

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Thorlak of Skálholt

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 23

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IN BRIEF

Saint Thorlak of Skálholt

Augustinian canon and bishop of Skálholt in the twelfth century, patron saint of Iceland.

Feast day	December 23, July 20 (translation of relics)
Born	1133, Fljótshlíð, Iceland
Died	December 23, 1193, Skálholt, Iceland
Canonized	Cult approved by the Althing in 1198, recognized by Pope John Paul II on January 14, 1984
Era	12th century
Patron saint of	Iceland

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Thorlak

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Thorlak of Skálholt

Saint Thorlak Thorhallsson, in Icelandic Þorlákur Þórhallsson, was an Icelandic bishop of the twelfth century. Trained in Paris and in England, he was a canon regular of Saint Augustine, abbot of Þykkvabær and then bishop of Skálholt from 1178 until his death in 1193. Venerated by Icelanders in the years right after his death, he was recognized by Pope John Paul II in 1984 as the patron saint of Iceland. His feast day is December 23.

Who was Saint Thorlak?

Thorlak was born in 1133 at Fljótshlíð, in the south of Iceland, into a family of good birth but modest means. Iceland was then a commonwealth of chieftains with no king, Christian since about the year 1000. The Church there was still closely tied to the great families: the chieftains, the *goðar*, built churches on their own land and treated them as their property.

We know his life mainly through the *Saga of Thorlak* (*Þorláks saga*), written in Icelandic shortly after his death, and through fragments of a Latin Life. These texts were written to promote his cult and stress his virtues and miracles, but they also preserve many concrete details about his time as bishop and his conflicts with the chieftains of the country.

Key dates

- **1133**: Born at Fljótshlíð, in southern Iceland.
- **Youth**: Made a deacon very young, then ordained a priest at about eighteen.
- **c. 1153-1159**: Studies abroad, in Paris, probably at the Abbey of Saint-Victor, then at Lincoln in England.
- **1161**: Returns to Iceland.

- **1168**: Prior, and in 1172 abbot, of the Augustinian monastery of Þykkvabær.
- **1174**: Elected bishop of Skálholt.
- **July 2, 1178**: Consecrated at Nidaros (Trondheim) by Archbishop Eystein Erlendsson.
- **December 23, 1193**: Dies at Skálholt.
- **1198**: The Althing, the assembly of Icelanders, approves his cult; his remains are raised on July 20.
- **January 14, 1984**: Pope John Paul II recognizes him as patron saint of Iceland.

A student in Paris and Lincoln

Ordained a priest very young, Thorlak was sent to continue his studies abroad, something rare for an Icelander of his time. He stayed in Paris, probably with the canons of the Abbey of Saint-Victor, one of the great centers of theology and spiritual life in the twelfth century, and then in Lincoln, England. He came home in 1161 after about six years away, marked by the ideal of the canons regular: a common life of prayer and study under the Rule of Saint Augustine.

Back in Iceland, according to his saga, he turned down an advantageous marriage and chose religious life. In 1168 he became prior of the community of Þykkvabær, in the south of the island, and its abbot in 1172. He introduced the Augustinian rule there and gained a reputation for wisdom and piety.

The reforming bishop of Skálholt

Elected bishop of Skálholt in 1174, Thorlak was only consecrated in 1178, at Nidaros, by the Norwegian archbishop Eystein Erlendsson, a supporter of the Church reform then spreading across Europe. The new bishop set out to apply

this program in Iceland. He fought against illegitimate marriages, concubinage and unions between close relatives, and sought to impose celibacy on priests.

Above all, he wanted churches and their lands to belong to the Church, not to the chieftains who had built them. This struggle set him against powerful men, in particular Jón Loftsson, head of the Oddi clan, who lived with Thorlak's own sister, Ragnheiður, as his concubine. Thorlak threatened excommunication, but had to give up part of his demands for lack of support after Archbishop Eystein went into exile. He nevertheless kept his moral firmness and his reputation for integrity, while showing great generosity to the poor.

The saint of Iceland

Thorlak died at Skálholt on December 23, 1193, after an illness. Healings obtained through his intercession were soon reported. In 1198 the Althing approved his cult, and his remains were raised and placed in a shrine on July 20. Canonizations were not yet strictly reserved to the pope, and this local recognition founded a very popular cult throughout medieval Iceland, until the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The day of his death, December 23, has remained in Iceland as *Þorláksmessa*, "Thorlak's Mass," two days before Christmas, a day of preparations and family traditions. On January 14, 1984, Pope John Paul II officially recognized his cult and declared him patron of Iceland. He appears in the Roman Martyrology on December 23.

Why is Saint Thorlak the patron saint of Iceland?

Icelanders venerated Thorlak spontaneously in the years after his death: the reports of healings, the approval of his cult by the Althing in 1198 and the feast of *Þorláksmessa* made him the saint of the whole island. Even after the

Reformation, his day remained part of Icelandic life. The recognition granted by John Paul II in 1984 confirmed this ancient bond and gave the small Catholic community of Iceland its patron.

Thorlak wanted a Church that was free, poor and faithful to the Gospel in a society where the power of great families dominated everything. He did not obtain everything, and he had to compromise. But his uprightness, his love of study and his life of prayer left a lasting mark on his people. He can be invoked for Iceland and the Nordic countries, for bishops who face pressure, and for all who seek to live their faith with integrity.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Thorlak or follow the novena to Saint Thorlak in the last days of Advent.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Thorlak in art

Saint Thorlak is usually shown as a bishop, with **miter and crozier**, the signs of his office at Skálholt. The statue in the Catholic cathedral of Reykjavik presents him this way. His images are few and simple, without a distinctive personal emblem.

Where to pray to Saint Thorlak

- **Reykjavik**: the Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King (Landakotskirkja), which has a statue of the saint.
- **Iceland**: the Catholic parish of Saint Thorlak, in the south of the country.
- **Skálholt**: his former episcopal see, now a Lutheran church, where he died and where his shrine once stood.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Thorlak, Patron Saint of Iceland

There is no widely known traditional English prayer to Saint Thorlak, patron saint of Iceland, and the Latin offices composed in his honor in the Middle Ages have only partly come down to us. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by his life: the student of Paris, the canon faithful to the Rule of Saint Augustine, the bishop of Skálholt who defended the freedom of the Church before the powerful.

An upright and generous bishop

As bishop of a harsh and isolated country, Thorlak wanted the Church there to be free and its customs to conform to the Gospel. He clashed with the Icelandic chieftains and sometimes had to give way, but he remained firm in conscience and generous to the poor. The day of his death, December 23, is still a day of preparation for Christmas in Iceland.

Prayer to Saint Thorlak

Saint Thorlak, you left your island to seek wisdom and came back to share it: give me a love of learning and of passing on what I have received.

You lived the common prayer and the poverty of the canons: help me to put God at the center of my days.

You defended the freedom of the Church without fearing the powerful: support pastors who face pressure, and give me the courage to stay upright when it would be easier to keep silent.

Watch over Iceland, over the peoples of the North and over the small Catholic communities scattered throughout the world. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

You entered the peace of God at the threshold of Christmas: prepare my heart to welcome Christ who comes. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Thorlak's feast day is December 23, the day of his death in 1193. Icelanders also commemorated on July 20 the translation of his relics in 1198. You can pray to him:

- in the last days of Advent, as Christmas draws near;
- for Iceland and the Nordic countries;
- for a bishop, a priest or any leader who must make a difficult decision;
- for students and those who teach;
- when you need courage to remain faithful to your conscience.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Thorlak. To get to know him better, read the life of Saint Thorlak.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Thorlak

This novena to Saint Thorlak, patron saint of Iceland, is an original composition by Saintspedia. It is not an official liturgical text. To end on his feast day, December 23, begin on December 15. It falls in the last days of Advent, when the Church prays the great "O Antiphons" and waits for the coming of Christ, a fitting time to walk with a saint who died on the threshold of Christmas.

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 pray one Our Father, one Hail Mary and one Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into ordinary life. The episodes recalled here come from the *Saga of Thorlak*, written in Icelandic shortly after his death. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

Day 1: A Child of Iceland

Thorlak was born in 1133 at Fljótshlíð, in a family of good birth but modest means, in a young Christian land at the edge of the known world. God calls saints from every place, even the most remote.

Prayer: Saint Thorlak, pray for the place where I was born and the place where I live, that the Gospel may take root there. Amen.

Today: Pray for the people of your town or neighborhood by name.

Day 2: Called Young

Thorlak became a deacon very young and was ordained a priest at about eighteen. He did not wait to be older to give himself to God and to the service of others.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Thorlak, raise up generous vocations among young people, and help me answer your call today. Amen.

Today: Pray for a young person you know who is discerning the future.

Day 3: Seeking Wisdom

He left his island to study in Paris, probably at the Abbey of Saint-Victor, and then in Lincoln. For an Icelander of his time this was a long and rare journey. He went to learn so that he could serve better.

Prayer: Saint Thorlak, give me a humble love of truth, and help students and teachers to seek wisdom for the good of others. Amen.

Today: Spend fifteen minutes reading Scripture or a good spiritual book.

Day 4: A Life Under the Rule

In Paris he discovered the life of the canons regular, who prayed and studied together under the Rule of Saint Augustine. Back home, he refused an advantageous marriage and chose this form of life.

Prayer: Lord, help me to order my days around prayer, and bless all who live in religious communities. Amen.

Today: Set a fixed time for prayer and keep it.

Day 5: The Abbot of Þykkvabær

As prior and then abbot of Þykkvabær, Thorlak introduced the Augustinian rule and became known for his wisdom and piety. He led his brothers by example more than by command.

Prayer: Saint Thorlak, pray for all who lead communities, families and parishes, that they may serve with wisdom and gentleness. Amen.

Today: Do a hidden service for someone in your household or community.

Day 6: Accepting a Heavy Charge

Elected bishop of Skálholt in 1174, he was consecrated in 1178 at Nidaros. He knew the task would be hard in a land where chieftains treated churches as their property. He accepted it all the same.

Prayer: Lord, give our bishops courage, humility and fidelity, and give me strength for the responsibilities you entrust to me. Amen.

Today: Pray for your bishop by name.

Day 7: Firm Before the Powerful

Thorlak fought for the freedom of the Church and for the dignity of marriage, even against Jón Loftsson, the most powerful chieftain of his day. He could not win everything and had to give way at times, but he never gave up his conscience.

Prayer: Saint Thorlak, help me to speak the truth with charity, and to stay upright when silence would be more comfortable. Amen.

Today: Ask God for the courage to face a situation you have been avoiding.

Day 8: Generous to the Poor

The saga remembers a bishop who was firm in principle but generous to the poor. Strictness with oneself and kindness to others went together in him.

Prayer: Lord, open my hands to those in need this Christmas, and make my heart merciful like that of Saint Thorlak. Amen.

Today: Give something to a person or charity serving the poor this Christmas.

Day 9: At the Threshold of Christmas

Thorlak died on December 23, 1193, two days before Christmas. In Iceland, *Þorláksmessa* is still a day of preparation for the feast. His passage into the peace of God reminds us that our whole life is an Advent, a waiting for the Lord.

Prayer: Saint Thorlak, at the end of this novena I entrust my intention to you. Pray for Iceland, for the peoples of the North and for me, that I may welcome Christ with a ready heart. Amen.

Today: Prepare a place for prayer at home for Christmas, such as a Nativity scene, and pray before it with your family.

Closing prayer

Lord God, you gave Saint Thorlak to the people of Iceland as a wise and upright shepherd. Through his intercession, keep your Church free and faithful, strengthen pastors in their trials, and grant us to live by the truth with generous hearts. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

To go further, read the life of Saint Thorlak and the prayer to Saint Thorlak.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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