



NOVENA
IN HONOR OF
SAINT THORLAC
OF ICELAND

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+NIHIL OBSTAT

+IMPRIMATUR

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BISHOP: DIOCESE OF REYKJAVIK

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Each Day, Say:

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the holy life and example of Saint Thorlac of Iceland. Inspired at the youngest age to seek wisdom, he found it in You; in the psalms and writings of Holy Scripture; in the virtuous instruction of the priests who fostered him; and in the majestic natural wonders of his homeland.

Receiving Holy Orders at eighteen, Thorlac devoted his entire life to feeding the spiritual and material hunger of his people. His quiet compassion for the poor and suffering led him to long hours of prayer on their behalf. He afforded peasants and penitents the same dignity he showed chieftains and kings. May Saint Thorlac help us live and to love, according to Your will. Amen.

Saint Thorlac, quietly humble and pure of heart. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, mentor in wisdom. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, gentle pastor. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, merciful confessor. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, champion of families and holy matrimony. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, defender of authentic Catholic living in all states of life. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, fatherly intercessor. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, true ambassador for Christ. Pray for us!

Saint Thorlac, devoted patron of Iceland. Pray for us!

Heavenly Father, we pray that all people in Iceland may be united in Christ under the patronage of Your holy servant, Saint Thorlac. May all taste Your unending love and mercy, and rejoice in Your presence.

Through Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. Amen.

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;*

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Day One:

Quietly Humble and Pure of Heart

St. Thorlac was described from his earliest age as quiet, observant and reflective. He kept this contemplative nature as he matured. Historical texts suggest he struggled with an actual speech impairment. Nonetheless, St. Thorlac left a strong impression, characterized as careful, gentle, wise, even-tempered and loving in all his words.

Humility came naturally to St. Thorlac. His family fell on hard times and voluntarily broke apart for lack of provisions. However poor they were, he showed such interest in learning that his mother made arrangements for him to live at Oddi, a renowned center of learning overseen by clergy. Thorlac rose quickly in his academic achievements, was ordained a deacon by the unlikely age of fifteen, and became a full priest by eighteen. He eventually earned the privilege of traveling to England and France to further his studies, which was expected to be the last he would see of his coarse, agrarian homeland. To everyone's surprise, he joyfully returned to Iceland after six years, resuming his pastoral role in the Church of his home district and seeing that his mother and sisters were properly cared for.

Even as he later rose from priest to abbot to bishop, St. Thorlac remained humble and unassuming. He greatly loved the poor and often privately invited them to dine with him, washing their feet and bestowing them with gifts before they left.

Nearly everyone who spoke of St. Thorlac in his lifetime remarked on the purity of his heart, which flows logically from the depth of his humility. Fellow priests, bishops and archbishops – even kings – were all equally inclined to comment on his modesty, virtue, purity and integrity.

Day One:

St. Thorlac, Quietly Humble and Pure of Heart

God our Father, when holiness and humility seem far from our reach, may we see through the example of St. Thorlac that we can achieve these virtues simply by loving You as we are, where we are, and in what we are given. May we watch quietly, as St. Thorlac did, to observe and experience Your presence in this very moment, and in the people before us.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Day Two:

Mentor in Wisdom

St. Thorlac never forgot the tutelage of Eyjolfur Saemundsson, priest and son of Saemundur the Learned, crediting his mentorship whenever he received praise. In turn, St. Thorlac himself mentored many people. When he furthered his studies, he did so intending to bring back what he had learned to his countrymen. He was an avid reader who encouraged others to read. When he wrote, it was for the edification of others. Even in his ordinary conversations, St. Thorlac was said to have sought out good and pure people in order to learn from their ways of living and then impart this knowledge to those in his care. He believed that wisdom was a gift from God... and he was most generous in wanting to share this gift with anyone he could.

St. Thorlac personally instructed young men in theology and matters of faith, including his nephew, Páll, who would himself go on to be named Bishop of Skálholt after his uncle's death. He frequently instructed fellow priests in liturgical practices and strove, above all else, to live the ways of excellence he himself prescribed.¹

Day Two: St. Thorlac, Mentor in Wisdom

Heavenly Father, source of all wisdom and knowledge, You taught us through Your Son Jesus that we are to be lights to the world, that others may see our deeds and give glory to You. You generously gave wisdom to Your servant, St. Thorlac, who delighted in bringing Your light to all in his path. Grant us the grace to share in Your wisdom with others through mentorship and example.

Through Christ Our Lord. AMEN.

Day Three: Gentle Pastor

The Saga of Bishop Thorlac uses many verbs to tell of his leadership in Iceland: commanded, ordered, admonished, taught, rebuked, helped, established, explained and called. Many historians characterize St. Thorlac as a headstrong reformer who tolerated no deviation from Church rules and battled with prominent leaders over matters of morality and ownership of Church property. Yet a study of the adverbs from the same pages of the Saga paints a different picture: beautifully, lovingly, gently, patiently, friendly and excellently. Two adjectives used often are mild and gentle. This hardly sounds like a stubborn taskmaster.

St. Thorlac was indeed a reformer. The clergy in Iceland during his time took many liberties with moral standards. Thorlac worked hard to teach, lovingly and gently, the reasoning behind Church rules. He took seriously his role as pastor (and later, Bishop), guarding against sin and leading people away from habits that were harmful to their souls. He believed a priest should serve the people, and so he did not flinch from telling the truth – yet he delivered his admonitions with, as the texts say, “moderation and gentle chastisement.”²

Day Three: St. Thorlac, Gentle Pastor

Almighty God, St. Thorlac took great care to lead others to You in ways that were loving and gentle. He wished for everyone to live harmoniously according to Your plan, that where two or more gather in faith, You become present. May the pastors of Your Church follow St. Thorlac's example in their perseverance, forbearance and striving for concord. Help us to hear Your voice through our pastors, not grieving those set over us by chasing discord with Your Church and its teaching.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Day Four: Merciful Confessor

Before he was consecrated Abbot or elected Bishop, Thorlac was a parish priest at the site called Kirkjubaer for six years. There, he and a fellow priest sought “to bear all the responsibilities on behalf of all those people inhabiting the districts close by them.”⁴ In plain words, St. Thorlac and his colleague heard confessions and then performed most of the penances of their people themselves as an act of mercy and a means by which penitents could joyfully experience the freedom of forgiveness. Thorlac continued this practice even as Bishop, spending many nights awake in prayer and fasting specifically for the redemption of his people.⁵

Thorlac’s desire was always for mercy and reconciliation, not excommunication, between his people and the Church. When his health began to fail, he issued a decree from his sickbed forgiving several souls whom he had excommunicated “as a comfort to them” from a Bishop who did not wish to see souls excluded without one last attempt at reconciliation.⁶ Instead of celebrating this magnanimous gesture, the parties in question ridiculed Bishop Thorlac. When he had the strength to speak again, Thorlac regretfully reinstated his original ruling⁷. Even after his death, Thorlac led supplicants to amend their ways. In one case, he healed an unwed mother and her newborn child, counseling her first about improper relationships⁸.

St. Thorlac consistently demonstrated mercy in all that he did and all that he taught: The mercy of forgiveness, the mercy of reconciliation, and the mercy we can show one another. For, when all is said and done, the purpose of mercy is to bring others, rejoicing, back to God.

Day Four: St. Thorlac, Merciful Confessor

God of all mercy, may our efforts to forgive and forget be lifted up as penance to help remit the sins of others and bring them closer to You. Help us through the intercession of St. Thorlac to desire mercy for our neighbors and associates, particularly those who offend us.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Day Five: Champion of Families and Holy Matrimony

St. Thorlac had obvious reasons for focusing his efforts on curbing immorality between men and women. One, of course, was his being a representative of the Church, whose teachings were not widely accepted when it came to chastity. Promiscuity was a cultural norm; married political leaders rarely hid their mistresses⁹. Clergy also disregarded the Church rules on celibacy. Secondly, St. Thorlac was a Canon Regular of St. Augustine, meaning that he was voluntarily bound by the honor of continence in all areas, so that even gazing upon members of the opposite sex was discouraged for potentially leading one's mind toward temptation¹⁰.

Above all else, St. Thorlac personally believed that the relations between a man and woman were a sacred gift from God, to be used to the glory of God alone. It was highly offensive to him that this gift, "the greatest enjoyment of this world," might be "wretchedly insulted and wrongly violated" by means of lust and promiscuity.¹¹ St. Thorlac was well aware of the value of an intact family, having experienced his parents' difficult choice to break up their household when they could no longer support each other and their children. Those who persisted in sins of the flesh were routinely assigned monetary fines as their penances. This income, however, did not fund the church. Instead, this money was immediately distributed to faithfully married but destitute couples with children. In this way, Thorlac helped struggling families stay together – and made acts of penance more personally meaningful to those repeatedly committing sins against Holy Matrimony.

Day Five:

**St. Thorlac, Champion of Families
and Holy Matrimony**

Heavenly Father, You endowed St. Thorlac with a loving comprehension of the marital bond and the fortitude to defend this sacrament for the sake of preserving families. May we have the same courage as St. Thorlac to help men and women honor one another and raise children within the blessing of marriage.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Day Six: Defender of Authentic Catholic Living in All States in Life

St. Thorlac lived in a time of great contrasts. He grew up in a country populated by poor farmers and seafarers, frequently subject to harsh climatic conditions and fluctuations in the availability of food. He himself came from a family in good social standing whose money ran out during a downturn in mercantile activity, and from complete poverty he then entered the high social class of the priesthood. He went from being self-taught to attending a prestigious center of learning, and he studied abroad only to return home to his humble roots. In his religious career, he was a deacon, a parish priest, a theological scholar, a Canon Regular of the Order of St. Augustine, a consecrated abbot of a monastery and a bishop. In each setting, St. Thorlac conducted himself as anywhere else: in full obedience to God. Historical narratives state he “heeded to the utmost the obligations which pertained to each of the ordinations that he received. And as quickly as his education and ordination proceeded, he foresightedly attained with resolute steadfastness all the good qualities which belonged to the orders.”¹²

St. Thorlac never took his rank lightly, and felt the higher one rose, the greater his responsibility to live uprightly. In particular, he believed those in public offices had the greatest burden of good living as examples for all to see. Of the matters which troubled him, he particularly disliked attending proceedings at the Althing, Iceland’s parliamentary gathering, as “many men who were highly thought of went astray in their suits there.”¹³ Likewise, he held the conviction that that it is the “greater downfall of the church if noble men erred greatly.”¹⁴

St. Thorlac tended many different walks of life among his flocks: peasants, married, single, prominent leaders, monks and fellow priests. He saw them all equally, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and expected no less from them.

Day Six:

**St. Thorlac, Defender of Authentic
Catholic Living in All States in Life**

Almighty God, we sometimes find ourselves setting different standards based on different states in life. Help us to see, as St. Thorlac did, that we all share the same fundamental vocation: to love the Lord Our God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds and all our strength; and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Day Seven: Fatherly Intercessor

Throughout his years of ministry, St. Thorlac was genuinely attuned to the material, physical and spiritual needs of those around him. Of these, he placed greatest emphasis on needs of the spirit, praying aloud for his petitioners and offering them counsel on how they might grow closer in relationship to God. His words were firm but affectionate, protective of the souls before him. He sought to impart instruction, not condemnation.

St. Thorlac was also a mediator... between disputants in his district, and also between the people and God. In the matter of civil disputes, St. Thorlac was said to have reconciled many feuding parties. He deliberately took the time and made the effort to seek truth and balance until it was found. In matters of personal conduct, St. Thorlac held penitents to rigid moral standards. He did this to show people how to strive for holiness, not to assert control. Knowing that rules alone do not change minds and hearts, he assigned stern penances to those who disregarded moral behavior – and then voluntarily performed these penances for them. By these living acts of mercy, he sought to heal the spiritual wounds of sin¹⁵.

In his lifetime, many miraculous intercessions were realized by Thorlac's prayers, including healings, calming harsh weather and extinguishing house fires. On his deathbed, a fellow priest implored him: "We ask you, master, although you are now parting from us visibly in bodily presence, be to us a spiritual father, interceding for mercy with Almighty God, for we firmly believe that in the spiritual life you will have no less power with God than now."

Indeed, after his death, reports of miraculous interventions by St. Thorlac poured in from all over Iceland and Scandinavia. In several cases, St. Thorlac himself appeared in dreams to his supplicants, assuring them and personally advising them just as he had in life. Recipients of his miracles were inspired to offer prayer and material donations to the poor or to the church in Iceland and pledged to order their lives more closely around God, materially and spiritually.

Day Seven:

St. Thorlac, Fatherly Intercessor

Father in Heaven, we praise You for the life and ministry of Your servant, St. Thorlac, whose fervent love of You brought people from all walks of life to a deeper understanding and appreciation of their faith. Whether wealthy or poor, healthy or infirm, young or old, those who encountered St. Thorlac felt personally touched and uplifted by his desire to share Your treasury with them.

May St. Thorlac see our present needs (*especially* _____) and respond with compassion, assistance and instruction. May he help us grow closer to God and find relief from our troubles. May his wise counsel lead us to the healing and restoration we need most.

In spiritual partnership with St. Thorlac, we pray for all who seek his intercession, particularly for the people of Iceland.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Day Eight: True Ambassador for Christ

St. Thorlac often acted as mediator: between feuding parties, between chieftains and the Church, and between penitents and God. It may be said that he took the role of ambassador in these matters, since in each case he was acting as a diplomat for Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. Thorlac may have been quiet and humble, but he never flinched in his duties as Ambassador for Christ to chieftains, archbishops and kings... and, even more, to ordinary people.

St. Thorlac was no stranger to political tension. When elected Bishop of Skálholt, he validly received this office from his predecessor; however, formal consecration could only be conferred by the Archbishop of Norway, who in turn required consent from the King. The political hostilities between Iceland and Norway at the time found the King unwilling to consent, even threatening violence against Iceland. St. Thorlac held steadfast to his request, asking nothing more than acceptance and validation of his election. Eventually, his quiet perseverance won out, and the King's blessing was given.¹⁶

St. Thorlac was as much a diplomat between the Church and its people. He ranked highly as Bishop, yet preferred the company of common folk. He held himself to high personal standards of fasting and abstinence, but if, for instance, he attended a banquet where alcohol was served, he gave the gracious appearance of sipping his drink in appreciation, but secretly, never truly imbibed¹⁷. In another example of his magnanimity, it was revealed at St. Thorlac's funeral that he had quietly cared for a man with leprosy until his death.¹⁸ Such was the way of Bishop Thorlac, faithful representative of Jesus to all he met.

Day Eight:

St. Thorlac, True Ambassador for Christ

Heavenly Father, help us to remember that, as Christians, we are called to be ambassadors of Your Kingdom among our own friends, families and municipalities. Help us to emulate the example of St. Thorlac in always remembering our allegiance as Your representatives.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Day Nine: Devoted Patron of Iceland

Our meditations on the life of St. Thorlac would be remiss if we did not acknowledge his official title, the Patron Saint of Iceland. Even a quick glance through the recorded accounts of miracles in the 12th and 13th centuries would validate this title firmly. No plea by any Icelander seemed too great or too trivial for St. Thorlac's help.

We have already considered that St. Thorlac had the opportunity to leave Iceland when he studied abroad, but he returned home out of love for his family and a sense of duty to his country. He knew the needs of the people of Iceland, whether believers or non-believers, and studied long enough to learn what he wished to learn so that he could return home and apply his newfound wisdom to his vocation there. We also know how greatly he loved the common folk in his lifetime, and certainly too, after his death, as his miracles attest.

On January 14, 1984, Pope St. John Paul II made St. Thorlac's status as Iceland's patron official, although that title had already been formalized in the hearts of Icelanders for almost 800 years. It is hard to dispute that St. Thorlac was a holy man and would likely have been a saint in any territory into which he was born. As it happened, God saw fit to bring this splendid soul to the people brave enough to weather life on the remote volcanic island just below the Arctic Circle.

Let us now join St. Thorlac in praying specifically for the perpetuation of the Catholic faith in Iceland. The church buildings of his lifetime are long gone, but the One True Church is very much alive in Iceland... and, rather like its patron, is a quiet, steadfast invitation to all Icelanders to come and encounter the Living Christ in the tabernacles therein. Thank you, St. Thorlac, for all of your labor for the Catholic Church: in Iceland, and the world.

Day Nine:

St. Thorlac, Devoted Patron of Iceland

Almighty God, send forth Your Spirit to all who dwell in Iceland. Lead them with Your light. Instruct them with Your wisdom. Remind them always of Your love. Provide them with abundance in all of their needs in spirit, mind and body. May Iceland know the Merciful Love of Jesus Christ and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, now and for evermore.

Through Christ, our Lord. AMEN.

Saint Thorlac, Pray for Iceland! Saint Thorlac, Pray for Us!



Þorlákur Helgi

ENDNOTES

- [1] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 12
- [2] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 14
- [3] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 7
- [4] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 6
- [5] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 16
- [6] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 18
- [7] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 18
- [8] DuBois, Thomas, ed. Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia p. 345
- [9] See Brown, Nancy Marie, Ivory Vikings, p. 93.
- [10] See RULE OF ST. AUGUSTINE, chapter 4. (Link directs to PDF)
- [11] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 15.
- [12] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 3.
- [13] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 11.
- [14] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 15.
- [15] See DuBois, Thomas (ed.), Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia, p. 246.
- [16] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 11
- [17] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 16
- [18] See SAGA OF BISHOP THORLAK, chapter 19