

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Willigis of Mainz

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: February 23

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IN BRIEF

Saint Willigis of Mainz

Archbishop of Mainz, chancellor of the Ottonian emperors and founder of Mainz Cathedral.

Feast day	February 23
Born	c. 940, Schöningen, Lower Saxony (Germany)
Died	February 23, 1011, Mainz, Germany
Canonized	Immemorial cult
Era	11th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Willigis for Leaders and for Starting Over

Novena to Saint Willigis of Mainz

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Willigis of Mainz

Saint Willigis was archbishop of Mainz at the end of the tenth century and one of the most influential men in the Holy Roman Empire. Born into a family of modest standing, he became chancellor of the emperors, acted as regent during the minority of Otto III and crowned King Henry II. A great builder, he founded Mainz Cathedral. He died on February 23, 1011, and his feast day is February 23.

Who was Saint Willigis?

Willigis was born around 940 at Schöningen, in Saxony, in today's Lower Saxony, Germany. His father was a free man but a commoner. A tradition says that his father was a wheelwright, and the city of Mainz has kept a wheel in its coat of arms to this day. This explanation belongs to popular tradition, but it expresses well the astonishment of his contemporaries at the rise of a man from such humble origins.

Thanks to his protector, Bishop Volkold of Meissen, he was admitted around 969 to the court of Emperor Otto I. From 971 he served as chancellor, an office he kept under Otto II. In 975 the cathedral chapter of Mainz elected him archbishop. He would remain archbishop for thirty-six years, until his death. In the Ottonian Empire, the archbishop of Mainz was one of the leading princes of the realm, so this election placed a man of humble birth at the very center of political and religious life.

Key dates in the life of Saint Willigis

- **c. 940**: Born at Schöningen, in Saxony.
- **c. 969**: Enters the court of Otto I.
- **971**: Becomes chancellor of the Empire.

- **975**: Elected archbishop of Mainz; Pope Benedict VII grants him primacy among the bishops of the Empire.
- **983**: The donation of Verona extends the lands of the archbishopric.
- **991-994**: Acts as regent during the minority of Otto III.
- **June 6, 1002**: Crowns King Henry II in Mainz.
- **1009**: Completion of the cathedral, ravaged by fire on the day of its consecration.
- **February 23, 1011**: Dies in Mainz.

The "father of emperors"

As soon as he was elected in 975, Willigis obtained from Pope Benedict VII primacy over the other bishops of the Empire. In 983, at the Diet of Verona, Otto II granted the Church of Mainz vast territories along the Rhine and the Nahe, which shaped the future Electorate of Mainz. That same year Otto II died, leaving a three-year-old son, Otto III. Empress Theophano ruled as regent; after her death in 991, Willigis effectively governed until the young king came of age in 994.

In 996 he went with Otto III to Rome, where the emperor supported the papacy against the powerful Crescentii family. After the death of Pope John XV, Otto had his relative Bruno elected, who became Gregory V; it was under the influence of Willigis that he was consecrated. When Otto III died young in 1002, it was again Willigis who made possible the accession of the Duke of Bavaria, Saint Henry II, whom he crowned in Mainz on June 6, 1002. His contemporaries called him "the father of the emperors and of the Empire."

The builder of Mainz Cathedral

Willigis founded Saint Martin's Cathedral in Mainz. He wanted a building worthy of his Church's place in the Empire: the cathedral was said to be so large that all the inhabitants of the city could fit inside. It was the first building

of such size north of the Alps. It is not known for certain whether work began as early as 975 or only around 998. Kings Henry II and Conrad II were crowned there.

The cathedral was completed in 1009, but a fire ravaged it on the very day of its consecration, or the day before, probably because of the torches lit for the celebration. Nearly seventy years old, Willigis immediately ordered it rebuilt. Around 990 he had also founded the Church of Saint Stephen in Mainz, where he was buried, since the cathedral had not yet been restored. He is also credited with the bronze doors of the cathedral, the Basilica of Saint Martin in Bingen and a stone bridge over the Nahe.

Why pray to Saint Willigis?

Willigis is honored above all in Mainz, the city he served for thirty-six years. He is not widely known as the patron of a particular profession, but his life makes him a natural intercessor for those who hold public responsibilities, for people of modest origins called to high office, and for all who must rebuild after a failure. The story of the cathedral burning on its consecration day and being rebuilt at once speaks to anyone who has seen years of work destroyed.

What can we learn from Saint Willigis?

Willigis belonged to an age when bishops were also statesmen. His holiness is not shown in miracles, but in the faithfulness of a pastor who put his talents at the service of the Church and of peace in the Empire, and in the perseverance of a builder who, standing before his ruined cathedral, chose to begin again. His life shows that power can be exercised as a service, and that humble beginnings are no obstacle to the plans of God.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Willigis in art

Willigis is depicted as an archbishop, with miter, pallium and crozier. A wheel may appear with him, recalling the tradition that his father was a wheelwright and the wheel in the coat of arms of Mainz.

Where to pray to Saint Willigis

- **Mainz** (Germany): the Church of Saint Stephen, which he founded and where he is buried.
- **Mainz**: Saint Martin's Cathedral, whose construction he began, and its bronze doors.
- **Bingen** (Germany): the Basilica of Saint Martin.

To pray with him, Saintspedia offers a prayer to Saint Willigis and a novena to Saint Willigis ending on February 23.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Willigis for Leaders and for Starting Over

There is no widely known traditional prayer to Saint Willigis in English. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by his life: the son of a modest family who became archbishop of Mainz, the counselor of emperors who served the peace of the Empire, and the builder who began again when his cathedral burned on the day of its consecration.

Prayer to Saint Willigis

Saint Willigis, you came from a humble family and God called you to great responsibilities. Help me never to be ashamed of where I come from, and to receive every task as a call to serve.

You counseled kings and emperors and watched over a young ruler. Pray for all who govern, that they may seek justice, peace and the common good, and use their power as a service.

You built a house for God, and you saw it burn on the very day it was to be consecrated. When my work falls apart and my plans fail, give me your courage to begin again without bitterness, trusting that God builds with us.

Pray for the Church of Mainz and for the Church in Germany, and for all bishops who carry heavy burdens.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Saint Willigis, pray for us. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

The feast of Saint Willigis is February 23, the day of his death in Mainz in 1011. You can pray to him:

- for leaders, public officials and all who hold authority;
- when you take on a new responsibility that feels too big for you;
- for young people of modest backgrounds who are beginning their studies or careers;
- after a setback, a failure or the loss of something you built;
- for architects, builders and all who care for churches.

A short prayer for starting over

> *Lord, unless you build the house, those who build it labor in vain (Psalm 127:1). Through the prayers of Saint Willigis, help me to rebuild what has been lost, and to build it with you. Amen.*

To learn more about him, read the life of Saint Willigis, or pray the novena to Saint Willigis.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Willigis of Mainz

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Willigis, archbishop of Mainz. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, February 23, begin it on February 15. It can also be prayed at any time, especially when facing a new responsibility or when you need courage to rebuild after a failure.

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 the spirit of Saint Willigis: humility, service, faithfulness and perseverance. You can pray it alone, with your family or with a parish group. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

The novena follows the main steps of his life, from his modest family in Saxony to his years as chancellor and archbishop, the coronation of Saint Henry II and the fire that destroyed his new cathedral. Each stage offers a lesson for our own lives: gratitude for our roots, service with our gifts, faithfulness in the long run and the courage to start again when what we have built is lost.

Day 1: Humble beginnings

Willigis was born in Saxony to a family of commoners. Tradition says his father was a wheelwright. God does not look at our origins but at our hearts, and he can call anyone to great things.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for my family and my roots. Help me to see my life as a gift from you.

Today: Thank God for one thing your parents or grandparents gave you.

Day 2: Those who help us rise

Willigis was introduced to the imperial court thanks to his protector, Bishop Volkold of Meissen. Many of us owe a great deal to someone who believed in us and opened a door.

Prayer: Lord, bless those who have helped me on my way, and make me attentive to those I can help in turn.

Today: Encourage or recommend someone who needs a chance.

Day 3: Serving with one's gifts

As chancellor, Willigis served two emperors with his intelligence and his skill. Our talents are not only for ourselves: they are given to serve others and the common good.

Prayer: Lord, show me how to use my gifts in your service and for the good of others.

Today: Do your work today with particular care, offering it to God.

Day 4: A shepherd for thirty-six years

Elected archbishop of Mainz in 975, Willigis led his Church until his death in 1011. Faithfulness over the long term is a quiet form of holiness.

Prayer: Lord, give me perseverance in my commitments, in my family, my work and my faith.

Today: Renew in prayer a commitment you have made, such as your marriage, vocation or promise.

Day 5: Protecting the young

When Otto II died, his son was only three years old. Willigis, with Empress Theophano, watched over the young king until he could reign. Caring for those who are vulnerable is a sacred trust.

Prayer: Lord, protect children and young people, and bless those who care for them.

Today: Pray for a child or young person you know, or help one in a concrete way.

Day 6: Serving peace

Willigis helped ensure that power passed peacefully from one ruler to another, crowning Saint Henry II in 1002. Those who hold authority have a duty to seek peace and justice.

Prayer: Lord, give wisdom to those who govern, and make me a peacemaker wherever I am.

Today: Pray for the leaders of your country and your town.

Day 7: Building a house for God

Willigis wanted a cathedral large enough to welcome the whole city. A church building is a sign that God wants to gather all his people. We too are living stones of his house.

Prayer: Lord, make me a living stone in your Church, and bless all who care for our churches.

Today: Visit a church and spend a few minutes in prayer there.

Day 8: When everything burns

In 1009 the new cathedral burned on the day of its consecration. Years of work were lost in a few hours. Willigis, then nearly seventy, ordered it rebuilt at once. Failure is not the end when we keep our trust in God.

Prayer: Lord, when my plans collapse, give me the courage to begin again with you.

Today: Take one small step to rebuild something that has been damaged in your life.

Day 9: A life given

Willigis died in Mainz on February 23, 1011, and was buried in the Church of Saint Stephen, which he had founded. His work outlived him: the cathedral still stands. What we build with God bears fruit beyond our own lifetime.

Prayer: Lord, may my life bear fruit for others, and receive me one day into your eternal house.

Today: Pray for those who will come after you in your family or community.

Closing prayer

Saint Willigis, archbishop of Mainz, servant of the Church and of peace, builder who was not discouraged by ruin, pray for us. Obtain for us humility in success, courage in failure and faithfulness in our daily duties. Present to God the intention I have carried during these nine days, and help me accept his will with trust. Amen.

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