

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Wilfrid

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: April 24

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IN BRIEF

Saint Wilfrid

Anglo-Saxon bishop of York, champion of Roman customs at the Synod of Whitby, founder of Ripon and Hexham, apostle of Sussex.

Feast day	April 24, October 12
Born	c. 633, Northumbria, England
Died	709 or 710, Oundle, England
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	Ripon, Diocese of Middlesbrough

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Wilfrid

Saint Wilfrid's Crypt, Ripon Cathedral

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Wilfrid

Saint Wilfrid, or Wilfrith, was a seventh-century Anglo-Saxon bishop, one of the strongest and most debated figures of the young Church in England. Born in Northumbria around 633 and trained at Lindisfarne, Lyon and Rome, he won the day for Roman customs at the Synod of Whitby in 664, became bishop of York, founded the monasteries of Ripon and Hexham, and evangelized Sussex during one of his exiles. He died in 709 or 710. His feast day is April 24 and, in England, October 12.

Who was Saint Wilfrid?

Wilfrid was a man of contrasts. His contemporaries describe him as an ambitious prelate with a lavish lifestyle, surrounded by a large retinue and often in conflict with kings and bishops. But they also show him tireless in the service of the Church: a builder, a missionary and an educator, so attached to unity with Rome that he made the journey there three times to defend his cause. He spent much of his time as a bishop in exile, without ever giving up.

We know him from two sources. The first is his *Life*, written shortly after his death by Stephen, a monk of Ripon, at the request of his disciples: it is a work of praise, but very rich in detail. The second is the *Ecclesiastical History* of Saint Bede the Venerable, which is more reserved about him.

Key dates

- **c. 633**: Born in Northumbria, probably into a noble family.
- **c. 648**: Queen Eanflæd entrusts him to the monks of Lindisfarne.
- **Between 653 and 658**: Journey to Rome with Benedict Biscop, stay in Lyon.
- **c. 660**: Abbot of Ripon, where he introduces the Rule of Saint Benedict.

- **664**: Spokesman of the Roman party at the Synod of Whitby; he is chosen as bishop.
- **669**: He actually takes possession of the see of York.
- **678**: Driven out by King Ecgfrith; appeals to Rome, where Pope Agatho rules in his favor in 679.
- **680-685**: Exile and evangelization of Sussex; founding of Selsey.
- **692-706**: New exile in Mercia, then a third journey to Rome.
- **706**: Restored to Ripon and Hexham.
- **709 or 710**: Dies at Oundle, probably on April 24, 710; buried at Ripon.

Lindisfarne, Lyon and Rome

At fourteen, after a quarrel with his stepmother, Wilfrid left his father's house and presented himself at the court of King Oswiu. Queen Eanflæd took him under her protection and sent him to study at the monastery of Lindisfarne, founded shortly before by Saint Aidan. There he received the formation of the Irish monks.

But Wilfrid dreamed of Rome. Around 653 he set out with Benedict Biscop: they were the first Anglo-Saxons known to make this pilgrimage. In Lyon, Bishop Annemund wanted him to marry his niece and take up an office; Wilfrid refused and continued his journey. In Rome he learned the Roman method of calculating the date of Easter and discovered the veneration of relics.

Back in Lyon, he observed the Frankish monasteries inspired by Saint Columbanus and by the Rule of Saint Benedict. He would bring back to England stonemasons, liturgical customs and a high idea of the Roman Church.

The Synod of Whitby

Returning around 658, Wilfrid received the monastery of Ripon from Prince Alhfrith, and there he imposed Roman customs and the Benedictine Rule. In 664 King Oswiu gathered a synod at Whitby, at the monastery of Abbess Hilda, to settle a question that divided his own court: the date of Easter. The monks trained at Iona followed an older calculation, different from that of Rome.

Wilfrid spoke for the Roman party and, according to Bede, his speech carried the king's decision: Northumbria aligned itself with Rome. Wilfrid became the dominant figure of the Church in the North and was chosen as bishop.

Bishop and builder

Doubting the validity of ordinations performed in England, Wilfrid had himself consecrated in Gaul, at Compiègne. His return was delayed, and on his arrival he found Saint Chad installed in his see, so he withdrew to Ripon. In 669 Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus restored him to York.

Nine years of intense activity followed. He restored the cathedral of York, founded the monastery of Hexham on land given by Queen Æthelthryth (Saint Etheldreda), created schools and brought a choirmaster from Kent to introduce Roman liturgical chant. His stone churches, built by masons from Gaul, impressed his contemporaries; the crypts of Ripon and Hexham are their surviving remains.

Exiles and mission

In 678, having fallen out with King Ecgfrith, who blamed him in particular for encouraging the queen to enter a monastery, Wilfrid was driven out. Archbishop Theodore divided his huge diocese. Wilfrid appealed to the pope. On the way, he spent the winter among the Frisians and preached the Gospel to them, opening the way for Saint Willibrord. King Dagobert II offered him

the bishopric of Strasbourg, which he refused. In Rome, Pope Agatho ordered his restoration, but the king of Northumbria had him imprisoned and then expelled him again.

Wilfrid then took refuge in Sussex, the last Anglo-Saxon kingdom still pagan. For five years he preached there, and Bede reports that he won the trust of the people by teaching them to fish in the sea, after a terrible famine. He founded the monastery of Selsey, the origin of the later diocese of Chichester.

Recalled in 686, he was driven out again in 692, spent years in Mercia, and went to Rome a third time, where Pope Sergius I supported him. In 706, reconciled, he recovered Ripon and Hexham. He died at Oundle in 709 or 710 and was buried at Ripon.

Why is Saint Wilfrid the patron saint of Ripon and Middlesbrough?

Ripon was Wilfrid's first monastery and the place he chose for his burial. The town has honored him ever since, and his crypt still lies beneath its cathedral. The Catholic Diocese of Middlesbrough, in the north of England, also has him as its patron, honoring the great bishop of the Northumbrian Church in the region where he lived and worked.

Wilfrid is not an easy saint. His uncompromising character made him many enemies. But he put that energy at the service of the Church's unity with Rome, the beauty of the liturgy, education and mission, and his exiles became opportunities to proclaim the Gospel. You can pray to him for those who are unjustly pushed aside, for church builders and for those who carry a difficult temperament they wish to place at God's service.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Wilfrid in art

Saint Wilfrid is shown as a bishop, with miter and crosier. Stained glass windows, such as the one in Chichester Cathedral, often show him preaching or baptizing the people of Sussex. A fishing net or fish can recall Bede's story of how he taught the South Saxons to fish, and a model of a church his work as a builder at Ripon and Hexham.

Where to pray to Saint Wilfrid

- **Ripon** (North Yorkshire): the crypt of Saint Wilfrid, beneath the cathedral.
- **Hexham** (Northumberland): the Anglo-Saxon crypt of the abbey he founded.
- **Chichester** (West Sussex): the cathedral, heir to the see of Selsey.
- **Middlesbrough**: the Catholic diocese of which he is patron.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Wilfrid or the novena to Saint Wilfrid.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Wilfrid in Trials and for the Mission

There is no widely used traditional prayer to Saint Wilfrid. Below is an original prayer inspired by what his *Life* by Stephen of Ripon and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* tell us about him: the pilgrim to Rome, the builder bishop, the exile who became a missionary.

A saint of faithfulness in adversity

Driven from his diocese three times, Wilfrid never resigned himself to injustice, but he never stopped serving either. Each of his exiles bore fruit: the first preaching among the Frisians, the conversion of Sussex, help for missionaries leaving for the continent. He reminds us that God can write straight with the crooked lines of our lives.

Prayer to Saint Wilfrid

Saint Wilfrid, you took the road to Rome so many times: keep me attached to the Church and to the unity of all who believe in Christ.

You built churches of stone for the praise of God: give me a love for beauty in the liturgy and in everyday life.

You knew exile, injustice and prison: support those who are pushed aside, slandered or driven out. Help them to defend the truth without hatred and to serve wherever they find themselves.

You taught the people of Sussex to fish so that they could live: teach me to help in practical ways those to whom I proclaim the Gospel.

Your character was fiery: pray for me, so that even my strengths and my faults may serve the Kingdom of God. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Wilfrid's feast day is April 24 and, in the dioceses of England, October 12. You can pray to him:

- in a time of conflict or when you suffer an injustice;
- before a journey or a pilgrimage, especially to Rome;
- for missionaries and for those who proclaim the Gospel in difficult places;
- for the unity of the Church;
- when you struggle with your own temperament and want to put it at God's service.

To pray with him over nine days, follow the novena to Saint Wilfrid. To know him better, read the life of Saint Wilfrid.

A prayer for the Church in the north of England

Wilfrid is honored at Ripon and as patron of the Diocese of Middlesbrough. You can also pray this short original text by Saintspedia for the Church he served:

> *Lord, through the intercession of Saint Wilfrid, bless the Church in the north of England and all the places where he preached, built and suffered. Give its pastors courage, its people faith, and all of us a love for the unity of your Church. Amen.*

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Wilfrid

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Wilfrid as told by Stephen of Ripon and Saint Bede the Venerable. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, April 24, begin it on April 16; in England, where he is also celebrated on October 12, you can begin it on October 4. It can be prayed at any time, especially in a time of conflict or injustice.

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 Wilfrid's spirit of zeal, perseverance and love for the Church. You can pray it alone, with your family or with a parish group.



Ripon Cathedral, where Saint Wilfrid is buried.

Day 1: Leaving home

At fourteen, after a quarrel at home, Wilfrid left his father's house and went to the royal court. Queen Eanflæd welcomed him and sent him to Lindisfarne. God can use even our family wounds to lead us forward. We pray for young people who leave home and for those who welcome them.

Prayer: Lord, watch over young people who leave their families. Put on their path people who will guide them to you.

Today: Pray for a young person you know who is starting out in life.

Day 2: Formed at Lindisfarne

At Lindisfarne, Wilfrid was formed by the monks of Saint Aidan, in prayer and Scripture. Even after he chose Roman customs, he had received much from them. We give thanks for all who have formed us, even those we later disagreed

with.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for all who have taught me, even imperfectly. Help me to keep what was good in what I received.

Today: Pray for a teacher or community that formed you.

Day 3: The road to Rome

Around 653 Wilfrid set out for Rome with Benedict Biscop. In Lyon he refused a marriage and an office to continue his pilgrimage. He wanted to drink from the source of the Church. We pray for a deeper love for the universal Church.

Prayer: Lord, give me a heart as wide as your Church, attached to the successor of Peter and open to all peoples.

Today: Pray for the pope and his intentions.

Day 4: Speaking at Whitby

At the Synod of Whitby in 664, Wilfrid spoke for unity with Rome on the date of Easter, and the king followed him. Unity in the Church is a gift to be sought and served. We pray for unity among Christians.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you prayed that all may be one. Heal the divisions among your disciples.

Today: Pray for Christians of another denomination, or take a step toward someone from whom you are divided.

Day 5: Building for God

Wilfrid built stone churches at Ripon, Hexham and York, brought masons from Gaul and a choirmaster from Kent. He wanted the worship of God to be beautiful. We pray for all who build and care for churches, and for those who

make the liturgy beautiful.

Prayer: Lord, may our churches and our liturgies give you glory and lift hearts toward you.

Today: Thank a musician, sacristan or volunteer who serves the liturgy in your parish.

Day 6: Driven out

In 678 Wilfrid was driven from his see by the king. Later he was imprisoned. He knew injustice, calumny and humiliation. We pray for all who suffer injustice, in the Church and in the world.

Prayer: Lord, defend those who are treated unjustly. Give them strength to seek justice without hatred.

Today: Pray for a person who has been unjustly treated, or speak up for someone who is being wronged.

Day 7: Mission in exile

Instead of only waiting, Wilfrid preached to the Frisians on his way to Rome and spent five years evangelizing Sussex. His exile became a mission. We ask for the grace to serve wherever we find ourselves.

Prayer: Lord, wherever I am, even in a place I did not choose, make me a witness of your Gospel.

Today: Look for one way to serve in the situation you are in now, even if it is not the one you wanted.

Day 8: Teaching to fish

Bede tells that Wilfrid won the trust of the people of Sussex, after a famine, by teaching them to fish in the sea. He met their hunger before speaking of God. We pray for those who serve the bodily needs of the poor.

Prayer: Lord, make me attentive to the concrete needs of others, so that my words about you may be believed.

Today: Give food or support to a food bank or a family in need.

Day 9: Reconciled at last

In 706, after long years of conflict, Wilfrid was reconciled and restored to Ripon and Hexham. He died at Oundle and was buried at Ripon. On this last day, we pray for reconciliation in our own lives and entrust our intentions to him.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Wilfrid, bring peace where there is conflict in my life, and keep me faithful until the end.

Today: Pray for someone with whom you are in conflict, and ask God for the grace of reconciliation.

Closing prayer

Saint Wilfrid, pilgrim to Rome, builder of churches, bishop exiled and faithful, you turned your trials into opportunities to proclaim the Gospel. Present to the Lord the intention I have carried during these nine days. Obtain for me love for the unity of the Church, courage in injustice and zeal for the mission. Help me to place my whole character, with its strengths and weaknesses, at God's service. Saint Wilfrid, pray for us. Amen.

For a shorter prayer, see the prayer to Saint Wilfrid.

PILGRIMAGE

Saint Wilfrid's Crypt, Ripon Cathedral

Beneath Ripon Cathedral, in North Yorkshire, lies one of the oldest Christian spaces in England still in use: the crypt built by Saint Wilfrid around 672 for the church of his monastery. This small vaulted room, a few meters long, has survived more than thirteen centuries. It is the most direct place to pray beside the great Anglo-Saxon bishop, who was buried at Ripon after his death.

History of the place

Shortly before 664, Prince Alhfrith entrusted the monastery of Ripon to Wilfrid. Having become a bishop, Wilfrid had a stone church built there by masons from Gaul, with a crypt under the choir meant to receive relics brought from Rome. He was buried there near the altar, in 709 or 710. In 948, the church was destroyed during a campaign by King Eadred; sources differ on the fate of the relics, part of which are said to have been carried off to Canterbury. But the crypt survives, and the successive churches, up to the present Gothic cathedral, were built above it. In 1836, Ripon became the seat of a diocese of the Church of England.



Ripon Cathedral, built above Wilfrid's crypt.

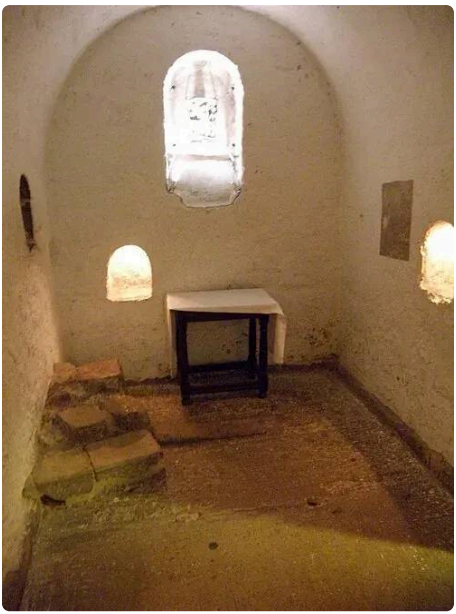
What you will see

One descends into the crypt by a narrow passage. The main chamber, with its barrel vault and whitewashed walls, is pierced by small niches that probably held lamps and relics. One of them, known as "Saint Wilfrid's Needle," is a narrow opening in the wall, tied to an old popular tradition. The whole, very simple, recalls the Roman crypts that Wilfrid had seen on his travels. In the cathedral itself, several works recall the founder.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can reread the life of Saint Wilfrid. In the silence of the crypt, take a moment to pray for the unity of Christians, which was dear to Wilfrid, then say the prayer to Saint Wilfrid. The cathedral now belongs to the

Church of England; Catholics are welcomed there as visitors and pilgrims. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



Saint Wilfrid's Crypt at Ripon.

Other places associated with Saint Wilfrid

- **Hexham** (Northumberland): the Anglo-Saxon crypt of the abbey he founded, comparable to the one at Ripon.
- **Whitby** (North Yorkshire): the ruins of the abbey where the Synod of 664 was held.
- **Chichester** (Sussex): the cathedral, heir to the see of Selsey that he founded.
- **Lindisfarne** (Northumberland): the island where he did his first studies.

Practical information

Ripon is a small town in North Yorkshire, about forty kilometers north of Leeds, reached by bus from Harrogate or Leeds. The cathedral is in the heart of the town. Access to the crypt may depend on services and guided tours. Check the opening and service times with the cathedral before you come.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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