

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Ursula

Life, prayer, novena and pilgrimage

Feast day: October 21

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IN BRIEF

Saint Ursula

Martyr venerated at Cologne with her companions, at the heart of the legend of the eleven thousand virgins.

Feast day	October 21
Died	Cologne, Germany
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	Cologne, Ursulines, young women, drapers, the Sorbonne

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Ursula for Young People and Educators

Novena to Saint Ursula

Basilica of Saint Ursula in Cologne

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Ursula

Saint Ursula is the central figure of one of the most famous legends of the Middle Ages: a princess from Britain massacred at Cologne with "eleven thousand virgins" for remaining faithful to Christ. Behind this greatly embellished story lies a more modest but real fact: the veneration, at Cologne, of a group of young martyrs of the early centuries, honored in a basilica as early as the 4th or 5th century. Patron saint of Cologne and of the Ursulines, Saint Ursula is listed in the Roman Martyrology on October 21.

Who was Saint Ursula?

Two things must be kept apart from the start: what history allows us to say, and what tradition has told. History is sober. In Cologne, an ancient inscription, still preserved in the Basilica of Saint Ursula, records that a certain Clematius rebuilt a church on the spot where virgins had shed their blood for Christ. So there was, very early, a local cult of martyrs whose number and names were probably already unknown.

The name Ursula, Latin for "little she-bear", appears later. According to the most common explanation, it came from a nearby epitaph, that of an eight-year-old girl named Ursula. As for the figure of eleven thousand, it is thought to come from a misreading of an abbreviation: where "eleven virgin martyrs" was meant, "eleven thousand" was read. The existence of an Ursula who was a princess and leader of a pilgrimage is therefore not established.

Key dates

- **4th-5th century**: A funerary basilica is rebuilt at Cologne over the graves of virgin martyrs, according to the Clematius inscription.

- **9th century**: The name Ursula and the figure of "eleven thousand virgins" appear.
- **1106**: Digging around the church uncovers many bones, immediately venerated as relics.
- **1261-1266**: Jacobus de Voragine sets the story down in the *Golden Legend*.
- **13th century**: The Sorbonne in Paris chooses her as patron, followed later by the universities of Coimbra and Vienna.
- **1535**: Saint Angela Merici founds the Company of Saint Ursula at Brescia, origin of the Ursulines.
- **1969**: Her memorial is removed from the General Roman Calendar, but she remains in the Roman Martyrology on October 21.

The story told in the Golden Legend

The most widespread version makes Ursula the daughter of a Christian king in Britain. Asked in marriage by a pagan prince, she obtains a delay of three years to make a pilgrimage, accompanied by many young women. The company sails up the Rhine, reaches Rome, then returns toward Cologne, which is besieged by the Huns. Ursula refuses to marry their chief and to deny her faith: she is killed by an arrow, and her companions are massacred with her. Some versions date these events to the 3rd, 4th or 5th century, which alone shows how uncertain the chronology is.

This story, enriched from generation to generation, does not have the value of a historical document. Yet it expresses an ancient conviction of the Church of Cologne: young women preferred death to abandoning their faith, and their memory deserves to be kept.

Why is Saint Ursula the patron saint of Cologne, schools and young women?

In the Middle Ages, devotion to Ursula spread far beyond the Rhineland. The eleven flames on the coat of arms of Cologne recall the virgin martyrs. The Sorbonne, then other universities, took her as their patron. She was invoked for a good death and a happy marriage, and as protector of young women. Drapers, too, placed themselves under her protection.

In the 16th century, Saint Angela Merici gave her name to the Company of Saint Ursula, devoted to the Christian education of girls. The Ursulines then spread to France, Canada and the whole world, making this legendary martyr the patron of generations of women educators. In the United States, the Ursulines arrived in New Orleans in 1727, and many Ursuline schools in America, Ireland and elsewhere still bear her name.



The Shrine of Saint Ursula painted by Hans Memling in 1489, Bruges.

The basilica and the Golden Chamber

The Basilica of Saint Ursula stands north of Cologne's old town, on the site of a Roman-era cemetery. After the discovery of 1106, the many bones found nearby were taken to be the remains of Ursula's companions. The Romanesque church, badly damaged in the Second World War and then restored, has a tower topped by a crown, a reminder of the princess of the legend. Inside, the Golden Chamber, fitted out in the 17th century, has walls entirely covered with bones arranged in patterns and inscriptions, beneath rows of reliquary busts. The display surprises visitors, but it expresses the fervor of an age that wanted to honor every martyr, even those without a name.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Ursula in art

Artists have produced many narrative cycles of her story: the shrine painted by Hans Memling in Bruges, the great canvases of Vittore Carpaccio in Venice, Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* in Naples. She is recognized by:

- a **crown**, as a princess;
- an **arrow**, the instrument of her martyrdom;
- sometimes a **banner**;
- a wide **cloak** under which she often shelters her companions.

What does her story teach?

Saint Ursula invites a clear-sighted piety. We can admire the beauty of her legend without taking it for a chronicle, and honor through her real martyrs whose names God alone knows. Her cult recalls the faithfulness of young Christian women in a violent age, and the fruitfulness of that memory: centuries later, women gave their lives to educating the young under her patronage.

To pray with her, see the prayer to Saint Ursula and the novena to Saint Ursula.



The Golden Chamber of the Basilica of Saint Ursula, Cologne.

Where to pray to Saint Ursula

- **Cologne** (Germany): the Basilica of Saint Ursula, which keeps the relics attributed to the virgin martyrs, the Golden Chamber and the Clematius inscription.
- **Bruges** (Belgium): Hans Memling's Shrine of Saint Ursula, in the former Saint John's Hospital.
- **Venice** (Italy): Carpaccio's cycle of the *Legend of Saint Ursula*, at the Gallerie dell'Accademia.
- The chapels of Ursuline convents and schools around the world.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Ursula for Young People and Educators

No single prayer to Saint Ursula has become universal, even though the Ursulines and the Church of Cologne have invoked her for centuries. Below is an original prayer by Saintspedia that entrusts to Saint Ursula young people, educators and all who suffer for their faith.

Prayer to Saint Ursula for young people and educators

Saint Ursula, you whom the Church of Cologne has honored since the early centuries together with your companion martyrs, pray for us. Help us remain faithful to Christ when faith is costly and the world presses us to give up.

I entrust to you the young women and young men who are looking for their path: may they find elders to guide them and the courage to choose what is beautiful and true.

I entrust to you educators, teachers and all the religious sisters who, in your name, have given their lives to teaching the young. Give them patience, joy and trust.

Finally, I entrust to you the Christians persecuted today, whose names perhaps no one will ever know, and my intention: (name it in silence).

At the end of our pilgrimage, obtain for us a good death in the peace of the Lord. Amen.

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

When to pray this prayer

Saint Ursula and her companions are listed in the Roman Martyrology on October 21. On that day the Basilica of Saint Ursula in Cologne and Ursuline communities around the world honor their memory in a special way. This prayer is also well suited to:

- the start of a school year, for students and teachers;
- a young woman or young man facing an important choice of life;
- the anniversary of an Ursuline school or community;
- a day of prayer for persecuted Christians;
- praying for a good death, for yourself or for someone close to you.

For nine days of prayer with her, see the novena to Saint Ursula.

A short invocation

> *Saint Ursula and holy companions, faithful unto death, pray for the young and for all who teach them.*

To learn what history says and what the legend tells, read the life and legend of Saint Ursula.

NOVENA

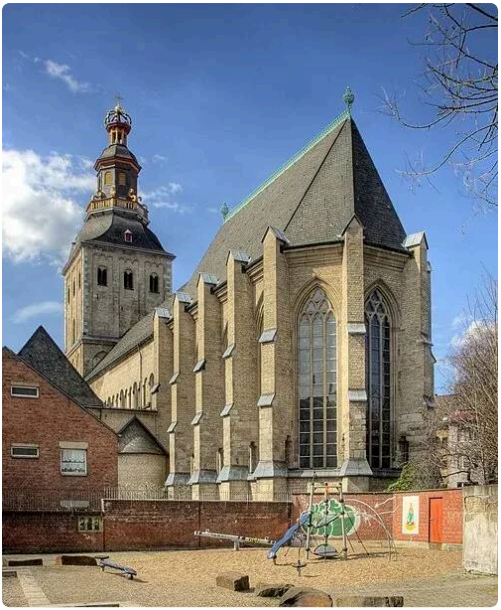
Novena to Saint Ursula

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the memory of Saint Ursula and her companions, martyrs of Cologne, and by the Ursulines who carried her name into schools around the world. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on the eve of her commemoration on October 21, begin on October 12; it ends on October 20. You can also pray it at the start of a school year or at any time, for young people and those who educate them.

Her story mixes a small core of history with a great deal of legend. This novena does not ask you to believe every detail of the legend, but to honor through Ursula the real young martyrs of Cologne, whose names God alone knows.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for each day helps carry the prayer into daily life. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off.



The Basilica of Saint Ursula, Cologne.

Day 1: Martyrs without names

The oldest witness to Saint Ursula is an inscription recalling virgins who shed their blood for Christ at Cologne. Their names were soon forgotten, but their faithfulness was not. God knows each person by name, even those history forgets.

Prayer: Lord, you know the names of all your witnesses. I entrust to you the forgotten martyrs of every age.

Today: Pray for someone who serves faithfully without ever being noticed.

Day 2: Telling the truth with love

Ursula's story has been embellished over the centuries. Honoring her well means distinguishing what we know from what is told, without despising the faith that the legend expresses. Truth and devotion go together.

Prayer: Lord, give me a faith that is both humble and clear-sighted, that loves the truth and is not afraid of it.

Today: Read a page of the Gospel slowly, as the most trustworthy story of all.

Day 3: A young woman who chose Christ

The legend tells of a princess who asked for time to make a pilgrimage before her marriage. Behind the story lies a simple truth: young people are capable of great choices for God.

Prayer: Lord, bless the young people I know. Give them the freedom and courage to choose you.

Today: Encourage a young person in a choice they are making.

Day 4: Walking together

Ursula is shown surrounded by many companions, sheltered under her cloak. Faith is not lived alone: we walk together, supporting one another.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the friends who walk with me in faith. Make me a support for them.

Today: Write a message to a friend who has helped you in your faith.

Day 5: Pilgrims on the way

The legend makes Ursula a pilgrim who traveled up the Rhine to Rome. Christian life is a journey, with stages, detours and moments of rest, always toward God.

Prayer: Lord, guide my steps, and keep me on the way when I am tired or lost.

Today: Walk to a church or chapel near you and pray there for a moment.

Day 6: Faithful in the face of violence

According to tradition, Ursula and her companions refused to deny their faith in the face of violence, and paid with their lives. In many countries today, Christians face the same choice.

Prayer: Lord, strengthen persecuted Christians, and give me the courage to bear witness to you in the small trials of my daily life.

Today: Learn about a community of persecuted Christians and pray for it.

Day 7: Teaching the young

In 1535 Saint Angela Merici placed her company under Ursula's name, to give girls a Christian education. Generations of Ursulines followed, in Europe, in America and around the world. In 1727 they reached New Orleans, where they opened a school for girls. Countless women owe their education, and often their faith, to these sisters.

Prayer: Lord, bless teachers and educators. Give them patience, wisdom and joy in their mission.

Today: Thank a teacher who marked your life, or pray for him or her by name.

Day 8: Places of learning

The Sorbonne, then other universities, chose Saint Ursula as their patron. The Church has always loved learning, as a path toward the truth that comes from God.

Prayer: Lord, bless students and researchers. May their studies lead them toward you, the source of all truth.

Today: Spend time learning something new about your faith.

Day 9: A good death

In the Middle Ages, people prayed to Saint Ursula for the grace of a good death. To die in peace, reconciled with God and with others, is the last and greatest of graces.

Prayer: Lord, when my hour comes, receive me in your peace. Saint Ursula and holy companions, pray for us.

Today: Pray for the dying, and for those who accompany them.

Closing prayer

> *God our Father, you gave to the virgin martyrs of Cologne the strength to remain faithful to Christ. Through the intercession of Saint Ursula and her companions, receive the intention I have carried for these nine days. Protect young people, bless those who teach them, strengthen persecuted Christians, and grant us all a good death in your peace. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the prayer to Saint Ursula each day, and read her life and legend.

PILGRIMAGE

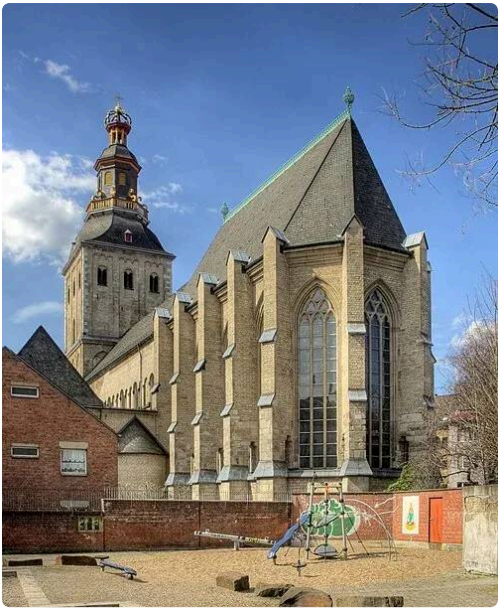
Basilica of Saint Ursula in Cologne

The Basilica of Saint Ursula in Cologne stands on the very spot where, from antiquity, Christians venerated virgin martyrs. It is the heart of the devotion to Saint Ursula and her companions: here you can see one of the oldest Christian inscriptions in the Rhineland and an astonishing "Golden Chamber" lined with relics.

A Church Built on an Ancient Cemetery

The church lies north of Cologne's old town, on the site of a Roman-era cemetery. An engraved inscription, known as the Clematius inscription and still visible in the building, records that a man of that name had a basilica rebuilt in honor of virgins who had shed their blood on that spot. It is the oldest witness to the cult that would give rise, centuries later, to the legend of Saint Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins.

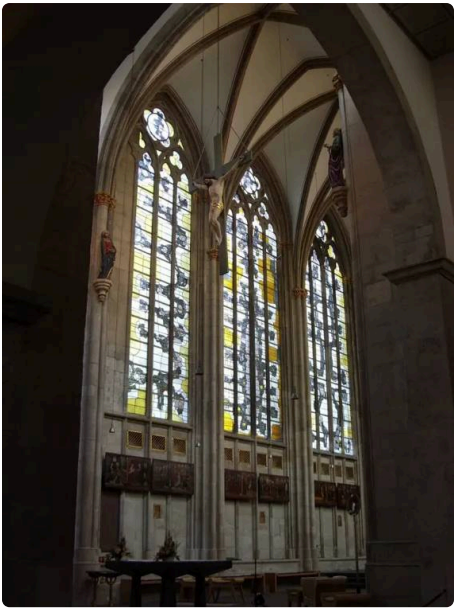
In 1106, excavations in the neighboring cemetery brought to light a great many bones, which were regarded as the remains of Ursula's companions. The present Romanesque church has been altered over the centuries. Severely damaged in the Second World War, it has been restored. It bears the title of minor basilica.



The Basilica of Saint Ursula seen from the outside.

Visiting the Basilica

The first thing you notice from outside is the tower topped by a crown, a reminder of the princess of the legend. Inside, several works evoke the story of Ursula. The most striking room is the Golden Chamber (*Goldene Kammer*), arranged in the 17th century: its walls are entirely covered with bones arranged in patterns and inscriptions, above which rows of reliquary busts are lined up. This decor is startling, but it expresses the fervor of an age that wanted to honor every martyr, even an anonymous one.



The interior of the Basilica of Saint Ursula.

Praying on the Spot

Before your visit, you might read the life and legend of Saint Ursula, to distinguish clearly between what is known and what is told. Once there, take time to pause before the Clematius inscription: it connects today's pilgrims with the first Christians of Cologne. You can say the prayer to Saint Ursula there, entrusting persecuted Christians to God. These suggestions are offered by Saintspedia.

Other Places Associated with Saint Ursula

- **Bruges** (Belgium): the Shrine of Saint Ursula painted by Hans Memling in 1489, at the former Saint John's Hospital.
- **Venice**: Vittore Carpaccio's cycle of the *Legend of Saint Ursula*, at the Gallerie dell'Accademia.

- **Brescia** (Lombardy): the city where Saint Angela Merici founded the Company of Saint Ursula in 1535.

Practical Information

The Basilica of Saint Ursula is a few minutes' walk from the cathedral and Cologne's central station. Access to the Golden Chamber may be limited to certain time slots or subject to a donation, so check with the parish or the Cologne tourist office before you come. Modest dress and silence are requested during services.

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