

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Wivina of Grand-Bigard

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: December 17

IN BRIEF

Saint Wivina of Grand-Bigard

Twelfth-century Benedictine nun, foundress of the monastery of Grand-Bigard near Brussels.

Feast day	December 17
Born	c. 1103, Oisy, Cambrésis (France)
Died	December 17, c. 1170 (some sources say 1168), Grand-Bigard (Belgium)
Canonized	Pre-Congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	12th century
Patron saint of	against fever and sore throats, cattle (popular devotion)

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Wivina for the Sick and for Vocations

Novena to Saint Wivina

Credits and sources

Booklet offered by Saintspedia, the directory of Catholic saints: lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage, at saintspedia.com. Texts written by Saintspedia, except traditional prayers marked as such. Original prayers and novenas are not official liturgical texts. Free booklet, to print and share for personal, family or parish use; please do not sell it.

LIFE

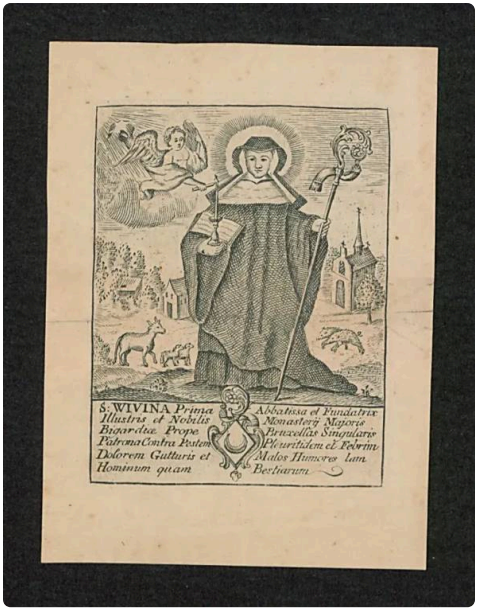
Saint Wivina of Grand-Bigard

Saint Wivina of Grand-Bigard was a twelfth-century nun, born into a noble family of the Cambrésis in northern France, who founded a hermitage near Brussels at Grand-Bigard (in Dutch, *Groot-Bijgaarden*) that grew into a Benedictine monastery. She died around 1170 and remains one of the best-loved saints of Brabant, invoked against fevers, sore throats and diseases of cattle. Her relics are kept in Brussels, in the church of Our Lady of the Sablon. Her feast day is December 17.

Who was Saint Wivina?

Wivina lived in the age of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, a time of great religious renewal in the old Low Countries, when abbeys, priories and hermitages were being founded everywhere. The daughter of a lord of Oisy, she turned down marriage to give herself to God and chose the solitude of a forest in Brabant. Other women joined her, and her small community became a monastery that lasted until the French Revolution.

Her life is known from an early biography and from later accounts that mix facts with embellishments. The dates of her birth and death vary from one source to another. Her birth is most often placed around 1103 and her death on December 17, 1170, but some authors propose 1109 and 1168.



Saint Wivina, old engraving.

Key dates in the life of Saint Wivina

- **c. 1103**: Born at Oisy, in the Cambrésis, daughter of Lord Hugh of Oisy, according to tradition.
- **c. 1118**: At about fifteen, she wishes to give herself entirely to God and refuses her suitors.
- **c. 1126**: At twenty-three, she leaves her father's house and settles with a few companions in a wood at Grand-Bigard, near Brussels.
- **1133**: Duke Godfrey I of Brabant grants her land to build a monastery; the community adopts the Rule of Saint Benedict and places itself under the guidance of Affligem Abbey.
- **December 17, 1170**: She dies at Grand-Bigard, on the date kept by tradition.
- **1719**: Her relics are placed in a new silver reliquary shrine.

- **1805**: The last abbess of Grand-Bigard entrusts her relics to the church of Our Lady of the Sablon in Brussels.

A young noblewoman who chose God

Born into a devout family, Wivina longed for consecrated life from an early age. Tradition says that a young lord named Richard asked for her hand and fell ill with grief when she refused him. Through her prayer he was healed, and only then did she carry out her plan. This story, common in the lives of women saints, shows both her firmness and her kindness.

At about twenty-three, she left her father's house and traveled north. With a few companions she settled in a wood at Grand-Bigard, west of Brussels. There they built a modest oratory and some cells, and lived a life of prayer, work and penance.

The founding of Grand-Bigard

Wivina's reputation drew new followers. In 1133, Duke Godfrey I of Brabant, known as Godfrey the Bearded, gave her land to build a true monastery. The community adopted the Rule of Saint Benedict and placed itself under the spiritual protection of the Benedictine abbey of Affligem, the great monastic center of Brabant. For centuries the monastery enjoyed the protection of the ducal family.

Wivina probably led the community, although no document explicitly gives her the title of abbess. Her biographers report that toward the end of her life some of the nuns criticized the severity of her austerities. She accepted this trial with humility. She died at Grand-Bigard on December 17, around 1170.



Remains of the Abbey of Saint Wivina at Grand-Bigard.

A popular devotion in Brabant

After her death, the monastery of Grand-Bigard became a busy place of pilgrimage. In the eighteenth century her relics were placed in a silver shrine. In 1755 a relic was given to the parish of Saint Stephen at Ohain, in Walloon Brabant, which became an important center of devotion: a procession in her honor takes place there every year at the end of September. Her psalter is said to be kept in the church of Saint Lambert at Orbais, near Perwez, where there was once a Confraternity of Saint Wivina.

When the French Revolution suppressed the monasteries, the last abbess of Grand-Bigard carried the foundress's relics in 1805 to the church of Our Lady of the Sablon in Brussels, where they remain today. Chapels, stained glass windows and streets keep her memory alive in many villages of Wallonia and Flanders, such as Temploux, Chastre, Incourt, Jodoigne and Han-sur-Lesse.

Why is Saint Wivina invoked against fever and for cattle?

Wivina is not an official patron of a profession, but popular piety has long turned to her in times of sickness. People in Brabant invoked her against plague and epidemics, pleurisy, fever and sore throats, and against diseases of cattle. In a rural region where the health of the herd meant the survival of the family, farmers naturally brought their animals into their prayers to the local saint. Her intercession for the sick also echoes the story of the suitor healed through her prayer.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Wivina in art

Saint Wivina is shown in the habit of a Benedictine nun. She often holds a crosier, a sign of her role as foundress and head of her community, and a book, a reminder of the prayer and study at the heart of monastic life. Sometimes an angel stands beside her, assisting her. Look for her in the chapels and stained glass windows of Brabant and Wallonia, and in old engravings of the saints of the Low Countries.

What can we learn from Saint Wivina?

Wivina chose solitude for God, and that solitude proved fruitful: from a hermitage in the woods came a monastery that prayed for more than six centuries. She reminds us of the beauty of contemplative life and the strength of a free and persevering choice. Her humility before the criticism of her sisters also shows that a foundress can accept being challenged without losing her peace. We can pray to her for the sick, for farmers and their animals, for religious vocations and for the people of Brabant.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Wivina and the novena to Saint Wivina, prayed from December 9 to her feast on December 17.



The church of Our Lady of the Sablon in Brussels, which keeps her relics.

Where to pray to Saint Wivina

- **Brussels**: the church of Our Lady of the Sablon (Notre-Dame du Sablon), which keeps her relics.
- **Grand-Bigard** (Dilbeek, Flemish Brabant): the site of the former abbey she founded.
- **Ohain** (Lasne, Walloon Brabant): the church of Saint Stephen, with her relic and the procession at the end of September.
- **Temploux** (Namur): the chapel of Saint Wivina.
- **Orbais** (Perwez): the church of Saint Lambert, linked to her memory.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Wivina for the Sick and for Vocations

Saint Wivina, foundress of the monastery of Grand-Bigard, has been invoked for centuries in Brabant, in Brussels, at Ohain and in many Belgian villages, especially against fevers, sore throats and diseases of cattle. The old local prayers to her, mostly in Dutch or French, have no established English form. This page offers an original prayer by Saintspedia, inspired by her life.

Prayer to Saint Wivina

Saint Wivina, you left your father's house and the promises of the world to seek God in the silence of a forest. Teach me to make room for God in my life, and to choose freely what leads me to him.

Your prayer obtained healing for the suitor you had turned away. Comfort those who are hurt by our choices, and teach me to join firmness with kindness.

You founded a community of prayer. Watch over monks and nuns, over religious vocations, and over all who seek silence and inner peace.

Our ancestors called on you in epidemics and fevers. Look kindly on the sick, especially those who suffer in their throat and lungs. Protect farmers too, their herds and the work of the land. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

You bore the reproaches of your sisters with humility. Teach me to accept criticism without bitterness. Through your intercession, may I persevere in doing good until the day I see God. Amen.

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

Intentions to entrust to Saint Wivina

- People suffering from fever, throat or lung illness.
- Farmers and the health of their livestock.
- Monastic and religious vocations.
- Young people discerning their path in life.
- Brussels, Brabant and the parishes that honor her.

A short invocation

Saint Wivina, faithful bride of Christ in solitude, pray for the sick and for all who seek God. Amen.

Original invocation by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Wivina's feast day is December 17. At Ohain, a procession in her honor takes place every year at the end of September. You can also pray to her in times of epidemic or illness, or when a young person is making a life choice. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Wivina, and read the life of Saint Wivina of Grand-Bigard.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Wivina

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Wivina, the twelfth-century foundress of the monastery of Grand-Bigard near Brussels. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, December 17, begin it on December 9. Falling in Advent, it is a good way to prepare for Christmas in silence and prayer. You can also pray it at any time, for a sick person, for a vocation or for a decision to be made.

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 carry the prayer into your daily life. You can pray it alone, as a family or with a parish or prayer group.



The former Abbey of Saint Wivina at Grand-Bigard.

Day 1: A heart given early

As a girl in the castle of Oisy, Wivina already desired to belong entirely to God. Long before she could act on it, the desire was there, quietly growing. God often plants his call in the heart long before the time to answer comes.

Prayer: Lord, awaken in me the desire to belong to you, and keep it alive until I can answer it fully.

Today: Take five minutes of silence to ask God what he desires for your life.

Day 2: Firmness and kindness

Wivina refused the suitor who asked for her hand, yet when he fell ill with grief she prayed for his healing. She did not give up her vocation, and she did not abandon him either. True firmness does not exclude tenderness.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be faithful to my choices without hardening my heart toward those they disappoint.

Today: Pray for someone you have had to say no to.

Day 3: Leaving home

At about twenty-three, Wivina left her father's house to follow God's call. Every vocation involves some leaving: of comfort, of plans, of what we know. What we leave behind for God is never lost.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to leave what keeps me from you, and to trust you on the road.

Today: Give up one small comfort as an offering for your intention.

Day 4: Silence in the forest

In the woods of Grand-Bigard, Wivina and her companions built an oratory and lived in prayer, work and penance. Silence was not an escape for them, but a place to meet God. In our noisy world, silence has become rare and precious.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to love silence, where your voice can be heard.

Today: Turn off your phone or screens for an hour and spend part of it in prayer.

Day 5: A community is born

Wivina did not stay alone. Other women came, drawn by her life, and a community took shape. Holiness is contagious: a life given to God draws others without needing to argue or persuade.

Prayer: Lord, bless the monasteries and religious communities of our time, and send them new vocations.

Today: Pray for a monastery or a religious community you know, or write to one.

Day 6: The Rule of Saint Benedict

In 1133, the community received land from the Duke of Brabant and adopted the Rule of Saint Benedict, under the guidance of Affligem Abbey. A rule is not a cage: it gives shape to love and helps it last over time.

Prayer: Lord, help me to give my days a rhythm of prayer and work that keeps me close to you.

Today: Choose a fixed time for daily prayer and keep it today.

Day 7: Humility under criticism

At the end of her life, some of her own nuns reproached Wivina for the severity of her penances. She accepted this trial with humility. It is painful to be misunderstood by those we love, yet such moments can unite us with Christ, who was also rejected by his own.

Prayer: Lord, when I am criticized, give me humility to learn what is true and peace to let go of what is not.

Today: Receive a remark or criticism calmly, without answering back.

Day 8: Caring for the sick and the land

For centuries the people of Brabant have called on Wivina against fevers, sore throats and diseases of cattle. Their prayers reached into every part of daily life, from the sickbed to the stable. Nothing in our lives is too small to bring to God.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Wivina, heal the sick, and bless farmers, their animals and the work of their hands.

Today: Visit, call or write to someone who is ill.

Day 9: A light that lasts

Wivina died at Grand-Bigard on December 17, around 1170. The monastery she founded prayed for more than six centuries, and her relics are still honored in Brussels. A life hidden in God bears fruit far beyond what we can see.

Prayer: Lord, at the end of this novena, I place my intention in your hands. Through the intercession of Saint Wivina, grant me perseverance in doing good, and lead me one day to see your face. Amen.

Today: Attend Mass if you can, or light a candle and pray before an image of Saint Wivina or of Our Lady.

Closing prayer

Saint Wivina, foundress of Grand-Bigard, I entrust to you the intention of these nine days. Pray for the sick, for farmers and their herds, for religious vocations and for all who seek God in silence. Obtain for us a free and generous heart, humility in trials, and faithfulness to the end. Amen.

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

CREDITS

Credits and sources

Texts: Saintspedia (saintspedia.com). The sources cited in each part are those of the corresponding page of the website. Biographical data partly from Wikidata (CC0). Font: EB Garamond (SIL Open Font License).

Images

- Cover: Anonymous, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Saint Wivina, old engraving.: Image: Anonymous, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- Remains of the Abbey of Saint Wivina at Grand-Bigard.: Image: Andre De Deurwaerder, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The church of Our Lady of the Sablon in Brussels, which keeps her relics.: Image: Unknown, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License
- The former Abbey of Saint Wivina at Grand-Bigard.: Image: Andre De Deurwaerder, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Source · License



More free booklets

Lives of the saints, prayers, novenas and places of pilgrimage: find all the booklets to print at

saintspedia.com