

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Willibrord

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: November 7

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IN BRIEF

Saint Willibrord

Anglo-Saxon monk, apostle of the Frisians, first bishop of Utrecht and founder of the abbey of Echternach.

Feast day	November 7
Born	c. 658, Northumbria, England
Died	November 7, 739, Echternach, Luxembourg
Era	8th century
Patron saint of	Netherlands, Luxembourg, Frisians, children with epilepsy

In this booklet

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Basilica of Saint Willibrord in Echternach

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Willibrord

Saint Willibrord (c. 658-739) was an Anglo-Saxon monk from Northumbria, in the north of England, who crossed the sea to bring the Gospel to the Frisians, on the coast of present-day Holland. First bishop of Utrecht and founder of the abbey of Echternach, in Luxembourg, he is venerated as the apostle of the Netherlands and the patron saint of Luxembourg. Every year, on the Tuesday after Pentecost, the famous dancing procession of Echternach honors his memory. He is celebrated on November 7.

Who was Saint Willibrord?

Willibrord was born around 658 in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. According to Alcuin, his first biographer, his father Wilgils was a Saxon recently converted to Christianity. Wilgils entrusted his son at a very young age to the abbey of Ripon, then led by Bishop Wilfrid of York. There Willibrord became a monk under the Rule of Saint Benedict.

As a young man he went to Ireland, where he lived for about twelve years at the abbey of Rath Melsigi. He deepened his monastic and intellectual formation there and was ordained a priest. The Irish and Anglo-Saxon monasteries of that time were centers of mission: many of their monks set out to proclaim the Gospel on the continent, sometimes at the risk of their lives.

Key dates in the life of Willibrord

- **c. 658**: Born in Northumbria.
- **Youth**: Education and monastic life at Ripon Abbey, under Wilfrid of York.
- **c. 678-690**: About twelve years in Ireland, at Rath Melsigi.
- **690**: Sets out on mission to Frisia.

- **November 21, 695**: Consecrated bishop in Rome, in the Basilica of Saint Cecilia in Trastevere.
- **698**: Founds the abbey of Echternach.
- **725**: Mission to Denmark, to King Ongendus.
- **728**: Signs the founding charter of Murbach Abbey, in Alsace.
- **November 7, 739**: Dies at the abbey of Echternach, where he is buried.

The apostle of the Frisians

In 690, Willibrord landed on the continent with a few companions. A local tradition places this first landing at Gravelines, on the Flemish coast of northern France, where a church is still dedicated to him. His destination was Frisia, a coastal territory recently conquered by the Franks, whose people had remained pagan.

Willibrord first went to Rome to receive the pope's approval, then traveled through the coastal regions of today's Netherlands. On a second journey, he was consecrated missionary bishop on November 21, 695, in the church of Saint Cecilia in Trastevere, during the pontificate of Saint Sergius I. He set up his see at Utrecht, which became the center of the Church in the Netherlands; the archdiocese of Utrecht is still the primatial see of the country today. He then pushed on as far as East Frisia.

Failures and friendships

His mission was not without failures. In 725 he went to Denmark and met King Ongendus, whom he described as "crueler than a wild beast and harder than stone." He managed to convert only about thirty children, whom he took back with him to save them from death.

Willibrord was also the friend of Saint Lambert of Maastricht, whom he met regularly, and for a time he worked with another Anglo-Saxon destined for a great future, Saint Boniface.

Echternach, the abbey of his heart

In 698, Willibrord founded the abbey of Echternach, in today's Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. It became a great center of monastic life and culture: the Echternach Gospels, also called the Gospels of Saint Willibrord, bear witness to it. He liked to withdraw there between missions, and it was there that he died, on November 7, 739, at more than eighty years of age. As he had wished, he was buried there.

His tomb quickly drew pilgrims, so much so that around the year 800 the small Merovingian church had to be replaced by a three-aisled church more than sixty meters long. Two lives of Willibrord, one written by Alcuin and the other by Abbot Thiofrid of Echternach, helped spread his cult.

The dancing procession of Echternach

Every Tuesday after Pentecost, thousands of pilgrims and dancers make their way through the streets of Echternach to the basilica, hopping to the rhythm of a traditional tune, linked to one another by white handkerchiefs. This very old procession is one of the most original in Europe, and it is now inscribed by UNESCO on the list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Why is Saint Willibrord the patron saint of Luxembourg and of epileptics?

Willibrord founded and loved the abbey of Echternach, where his tomb has been venerated for nearly thirteen centuries: this is why he is the patron saint of Luxembourg. As the first bishop of Utrecht and evangelizer of the Frisians, he is also the patron of the Netherlands and of the Frisians. At Echternach, he is invoked in particular for the sick, especially for children with epilepsy, whose patron he is.

His memory remains very much alive in both countries. In the Netherlands, he is one of the fifty topics of the official canon of national history. Many stories also show him as a spiritual counselor: according to tradition, he guided Saint Amalberga of Ghent, whom her family wanted to force into marriage, in her choice of life, and sent her to Saint Landrada, abbess of a nearby monastery.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Willibrord in art

- **A bishop's miter and crozier**, recalling that he was the first bishop of Utrecht.
- **The dress of an abbot**, sometimes, for the founder of Echternach.
- **A beardless face**: this is how he is distinguished from Saint Boniface, often painted beside him.

What his holiness teaches us

Willibrord spent nearly fifty years far from his homeland, in the service of peoples who did not know him. He knew how to unite the prayer of the monk with the boldness of the missionary, fidelity to Rome with attention to local realities. He sowed patiently, without always seeing the fruit. He is prayed to for missionaries, for the Netherlands and Luxembourg, and for the sick.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Willibrord and the novena to Saint Willibrord, prayed from October 29 to November 6.



The dancing procession of Echternach, on the Tuesday after Pentecost.

Where to pray to Saint Willibrord

- **Echternach** (Luxembourg): his tomb in the crypt of the Basilica of Saint Willibrord.
- **Utrecht** (Netherlands): the city of which he was the first bishop.
- **Gravelines** (northern France): the church of Saint Willibrord, in memory of his arrival on the continent.
- **Ripon** (England): the place of his monastic formation.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Willibrord for Missionaries and the Sick

Saint Willibrord has been invoked for more than twelve centuries at Echternach, especially during the dancing procession on the Tuesday after Pentecost. Yet no single prayer to him has become established everywhere. Saintspedia offers below an original prayer inspired by his life as a missionary, for those who set out, those who welcome and those who suffer in their bodies.

The missionary from afar

Willibrord left Northumbria, then Ireland, to proclaim the Gospel to peoples who did not know Christ. He had successes, such as the founding of the Church of Utrecht and the abbey of Echternach, but also failures, such as his mission to Denmark. His prayer suits missionaries, migrants, those who welcome newcomers, and the sick.



Saint Willibrord, bishop and missionary.

Prayer to Saint Willibrord for missionaries and the sick

Saint Willibrord, you who left your homeland and your family to bring Christ to the peoples of the North, give me the courage to go out of myself and toward those who are waiting for a word of hope.

You who built the Church of Utrecht and the abbey of Echternach, watch over the Christians of the Netherlands and Luxembourg, and over all the peoples to whom the Gospel has yet to be proclaimed. Support missionaries, especially those who do not yet see the fruit of their labor.

You who are invoked for the sick, be close to people with epilepsy, to fragile children and to their families. Obtain for them strength, peace and, if God wills, healing.

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

Teach me to pray like a monk and to serve like an apostle, with joy and perseverance. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Willibrord is celebrated on November 7, the day of his death at Echternach in 739. His great pilgrimage takes place on the Tuesday after Pentecost, with the dancing procession of Echternach. You can also pray to him:

- for a person with epilepsy, or for a sick child and the family caring for them;
- for missionaries, especially those working in difficult or discouraging places;
- before leaving home for a new country, a new job or a new mission;

- for the Church in the Netherlands, in Luxembourg and in England, his homeland.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Willibrord, and read the life of Saint Willibrord.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Willibrord

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Willibrord. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his feast, begin it on October 29 and pray the last day on November 6, so that you reach November 7 with him. It can also be prayed in the days leading up to the dancing procession of Echternach, before the Tuesday after Pentecost, or at any time for a sick person.

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. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into the rest of your day. Families who pray for a sick child can say it together in the evening, each member adding a short intention of their own.

You may begin each day with this opening prayer: "Lord, through the intercession of Saint Willibrord, who left everything to bring your Gospel to the peoples of the North, I bring you this intention. Give me his courage, his patience and his trust. Amen."



Statue of Saint Willibrord in Echternach.

Day 1: A faith received

Willibrord's father, recently converted, entrusted his son to a monastery. Willibrord's faith began with a father's choice. Every faith is first received from someone before it is given in turn.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for those who passed on the faith to me. Bless the parents who pass it on today. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

Today: Pray for your parents, living or deceased.

Day 2: The time of formation

Willibrord spent about twelve years in Ireland before setting out on mission. He took the time to prepare, in prayer and study. Hidden years are not wasted years.

Prayer: Lord, give me the patience of long preparations and faithfulness in hidden things. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

Today: Spend ten minutes in silence before God.

Day 3: Daring to set out

In 690 he crossed the sea to Frisia, an unknown and pagan land. He left without knowing what awaited him, like Abraham leaving his country at God's call.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to leave my securities when you call me. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

Today: Take a first step toward a person or a project you have been dreading.

Day 4: In communion with the Church

Before acting, Willibrord went to Rome to ask for the pope's blessing. His mission was not a personal adventure, but that of the whole Church. A missionary does not carry his own message, but the faith of the apostles.

Prayer: Lord, keep me united to your Church, and bless the pope and the bishops. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

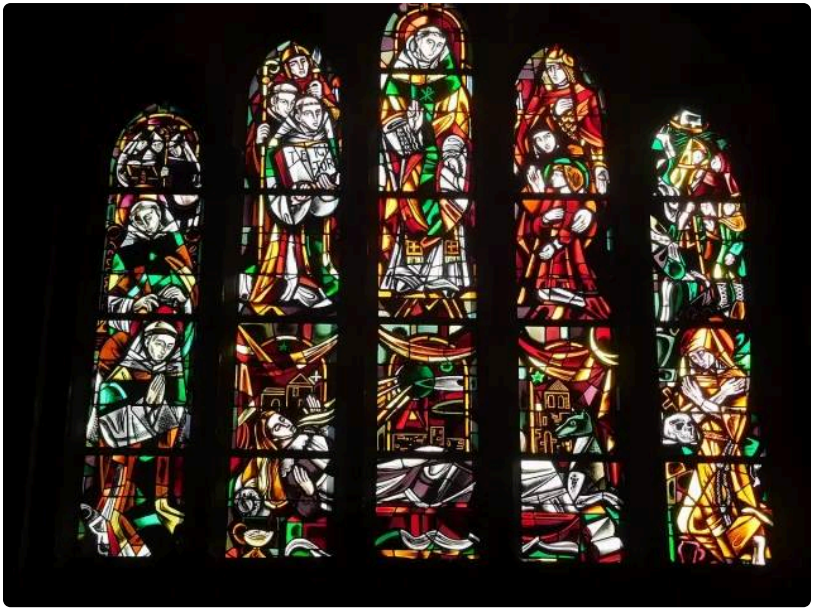
Today: Pray for the bishop of your diocese.

Day 5: Building on rock

At Utrecht he founded a Church that still exists thirteen centuries later. He built for those who would come after him, without knowing them.

Prayer: Lord, may my work serve those who will come after me. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

Today: Support a work of your parish or diocese.



Saint Willibrord in a stained glass window.

Day 6: Accepting failure

In Denmark, King Ongendus remained closed to the Gospel. Willibrord left with only thirty children. He did not measure his mission by its success. He saved the lives he could, and left the rest to God, who would raise up other missionaries after him.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to sow without demanding to reap, and to entrust my failures to you. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

Today: In prayer, hand over to God a project that did not work out.

Day 7: Friendship among the saints

Willibrord regularly met his friend Lambert, bishop of Maastricht. Even an apostle needs brothers to keep going. Holiness is not a solitary road: the saints encouraged, corrected and supported one another.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for my friends. Make our friendships a support on the road of faith. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

Today: Get in touch with a friend you have not heard from in a while.

Day 8: The monk's rest

Between missions, Willibrord withdrew to Echternach. The prayer of the abbey fed the zeal of the missionary. Without times of rest and prayer, even the most generous service runs dry.

Prayer: Lord, let me find in you rest and the strength to set out again. Saint Willibrord, pray for us.

Today: Pray one hour of the Liturgy of the Hours, or a psalm, in a quiet place.

Day 9: For the sick

For centuries, the pilgrims of Echternach have entrusted the sick to Willibrord, especially children with epilepsy. The dancing procession is a prayer of the whole body. In it, the healthy and the sick, young and old, move forward together, linked to one another by white handkerchiefs.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Willibrord, be close to all the sick and to those who care for them. Amen.

Today: Visit or call a sick person.

Closing prayer

Saint Willibrord, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for the Netherlands and Luxembourg, for missionaries and for the sick. Obtain for us the grace to carry the Gospel with courage and patience wherever God sends us. Amen.

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

PILGRIMAGE

Basilica of Saint Willibrord in Echternach

The Basilica of Saint Willibrord in Echternach, Luxembourg, is the former church of the abbey that Saint Willibrord founded in 698 and where he died in 739. In its crypt rests the sarcophagus containing his relics. A pilgrimage site for more than twelve centuries, it is also the endpoint of the famous dancing procession held on Whit Tuesday.

From Merovingian abbey to basilica

Willibrord made Echternach the center of his work: a monastery where he withdrew between his missions and where he asked to be buried. After his death, his tomb drew so many pilgrims that the small Merovingian church was replaced, around the year 800, by a three-aisled church more than two hundred feet long. The abbey became a center of culture, known notably for its illuminated manuscripts. The building was rebuilt several times over the centuries; badly damaged during the Second World War, it was restored after the conflict.



The Basilica of Saint Willibrord in Echternach.

The crypt and the tomb

The heart of the pilgrimage is in the crypt, where the sarcophagus of Saint Willibrord is kept. Pilgrims come here to pray and entrust their intentions, especially for the sick. It is before this tomb that the dancing procession ends each year.

The dancing procession

On Whit Tuesday, thousands of pilgrims, musicians and dancers make their way through the town to the basilica, advancing in little hops, linked by white handkerchiefs. This tradition, one of the oldest and most unusual in Europe, is inscribed on UNESCO's list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It gathers pilgrims of all ages, from Luxembourg and neighboring countries.

Praying on site

Before your visit, you can read the life of Saint Willibrord. In the crypt, you can entrust to the saint a sick person, a missionary or a loved one far from the faith, then say the prayer to Saint Willibrord. The novena to Saint Willibrord can prepare the Pentecost pilgrimage or his feast on November 7. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.



The sarcophagus of Saint Willibrord, in the crypt.

Other places connected with Saint Willibrord

- **Utrecht** (Netherlands): the city of which he was the first bishop, seat of the primatial archdiocese of the Netherlands.
- **Gravelines** (Nord): the Church of Saint-Willibrord, in memory of his first landing on the Continent.
- **Rome**: the Basilica of Saint Cecilia in Trastevere, where he was consecrated bishop in 695.
- **Ripon** (England): the town of his monastic formation.
- **Murbach** (Alsace): the abbey whose founding charter he signed in 728.

Practical information

Echternach is in eastern Luxembourg, on the Sûre River, on the German border. The basilica is open to visitors outside of services. On Whit Tuesday, the town welcomes a large crowd: plan to arrive early. For opening hours, Masses and the procession program, check the official website of the basilica or of the Archdiocese of Luxembourg.

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