

St. Ursula – Patron Saint of the Ursulines



Angela was a woman who travelled, listened, prayed, observed and was open to the influences of her day. Following the founding in 1440 of the Gutenberg press, books for the first time became widely available and very popular. Amongst the most significant of the books in circulation during Angela's youth was *The Golden Legend* – a medieval bestseller telling the lives of the saints! Angela's father regularly read from it to his family. It is probably here that Angela first heard of Ursula and Catherine of Alexandria – two important shapers of her spirituality and vision, an inspiration reinforced by much of the art work of her time.

So who is Ursula? Where did she come from? Why are we Ursulines? Why do we celebrate Ursula's feastday? Read on to find the answer to these questions.

According to legend St. Ursula was the daughter of a 5th Century Christian King in Britain. She was a beautiful, intelligent, outgoing and friendly girl. Ursula was deeply spiritual and at an early age had dedicated herself to God, deciding to remain a virgin because of her love of Christ.

At that time young girls did not choose their own husbands, their parents decided whom they would marry. A powerful pagan king requested of Ursula's father that she would marry his son Etheus. The pagan king sent ambassadors to Ursula's father offering large sums of money and other promises if the marriage took place. Ursula's father was very afraid for three reasons: he was afraid of the violent reaction of the other king; he didn't think Ursula would agree to marry; and both he and Ursula would prefer a Christian marriage.

Much to her father's surprise, Ursula, inspired by God in a dream, agreed to the marriage but only on certain conditions:

- Each king should put at her disposal ten girls.
- Each girl was to be accompanied by another thousand girls.
- The kings were to provide ships for a journey.
- Ursula was to be granted three years to dedicate herself to God.
- The young prince was to receive Christian instruction for baptism.

Ursula actually thought the proposal would be withdrawn on these conditions – but no, the king agreed and Ursula's demands were carried out immediately!

Young people began arriving from all directions to join the voyage. During the journey Ursula converted all the girls to Christianity and soon they arrived in Cologne, Germany. Here an angel appeared to Ursula and told her that she and all her companions would return to this place and win the crown of martyrdom. They moved on to Rome and Pope Cyriacus asked to join Ursula's group. They set out to return to Cologne. Back in Britain, Etherius also decided that he would join them. All met up in Cologne where they encountered the aggressive Huns who were interested in women for pleasure only. Ursula and her young girls resisted this violation. Julius, leader of the Huns, instructed his army to kill them all, including Etherius and the ex-pope Cyriacus. Julius decided not to kill Ursula as he thought she was so beautiful he wanted to marry her. Ursula firmly refused his proposal because she wanted to keep the promise she had made to God to remain a virgin. Julius was so enraged he threw an arrow towards her, which pierced her heart and killed her. And so legend tells us, Ursula and her companions were martyred in Cologne.

Angela Merici founded the Ursulines in 1535 in Italy. At that time the story of Ursula was very popular and people would have heard it, been inspired by it and prayed to Ursula. While in Venice Angela would surely have been inspired by Carpaccio's wonderful paintings of Ursula's story. Angela was calling young women to live a life of virginity and to be of service to others. She chose Ursula as a role model for herself and her companions and so still today we are known as Ursulines. Just as God called Angela and her companions he still invites women of today to say yes to the call to dedicate their lives to Him in the spirit of Angela Merici.