

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: May 29

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IN BRIEF

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

Polish nun, foundress of the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus, known as the apostle of the smile.

Feast day	May 29
Born	April 17, 1865, Loosdorf, Austria
Died	May 29, 1939, Rome, Italy
Canonized	May 18, 2003, by Pope John Paul II
Era	20th century

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Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska was a Polish nun, an Ursuline in Kraków, then a missionary in Saint Petersburg and Scandinavia, before founding the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus, often called the Grey Ursulines. Known as "the apostle of the smile," she gave her life to educating young people and caring for poor and abandoned children. She died in Rome on May 29, 1939, was canonized by Saint John Paul II in 2003, and her feast day is May 29.

Who was Saint Ursula Ledóchowska?

Julia Maria Ledóchowska was born on April 17, 1865, at Loosdorf, in Austria, into a noble Polish family of nine children. Her father was a Polish landowner, and her mother, Countess Josephine Salis-Zizers, came from the Swiss nobility. Faith held a central place in this family: three of the children would consecrate their lives to the Church. Her elder sister, Maria Theresa, founded the Missionary Sisters of Saint Peter Claver and was beatified in 1975. Her brother Włodzimierz became Superior General of the Society of Jesus in 1915.

After being educated at home, Julia moved with her family to Kraków. She entered the Ursuline convent there and took the name Sister Ursula. She taught for twenty-one years and opened a first residence for female students. In 1904 she became superior of the community.

Key dates in the life of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

- **April 17, 1865**: Born at Loosdorf, Austria.
- **Youth**: Enters the Ursulines of Kraków.
- **1904**: Becomes superior of the Kraków convent.
- **1907**: Encouraged by Saint Pius X, she leaves for Saint Petersburg.

- **1914**: Expelled from Russia at the start of the war, she settles in Scandinavia.
- **1917**: Opens a home in Aalborg, Denmark, for orphaned children of Polish immigrants.
- **After 1918**: Her congregation, the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus, is approved and settles in Pniewy.
- **May 29, 1939**: Dies in Rome, on Pentecost Monday.
- **June 20, 1983**: Beatified in Poznań; **May 18, 2003**: canonized in Rome by Saint John Paul II.

Mission to Russia

Ursula felt drawn to Russia, where Catholics then lived in difficult conditions. She later recalled: "The revolution of 1905 in Russia created in me the desire to enter that country." Received by Pope Saint Pius X in 1907, she heard this encouragement, full of humor: "Wear pink dresses if you like, but go to Russia." Since nuns could not live openly there, she obtained the necessary diplomas and, with another sister, joined the Saint Catherine school for girls in Saint Petersburg.

The community lived almost in hiding. Ursula obtained from Rome the autonomy of her house and became its superior. Other houses opened in Finland. But in 1914 war broke out and, like all foreigners, she was expelled.

The foundress

Ursula settled in Scandinavia, from where she hoped to stay in touch with her sisters in Russia. In Stockholm she founded an institute of modern languages for young women. In 1917 she moved her community to Aalborg, Denmark, and opened a home there for orphaned children of Polish immigrants. She

traveled across the neutral countries giving lectures to make known the plight of Poland and to support the committee for aid to war victims. Vocations came, and a novitiate was opened.

After the war she thought of returning to Kraków. But the apostolic nuncio in Poland, the future Pope Pius XI, encouraged her to continue the work she had begun. She went to Rome and obtained approval of her group as a religious congregation: the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus. The generalate was established at Pniewy, near Poznań. Ursula continued to teach and traveled a great deal. Her growing number of sisters settled in poor regions, notably in Poland, Italy and France.

The apostle of the smile

Ursula Ledóchowska died in Rome on May 29, 1939, Pentecost Monday, on the eve of the Second World War. Her body, found incorrupt, rests in the chapel of her congregation's motherhouse in Pniewy. Beatified in Poznań on June 20, 1983, she was canonized on May 18, 2003, in Saint Peter's Square, before a crowd of about fifty thousand people. Her sisters are present today in about a dozen countries, in Europe, Brazil, Canada and the Philippines.

Her nickname, "the apostle of the smile," comes from the joy she brought to her service. She used to say: "Be joyful, for joy is the sign of a heart that loves." Looking back on a life of unexpected moves, she wrote: "The pawn fell where it did not want to, but surely where God wanted it. I did not choose; God chose."

Why pray to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska?

Saint Ursula is not the official patron of a profession, but her life makes her a natural intercessor for teachers and educators, for orphaned and abandoned children, for exiles and migrants, and for anyone who needs to keep joy in the

midst of trials. Polish communities around the world, and the parishes and schools served by her sisters, keep her memory alive.

What can we learn from Saint Ursula?

Ursula teaches us to welcome changes of direction as calls from God. Expelled from Russia, she founded elsewhere; prevented from returning home, she obeyed and saw her work grow. She united education, service of the poor and a contagious joy.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Ursula Ledóchowska in art

Because she lived in the age of photography, Ursula is usually shown as she appears in photographs: in a religious habit and veil, often smiling. Devotional images emphasize her smile, the sign of the joy for which she is remembered.

Where to pray to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

- **Pniewy** (near Poznań, Poland): the chapel of the motherhouse, where her body rests.
- **Kraków** (Poland): the Ursuline convent, where she made her vows and taught.
- **Rome**: the city where she died and was canonized.

To pray with her, Saintspedia offers a prayer to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska and a novena to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska ending on May 29.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska for Joy and for Children

There is no widely known traditional prayer to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska in English. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by her life and her words: the teaching sister, the missionary expelled from Russia, the foundress who served poor children, "the apostle of the smile."

The joy of a heart that loves

Ursula Ledóchowska often had to change course: from Kraków to Saint Petersburg, from Russia to Scandinavia, and finally to Pniewy. She saw God's hand in it: "I did not choose; God chose." Everywhere she taught, took in orphans and kept a joy she wanted to share: "Be joyful, for joy is the sign of a heart that loves."

Prayer to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

Saint Ursula, apostle of the smile, teach me the joy that is born from a heart that loves and gives itself.

You devoted your life to the education of young people. Pray for teachers, educators and all who walk with children on the path of life.

You welcomed orphans and abandoned children. Protect those who grow up without a family, and raise up generous hearts around them.

You were driven out of one country and began again in another. Support exiles, migrants and refugees, and help me recognize God's will in the detours of my own road.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Saint Ursula Ledóchowska, 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

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska is celebrated on May 29. You can pray to her:

- at the start of the school year, for teachers and students;
- for a child in foster care or an orphan;
- when moving to a new place, or for those living in exile;
- when sadness or discouragement threatens;
- when your plans are overturned and you need to trust God's choice.

Where to pray to her

Her body rests in the chapel of the motherhouse of the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus at Pniewy, near Poznań, in Poland, which has become a place of pilgrimage. Pilgrims come there to entrust children, educators and people far from home to her prayers.

To learn more about her, read the life of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska, or pray the novena to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life and words of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on her feast day, May 29, begin it on May 21. It can also be prayed at any time, especially for children, educators, exiles, or when you need to recover joy.

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 Saint Ursula's spirit of joy, trust and service. You can pray it alone, with your family, or with a class or parish group. If you miss a day, simply continue the next day.

The nine days follow the path of her life: her family, her vocation in Kraków, her years of teaching, the mission to Saint Petersburg, the expulsion of 1914, the home for orphans in Denmark, the founding of her congregation, and the joy that earned her the name "apostle of the smile." Her feast often falls close to Pentecost, and she herself died on Pentecost Monday. This novena can therefore also be prayed as a time of waiting for the Holy Spirit, asking for the gifts of joy, courage and trust that filled her life.

Day 1: A family of faith

Julia Ledóchowska grew up in a large family where faith was lived deeply: three of the nine children gave their lives to the Church. Holiness often grows in the soil of a praying family.

Prayer: Lord, bless my family. Make our home a place where faith is lived and passed on.

Today: Pray together with a family member, even briefly.

Day 2: Saying yes

Julia entered the Ursulines of Kraków and became Sister Ursula. She gave herself to God without knowing where this road would lead her. Every vocation begins with a trusting yes.

Prayer: Lord, help me say yes to you each day, even when I do not see the whole way.

Today: Pray for vocations to religious life.

Day 3: The joy of teaching

For twenty-one years Ursula taught young women in Kraków. Education was for her a work of love: helping young people grow in mind, heart and faith.

Prayer: Lord, bless all teachers and educators. Give them patience, joy and wisdom.

Today: Thank a teacher, or help a young person with their studies.

Day 4: Daring to go

Saint Pius X told her with a smile: "Wear pink dresses if you like, but go to Russia." Ursula went, living almost in hiding to serve Catholics there. Faith sometimes asks us to leave our comfort.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to go where you send me, with joy and simplicity.

Today: Do something you have been avoiding out of fear.

Day 5: Expelled and starting over

In 1914 Ursula was expelled from Russia. Instead of giving up, she began again in Scandinavia. When doors close, God opens others.

Prayer: Lord, when I lose what I had built, help me trust that you are preparing something new.

Today: Pray for refugees and people forced to leave their homes.

Day 6: A home for orphans

In Aalborg, Denmark, Ursula opened a home for the orphaned children of Polish immigrants. She saw Christ in the smallest and most forgotten.

Prayer: Lord, protect children who have no family, and make me attentive to the little ones around me.

Today: Support a work that cares for children in need.

Day 7: Obedience that bears fruit

After the war, Ursula wanted to return to Kraków. But the nuncio, the future Pius XI, encouraged her to continue her new work. She obeyed, and her congregation was born. Obedience can open roads we would never have chosen.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to listen to good counsel and to accept your will when it differs from mine.

Today: Ask advice from someone wise about a decision you face.

Day 8: The apostle of the smile

"Be joyful, for joy is the sign of a heart that loves." Ursula's smile was not a mask, but the fruit of a heart given to God and others. Joy is a way of loving.

Prayer: Lord, fill my heart with your joy, so that I may bring it to those I meet.

Today: Offer a smile and a kind word to someone who seems sad or alone.

Day 9: God chose

"I did not choose; God chose." At the end of her life, Ursula saw all her detours as the work of Providence. She died in Rome on Pentecost Monday 1939, and her body rests at Pniewy.

Prayer: Lord, I give you my past, my present and my future. Lead me where you want.

Today: Thank God for an unexpected turn in your life that brought good, and write it down so you remember it.

Closing prayer

Saint Ursula Ledóchowska, apostle of the smile, teacher, missionary and mother of orphans, you followed God along every road he chose for you and kept your joy in every trial. Pray for us, that we may serve children and the poor with generous hearts, trust God's Providence and bring his joy to the world. Present to God the intention I have carried during these nine days, and help me accept his will with trust, smiling even when the road is hard. Amen.

PILGRIMAGE

Shrine of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska in Pniewy

In Pniewy, a small town in Greater Poland near Poznań, the motherhouse of the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus houses the body of their foundress, Saint Ursula Ledóchowska. Its chapel has become a shrine where the faithful come to pray to the woman nicknamed "the apostle of the smile."

History of the site

After World War I, Ursula Ledóchowska returned to Poland with the sisters gathered around her in Scandinavia. Her congregation, the Ursulines of the Agonizing Heart of Jesus, received Rome's approval, and its generalate was established in Pniewy. From here the foundress directed the work, taught, and set out on her many journeys.

Ursula died in Rome on May 29, 1939. Her body, found incorrupt, was later buried in the chapel of the motherhouse in Pniewy. After her beatification by Saint John Paul II in Poznań on June 20, 1983, and her canonization in Rome on May 18, 2003, it became a place of pilgrimage.

What you will see

The heart of the shrine is the chapel of the motherhouse, where the body of Saint Ursula rests in a sarcophagus. Pilgrims come to pray there and entrust their intentions. The place remains above all the home of a living community: the sisters of the congregation live and pray here and welcome those who come to learn about their foundress.

Praying on site

Before you come, you can reread the life of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska. Before her sarcophagus, entrust to God the children around you, educators, and people living far from home. Say the prayer to Saint Ursula Ledóchowska, then ask for the grace of joy, remembering her words: "Be joyful, for joy is the sign of a heart that loves." These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other places of Saint Ursula Ledóchowska

- **Kraków**: the Ursuline convent, where she lived and taught for many years.
- **Saint Petersburg**: the city of her mission in Russia, from 1907 to 1914.
- **Aalborg** (Denmark): where she opened a home for the orphans of Polish immigrants.
- **Rome**: the city of her death and canonization.

Practical information

Pniewy is in Greater Poland, not far from Poznań. The feast of Saint Ursula, May 29, is the favored time for a pilgrimage. Since the shrine is also the home of a religious community, check with the sisters for Mass and visiting times before you come.

CREDITS

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