

Concerning the form of the name "Kilian" the following seems to be well established. Irish names ending in an, iane, ene are often nicknames. As we have seen with other saints, the prefix and suffix cell, cill and celle signify a person who lived in the cell of a monastery, a church, or a self-made hermitage. As a result, variations on the names Cellan and Cillene were common among Irish clergy in the seventh and eighth centuries, signifying "anchorite." Killian spelled with two ll's might properly be regarded as a variant of Cillene. Only the Frankish form of this name is Kilian with single l. Necrologies of the time which refer to Bishop Chilianus are accepted as references to Saint Kilian, since the regular laws of Germanic phonology lead to the common respelling of K with Ch.

In art, Saint Kilian is a bishop holding a sword (often large) and standing between two priests. Sometimes all three are shown assassinated at the command of the Duchess, or Kilian is shown between Colman and Totman buried in a stable as a blind priest is cured at their grave. Kilian's image appears on seals and coins of the region. Some old hymns in Latin and German survive that honor him. The trio are also venerated as the patrons of whitewashers, and are invoked against gout and rheumatism.

Those accounts which include a year of death report that St. Kilian died on July 8, 689.

\* (Excerpted from: [www.allsaintsbrookline.org](http://www.allsaintsbrookline.org))

### A Prayer for St. Kilian

God, you called missionaries from Ireland  
with Saint Killian to take the message of the gospel  
to Franconia and Bavaria;  
Grant that the church may draw strength  
from their examples,  
and never lack zeal to proclaim  
your love when the going is difficult:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

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# Saint Kilian

**Feast Day: July 8**



**Patronage:  
Sufferers of Rheumatism**

## Saint Kilian

\*Kilian (Killion, Killian, Kilian) was born to noble parents in approximately the year 640. Some accounts give his birthplace in Ireland as Mullagh, County Cavan. Other sources claim a birthplace in Scotland. Matters are further confused by the fact that medieval records sometimes used Celtic place names interchangeably, especially in the use of the word Scotland to also mean parts of Ireland.

In his childhood Kilian was distinguished for piety and love of study, and embraced the monastic life while still a young man. Some records state that Kilian served as a monk in the celebrated monastery at Hy, Hy being an early name for what was later known as Iona. Medieval Scottish historian Trithemius also states that Kilian was one of the abbots of Hy, but few other sources support this assertion. There are conflicting accounts about when Kilian was consecrated bishop; one version claims he was raised to the purple before leaving his native land, a later source says his consecration occurs during his famous sojourn in Rome. In accordance with the custom then prevailing in the Irish Church, he was assigned to no particular diocese, but was a district bishop or travelling bishop.

One day he made up his mind to be a missionary, left his native country with eleven companions, and set out for Europe. They travelled through Gaul, arrived at Aschaffenburg on the Rhein and then sailed up to the River Main and Würzburg. The castle of Würzburg was at that time inhabited by the Frankish Duke Gosbert (Gospert, Gozbert), who was, like his people, still pagan. Kilian resolved to preach the Gospel here, but first journeyed with his companions to receive guidance from the pope. Kilian and his companions arrived in Rome in the autumn of 686, expecting to receive his missionary faculties from Pope John V, but John V had died and had been succeeded by Pope Conon. Fortunately the trip was not in vain: Kilian and his companions were granted permission from Conon to pursue their evangelistic mission.

On the return from Rome, the original group separated. St. Kilian came back to Würzburg with two companions, the priest Colman (Coloman, Colonat) and the deacon Totnan. The other nine travellers carried out their missionary work in other areas. Kilian took Würzburg as the base of his activity, which also extended over an ever-increasing area in East Franconia and Thuringia. He converted Duke Gosbert to Christianity, along with a large number of his subjects. The account of the baptism of Gosbert in a large wooden tub has been recorded by ancient sources.

Kilian confronted the ruling class on matters of Christian ethics and Roman Catholic canon law, and these acts of virtue and character were ultimately responsible for his death. Like most Irish missionaries, the trio of Kilian, Colman and Totman spoke out fearlessly against any breach of faith or morals. Concerning the cause of the martyrdom of the three missionaries, early documents supply the following information: After Duke Gosbert became a Christian, Kilian openly rebuked him for his irregular marriage to his brother's widow. St. Kilian explained to him that his marriage with his brother's widow

Geilana was unlawful under the Christian dispensation, and Gosbert promised to separate from her.

When Geilana learned that Gosbert was planning to leave her because their marriage was forbidden by the Church, she plotted fatal vengeance against the saint. Legend says she paid the castle cook and the castle warden to do the killing while Duke Gosbert was away on a military expedition. Kilian, Colman and Totman were beheaded, and their corpses were buried at the scene of the crime together with all their sacred vessels, vestments, and holy writings. Although opinions vary as to the exact year, the date of this event is generally held to have happened on 8 July. The just punishment for this atrocity was not long in coming. After the Duke's return, Geilana at first denied any knowledge of what had become of the missionaries; one of the murderers went mad, confessed his crime, and both murderers were stricken by a miserable death. Geilana was said to be possessed by a demon and went insane.

After Killian's death, a strong cultus was immediately established in Germany and spread as far as Vienna, Austria, and Ireland. Even today, the Kilianfest is one of the better known festivals of the German peoples, including German-Americans. Many pre-Reformation cathedrals in Germany and Austria were dedicated in honor of Kilian, pre-eminent among them the cathedral at Würzburg, since that is the place of his martyrdom. A New Testament belonging to St. Kilian was preserved among the treasures of Würzburg Cathedral until 1803, and since then has been in the university library. This same Bible is exposed on the high altar of that cathedral on his feast day, which is celebrated each year with great solemnity, including a mystery play of the events of his life.

Some historians doubt the authenticity of the account of Kilian's journey to Rome, and also call into question the detailed descriptions of the cause and immediate circumstances of the martyrdom of the three missionaries. Some say that the Franks dwelling on the middle Main were no longer a pagan people and Kilian's labors with respect to that people were not those of a missionary, strictly speaking. However, his missionary labors elsewhere throughout Eastern Franconia and the central fact of his martyrdom are accepted without question by all sources. Many of the Celtic saints who left the islands for missionary work in other parts of the world are no longer recognized as "Celtic". Kilian, Colman, and Totman are rare exceptions to this in that the Irish themselves continue to show veneration for these expatriates, rather than their usual disinterest. All accounts agree that Kilian came from Ireland to preach the Gospel of Christ and met death because of his faith. Therefore, Saint Kilian deserves to be remembered with the host of other noted missionaries who carried the light of Christianity from the Celtic lands to Europe and throughout the then-known world.