

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Wenceslaus

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: September 28

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IN BRIEF

Saint Wenceslaus

Duke of Bohemia and martyr, principal patron saint of the Czech nation.

Feast day	September 28
Born	c. 907, Bohemia, near Prague
Died	September 28, 935, Stará Boleslav, Bohemia
Canonized	immemorial cult
Era	10th century
Patron saint of	Bohemia, Czech Republic

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Wenceslaus: the Chorale "Svatý Václave"

Novena to Saint Wenceslaus

Chapel of Saint Wenceslaus in Saint Vitus Cathedral, Prague

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Wenceslaus

Saint Wenceslaus (also spelled Wenceslas) was a tenth-century Duke of Bohemia, murdered by his brother Boleslav on the threshold of a church in 935. Raised in the Christian faith by his grandmother, Saint Ludmila, he governed with a concern for the poor and for the Church that struck his contemporaries, and he was venerated as a martyr right after his death. English speakers know him as the "Good King Wenceslas" of the Christmas carol. The principal patron of the Czech nation, he is celebrated on September 28, the anniversary of his death, which is also the Czech Republic's national Statehood Day.

Who was Saint Wenceslaus?

Wenceslaus, in Czech Václav, was born around 907 into the Přemyslid family, the dynasty then ruling Bohemia. His father, Duke Vratislav, was a Christian; his mother, Drahomíra, came from a Slavic tribe that was still largely pagan. Bohemia had only recently received the Gospel: the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Great Moravia, in the previous century, had left its mark, and Wenceslaus's grandfather, Bořivoj, had been baptized with his wife Ludmila.

It was Saint Ludmila who took charge of the boy's education. Early accounts report that he learned to read Latin and Slavonic, something rare for a prince of his time. When his father died in 921, Wenceslaus was still too young to rule, and power passed to his mother.

Key dates

- **c. 907**: Born in Bohemia, into the ducal Přemyslid family.
- **921**: Death of his father, Duke Vratislav; his mother, Drahomíra, becomes regent.

- **September 15, 921**: His grandmother Ludmila is murdered at Tetín castle.
- **c. 924-925**: Wenceslaus takes over the government of Bohemia.
- **929**: Faced with the armies of the German king Henry I, he accepts his overlordship to avoid war.
- **c. 930**: Founds at Prague Castle a rotunda dedicated to Saint Vitus, forerunner of today's cathedral.
- **September 28, 935**: Murdered at Stará Boleslav by his brother Boleslav and his supporters; some sources give the year 929.
- **c. 938**: His remains are moved to the Saint Vitus rotunda in Prague.
- **1360s**: The Saint Wenceslas Chapel of Saint Vitus Cathedral is built at the wish of Emperor Charles IV.

A Christian prince

The reign of Wenceslaus is known mainly through *Lives* written in the decades after his death, in Slavonic and Latin. They describe a devout and just prince, attentive to the poor, to widows and to prisoners, who welcomed priests and built churches.

Some details belong to hagiography: it is said that he grew the wheat and tended the vines himself to prepare the bread and wine for Mass, and that he carried firewood to the poor at night. This trait inspired, much later, the English Christmas carol *Good King Wenceslas*, written by John Mason Neale in 1853, in which the king goes out on the Feast of Stephen to bring help to a poor man.

Politically, Wenceslaus sought peace with his powerful German neighbors. In 929, rather than wage a war that was lost in advance, he recognized the overlordship of King Henry I and paid him tribute. This choice, wise in the

eyes of some, angered part of the Bohemian nobility. Henry gave him a relic of Saint Vitus, to whom Wenceslaus dedicated the rotunda he built at Prague Castle.

Martyrdom at Stará Boleslav

His younger brother Boleslav, who lived in the stronghold of Stará Boleslav, northeast of Prague, became the leader of the discontented. In September 935, he invited Wenceslaus to the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian, patrons of the local church. The next morning, September 28, as Wenceslaus was on his way to the morning office, Boleslav and his companions attacked him. The duke was killed at the church door. Early accounts say he forgave his brother.

Boleslav took power. A few years later, filled with remorse according to tradition, he had his brother's body moved to Prague, to the Saint Vitus rotunda. Very soon, the murdered duke was venerated as a martyr, killed for his faithfulness to Christ and an innocent victim of violence. His cult spread through Bohemia and the neighboring lands.

Why is Saint Wenceslaus the patron saint of Bohemia and the Czech Republic?

Over the centuries, Saint Wenceslaus became the symbol of the Czech nation, its "eternal prince". The dukes and then the kings of Bohemia presented themselves as his lieutenants, and the royal crown, made in the fourteenth century for Charles IV, bears his name: the Crown of Saint Wenceslas.

The chorale "Svatý Václave", sung since the Middle Ages, calls on him as prince of the Czech land. A popular legend even says that an army of knights sleeps under Mount Blaník and that Wenceslaus will lead it to help his people in the hour of their greatest danger.

His equestrian statue, by the sculptor Josef Václav Myslbek, has stood since the early twentieth century over the square in Prague that bears his name. Wenceslas Square has been the stage for many moments of Czech history, up to the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

Saint Wenceslaus shows that power can be exercised as a Christian: with care for the weakest, a desire for peace and faithfulness to prayer. His violent death, accepted without hatred, united him to Christ. He is prayed to for one's country and its leaders, for families divided by rivalry, and for all who hold authority.

To pray with him, read the prayer to Saint Wenceslaus, with the medieval chorale "Svatý Václave", or follow the novena to Saint Wenceslaus from September 19 to 27, so that it ends on the eve of his feast.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Wenceslaus in art

Saint Wenceslaus is shown as a young duke in armor, often wearing the ducal cap or a crown. He holds a lance with a banner, frequently bearing the eagle, and a shield. On horseback, as in Myslbek's monument, he appears as the protector of his people.



The Saint Wenceslas monument by Josef Václav Myslbek, Wenceslas Square, Prague.

Where to pray to Saint Wenceslaus

- **Prague**: the Saint Wenceslas Chapel in Saint Vitus Cathedral, which holds his tomb.
- **Stará Boleslav**: the Basilica of Saint Wenceslas, on the site of his martyrdom, the goal of a national pilgrimage around September 28.
- **Tetín**: the place where his grandmother, Saint Ludmila, was martyred.
- **Prague**: Wenceslas Square and its monument.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Wenceslaus: the Chorale "Svatý Václave"

The oldest prayer to Saint Wenceslaus is a hymn: the chorale "Svatý Václave", which Czechs have sung since the Middle Ages. It was not composed by Wenceslaus, but is a popular invocation addressed to him. Below you will find its best-known verses, then an original prayer to Saint Wenceslaus by Saintspedia.

The chorale "Svatý Václave"

This hymn in Old Czech, recorded in writing since the fourteenth century and probably older, is one of the oldest religious songs in the Czech language. For a long time it was sung as a national anthem. Translation by Saintspedia; the original text is in the public domain.

> *Saint Wenceslaus, duke of the Czech land, our prince, pray for us to God and the Holy Spirit! Kyrie eleison.*
>
> *We ask for your help, have mercy on us, comfort the sorrowful, drive away all evil, Saint Wenceslaus! Kyrie eleison.*

Source: the chorale "Svatý Václave", a medieval Czech hymn (verses 1 and 3 in the usual form): *Svatý Václave, vévodo české země, kníže náš, pros za ny Boha, svatého Ducha! Kyrie eleison.*

Prayer to Saint Wenceslaus

Saint Wenceslaus, prince of Bohemia, you received the faith from the hands of your grandmother Ludmila: teach me to keep and to pass on what I have received.

You governed with justice, thinking first of the poor, of widows and of prisoners: pray for those who hold authority, that they may serve the common good with integrity and humility.

You sought peace rather than war: obtain peace for our countries and for the world. You were killed by your own brother and you forgave him: heal families divided by jealousy and resentment.

I also entrust to you my intention (name it in silence).

May I be, like you, faithful to prayer, generous toward those who lack everything, and ready to give my life for Christ. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Wenceslaus is celebrated on September 28, the anniversary of his death, an optional memorial in the Roman calendar. On that day, a great national pilgrimage goes to Stará Boleslav, the place of his martyrdom. He is also prayed to for one's country, for its leaders and for peace, and by families torn apart by rivalry between brothers and sisters.

At Christmas, the carol *Good King Wenceslas* can also become a prayer: a reminder to go out, like him, toward those who are cold and poor.

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

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Wenceslaus

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Wenceslaus as told in the early legends of Bohemia. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast on September 28, begin on September 19: it ends on September 27, the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian, to which Wenceslaus had been invited on the eve of his death. You can also pray it at any time of year, for your country, for a family in conflict, or for someone who holds responsibility.

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. You can end by singing or saying the invocation "Saint Wenceslaus, pray for us". The small act suggested for the day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply pick up where you left off.

The nine days follow the life of the duke: the child taught by his grandmother, the young ruler who loved the Eucharist and the poor, the prince who chose peace, and the martyr who forgave the brother who killed him.



Saint Wenceslaus, church stained glass.

Day 1: Faith received from a grandmother

Wenceslaus was raised in the faith by his grandmother, Saint Ludmila. Grandparents are often a child's first witnesses to God, through their prayers, their stories and their patience.

Prayer: Lord, bless the grandparents who pass on the faith, and make me grateful for those who taught me to pray.

Today: Call a grandparent or an elderly person you know.

Day 2: Learning and understanding

Early accounts say that the young prince learned to read, something rare in his time. Knowing our faith helps us to live it better and to give a reason for the hope that is in us.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, give me a desire to know your Word and the teaching of the Church more deeply.

Today: Read one chapter of a Gospel.

Day 3: The bread and wine of the altar

According to tradition, Wenceslaus prepared the bread and wine for Mass with his own hands. This detail speaks of his love for the Eucharist, at the heart of his life as a ruler.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, present in the Eucharist, increase in me the hunger to receive you.

Today: Go to a weekday Mass, or spend some time in adoration.

Day 4: The prince of the poor

The legends show Wenceslaus carrying firewood to the poor at night, visiting prisoners and feeding orphans. The carol *Good King Wenceslas* keeps this memory alive. Power is meant for service.

Prayer: Lord, open my eyes to those around me who are cold, hungry or alone.

Today: Give to an organization that helps homeless people.

Day 5: Governing with justice

Wenceslaus wanted to be a just ruler, at the service of his people. Each of us, in our own measure, holds some responsibility toward others: at home, at work, in the parish or the town.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust to you the leaders of my country and all who hold authority. Give them wisdom and a care for the common good.

Today: Pray for a political leader, by name.



Saint Vitus Cathedral in Prague, where Saint Wenceslaus rests.

Day 6: Choosing peace

In 929, rather than throw his people into a hopeless war, Wenceslaus chose peace with the German king. Peace sometimes demands that we give up our pride and accept being misunderstood.

Prayer: Prince of Peace, give peace to nations at war, and teach me to calm the conflicts around me.

Today: Take the first step toward someone you disagree with.

Day 7: A brother's jealousy

Boleslav, jealous of his brother's power, decided to kill him. Like the story of Cain and Abel, the story of Wenceslaus reminds us how rivalry can destroy a family.

Prayer: Lord, heal the wounds between brothers and sisters, and free my heart from all jealousy.

Today: Pray for your own brothers and sisters, or for a family torn apart.

Day 8: At the threshold of the church

Wenceslaus died on the morning of September 28, on his way to prayer. His last steps were a path toward God. He did not know that this morning would be his last, but he was where he wanted to be: on the way to meet the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, may each of my days be turned toward you, and may death find me on the way to your house.

Today: Say a morning prayer before doing anything else.

Day 9: The martyr's forgiveness

The early accounts say that Wenceslaus forgave his brother. Later, Boleslav had his body moved to Prague. Forgiveness opens a future where everything seemed to be over. It does not erase the wrong, but it refuses to let hatred have the last word.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Wenceslaus, give me a forgiving heart, and grant peace to those I love. Amen.

Today: Forgive an offense in your heart, and hand it over to God.

Closing prayer

Saint Wenceslaus, duke of the Czech land and martyr of Christ, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for our countries and for those who govern them, for the poor and for divided families. Obtain for us faithfulness, justice and peace. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Chapel of Saint Wenceslaus in Saint Vitus Cathedral, Prague

The Chapel of Saint Wenceslaus, in Saint Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle, houses the tomb of the holy Duke of Bohemia. It stands on the site of the rotunda he himself founded in the 10th century and where his body was laid a few years after his martyrdom. It is the spiritual heart of the Czech nation and the main pilgrimage site of Saint Wenceslaus.

From Wenceslaus's rotunda to the Gothic cathedral

Around 930, Wenceslaus had a round church built at Prague Castle, dedicated to Saint Vitus, of whom he had received a relic. After his death, around 938, his body was transferred there. In the 11th century, the rotunda was replaced by a Romanesque basilica, then, beginning in 1344, Emperor Charles IV launched the construction of the present Gothic cathedral, entrusted to Matthias of Arras and then to Peter Parler. The cathedral was not completed until 1929, for the traditional millennium of Wenceslaus's death.



Saint Vitus Cathedral, at Prague Castle.

The Chapel of Saint Wenceslaus

The chapel was built in the 1360s by Peter Parler. Its lower walls are inlaid with more than a thousand semiprecious stones, jaspers and amethysts, set in gold, an image of the heavenly Jerusalem. Wall paintings from the 14th century depict the Passion of Christ; others, from the early 16th century, tell the life of Saint Wenceslaus. A Gothic statue of the saint, dated 1373, dominates the altar. Above the chapel is the room where the crown jewels of Bohemia are kept, including the Crown of Saint Wenceslaus, protected by a door with seven locks; they are shown to the public only on rare occasions.

Praying at the tomb of Saint Wenceslaus

Before your visit, you may reread the life of Saint Wenceslaus. The chapel, very crowded, is most often viewed from its doorways; a moment of recollection remains possible there, especially during the Masses celebrated in the cathedral. You can entrust to him your country, a divided family, or a personal intention, with the prayer to Saint Wenceslaus. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The Chapel of Saint Wenceslaus in Saint Vitus Cathedral, the interior.

Other places of Saint Wenceslaus

- **Stará Boleslav**, northeast of Prague: the Basilica of Saint Wenceslaus, on the site of his martyrdom, goal of the national pilgrimage of September 28.
- **Tetín**, near Beroun: the place where his grandmother, Saint Ludmila, was murdered in 921.
- **Prague**: the Basilica of Saint George at the castle, where the remains of Saint Ludmila rest.

- **Prague**: Wenceslas Square and the equestrian statue of the saint by Josef Václav Myslbek.

Practical information

Saint Vitus Cathedral is within the grounds of Prague Castle, reachable on foot from the Malá Strana district or by streetcar. Visiting certain parts of the cathedral and the castle requires a ticket; tourist crowds are heavy, especially in summer. September 28, the feast of Saint Wenceslaus, is a public holiday in the Czech Republic. Check Mass and visiting times with the Archdiocese of Prague or the castle administration before you come.

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