

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Walburga

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: February 25

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IN BRIEF

Saint Walburga

Eighth-century Anglo-Saxon nun, abbess of Heidenheim and missionary in Germany.

Feast day	February 25
Born	c. 710, England
Died	February 25, 779, Heidenheim, Franconia, Germany
Era	8th century

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Walburga

Saint Walburga, also known as Walpurgis, Walburge or Vaubourg, was an Anglo-Saxon nun of the eighth century who came to Germany to help the missionary work of her uncle, Saint Boniface. Abbess of the monastery of Heidenheim, in Franconia, she died in 779. Her relics, moved to Eichstätt, still draw pilgrims today, and her name gave rise to "Walpurgis Night." Her feast is February 25.

Who was Saint Walburga?

Walburga was born around 710 in the south of England, into a noble and deeply Christian family. According to tradition, her father, Richard, died on pilgrimage at Lucca, in Italy, and her mother, Wynna, was the sister of Wynfrith, the future Saint Boniface, apostle of Germany. Her two brothers, Willibald and Wunibald, also became missionaries and are honored as saints.

While still young, Walburga was entrusted to the double monastery of Wimborne, in Dorset, where monks and nuns lived under the Rule of Saint Benedict under the authority of an abbess. She received a solid education there and, according to the accounts, formed a bond with the nun Lioba, who would also become one of Boniface's co-workers.



Saint Walburga, by the Master of Meßkirch (c. 1535-1540).

Key dates

- **c. 710**: Birth in England.
- **720s-740s**: Monastic life at Wimborne.
- **c. 750**: Departure for Germany, at the call of Saint Boniface.
- **752**: Her brother Wunibald founds the double monastery of Heidenheim.
- **761**: Death of Wunibald; Walburga takes charge of Heidenheim.
- **February 25, 779**: Death at Heidenheim, according to the traditional date.
- **c. 870**: Translation of her relics to Eichstätt, on a May 1.
- **1035**: Foundation in Eichstätt of the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Walburga, around her tomb.

Missionary in Germany

In the middle of the eighth century, Boniface was organizing the Church in the Germanic lands, which were still only lightly Christianized. He called on monks and nuns from England to found monasteries that would be at once places of prayer, schools and centers of evangelization. Walburga answered this call. Her brother Willibald became bishop of Eichstätt, and Wunibald founded a double monastery at Heidenheim, not far away.

When Wunibald died in 761, Walburga took the lead of the community. A woman thus governed monks as well as nuns, something accepted in double monasteries of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. She led Heidenheim for nearly twenty years, in a region where Christianity was slowly taking root.

Medieval accounts credit her with knowledge of medicine and several healings; these belong to the hagiographic tradition more than to verifiable history.

The tomb of Eichstätt and Saint Walburga's oil

Walburga died at Heidenheim in 779, and her tomb quickly became a place of pilgrimage. Around 870, the bishop of Eichstätt had her relics transferred to his cathedral city. According to tradition, the translation took place on May 1, and so the night before that date, already marked by old spring festivals, took the name "Walpurgis Night." The witchcraft legends later attached to that night have no connection with the saint.

In Eichstätt, a remarkable phenomenon keeps the devotion alive. Every year, roughly from October to February, a clear liquid seeps from the stone slab covering her relics. The Benedictine nuns collect it and give it out in small vials as "Saint Walburga's oil." The Church has made no judgment on this phenomenon, but pilgrims receive the oil as a sign of prayer and trust. This is why the saint is often shown holding a flask.

A devotion spread throughout Europe

Fragments of her relics were sent very early to other regions, which explains the large number of churches dedicated to her, especially in Flanders, the Netherlands, Alsace and Lorraine. The collegiate church of Oudenaarde, the church of Saint Walburga in Bruges, the one in Veurne and the basilica in Arnhem all bear her name. In France she is also found under the names Vaubourg and Gauburge, especially in Normandy.

In the English-speaking world, her memory is tied to Wimborne in Dorset, where she was formed as a nun, and in the United States a Benedictine abbey in Colorado, founded from Eichstätt, bears her name.

Why is Saint Walburga invoked for the sick and for harvests?

Saint Walburga has no official patronage, but tradition has long invoked her for the sick, especially children, and against certain illnesses such as rickets and skin diseases. This devotion comes both from the medieval accounts of her healings and from the oil collected at her tomb, which pilgrims take home to pray for the sick. She is also invoked for good harvests and for those who leave home to proclaim the Gospel.

Walburga belongs to the generation of Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns who left their country to bring the Gospel to the heart of Europe. Her holiness is that of a woman of prayer and of leadership, who faithfully held for many years the post others had entrusted to her. She is a reminder of the decisive role of women in the evangelization of the continent.

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

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Walburga in art

Saint Walburga is shown as a Benedictine abbess, in a black habit with a veil, holding an abbess's crozier. Her most distinctive attribute is a small flask or vial, recalling the oil of Eichstätt. She sometimes holds a book, the Rule or the Gospels, and in some images ears of grain, a sign of her protection over harvests.



The reliquary of Saint Walburga at Meschede (Westphalia).

Where to pray to Saint Walburga

- **Eichstätt, Bavaria**: the Abbey of Saint Walburga, where her relics rest in a crypt beneath the choir and where the Benedictine nuns give out Saint Walburga's oil.
- **Heidenheim, Middle Franconia**: the former abbey she governed and where she died.

- **Wimborne Minster, Dorset, England**: the place of her monastic formation.
- **Oudenaarde, Bruges and Veurne** (Belgium) and **Arnhem** (Netherlands): churches dedicated to her.
- **Walbourg** and the pilgrimage chapel of **Leymen**, in Alsace, France.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Walburga for the Sick and for Missionaries

Saint Walburga has been prayed to for more than a thousand years, especially in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, but no single ancient prayer has become standard in English. Saintspedia therefore offers an original prayer, inspired by her life as a missionary nun and by the devotion surrounding her tomb in Eichstätt.

What people ask of Saint Walburga

Tradition invokes Saint Walburga for the sick, especially children, for good harvests and for those who leave home to proclaim the Gospel. Pilgrims to Eichstätt often take home a small vial of "Saint Walburga's oil," collected by the Benedictine nuns from the stone slab over her tomb, and pray with her for healing or protection.



Saint Walburga, statue in Saint Peter's Church, Munich.

Prayer to Saint Walburga for the sick and for missionaries

Saint Walburga, you left your homeland to serve the Gospel among peoples who did not yet know Christ: give me a willing heart, ready to go wherever the Lord calls me.

You governed your community with wisdom and gentleness: pray for all who are responsible for others, in monasteries, families and parishes.

For centuries you have been invoked for the sick: intercede for those who suffer in their bodies, especially children, and for those who care for them. Obtain for them strength, patience and, if God wills, healing.

I also entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). May your prayer help me to remain faithful, day after day, as you were at Heidenheim. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Walburga is celebrated on February 25. May 1, the traditional anniversary of the translation of her relics, is also a day when she is remembered in several regions of Germany. You can also pray to her:

- at the bedside of a sick child, or when using Saint Walburga's oil;
- for missionaries, especially women religious working far from home;
- for abbesses, superiors, parents and all who carry responsibility for others;
- in spring, for the harvests and the work of farmers.

A short invocation

> *Saint Walburga, faithful abbess and missionary, pray for us and for all the sick.*

To get to know her better, read the life of Saint Walburga, or pray the novena to Saint Walburga.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Walburga

This novena to Saint Walburga is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the Anglo-Saxon nun who left England to support the mission of her uncle Saint Boniface, governed the monastery of Heidenheim and whose tomb in Eichstätt still draws pilgrims. To end on her feast day, February 25, begin it on February 17. You can also pray it at any time, especially for a sick person, a child in difficulty or for missionaries.

How to pray this novena

Each day, find a quiet moment. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with the small act proposed. If you have a vial of Saint Walburga's oil, you may keep it near you as a sign of prayer. If you miss a day, simply continue.

Day 1: A family of saints

Walburga was born around 710 in southern England. Her uncle was Saint Boniface, and her brothers Willibald and Wunibald also became missionaries and saints. Faith was a family affair, passed from one generation to the next.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, pray for my family, that faith may grow in each of us and be handed on to our children. Amen.

Today: Pray for each member of your family by name.

Day 2: Formed at Wimborne

As a young girl, Walburga was entrusted to the monastery of Wimborne, in Dorset, where she lived under the Rule of Saint Benedict and received a solid education. Her missionary life grew out of years of prayer and learning.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, help me to give time to prayer and to learning the faith, so that my life may bear fruit. Amen.

Today: Read a short passage of the Rule of Saint Benedict or the Gospel.

Day 3: The friendship of saints

At Wimborne, Walburga formed a bond with the nun Lioba, who would also become one of Boniface's co-workers. Holy friendships help us to grow and to persevere.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, bless my friendships and make them a help on the way to God. Amen.

Today: Contact a friend who has helped you in your faith and thank them.

Day 4: Leaving home

Around 750, Walburga answered Boniface's call and left England for Germany, where Christianity was still young. She left her homeland, her community and her language to serve the Gospel. Like Abraham, she set out for a land God would show her, trusting that he would go before her.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, pray for missionaries, especially women religious who serve far from home. Amen.

Today: Support a missionary or a mission society through prayer or a gift.

Day 5: Taking up the burden

When her brother Wunibald died in 761, Walburga took charge of the double monastery of Heidenheim. She accepted a responsibility she had not sought and carried it for nearly twenty years.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, pray for all who carry responsibility for others: parents, superiors, teachers and pastors. Amen.

Today: Offer a word of support to someone who leads others.

Day 6: Wisdom and gentleness

Walburga governed both monks and nuns in a region where the faith was slowly taking root. Leadership in the Church is a service, exercised with patience and gentleness. Jesus, who washed the feet of his disciples, showed that the one who leads must first be the servant of all.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, give me wisdom and gentleness in the way I guide and correct others. Amen.

Today: Speak kindly to someone you find difficult.



The crypt and tomb of Saint Walburga, in Eichstätt.

Day 7: For the sick

Medieval accounts say Walburga had knowledge of medicine and attribute healings to her. For centuries, the sick, especially children, have been entrusted to her prayer.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, intercede for the sick, especially children, and for those who care for them. Obtain for them strength, relief and, if God wills, healing. Amen.

Today: Visit or call a sick person, or pray for a sick child.

Day 8: The oil of Eichstätt

Every year, from about October to February, a clear liquid seeps from the stone over her relics in Eichstätt. The nuns give it to pilgrims as "Saint Walburga's oil." It is not magic, but a sign that invites us to trust and to pray, as Christians

have always done when they anoint the sick in the name of the Lord.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, increase my trust in God, who cares for his children in body and soul. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who has lost hope.

Day 9: Faithful to the end

Walburga died at Heidenheim on February 25, 779. She had held faithfully, day after day, the place God had given her. Her life still bears fruit in the many churches that bear her name across Europe.

Prayer: Saint Walburga, present to the Lord the intention I have carried through this novena, and help me to remain faithful as you were. Amen.

Today: Do one ordinary duty with great love.

Closing prayer

> *Lord our God, you called Saint Walburga to leave her homeland to serve your Gospel and to guide her community with wisdom. Through her intercession, comfort the sick, especially children, sustain missionaries and all who carry responsibility for others, and make us faithful in our daily work for your Kingdom. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Read more in the life of Saint Walburga, or say the prayer to Saint Walburga.

PILGRIMAGE

Saint Walburga's Abbey in Eichstätt

The relics of Saint Walburga rest in Eichstätt, Bavaria, in the church of the Benedictine abbey that bears her name. For more than a thousand years, pilgrims have come to pray to the Anglo-Saxon nun who led the nearby monastery of Heidenheim in the 8th century. A community of Benedictine nuns still lives there and watches over her tomb.

History of the site

After Walburga's death in 779, her tomb at Heidenheim was already drawing the faithful. Around 870, the Bishop of Eichstätt, the city where her brother Saint Willibald had been bishop, had her relics transferred to the Church of the Holy Cross in his episcopal city. In 1035, an abbey of Benedictine nuns was founded around this shrine. The present Baroque church dates from the 17th century, after the destruction of the Thirty Years' War. The nuns have maintained liturgical prayer and the welcome of pilgrims there without interruption.



Saint Walburga's Abbey in Eichstätt, exterior view.

The tomb and the oil of Saint Walburga

The relics are kept in a crypt, beneath the choir of the church, and are visible from a chapel where pilgrims can pray. Every year, generally between October and February, a clear liquid seeps from the stone slab covering the bones. The nuns collect it and put it into small vials, called "Saint Walburga's oil." The faithful take it away as a sign of prayer for the sick. The Church has not ruled on the nature of the phenomenon, which remains an object of devotion and not a dogma.

Visiting the abbey

The abbey church is open to visitors. The old town of Eichstätt, an episcopal see since the 8th century, is easily explored on foot: the cathedral holds the tomb of Saint Willibald, Walburga's brother. A visit to the saint's tomb is thus

part of a true journey in the footsteps of this family of Anglo-Saxon missionaries. Respect the silence of the monastic community, which lives in enclosure.

Praying on site

Before your pilgrimage, you may read the life of Saint Walburga. Before the tomb, you can entrust an intention and then pray the prayer to Saint Walburga. Taking part in one of the nuns' services is a beautiful way to join the prayer that has risen in this place for nearly a thousand years. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The crypt and tomb of Saint Walburga, in Eichstätt.

Other places of Saint Walburga

- **Heidenheim** (Middle Franconia): the former monastery she led and where she died.

- **Wimborne Minster** (Dorset, England): the place of her monastic formation.
- **Oudenaarde** and **Bruges** (Belgium): churches of Saint Walburga.
- **Arnhem** (Netherlands): the Basilica of Saint Walburga.
- **Walbourg** (Bas-Rhin): the Church of Sainte-Walburge, in Alsace.

Practical information

Eichstätt is in the Altmühl valley, between Nuremberg and Munich, and is served by train. The opening hours of the church, of services, and of the distribution of Saint Walburga's oil may vary: consult the official website of Saint Walburga's Abbey or that of the Diocese of Eichstätt before you come.

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