, late in the afternoon, they burst into the cathedral at the hour of Vespers. Thomas refused to let the church doors be closed. He was cut down with swords in the north transept. An eyewitness, the cleric Edward Grim, wounded while trying to protect him, wrote an account of the scene.

The shock was immense throughout Christendom. Miracles were reported at his tomb, and Alexander III canonized him as early as 1173. In July 1174 Henry II came to Canterbury as a penitent, barefoot, and had himself scourged by the monks. For more than three centuries Canterbury was one of the great pilgrimages of Europe, the one described in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot retold his death in the play *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Why is Saint Thomas Becket the patron saint of the clergy?

Thomas Becket is invoked as patron of the secular clergy, the priests who serve in dioceses and parishes, because he died as a shepherd defending the freedom of the Church and its ministers. He was not a saint from his youth: a man of power and luxury, he was converted by accepting a burden beyond him, and chose to pay the price. His holiness is that of a pastor who placed faithfulness to the Church above the friendship of the king, without hatred, forgiving his murderers. He is invoked for courage of conscience, for priests and for religious freedom.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Thomas Becket in art

- **Archbishop's vestments**, with miter, crozier and pallium.
- **A sword**, sometimes driven into his head, recalling the blows of the knights.
- **Knights in armor** attacking him before an altar, in scenes of his martyrdom.
- **The palm of martyrdom**.

Where to pray to Saint Thomas Becket

- **Canterbury, England**: the cathedral, now Anglican, where he was martyred and where his shrine once stood. The place of his death is still

called "the Martyrdom."

- **Sens, France**: the Cathedral of Saint-Étienne, where he stayed in exile, which keeps liturgical vestments attributed to him and a window telling his life.
- **Pontigny, France**: the Cistercian abbey church that welcomed him from 1164 to 1166.
- **Rome**: the Church of Saint Thomas of Canterbury, the chapel of the Venerable English College.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Thomas Becket, which recalls his last words, or follow the novena to Saint Thomas Becket from December 20 to 28, ending on the eve of his feast.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Thomas Becket for the Freedom of the Church

Saint Thomas Becket left no prayer that is recited today under his name. But his last words have come down to us through an eyewitness of his martyrdom, and for centuries the Church prayed on his feast with a collect of its own. This page presents both texts, followed by an original prayer to Saint Thomas Becket for courage and for the freedom of the Church.

The last words of Thomas Becket

On December 29, 1170, the cleric Edward Grim was at the archbishop's side when the knights attacked him in the cathedral; he himself was badly wounded in the arm. In the life of Saint Thomas he wrote shortly afterward, he reports that the archbishop, already struck, murmured these words. The translation from the Latin is by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *"For the name of Jesus and the defense of the Church, I am ready to embrace death."*

Source: Edward Grim, *Vita sancti Thomae*, account of the martyrdom (c. 1172-1177). Other contemporary biographers report his last words with variations; all agree that he commended himself to God without resisting.

The ancient collect of his feast

The Roman Missal promulgated in 1570 after the Council of Trent included a proper collect for Saint Thomas of Canterbury on December 29. The translation from the Latin is by Saintspedia.

O God, for whose Church the glorious bishop Thomas fell by the swords of the wicked: grant, we beseech you, that all who implore his help may obtain the happy fulfillment of their petition. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Source: *Missale Romanum* (1570), collect for the feast of Saint Thomas, bishop and martyr, on December 29 ("Deus, pro cuius Ecclesia gloriosus Pontifex Thomas gladiis impiorum occubuit").

Prayer to Saint Thomas Becket for courage

Saint Thomas Becket, you knew honors, wealth and the friendship of the powerful, and you left it all to serve Christ and his Church: pray for me.

You changed your life when God entrusted you with a new task: teach me to be converted every day. You preferred exile to betraying your conscience: give me the courage to stay faithful to what I believe is right, without pride and without harshness.

I entrust to you priests and bishops, especially those who face pressure or persecution, and all who hold authority: may they serve justice and not their own interest. I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

You would not let the church doors be closed against your murderers, and you gave your soul to God forgiving them: obtain for me peace of heart in times of trial. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Thomas Becket is celebrated on December 29, within the octave of Christmas, the anniversary of his martyrdom. The Church of England also commemorates him on that day. You can pray to him for priests, for those who must make a difficult decision in conscience, for people under pressure at work to compromise their integrity, and for religious freedom.

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Thomas Becket

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia. It follows the stages of the life of Saint Thomas Becket, from London to Canterbury by way of his exile in France. It is not an official liturgical text or a text written by the saint. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin on December 20: it ends on December 28, the day before his feast on December 29, and so passes through Christmas. You can also pray it at any time of year, before a hard decision of conscience or for priests.

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 suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life. In these days close to Christmas, the novena can also be a way of contemplating Christ who came in humility. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow Thomas from his childhood in London to his years of power, his conversion, his refusal at Clarendon, his exile in France, his return to Canterbury and his death. You may pray it alone, with your family, or with your parish, especially for its priests.



Saint Thomas Becket, in a church window or statue.

Day 1: A son of London

Thomas grew up in a merchant family, at the heart of a busy city. According to his biographers, his mother taught him prayer and almsgiving. The first years of life plant seeds that sometimes sprout very late.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who sowed faith in me. Make what they planted grow.

Today: Pray for your family, naming each person.

Day 2: Talents put to service

Brilliant and hardworking, Thomas rose through the ranks in the service of the archbishop and then of the king. His talents were real; the question was whom they would serve.

Prayer: Lord, you have given me gifts. Teach me to put them at the service of others, and not only of my own success.

Today: Offer a skill, free of charge, to someone who needs it.

Day 3: Friendship and truth

Thomas is said to have warned Henry II that their friendship would not survive his appointment. A true friendship does not demand that we give up our conscience.

Prayer: Lord, bless my friends. Give us a true friendship, strong enough to bear disagreement.

Today: Get back in touch with a friend you have lost sight of.

Day 4: Changing one's life

Once he became archbishop, Thomas gave up luxury, prayed at length, and welcomed poor people to his table every day. It is never too late to answer a new call.

Prayer: Lord, show me what I must change in my life, and give me the strength to begin.

Today: Give up an unnecessary comfort and give what it costs to the poor.

Day 5: Saying no

At Clarendon, Thomas gave way for a moment, then recovered himself and refused to seal what he judged contrary to the freedom of the Church. He knew weakness, but he did not settle into it. Saints are not people who never fall, but people who get up again.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, when I have been weak, lift me up. Give me the strength to say no to what is unjust.

Today: Honestly revisit a commitment you made out of cowardice.

Day 6: Exile at Pontigny

Taking refuge with the Cistercians, Thomas shared their life of prayer, silence and work. Exile, which he had not chosen, became for him a time of purification.

Prayer: Lord, when I feel far from home or pushed aside, make this time a place of encounter with you.

Today: Pray for exiles and refugees, or support an organization that welcomes them.



Praying with Saint Thomas Becket.

Day 7: The shepherd returns

In December 1170, Thomas returned to England knowing the danger. The people welcomed him with singing. He preferred to be among his flock rather than safe far away from them.

Prayer: Jesus, Good Shepherd, bless the priests who stay among their people, even in hard times.

Today: Thank a priest or a community leader for his or her service.

Day 8: Open doors

As the knights approached, Thomas refused to let the church be barricaded: a church is not a fortress. He awaited his murderers at the hour of evening prayer.

Prayer: Lord, keep my heart open, even toward those who wish me harm. Deliver me from fear.

Today: Pray for someone with whom you are in conflict.

Day 9: For the name of Jesus

"For the name of Jesus and the defense of the Church, I am ready to embrace death." Thomas died without defending himself, commending himself to God. His death, in the days after Christmas, joins him to the first witnesses of Christ, Saint Stephen and the Holy Innocents, whose feasts come just before his.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Thomas Becket, grant me to be faithful to you to the end. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians who are persecuted around the world.

Closing prayer

Saint Thomas Becket, shepherd and martyr, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for the Church, for priests and for those who govern. Obtain for us the grace to serve God before men, with courage and without hatred, and to forgive as you forgave. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Canterbury Cathedral, Site of the Martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket

Canterbury Cathedral, in Kent, is the place where Saint Thomas Becket was murdered on December 29, 1170, and where his tomb drew pilgrims from all over Europe for more than three centuries. The seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury, it is today the mother church of the Anglican Communion, and remains a place of memory for Catholics and Anglicans alike.

The place of martyrdom

Thomas Becket was killed in the northwest transept of the cathedral as he was going to Vespers. This spot, known simply as "The Martyrdom," is marked by a small altar, the Altar of the Sword's Point, topped by a modern sculpture of swords. An inscription in the floor recalls the event. In 1982, Pope John Paul II and the Anglican Archbishop Robert Runcie knelt there together to pray, during the first visit of a pope to Great Britain.



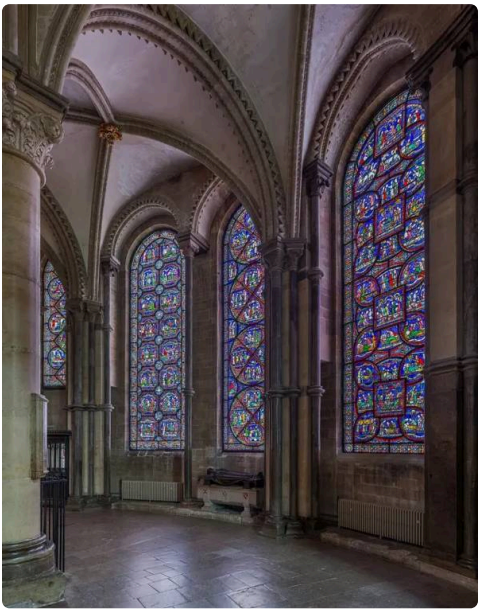
Canterbury Cathedral, site of the martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket.

The crypt and the former shrine

After his death, Thomas was first buried in the crypt. It was there that Henry II came to do penance in 1174. In 1220, his relics were moved to a richly decorated shrine placed in the Trinity Chapel, behind the high altar. For more than three centuries, it was one of the most visited pilgrimages in Christendom. In 1538, on the orders of Henry VIII, the shrine was destroyed and its treasures confiscated. A lit candle now marks its location. Around it, 13th-century stained-glass windows, among the oldest in England, depict the miracles obtained through his intercession.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Thomas Becket. On site, a time of silence at the place of martyrdom, then before the candle in the Trinity Chapel, lets you entrust an intention, especially for persecuted Christians or for Christian unity. The prayer to Saint Thomas Becket can accompany this moment. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia; since the cathedral is an Anglican place of worship, respect any services in progress.



Canterbury Cathedral, site of the martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket, interior.

Other places of Saint Thomas Becket

- **Sens** (Yonne): the Cathedral of Saint-Étienne, whose treasury preserves liturgical vestments attributed to him, and a 13th-century stained-glass window devoted to his life.
- **Pontigny** (Yonne): the Cistercian abbey church where he lived in exile from 1164 to 1166.

- **London**: the city of his birth; the chapel of Mercers' Hall, in the City, stands near the site of his birthplace.
- **Rome**: the church of Saint Thomas of Canterbury, at the English College, where seminarians from England and Wales are trained.

Practical information

Canterbury is about an hour by train from London. There is an admission fee to tour the cathedral outside services, but attendance at services is free. On December 29 and around July 7, the anniversary of the translation of his relics, special celebrations may be held. For a Catholic Mass, the Catholic Church of Saint Thomas of Canterbury is in the city. Check times with the cathedral and the parish before you come.

Credits and sources

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