

A City Walk with Saints

Once every seven years, Maastricht hosts the Heiligdomsvaart, during which the relics of Saint Servatius and other saints are carried through the city. This tradition dates back to the thirteenth century and made Maastricht an important religious center for pilgrims in the Middle Ages.

Little is known with certainty about the historical Servatius, who became known as the first bishop of the Netherlands. According to legend, he lived in the fourth century and introduced the Christian faith first in Tongeren and later in Maastricht. Although venerated for centuries, he was not formally granted sainthood until 1584.

Processions remain a highlight of many Catholic annual calendars even today. Clergy and believers then walk in prayer through a city or village, presenting the Blessed Sacrament from the treasury of their church to the onlooking public. This occurs not only in Limburg, but also in nearby early Christian areas around Aachen in Germany and Tongeren in Belgium.

The Heiligdomsvaart could be called the Champions League of Catholic street theater. Religious and cultural groups from this international region are only too happy to participate. The preliminary program for the so-called "jubilee year" began in September 2024 with concerts, lectures, meetings, and exhibitions, culminating in a series of processions in May and during the eleven-day closing event in June 2025.

These days, few people travel to Maastricht expecting to have their sins absolved with an indulgence. For many tourists, the Heiligdomsvaart is an unexpected, playful addition to their visit to Maastricht. Those who do come specifically for the spectacle take up a spot along the route and film on their smartphones. No one crosses themselves, no one kneels before a passing saint or bishop. That Servatius might not even have existed, or that the piece of skull in his bust almost certainly belonged to someone else, seems to bother no one during the "ommegang" —the formal name for a procession during the Heiligdomsvaart. It demonstrates once again what faith essentially is: the willingness to attribute supernatural truth to human-made stories. And you can view this as a procession with costumed people re-enacting something from a bygone era.

The photos in this series were taken during processions in Heer (2014), Amby (2015 and 2016), Eijsden (2015 and 2018), the Heiligdomsvaart in Susteren (2022), the Coronation Festivities in Tongeren (2023), and the Heiligdomsvaart in Maastricht (2025).