

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Willehad

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: November 8

IN BRIEF

Saint Willehad

Anglo-Saxon missionary to the Frisians and the Saxons, first bishop of Bremen.

Feast day	November 8
Born	8th century, Northumbria, England
Died	November 8, 789, Blexen, Germany
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (listed in the Roman Martyrology)
Era	8th century

In this booklet

Life

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Willehad

Saint Willehad was an Anglo-Saxon monk and missionary of the eighth century who left Northumbria to preach the Gospel to the Frisians and then to the Saxons. Driven out by the revolt of Widukind, he returned to Saxony and in 787 became the first bishop of Bremen, where he built the first cathedral. He died on November 8, 789, during a pastoral visit, is listed in the Roman Martyrology and is celebrated on November 8.

Who was Saint Willehad?

Willehad belongs to the great generation of missionaries who came from England to evangelize the Germanic peoples of the continent, following in the footsteps of Saint Willibrord and Saint Boniface. He is thought to have been born in Northumbria, in the north of England, and to have been trained at York, in the circle of the scholar Alcuin, who would later become an adviser to Charlemagne.

Most of what we know about his life comes from an early biography written in Bremen after his death. It allows us to trace the main stages of his life, although many details remain unknown, starting with the date of his birth.

For English-speaking Catholics, Willehad is one of a remarkable line of saints from the Anglo-Saxon Church, the same Northumbrian world that produced Saint Bede the Venerable, who went out to bring the faith to the lands from which their own ancestors had come.

Key dates

- **First half of the 8th century**: Birth in Northumbria.

- **c. 770**: Sent on mission to the Frisians by King Alhred of Northumbria; he settles at Dokkum.
- **780**: Charlemagne sends him to preach among the Saxons.
- **782**: The revolt of Widukind forces him to flee.
- **782-785**: Pilgrimage to Rome, then a stay at the abbey of Echternach.
- **785**: Return to Saxony.
- **787**: He is consecrated bishop of Bremen.
- **November 8, 789**: Death at Blexen, on the Weser, during a pastoral visit.

The Anglo-Saxon mission to the continent

In the eighth century, the young Church of England, itself evangelized only a few generations earlier, sent many of its best monks across the North Sea. They felt a special bond with the Frisians and the Saxons, whom they regarded as kinsmen, since the Angles and Saxons of Britain had come from those same coasts. Willibrord had become the apostle of the Frisians, and Boniface the organizer of the Church in Germany. Willehad stepped into this movement, carrying the faith back, as it were, to the homeland of his ancestors.

Among the Frisians, in the footsteps of Boniface

Once ordained a priest, Willehad was sent around 770 to the Frisians by Alhred, king of Northumbria. He settled at Dokkum, in eastern Frisia, in the very place where Saint Boniface had been martyred with his companions in 754. There he took up the work of his famous predecessor: preaching, baptizing and forming small Christian communities in a country that was still largely pagan.

The mission to the Saxons

In 780 the Frankish king Charlemagne, who was seeking to subdue and Christianize Saxony, sent Willehad to preach in the region between the Elbe and the Weser. The mission met strong resistance: for many Saxons, Christianity was the religion of the conqueror. In 782 the Saxon duke Widukind led a great revolt. Priests and faithful were killed, and Willehad had to flee.

He then went on pilgrimage to Rome, and afterward stayed for some time at the abbey of Echternach, founded by Saint Willibrord and then led by another Anglo-Saxon, Abbot Beornrad. This time of withdrawal allowed him to pray and to prepare his return.

The first bishop of Bremen

In 785, after Widukind submitted, Willehad returned to Saxony and carried out an intense pastoral ministry. In 787 he was consecrated bishop, with his see at Bremen, on the Weser. There he built the first cathedral, made of wood.

Two years later, on November 8, 789, he died at Blexen, near the mouth of the Weser, during a pastoral visit. His body was brought back to Bremen and buried in his cathedral.

After his death, many miracles were attributed to him, and his cult spread through northern Germany, Denmark and England. A few decades later, another great bishop of Bremen, Saint Ansgar, would carry his work as far as Scandinavia. Forgotten at the time of the Reformation, Willehad has become better known again over the last century.

What can we learn from Saint Willehad?

Saint Willehad has no particular patronage, but his life speaks to anyone who has known failure in their work for God. His first Saxon mission ended in violence and flight. Yet he did not give up. After a time of prayer and pilgrimage, he came back, founded a Church and ended his life on the road, in the service of his people.

He reminds us that proclaiming the Gospel requires patience and perseverance, and that it can never be confused with conquest. He can be prayed to for missionaries, for those who must begin again after a failure, and for the Church in northern Germany.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Willehad in art

Saint Willehad is usually shown as a bishop, with miter and crosier, as in the engraving of the early sixteenth century reproduced above. Images of him are rare, which reflects the long period during which his memory faded in Bremen after the Reformation.

Where to pray to Saint Willehad

- **Bremen** (Germany): Saint Peter's Cathedral, on the site of the cathedral he founded.
- **Dokkum** (Netherlands): the town where he began his Frisian mission, a major place of remembrance of Saint Boniface.
- **Blexen** (Germany): the village on the Weser where he died.

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

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Willehad for Missionaries and New Beginnings

No traditional prayer to Saint Willehad has come into wide use in English, and his memory, long faded after the Reformation, is only gradually being rediscovered. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by his life: the Northumbrian monk who left his homeland for the mission, the missionary who failed and began again, the first bishop of Bremen who died on the road.

A saint of perseverance

Willehad preached to the Frisians and then to the Saxons. In 782 the revolt of Widukind destroyed his work and forced him to flee. After a pilgrimage to Rome and a time of prayer at Echternach, he returned to Saxony, became the first bishop of Bremen in 787 and died during a pastoral visit in 789.

Prayer to Saint Willehad for missionaries and new beginnings

Saint Willehad, you left Northumbria and your people to carry the Gospel across the sea: give me the courage to go out of myself and to share the faith I have received.

You saw your mission destroyed by violence and had to flee: support all who are discouraged by failure, and teach me to begin again with trust.

You took time to pray and to go on pilgrimage before returning: help me to find in silence and in prayer the strength I need.

You proclaimed Christ to peoples who saw him as the God of their conquerors: teach me to bear witness with gentleness and respect, never by force.

Pray for missionaries, for the Church in Germany and the Netherlands, and for my own 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 Willehad is celebrated on November 8, the day of his death in 789. This prayer also fits:

- for missionaries and for those preparing to leave on mission;
- after a failure, when you need to start over;
- before a pilgrimage or a retreat;
- for the Church in northern Germany, in Frisia and in England.

A short invocation

> *Saint Willehad, faithful missionary and patient shepherd, pray for us. Amen.*

To get to know him better, read the life of Saint Willehad, or pray the novena to Saint Willehad.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Willehad

This novena to Saint Willehad is an original composition by Saintspedia. Over nine days, it follows the Anglo-Saxon monk from Northumbria who preached to the Frisians and the Saxons, knew failure and exile, and became the first bishop of Bremen. To end on his feast day, November 8, begin it on October 31. You can also pray it at any time, especially for missionaries, or when you need the courage to begin again after a setback.

How to pray this novena

Each day, take a quiet moment. Make the Sign of the Cross, read the short 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 miss a day, simply start again: that is exactly what Willehad's life teaches.

Day 1: A son of Northumbria

Willehad was born in Northumbria, in the north of England, a land of monks and scholars. He grew up in a Church that was young, fervent and already eager to share its faith. Only a few generations earlier, his own people had received the Gospel from missionaries.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, help me to give thanks for the faith I received and for those who handed it on to me. Amen.

Today: Pray for the parish or community where you came to know Christ.

Day 2: Formed at York

He was trained at York, in the circle of the scholar Alcuin. Study and prayer prepared him for a mission he could not yet imagine. God uses every season of our lives. The years of hidden preparation are never wasted.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, bless students and teachers, and help me to keep learning about my faith. Amen.

Today: Read a chapter of Scripture or a few pages of a spiritual book.

Day 3: Leaving home

Around 770 he left his homeland to go to the Frisians, across the sea. Like Abraham, he set out for a land he did not know, trusting in God. He left behind his language, his friends and the security of his monastery.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, pray for missionaries and for all who leave their homeland, by choice or by necessity. Amen.

Today: Support a missionary or a missionary organization with a prayer or a gift.

Day 4: Where Boniface fell

Willehad settled at Dokkum, where Saint Boniface had been martyred only a few years earlier. He took up the work of another, without seeking his own glory. In the Church, no one starts from nothing, and no one finishes alone.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, teach me to continue humbly the good work that others have begun. Amen.

Today: Thank someone whose work you have inherited or benefit from.

Day 5: Among the Saxons

In 780 he was sent to the Saxons. For many of them, Christianity was the religion of the Frankish conqueror. Willehad had to proclaim a Gospel that was misunderstood. He had to show by his life that Christ does not come as a conqueror but as a servant.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, help me to witness to Christ with gentleness and respect, especially where faith is mistrusted. Amen.

Today: Listen patiently to someone who does not share your faith.

Day 6: Failure and flight

In 782 the revolt of Widukind swept away the mission. Priests and faithful were killed, and Willehad had to flee. Everything he had built seemed lost. Many would have gone home to England for good.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, stay with all who see their work destroyed, and keep them from despair. Amen.

Today: Entrust to God a failure that still weighs on you.

Day 7: Pilgrim and pray-er

Rather than give up, he went on pilgrimage to Rome and then withdrew to the abbey of Echternach to pray. Before acting again, he let himself be renewed by God. Prayer is not an escape from the mission; it is its source.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, teach me to stop, to pray and to let God rebuild my strength. Amen.

Today: Take fifteen minutes of silence before the Blessed Sacrament or in a quiet place.

Day 8: Beginning again

In 785 he returned to Saxony, and in 787 he became the first bishop of Bremen, where he built a wooden cathedral. From the ashes of failure, a new Church was born. God can bring life out of what we think is finished.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, give me the courage to begin again where I have failed. Amen.

Today: Take up again a good resolution you had abandoned.

Day 9: Dying on the road

On November 8, 789, he died at Blexen, on the Weser, during a pastoral visit. He was a shepherd to the very end, on the road to his people. His body was carried back to Bremen and laid to rest in the cathedral he had built.

Prayer: Saint Willehad, present to God the intention I have carried through this novena, and help me to be faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Visit or call someone who is lonely.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you called Saint Willehad from Northumbria to proclaim your Gospel to the Frisians and the Saxons, and you made him the first shepherd of the Church of Bremen. Through his intercession, give missionaries courage, give the discouraged the strength to begin again and make us patient and gentle witnesses of your love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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

Credits and sources

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