Homily for St. Ursula and Companions

October 22, 2026

There are two things I'd like to address tonight. I'll begin with the Gospel, and then I want to talk a little bit about Saint Ursula.

Regarding the Gospel, this Gospel, I think, is one that gives some people issues.

They read it and say, "But hold on a moment. Aren't we as Christians supposed to be charitable? Shouldn't the wise virgins have given some little bit of oil to others?"

It is true that as Christians we should be charitable, and I hope if you ever find yourself with a lantern and another friend or person asks you for a bit of a light, that you'll give it to them.

But it is important to remember that Christ here is speaking a parable. We cannot think of it as twelve, or any number of literal virgins, literally denying oil and light to their fellows.

Rather, we should think of it like this.

In our lives, in each day of our lives, we run into people who perhaps don't live the most Christian of lives. They live foolishly, as it were.

And I think we've all had a person in our lives at some point who, no matter how much we try to help or give them advice or tell them what the right thing to do might be, they don't listen.

Sometimes they don't listen because of addiction. Sometimes they don't listen because we didn't express it clearly enough. And sometimes they do not listen simply because they do not want to listen.

And when we've had that person in our lives who, despite trying to help, despite doing all that we can, never reforms, there comes a moment where we have to say, "I've done all I can. If I keep trying, if I keep bashing my head against the wall, I'm going to lose a part of myself, my joy, my union with Christ, my freedom."

And so, when we think of tonight's parable, don't think of twelve virgins, or twelve friends, or any number...I don't know why I'm going with twelve...saying to their friends, "No, literally, I'm not going to help you."

It's a reminder that as Christians, we are called to do good things. And yes, we are called to help others and to be there for others when they come in true need.

But tonight's parable is also a reminder that living a life focused only on others, on constantly helping others, can leave our own reserves of oil critically low, dangerously close to sputtering out.

And that really, I think, is one of the key points of the parable.

Yes, as Christians, we must shed light and we must share light. We must love others. And it's something emphasized, I know, hopefully, in almost every Christian church: do for others.

But much less often do we hear, "But remember yourself and love yourself, because you don't want your own reserves of oil going dry."

Moving on from the Gospel and on to St. Ursula, though I think we'll find that there's a connection here too, it's important first to ask who St. Ursula and her companions are.

And the story you get is, well, very interesting.

And it's perhaps best begun with a simple question.

Have you ever played make-believe, perhaps when you were a child, or an adult, or even these days?

Why?

For those who've said yes, why do we play make-believe?

For some people, it's an escape. For some people, it's simply fun. It's enjoyment.

In both instances, playing make-believe involves making something very mundane into something extraordinary.

But why am I talking about make-believe in discussing St. Ursula?

Well, it's because we don't know very much about her, if she existed, or if the stories we've heard about her and for many centuries believed about her are even true.

We know that in the city of Cologne in Germany, there's an inscription to virgins who were murdered here. The name Ursula is found amongst it at some point in history. But there are other names too.

And there are conflicting accounts.

The first real fleshed-out accounts of St. Ursula appeared nearly 700 years after those supposed inscriptions in the third and fourth centuries, in the 12th century.

And the story we heard was that St. Ursula was the daughter of a king in Cornwall.

And this king wanted her to marry a pagan, a governor who, according to myth and legend, would become the founder of Brittany in France, the Breton kingdoms.

And St. Ursula implored her father for time, according to the legends, before the marriage, a marriage she really didn't want to enter into.

And it is said, according to that legend, that she and ten companions, and each of those ten companions were eventually joined by a thousand more, went throughout Europe spreading the word of God, showing others marvelous acts and doing good things.

It's even said they went to Rome.

Now, the year that they supposedly went to Rome, 383 or around that time, they do mention visiting a pope.

Now, at first, the pope's name, for many years, no one was sure who it actually was or if it was a real pope.

It was found later, in 384, there was a pope whose name matched almost one for one, the C's and S's just being swapped out.

From Rome, St. Ursula is said to have gone up to Germany, to Cologne, and there she and her followers ran into the Huns.

And it's said that the Huns slaughtered her and her followers because of their Christian faith.

All of this, of course, cannot be verified. All of it has conflicting sources, conflicting enigmas that we can't really answer.

All we have is an inscription. All we have firmly is an inscription: "Here lie the holy virgins who were martyred."

And at first, this might concern you.

You might say, "Well, I had a devotion to St. Ursula. I've heard about Ursula and the Ursulines."

Or, "Why does the Church have a saint who might not even have existed?"

But I ask you not to fear just yet.

I asked you when I began this topic of Ursula and the Ursulines whether or not you've ever played make-believe before.

Now, it is my opinion that any child playing make-believe loves to imagine the things they want to be.

They want to be a president. They imagine being a president.

They want to fight dragons and save a prince or princess. And so they pretend to be a knight.

We know, of course, they're not, that they live an otherwise ordinary life, a mundane life.

Do we call the imagination and the playing that they do, the embellishing, as it were, a bad thing?

Or do we call it taking a moment of mundanity, a simple moment of play, the most mundane thing anyone could do, and making it into something aspirational, making it into a lesson, making it into something attractive for others?

In a way, that's like Saint Ursula.

We know in the city of Cologne, holy virgins were put to death.

And if we left it there, we can talk about how holy it was and how good they were to have been put to death. But where does that leave us in our minds and in our inspiration?

But then we go forward. We say, "Holy virgins were here."

And because of this inscription, one was named Ursula, probably.

We put a face to the idea. We put heroism to the idea.

She was running away and conducting a pilgrimage, speaking about God. She stood up to the Huns, even knowing that it might lead to her death.

Suddenly, we go from "Here, holy virgins were killed," to "Here is a hero, to emulate, to live your life after."

It's just like any story we read.

We read it to be inspired, to remind us that faith is not about looking at the mundane world. It's looking at the beautiful, extraordinary world of faith, of belief, of heaven.

Faith is not keeping our eyes downcast.

Faith is hoping for a world we might never see.

Faith is not accepting the cynicism of the world: "Here, some holy virgins died."

Faith is about believing that we can build a world that we might never see, despite all the obstacles.

"Here is Saint Ursula. Here is her heroism. Be like her."

And I think anyone who hears the two stories, "Here, some holy virgins died," and "Here, a heroic woman gave up so much to travel, to be brave, and to stand up for the good."

Saint Ursula, or whatever the names were of those holy virgins, Saint Ursula and her companions were never about lying.

Their tales were never about deceiving.

Their tales were taking the facts of life, the mundane things of this world, and turning them into something extraordinary.

Just like any author will take the mundane events of this world, finding a bit of jewelry, for instance, and turn it into an extraordinary lesson on morals, on friendship and companionship, sort of like J. R. R. Tolkien did with Lord of the Rings.

And so I encourage you, dwell and reflect on Saint Ursula, not because of her historicity, but because of what she can inspire you to think and believe.

And I think you will find, if you do this, and if you ignite the imagination of your faith, you'll live a faith more vibrant and full than ever before.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Amen.