

## Saint Ursula and Companions

birthdate unknown

died c. 453 Cologne, Germany

There are many versions of Ursula's story, but most agree that she was a British princess, famous for her beauty, virtue, and learning, who resisted her many suitors because she had consecrated herself to Christ. Ursula finally agreed to marry Prince Conon on three conditions:

First, he and his court must become Christians.

Second, they would have a three-year engagement, during which she would travel to the shrines of the saints.

Third, she wanted as companions ten noble virgins, each attended by a thousand handmaidens, as well as another thousand handmaidens attending to Ursula herself.

Prince Conon and his father the king agreed to everything, and on a May morning, Ursula and eleven thousand companions set sail from London. A strong wind swept them up the Rhine to Basel, where they disembarked and continued on foot across the Alps. On reaching Rome they were welcomed by Pope Cyriacus and Prince Conon, who had arrived there via another route. Conon joined Ursula in a vow of celibacy and the entire company sailed to Cologne, where they were captured and beheaded by the Huns. Ursula begged to die with her companions, but the barbarians were so awed by her beauty that they brought her to their leader Attila. He offered to make her his queen. She rejected him, so Attila drew his bow and pierced her breast with three arrows. Ursula fell dead, and her soul ascended to heaven with her companions. The people of Cologne buried the martyrs and built churches on the gravesites, the most favours being the church of the Holy Virgins.

### **The Genius of Ursula:**

This is, of course, a fantastic tale. Some scholars suggest that the eleven thousand figure arose from a transcription error and that Ursula was martyred with only eleven companions. Although the historical facts may never be known, Ursula and her army of women inspired generations of Christians and she has long been a patron of girls and educators. Among her admirers was Angela Merici (27 January) who founded the Ursuline Order after a vision of the saint.

### **Reflection:**

*"Happy are those who are blameless,  
who walk by the teaching of the LORD.  
Happy are those who observe God's decrees,  
who seek the LORD with all their heart".*

Psalm 119.1-2

Gallick, Sarah: The Big Book of Women Saints, p. 318