

# Saint Gertrude

## A Saint of the Sacred Heart

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In the year 1229, Count Burchard of Mansfield, following the custom of pious nobles of his time, founded near his castle at Mansfield, in Saxony, a community of nuns under the rule of the Cistercian branch of the Benedictine family. (It seems now to be definitely established that the foundation was not Benedictine as such, although it may have become so after Saint Gertrude's time.)

Five years later, to secure greater quietness, they removed to Rossdorf, finally settling in 1258 at Helfta, near the town of Eisleben. Helfta was a place of great natural charm, a fertile valley rich with meadows and cornfields, watered by a silvery stream – a fit setting for lives graced by the beauty of holiness. At the time of its establishment there, the convent, still in its first fervour and a model of spirituality, was ruled by the saintly Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn. This remarkable woman had given evidence so early of exceptional spiritual and mental powers that she had been unanimously elected Abbess at the age of nineteen. For forty years, she sustained her charge with admirable fitness, charity and zeal, loved by her subjects as a mother. As assistant, she had her sister, Saint Mechtilde, who held the important office of cantor, mistress of novices and directress of the schools.

In Saint Mechtilde's care was placed, in 1261, our Saint Gertrude, then a little girl of five. Gertrude was born on the feast of the Epiphany, January 6th, 1256, but her birthplace is unknown, probably it was at some distance from Helfta. The name and rank of her parents are also unrecorded. If not quite of obscure origin, it seems unlikely that her family held a high social position. After entering the school at Helfta, she apparently never saw her parents again; perhaps they lived too far away, or possibly, she was early left an orphan.

Gertrude was a most attractive child and possessed exceptional abilities, which enabled her easily to out-distance her fellow-pupils in study. At that time, education in the convent schools of Germany was of a high order. Instruction was not confined by any means to elementary studies; in some cases, it extended even to theology. It is no wonder, then, that some of the glories of literature in the Middle Ages emanated from the German convents. At Helfta, the Abbess Gertrude and her sister assiduously promoted the cause of learning among the religious and their pupils. Gertrude became a most proficient Latin scholar. Study, indeed, was with her a passion; caring little for the ordinary distractions of childhood, she devoted to it all the time she could. When she passed in due course from the school into the community this intense interest remained.

Later, after what she calls her "conversion," she felt that her literary studies had occupied too large a place in her life. While careful about the observance of the Rule, the recitation of the Divine Office and her spiritual exercises, she found perhaps a greater attraction in the pleasures of the mind. In her

humility, no doubt, she exaggerates the former state of her soul. When she turned from secular studies to sacred, it is certain that the habits of diligence, which she had formed in earlier years, and the sound foundation of knowledge, which she had built up were of incalculable value both to herself and to the Church.

Towards the end of Gertrude's twenty-fifth year a feeling of strong dissatisfaction with her life seized her. Her pride and joy in study disappeared. She felt isolated, and human consolation seemed of no avail. Then it was that our Lord drew her to Himself and showed her where to find repose. Peace came to her soul on the Monday before the Feast of Purification (Jan. 27th), 1281. When in the middle of the dormitory after Compline (Night Prayer) on that day, she tells us, she perceived our Lord, in the form of a beautiful youth, standing before her. Tenderly addressing her, He said: "Your salvation is at hand. Why are you consumed with grief? Have you no counsellor that you are so changed by sadness?"

Then she adds: "As he said these words, although I was certain of my bodily presence in the place of which I have spoken, nevertheless it seemed to me that I was in choir, in that corner where I was accustomed to say my tepid prayers, and there I heard these words: 'I will save you and deliver you; be without fear.' When He had said this, I saw His fine and delicate Hand take mine, as though solemnly to ratify these promises; then He added: 'You have licked the earth with My enemies and sucked drops of honey amidst the thorns; return now to Me, and I will inebriate you with the torrent of My Divine delights.' While Our Lord thus spoke, I looked and saw between us, that is to say, to His right and to my left, a hedge which extended so far that neither in front nor behind could I perceive the end of it. The top of this hedge appeared to bristle with such a mass of thorns that I could see no means of reaching Him. I remained hesitating, carried away by my desire for Our Lord, and was on the point of falling when suddenly taking hold of me, He raised me without any difficulty and placed me by His side. I then recognised in the Hand which had just been given me as a pledge the resplendent jewels of those Sacred Wounds, which have made of no effect the handwriting that was against us."

Thus took place Gertrude's "conversion". Divine grace operating on a soul naturally prone to good, had hitherto preserved her from evil. Now, however, nothing less than perfection was her goal. With intense ardour, she sought a closer union with God, and having now the support of her Divine Master, she made rapid progress towards that end. It was the Vigil of the Annunciation, 1281, that she felt for the first time that intimate union with God, which she so greatly desired and which was to bear such marvellous fruit. While at first she enjoyed special delights only on the days on which she received Holy Communion, yet her ordinary state of union with Our Lord was so constant that nine years afterwards she could tell Him that He had not left her even for a moment, from her conversion until that time, except once for the space of eleven days, on account of a worldly conversation in which she had engaged.

Everything now spoke to her of God. In a charming little picture which she paints of an incident, which happened soon after her conversion, she shows how the beauties of nature may draw us to Him.

"It happened on a certain day," she says, "between the Resurrection and the Ascension, that I went into the court before Prime, and sitting down near the fountain, began to meditate on the beauty of the place. I was enchanted with the clearness of the flowing stream, the verdure of the trees surrounding the spot, the unrestricted flight of the birds and especially of the doves, but above all by

the rare calm of this hidden retreat. I began to ponder in my mind what else I should desire to complete the charms of the place, and I concluded that I should like the presence of a sociable and loving friend, one capable, in a word, of cheering my solitude. Then You, O my God, the author of ineffable delights, Who, as I hope, did prompt me to begin this meditation, did also make Yourself the end of it, inspiring me with the thought suggested by the stream, that if by continual gratitude I should cause Your graces to flow back to You; if, growing in the love of virtue, I should bring forth, like the trees, the fruit of good works; if, again, despising earthly things, I should fly heavenwards freely like the doves, and if, with my senses stranger to the tumult of exterior distractions, I should devote myself to You with all my soul, my heart would become for You a habitation full of delight."

One of the first fruits of Gertrude's conversion was the readjustment of the relations between her intellectual and her spiritual life. In her case, she considered, the call to perfection involved the abandonment of her once-loved literary studies. The time that she had previously devoted to them she now felt it her duty to give to Holy Scripture and the theologians and Fathers of the Church, her favourites being Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory the Great and Saint Bernard. The literary powers, which her previous studies had developed, she now put to excellent use by writing simple works for the people, explaining obscure passages of the Bible. Unfortunately, all of these writings are lost, although we possess other most valuable works from her pen. She also procured copies of the Holy Scriptures for those who required them, apparently sometimes making transcripts with her own hand, printing yet being unknown.

As Gertrude's life was that of a simple nun in a contemplative order, it presents to us externally nothing of a startling nature. Her outward life, indeed, was a round of ordinary duties faithfully performed. She held the office of assistant to her former mistress, Saint Mechtilde, but at times exterior occupations were given to her, and as the fame of her sanctity spread abroad, strangers came to the convent seeking her advice. While she gladly gave her help, intercourse with the world was a real cross to her. "Were I free to choose," she said to Our Lord, "I would have no other companionship and no other conversation but Yours. I abandon them all to return to You, O my Supreme Good and the one joy of my heart and soul."

Her well-informed and eloquent discourses often had striking effects. By her persuasive words, we are told, she would arouse in some the desire for salvation, give light to others whereby they might know God and their own defects, console the afflicted, or excite in other souls the more ardent love of God. A single word of hers, it was said, had more power to touch souls than whole sermons of the most celebrated preachers.

When her sisters in religion came to consult her, she would at any time willingly place herself at their disposal, even forsaking for them the delights of intimate intercourse with Our Lord.

She used to say that the favours with which the excessive goodness of God enriched her unworthiness seemed to her like treasures hidden under a rubbish-heap when kept to herself, but that immediately she revealed them to others they became like precious stones mounted in pure gold.

Gertrude's purity of heart was obvious to all who came in contact with her. Indeed the sisters used to say laughingly that she had a heart so pure that it would not be out of place among the relics on the altar. Her biographer relates that an old man of great authority declared that he had never met anyone a greater stranger to every motion of the senses than our saint; and he added that he did not

wonder God had chosen to reveal His secret to her before all others; since He says in the Gospel: "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God."

Father Faber has said that in the creature, humility is the infallible accompaniment of nearness to the Creator. Saint Gertrude is a striking example of this truth. She considered no one so vile that he did not appear to her to be a more worthy recipient of God's gifts than herself. Each fresh access of grace deepened her sense of unworthiness. She recognised that the favours, which God showered on His creatures, are unmerited gifts. She thought with Saint Teresa, that "if it seems to us that Our Lord has given us some virtue, we must regard it as a blessing received from Him that He can at any time take away from us."

It was humility that urged Gertrude to consult others when she was about to undertake anything important, and readily to follow their advice even when it was contrary to her inclinations. It was humility, again, that both kept her for a time from making known her favours and also impelled her to reveal them, for while she feared to attract attention to herself, she felt that God did not give her His revelations for herself alone. An impetuosity natural to her temperament gave her frequent cause for humbling herself. Scrupulously careful herself about observance of the Rule, negligence on the part of others would bring down on them a reproach, sometimes severe. Then she would humbly beg her sisters to implore God to grant her the grace of gentleness and meekness. She endeavoured to obtain from Our Lord complete deliverance from these faults but learned from Him that He leaves these defects to His chosen souls so that they may bear in mind the weakness of their nature and realise that all their purity is only an effect of His free mercy.

As humility is, in the words of Saint Augustine, "the love of God reaching to contempt of self," we should expect to find in one so humble as Saint Gertrude an ardent love of God. This, indeed, was one of her most striking characteristics. Her love of God was shown by her complete submission to His will in small things as well as great. Our Lord taught her to make use of all the necessities of life, such as eating, drinking and sleeping, for the praise of God and the salvation of souls, in union with the love with which He had sanctified those actions when on earth.

During Mass on a certain Palm Sunday, when she was suffering from extreme weakness, one of the sisters came and begged her to take some food. Her custom was never to take anything until she had heard the Passion. Asking Our Lord what she ought to do, she heard the reply: "Take this refreshment, my beloved, in union with that love with which I had, your Lover, before I suffered on the Cross, refusing to drink the wine mingled with myrrh and gall, after I had tasted it." At these words, she submitted her will to God and gave Him thanks. Our Lord then showed her His Heart and said: "Behold the cup wherein is preserved the memory of that saying, 'When He had tasted He would not drink'. In it, I present you with the desire, which made me refuse to drink the draught in order that it might be reserved for you. Drink it then freely, for I, the experienced Physician, have tasted it, and have prepared it for you as a most salutary potion. The desire of suffering much for men prevented Me from drinking the wine mingled with myrrh and gall that was offered Me...With the same love must you, on the contrary, take all that is necessary and profitable, that you may live the longer for My service."

Our Lord went on, "In the cup offered Me, there are three considerations, and you must do three things in memory thereof. First, you must perform all your actions joyfully for My glory; this is donated by the wine. Secondly, you must make use of the conveniences of life, that you may be able to suffer the longer for My love; this is signified by the myrrh, which preserves from corruption.

Thirdly, you must be quite willing, for My love, to be deprived of the joys of My sweet presence in Heaven and to remain in this vale of misery as long as it pleases Me; this is indicated by the gall. Whenever you use the conveniences of life with this intention, I will regard you as you would a friend who drank all the gall offered you, in order to give you in exchange the sweetest nectar."

Saint Gertrude's general indifference to the material necessities of every-day life, such as food and clothing, is shown by the manner in which she would choose them. Shutting her eyes, she would take the first object she touched, and then, whatever her natural preference might be, she would regard it with affection as a direct gift from God.

Saint Gertrude, as we have seen, did not allow her zeal for God's service to infringe on the charity that she owed to her neighbour. One of the fruits of her love for God was the compassion, which she bestowed for His sake on all those in need or distress. On one occasion, we are told, that, "Gertrude had risen to say Matins, although in a very weak state, and she had already finished the first Nocturn, when another sister who was also ill came to her, and Gertrude charitably began to recite the office with devotion all over again with her. Afterwards at Mass, while she was devoutly meditating on Our Lord, she saw her soul clothed in most wonderful apparel and magnificently adorned with precious stones emitting a marvellous light. Our Lord then made known to her that she had deserved these adornments because in humble charity, she had said part of Matins over again with a younger sister, and that her vesture shone with as many ornaments as she had recited words.

"She then remembered certain negligences which she had not yet confessed on account of the absence of her confessor, and laid her trouble before Our Lord, Who said to her: 'Why do you bewail your negligences, you who are so gloriously clothed with the robe of charity, which covers a multitude of sins?' 'How can I console myself,' she answered, 'with the thought that charity covers my sins, when I see myself still stained with them?' 'Charity not only covers sins,' replied Our Lord, 'but like a burning sea consumes within itself and annihilates venial faults and moreover overwhelms the soul with merits'."

Saint Gertrude's compassion for the afflicted extended to all living creatures, and when she saw animals in pain, she would feel the deepest pity for them and implore God's mercy for their sufferings.

Nor did Gertrude's charity stop at the living; she showed the greatest zeal for the welfare of the Holy Souls in Purgatory. We are told that having offered all her good works on behalf of the soul of a departed Sister in religion, she asked Our Lord, in consequence, frequently to remember in mercy her absolute poverty. "What more can I do," He replied, "for one who out of charity has thus despoiled herself, than to cover her with My Own garments and work earnestly with her for the speedy regaining of what she has lost by Charity?" "Whereas You may do," she answered, "I must nevertheless appear before You despoiled of all, for I have renounced future as well as past benefits." "A mother allows her children who are clothed to sit at her feet," replied Our Lord, "but she takes one that is barely clad into her arms and warms it in her bosom with her own garments."

And He added, "Seated on the shore of the ocean, are you poorer than those who seat themselves at the source of a little brook?" "That is to say," explained the chronicler, "those who keep their good works to themselves remain at the source of the brook, but those who in charity and humility despoil themselves of everything, possess God, the inexhaustible ocean of all blessedness."

Saint Gertrude's love of God was supplemented by an unshakable confidence in His goodness. Her confidence in God, to which, indeed, she attributed all her spiritual gifts, enabled her to receive Our Lord frequently in the Blessed Sacrament of His love, at a time when frequent Communion was little practised. When some of her companions hesitated through scruples to approach the altar, she would exhort and encourage them, and herself set the example. When she read or heard anyone speak of the danger of receiving the Lord's Body unworthily, she approached the Holy Sacrament with renewed acts of confidence in the goodness of God. If she had omitted to say the prayers, which formed her usual preparation for Holy Communion, she did not abstain from making her Communion on that account, because she knew that no preparation for so stupendous a Gift could be really adequate. The efforts of man to prepare himself worthily she compared to a drop of water in the vastness of the ocean. Still, having done what she could, she put her trust in God's infinite goodness and strove to receive the Holy Sacrament with a pure heart and fervent love.

A certain pious person once begged of God in prayer to reveal to him what it was that most pleased Him in Saint Gertrude. He was told her liberty of spirit. Liberty of spirit does not mean, as Father Faber points out in praising this virtue of Saint Gertrude, negligence, unpunctuality, slovenliness, or caprice, in the spiritual life. Rather it implies a certain broadness of outlook, enabling the eyes of the soul to look behind the creature to the Creator. It is the virtue, which pre-eminently informs the Rule of Saint Benedict, on which Saint Gertrude's life as a Cistercian religious was based. Saint Gertrude's liberty of spirit was manifested by her readiness to come to the aid of her neighbour even at the expense of ordinary duties prescribed by the Rule and at the sacrifice of the delights of familiar intercourse with Our Lord; by her frequent Communions in spite of her defects; by her willingness to die even with little or no preparation for death, should God ordain it.

The following illustrates this last point in a remarkable way. It once happened that when out walking in the country Gertrude fell from a dangerous height. "Immediately," writes one of her companions, "feeling great joy, she said in spirit to Our Lord: 'What happiness would it have been for me, O my beloved Lord, if that fall had been the occasion of my suddenly coming to You.' And when we asked her in astonishment if she was not afraid to die without being fortified with the Sacraments of the Church, she replied: 'Indeed, with my whole heart do I desire to be fortified with the most salutary Sacraments; nevertheless, the will and appointment of my God seem to be the best and most salutary preparation. Therefore, I shall most gladly depart to Him in whatever way He shall wish, either by a sudden or by a foreseen death, certain that whatever the manner of my death I shall never lack the mercy of God, without which in either case I know that I cannot possibly be saved'."

Saint Gertrude's liberty of spirit enabled her to perform all her actions for the glory of God. When she had anything to do, she carried it out on the spot, in case preoccupation with the matter should prove a hindrance to the service of God. Our Lord revealed to Saint Mechtilde that He was pleased by this. He appeared to her, in a vision, seated on a magnificent throne. Saint Gertrude seemed to be walking up and down before Him, keeping her eyes fixed on Our Lord and following every motion of His Sacred Heart. When Saint Mechtilde expressed her admiration at this sight, Our Lord said to her: "As you see, in walking before Me, My elect acts as though she desires without ceasing the good pleasure of My Heart, and seeks diligently to learn it. When she has found out My will in any matter, she employs all her strength to perform it and soon returns to discover My other desires and execute them faithfully. Thus her whole life redounds to My praise and honour."

On entering the convent, Gertrude had dedicated herself to a life of prayer. Her conversion had confirmed and strengthened her in this resolution. The whole of her life as a contemplative nun was, of course, built round the liturgy of the Church – the Holy Mass and the Divine Office and her writings and visions indicated the extent to which these became absorbed into her very being. They indicate, too, her tender devotion to Our Lord Crucified and her childlike love for his Blessed Mother; but, if one may say so, it was the Sacred Heart of Jesus that made the greatest appeal to her soul. To exhibit the solid foundation in theology and the devotion to the Sacred Heart and thus to prepare the way for its propagation in God's good time by its apostle, Saint Margaret Mary, became, in fact, the mission of this simple religious.

With this high vocation in view for her, Our Lord gently led Gertrude through all the stages of the spiritual life to the highest sanctity. Gertrude became the recipient of "extraordinary graces", graces that is to say, quite apart from those which God has attached to the ordinary Christian acts of prayer, mortification, charity and so on. These extraordinary graces which are thus beyond the will of man to obtain by his own act, are the fruit of what is called the mystical life, whereby the soul learns to know God Himself by attaining a most intimate union with Him. And to these chosen souls, as to Saint Gertrude, God sometimes, but not always, grants the favour of visions of His Divine Son and of the saints and angels, as well as supernatural discourse, or revelations.

Although the mystical life cannot be attained to by our own efforts, yet the privilege is granted only to those souls who by their piety and mortification are deemed by God in some sense to deserve it. Such was the fervour of the Helfta Convent that several of the religious reached the holy state. The path to the mystical life was thus made easier for Gertrude by the support and encouragement, which she received from those of her companions who had already entered it. Among their number was her former mistress, Saint Mechtilde, who was also granted the grace of visions and revelations. Between these two holy religious, there existed the strongest possible bonds of confidence and spiritual affection. Saint Gertrude had many visions relating to Saint Mechtilde's death and Our Lord prompted her to warn her friend of the time when she ought to receive Extreme Unction.

The lives of some of the greatest mystics, like Saint Bernard and Saint Teresa, have been as remarkable for their unparalleled activity as for their intense spirituality. Saint Gertrude's mysticism, similarly, was no hindrance to her ordinary exterior life. Once only do we read of its leading her into any appearance of eccentricity. On a certain occasion, during Mass, she was so carried away by the delights of the intimate intercourse with Our Lord that she neglected to conform to the ordinary movements of the choir. One of the sisters having drawn attention to it, she begged and obtained from Our Lord the favour of deliverance in future from all such singularity.

In order to test the souls of those who aspire to a close union with Him in the mystical life, God makes a condition of their progress the acceptance of trials, disappointments and acute bodily suffering. Unlike another soul dear to the Sacred Heart – Saint Margaret Mary – Saint Gertrude was spared the bitter pains of opposition from her superiors, who always gave her, indeed, their warmest sympathy. Some misunderstanding she was to encounter from her sisters within the convent, but her greatest suffering arose from the physical maladies with which she became afflicted.

Not long after her conversion, she received from Our Lord the impressions of the stigmata – His Five Sacred Wounds. These were imprinted interiorly on her heart and thus, unlike those of Saint

Francis and many other saints, were invisible to others: nevertheless, they united her intimately to the sufferings of Christ and thenceforward she was to tread the Way of the Cross.

In the eighth year after her conversion, she was attacked by the first of a series of severe illnesses, which did not cease until her death. "On the Feast of the most holy Purification," she tells us, "I was confined to bed after a severe illness, and about daybreak was sorrowfully complaining of myself that my sickness would deprive me of the Divine visit with which I had often been consoled on such Feasts. I received consolation from the Mediatrix, Mother of Him Who is the true Mediator between God and man. 'You do not remember,' she said, 'having experienced before this, bodily sufferings more severe; but I learn that you have never received a more noble gift from My Son than the one that is to be given you, and it is in order that you may receive it worthily that your soul has been fortified by sufferings.'

"I was much comforted by these words and received the Food of Life immediately before the Profession. As I was meditating on the presence of God within me, I beheld my soul in the likeness of wax carefully softened at the fire, presented to the bosom of Our Lord as though to a seal of which it was to receive the impression. Suddenly this Divine Seal seemed to be placed upon it, and my soul appeared to be drawn into the treasure house in which the whole fulness of the Godhead dwells corporeally, there to be marked with the impression of the resplendent and ever-peaceful Trinity."

After this, Gertrude's ill-health was often so severe that she had to be dispensed from strict observance of the Rule. She was unable to fast, even during Lent; indeed, she sometimes could not get through the night without taking nourishment. We have seen already that she was obliged in times of great weakness to take sustenance during a long ceremony. She was once absent from the choir for a whole year. Even when not too ill to attend, she often had to remain seated during the Office. At first, she found her inability to fulfil her religious obligations a serious trial. When, lying sick and helpless, she was forced to accept the services of her sisters – services joyously rendered – she used to feel that she was robbing God of times that she would otherwise have been able to devote to His service. Gradually, however, she learnt from Our Lord to regard herself and her own efforts as nothing.

The following vision shows how completely Gertrude resigned herself to the Divine Will even to the extent of indifference to sickness or health.

Once, when very ill, she began to wonder how her malady would terminate. Our Lord then appeared to her, bearing health in His right Hand and sickness in His left. He presented them to her so that she might choose which she preferred; but Gertrude refused both. Tenderly embracing her, Our Lord allowed her to rest upon His Sacred Heart, but she turned her head away from Him, saying that she wished to show Him that it was her desire that He should disregard her will, but accomplish His good pleasure in her in all things.

To complete the union between Himself and His chosen one, Our Lord drew Gertrude mystically within His Sacred Heart. At Matins on one Feast of the Dedication of the Church, we are told that Our Lord "introduced her into a place of incomparable splendour – the Heart of Jesus Christ, which He had adorned as a house that she might celebrate the Feast therein.

"The marvellous profusion of delights which she found on entering seemed to overcome her and she said to Our Lord: 'My Lord, if You have led my soul into some place where Your Feet had stood, it would have been more than enough for me; but what can I offer You in return for the

stupendous favour which You are now bestowing on me?' 'Since you often seek, ' Our Lord replied, 'to offer Me the most noble part of your being – your heart – I deem it fitting that I should present you Mine for your delight...' 'If my heart,' she said, 'has conformed itself in any way to Yours, O my God, it has been by Your grace.' 'I naturally follow,' Our Lord answered, 'and reward with happiness those souls whom I have previously prepared. If anyone co-operates with My grace according to the good pleasure of My Heart, I conform Myself in turn to all the good pleasure of his heart'."

Thus was effected a spiritual marriage which marked a new stage in the relations between our saint and her Divine Lover, the highest that the creature can reach in this life. Gertrude was now sometimes deprived of the sensible presence of Our Lord, but her union with Him was so complete that she felt no pain at the loss of His visits. She asked Him why He no longer visited her in the same way as before.

"At first I often instructed you," He answered, "by means of replies which allowed you to make known My good pleasure to others; but now I manifest my operations to your intellect only, because it would sometimes be very difficult to explain them in words. I store up the riches of My grace in your soul as in a treasure-house, so that everyone may find in you what he seeks. You are thus like a wife who knows all the secrets of her husband, and having lived a long time with him knows how to divine his will in everything. Nevertheless, it would not be fitting that the secrets learnt through such intimacy should be revealed."

Saint Gertrude's ill-health was not the only trial of her comparatively peaceful life. The close relations which existed in the Middle Ages between convents and the families of their founders were not always to the advantage of the religious. Heirs were sometimes apt to grudge the loss of property through religious benefactions and to express their chagrin in no gentle fashion. In 1284 the community at Helfta was subject to much annoyance on the part of one of the sons of the founder, a brother, indeed, to the Abbess who succeeded Gertrude of Hackeborn. On Good Friday, he sacrilegiously invaded the convent with an armed force. Ten years later a similar desecration took place as a result of a war which was devastating the whole country.

A fresh misfortune befell them in 1296. Differences had arisen between the convent and the Chapter of Halberstadt on some financial position. The episcopal see falling vacant the canons seized the opportunity of launching an interdict on the nuns, who suffered greatly from the deprivation of Mass and Holy Communion and the suspensions of the public recital of the Divine Office. Fortunately, the dispute appears to have been quickly settled, and cordial relations were soon established between the community and the new Bishop. None of the convent's external affairs was without its interest for Gertrude, and at this time of intense anxiety, she prayed with great earnestness for a happy solution of its difficulties.

But greater than any of these calamities was the blow that befell Gertrude and her sisters when their beloved Abbess died in 1291. Saint Mechtilde was especially grieved. To a fervent and united family like that of Helfta, the loss of their Mother seemed an irreparable disaster. For forty years, she had directed them in the way of sanctity, building up a household brightly conspicuous for its zeal and piety. A confirmed invalid during the last months of her life, the Abbess derived much spiritual consolation from Saint Gertrude, especially at those times when her own sister, Saint Mechtilde, was too ill to attend her. After the saintly Abbess's death, Gertrude was able to bring joy

to the sorrowing hearts of her companions by relating to them the visions she had had of their mother in heavenly glory.

Eight years after the departure of Abbess Gertrude, her sister, Saint Mechtilde, passed away after much suffering. Her visions and revelations were written down without her knowledge by Saint Gertrude, her dear friend and former pupil, with the assistance possibly, of another nun also in her confidence. This record is entitled: "The Book of Special Grace". It was not the first work of Saint Gertrude's, dealing with miraculous favours. She had previously written an account of the graces she had herself received in a book, which Our Lord told her to name "The Herald of Divine Love". In her humility, she felt that her favours could not have been granted her for herself alone, and that God must wish to use her as a channel to communicate them to others. Yet for a long time she hesitated about writing on the subject. She wondered what would be the use of it. She was determined not to allow anything she might write concerning her visions to circulate during her lifetime, and she doubted if anyone would benefit by reading about them after her death. Moreover, she was afraid that some narrow-minded persons, so far from being edified at learning of her favours, would find in them a pretext for calumny.

We are told that Our Lord thus answered her thoughts: "I have given you My grace in such abundance that I must exact more fruit from it. That is why I desire that those who are granted like gifts and through negligence undervalue them, when they hear of you will recollect the gifts they have themselves received and redouble their thankfulness for them, and thus My grace will be increased in them."

Finally, Our Lord overcame all Gertrude's scruples by saying to her: "Be assured that you will not quit the prison of your body until you have paid your debts to the last farthing." Her desire to see Christ face to face was too strong to make further resistance possible. She then wrote with her own hand in Latin the second part of "The Herald of Divine Love", describing with easy grace the revelation she had received. After a time she laid aside her pen, as in her great humility she thought herself unequal to the task of giving human expression to celestial glories. She considered that another might be more skilful than herself in finishing what she had begun, and one of her sisters in religion was ordered by her superiors to write down what Gertrude would reveal. To the autobiography thus completed by dictation a short life of the saint was prefixed after her death, and the whole work, in five parts, then went by the title "The Herald of Divine Love", which originally applied only to Saint Gertrude's contributions.

Through Saint Gertrude Our Lord made the following promises to readers of her book: "...he who reads this book for My glory, with a right faith, humble devotion and loving gratitude, and seeks therein the good of his soul, will obtain the remission of his venial sins and be granted the grace of spiritual consolation and in addition the disposition to receive an increase of grace."

Saint Gertrude has been called the Saint of the Humanity of Jesus Christ, as Saint Catherine of Genoa was the Saint of His Sacred Heart, "the symbol of that immense charity which urged the Word to take flesh, to institute the Holy Eucharist, to take on Himself our sins, and dying on the Cross, to offer Himself as a Victim and a sacrifice to the Eternal Father." Down to the time of Saint Gertrude there had been few to sound the praises of the Sacred Heart. Allusions to It indeed, are to be found in the Works of the Fathers of the Church, especially in Saint Bernard, the illustrious Abbot of Clairvaux, whom Saint Gertrude as a Cistercian venerated as a second founder of her Order, and for whose writings she had especial affection. But Saint Gertrude gathered more

knowledge of the Sacred Heart and Its love for men from the many years of intimate companionship with her revered mistress, Saint Mechtilde.

In "The Book of Special Grace", the Sacred Heart is a constantly recurring theme. The knowledge of the Sacred Heart granted to Saint Mechtilde and to some other elect souls, however, was a "special grace" for those souls alone. To Saint Gertrude the revelation was made that it might be scattered broadcast to all men, and the chief source of her profound apprehension of the doctrine of the Sacred Heart was that Heart Itself, which willed that Saint Gertrude with her sound foundation of learning should be Its theologian.

In her vision, Saint Gertrude reveals to us, in a series of marvellous parables, different aspects of the Divine Heart of Jesus Christ as the source of His infinite love for man. She thus prepared the way for the propagation of the devotion to the Sacred Heart by Saint Margaret Mary nearly four centuries later and for its official recognition by the Church in the establishment of the Feast of the Sacred Heart. Then was put into operation one of the most powerful means that God had devised for drawing souls to Him, and Ireland, which cherishes a particular affection for this devotion, today one of the most striking characteristics of its religion, should hold in special veneration the forerunner Saint Gertrude, who illuminated the path that Saint Margaret Mary was to tread.

A few of Saint Gertrude's visions we have already mentioned; some of the most beautiful are unfortunately too long in their panoramic unfolding of heavenly scenes to be included in this brief sketch. But we shall be able to consider a few of the many visions scattered through "The Herald of Divine Love" which have the Sacred Heart for their theme. In one, she tells how Our Lord appeared to her during a certain Lent when she was lying seriously ill.

"I was alone one morning," she said, "while the other sisters were attending to their duties, when Our Lord, Who does not abandon those who are deprived of human consolation, appeared to me, thus fulfilling the word of the prophet, 'I am with him in tribulation.' He showed me His left Side, from which gushed forth, as from the inmost depths of His Sacred Heart, a fountain of pure water, which appeared solid like crystal. Flowing away, it covered His holy bosom like a costly necklace, which seemed to alternate in colour between gold and purple. Meanwhile Our Lord thus spoke to me: 'The illness from which you are now suffering has so sanctified your soul that whenever for My love or in condescension to your neighbour you seem to forsake Me in thought, word, or deed, you will in reality no more withdraw yourself from Me than this fountain withdraws itself from My Heart. And as the gold and purple shine through the pure crystal, so the co-operation of My Divinity, shown forth by the bold gold and the perfect patience of My Humanity, represented by the purple, will render all your actions agreeable in My eyes'."

Once when the saint was praying for certain persons who had been recommended to her prayers, Our Lord, we are told, said to her: "I have given to every soul a golden tube by means of which it can draw from the depths of My Divine Heart whatever it desires." She understood that this tube signified the good will with which men can appropriate for themselves all the spiritual riches of heaven and earth. If they wish, for example, to offer to God the praises, thanksgivings, obedience and fidelity of which some saints have given us an example, the infinite goodness of God immediately accepts the intention for the deed. This tube becomes more brilliant than gold when men thank God for the gift of so noble a faculty as the will, by which they may acquire infinitely greater riches than the whole world could obtain by exerting all its strength.

She understood further that all the sisters of the community who were surrounding Our Lord, were provided with tubes, and that each received Divine grace according to the measure of her powers. Some appeared to draw it directly from the depths of the Divine Heart; others received it from Our Lord's Hands. The further the source of grace from Our Lord's Heart, the greater was their difficulty in obtaining their desires, whereas the nearer this source was to His Heart the more easily, sweetly, and abundantly they obtained them.

Those who drew directly from Our Lord's Heart represented those who conform themselves entirely to the Divine Will and desire above all things that His adorable will should be fully accomplished in them, both in spiritual and temporal affairs. These souls move the Divine Heart so profoundly and effectively that at the time ordained by God they receive the torrent of Divine sweetness with abundance and pleasure proportioned to the extent that they will have abandoned themselves perfectly to the Divine will. Those who endeavour to draw grace from the other members of Our Lord's Body represent those who try to obtain gifts or virtues by following their inclinations and their own will: and these obtain their desires with difficulty proportioned to their failure, in relying on their own will, to abandon themselves to Divine Providence.

On Christmas Day, Our Lord taught Saint Gertrude how acceptable to Him is the good-will of those devout souls who are lawfully hindered from offering Him all the devotions their hearts desire. During Midnight Mass she offered to Our Lord, as she had been requested, the prayers of certain persons which had been made before the Feast, together with the good-will of others who had been legitimately prevented from offering those prayers. She then saw all the prayers, which had been devoutly said, laid before Our Lord in the form of costly pearls, on a table of gold; but the good-will of those who had been unable to carry out their intentions was placed in a magnificent chain, which adorned Our Lord's bosom. "These souls," we are told, "thus obtained from this nearness to the Divine Heart an advantage like that possessed by a person who holds the key of a treasure-chest from which he can take all that he can desire."

Our Lord also taught Saint Gertrude how He offers the love of His Sacred Heart to the Eternal Father for the omission of faithful souls who seek to repair their neglect. The Passion was, naturally, a frequent subject of meditation with Saint Gertrude. But on a certain Friday evening, she remembered that her occupations had crowded out the thought of the sufferings of her Saviour on the very day of the week when she most wished to remember them. When she lamented her negligence before a crucifix, Our Lord consoled her thus: "What you have neglected, I have supplied for you; for every hour I have accumulated in My Heart what you ought to have accumulated in yours, and My Heart has become so full that I have waited with an ardent desire for the hour when you should address this prayer to Me. With this prayer I now offer to God My Father all that I have done for you during this day, for without your good intentions this offering of Mine would not be so advantageous for your salvation."

In another vision, Saint Gertrude learnt that the grace of the Holy Ghost flows into the hearts of the faithful through the Sacred Heart of Jesus. "On the Vigil of Pentecost," we are told, "as she was fervently praying during the Office that she might be prepared for the coming of the Holy Ghost, she heard Our Lord say to her interiorly, with infinite tenderness: 'You shall receive the power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you.' These words brought her a feeling of wondrous sweetness, yet she began desponding to consider her unworthiness. It then seemed to her that this feeling of unworthiness produced a kind of cave in her heart, which became deeper and deeper as she considered herself more and more vile. Then from the most sweet Heart of the Son of God, there

flowed a stream most pure, like honey, which trickled drop by drop into the cave of her heart until it was completely filled. She understood that this stream represented the sweetness of the Holy Spirit which gently flows into the hearts of the elect through the Heart of the Son of God."

At another time, Our Lord showed His Sacred Heart to our Saint under the form of a lyre, which offered sweet music to the Blessed Trinity. "When Vespers were begun," on a certain Feast of the Holy Trinity, "the Son of God offered His Sacred Heart to the glorious Trinity, holding It in His Hands in the form of a lyre, upon which all the fervour of the worshippers and all the words which were chanted through the whole of the Feast resounded most melodiously before God. The singing of those who chanted without special devotion, either by routine or with merely human satisfaction, produced unpleasing sounds on the lower strings of the instrument. But those who gave themselves up to singing devoutly the praise of the adorable Trinity, seemed to produce through the most holy Heart of Jesus Christ sweet and melodious strains upon the most sonorous strings."

Again, at Lauds on the same Feast, while the Antiphon was being sung, "Gertrude praised with all her soul the Ever- Blessed Trinity, desiring that if it were possible, she should sing the Antiphon in her last agony with fervour sufficient to consume her forces and cause her to die praising God; and it seemed that the resplendent and ever-peaceful Trinity inclined with loving tenderness to the most venerable Heart of Jesus, which like a marvellous lyre sweetly resounded in Its presence. On this lyre the Blessed Trinity placed three strings, which in harmony with the invincible omnipotence of God the Father, the wisdom of God the Son, and the benevolence of God the Holy Ghost, might atone without ceasing for all Gertrude's defects in pleasing the Most Blessed Trinity."

On another occasion, during Vespers of the Assumption, Saint Gertrude, we are told, was privileged to make mystical use of the lyre of the Blessed Heart to sound the praise of Our Lady. While the psalms were being sung, she saw Our Lord first draw into His Divine Heart all the praises addressed to Him and then pour them forth in a stream towards the holy Mother of God. At the chanting of the Antiphon, Gertrude rushed into Our Lord's arms and tried to make these words resound on the instrument of His Sacred Heart, in honour of the tenderness, which He had lavished on His Blessed Mother. This demonstration of love caused the torrents from the Sacred Heart to gush forth upon Our Lady's soul with such force that drops of water sprang out from the stream. These drops, becoming brilliant stars of incomparable beauty, served as an adornment for the Queen of Heaven; but so numerous were they that many fell to the ground, whereupon the Saint found delight in hastening to gather and present them to Our Lord. By this time, Saint Gertrude understood that the saints experience the greatest joy in the superabundance of Our Lady's merits.

In another marvellous vision, Our Lord presented Saint Gertrude with His Sacred Heart under the form of a burning lamp. On a certain occasion, during the recitation of the Divine Office, we are told that "when she was endeavouring to pay the greatest attention to every note and word, she was often hindered by natural weakness, and grieving at her failure, she said to herself: What fruit can I obtain from this exercise in which I show such inconsistency?"

"Our Lord, being unable to endure the sight of her affliction, with His Hands presented her with His Divine Heart in the form of a burning lamp, saying to her: 'Behold I offer to the eyes of your soul My Heart, the sweet organ of the Ever-Adorable Trinity, that you may with confidence ask It to perform all that you are unable to perform yourself, and thus you will appear perfect in My eyes. 'For just as a faithful servant is always in readiness to carry out the wishes of his master, so My Heart will henceforth be always ready at any moment to make good your negligence...'"

“Some days afterwards, while she was reflecting upon this magnificent gift, she anxiously enquired of Our Lord how long He would deign to continue the favour. ‘As long as you desire to have it,’ He replied, ‘you will never have to grieve that I have taken it away.’ ‘But how is it possible,’ she said, ‘O God, Who works the greatest marvels, that I can perceive that Your Divine Heart is suspended like a lamp in the midst of my heart, which is (alas!) so unworthy, and nevertheless whenever by the help of Your grace I have been counted worthy to approach You, I rejoice to find within Your bosom the same source of all delights?’ ‘When you wish to take hold of anything,’ Our Lord replied, ‘you stretch out your hand, withdrawing it after you have clasped what you wanted; so also, when you turn your attention to exterior things, I, in My extreme love for you, stretch out to you My Heart to draw you to Myself; and when you respond to My tender advance and recollect yourself, I withdraw My Heart and you with It, offering you in Its recesses the delights of all virtues’.”

During the ‘Mass of the Pre-sanctified’ on a certain Good Friday, Our Lord gave Saint Gertrude His Sacred Heart under the form of a golden thurible, from which as many clouds of incense rose as there are races of men redeemed by the Precious Blood. When the prayers were offered for the different orders in the Church, Saint Gertrude saw all the prayers of the whole Church ascend together like fragrant incense from the thurible of the Sacred Heart. This union gave the prayers a singular splendour and beauty. "We should therefore pray for the Church on this day, with greater devotion," says "The Herald of Divine Love", "because it is Christ's Passion which gives our prayers their greatest value in the sight of God the Father."

A wonderful vision is recorded in which Saint Gertrude assisted at a mystical Mass in Heaven while the priest was offering the Holy Sacrifice in the convent church. Our Lord, true Priest and Supreme Pontiff, was the celebrant; the saints and heavenly hosts acted as ministers and choir. At the Elevation of the Host on earth, Our Lord in Heaven rose from His throne and presented to God the Father, with His Own Hands, His Sacred Heart under the form of a golden altar. Thus, Saint Gertrude learnt that the sacred liturgy links Heaven and earth, the Church doing for Christian souls below what the Saviour does above. The oneness of the spiritual life on earth and in Heaven is indeed the supreme lesson of Saint Gertrude's mysticism and the key to many of her visions.

"She soars to Heaven," says Aubrey Thomas de Vere in the course of a beautiful panegyric on Saint Gertrude, "to find there in a resplendent form, the simplest of those truths which are our food on earth...Her special gift was realisation; what others admitted, she believed; what others believed, she saw. It was thus that she felt the co-presence of the supernatural with the natural, the kingdom of spirit being to her not a future world, but a wider circle clasping a smaller one."

“From this feeling followed her intense appreciation of the fact that all earthly things have immediate effects on high. If a prayer is said on earth, she sees the sceptre in the hand of the heavenly King blossom with another flower; if a sacrament is worthily received, the glory of His Face flashes lightning round all the armies of the blessed. That such things should be seen by us may well seem wonderful; that they should exist can appear strange to no one who realises the statement that when a sinner repents there is joy among the angels in Heaven."

Towards the end of Saint Gertrude's life, the desire for death, which she had often felt but which she had learnt to subordinate to the will of God, became very insistent. On one Feast of Saint Martin, she felt, like Saint Martin himself, a vehement desire to die and be with Christ, and she heard Him say: "Soon I shall bear you away from this life." These words increased her longing and one day during the following Easter week, just after she had received Our Lord in Holy Communion, He

said to her: "Come, my elect, and I will place you in My throne." She then realised that the day of her release was approaching. Our Lord, indeed, counselled her to prepare for death. She did so by means of an exercise, which she had written for the use of others – a kind of five-days' retreat devoted to the consideration of the last illness, the last sacraments and death itself. But she was not to die before further sufferings were to be added to the many that she had already endured. When she became weaker and the doctors pronounced her malady practically incurable, she increased her prayers and acts of piety, but all the time she did not neglect to console and sustain her sorrowing sisters.

There is no explicit record of Saint Gertrude's actual death, but it was revealed to her during these last days in what manner she was to die. In this vision, she beheld herself during her last agony in the arms of Our Lord, reposing on His Sacred Heart. She saw Our Lady tenderly embrace her, and the saints and angels surround her bed and adorn her soul with their gifts. Then she saw Our Lord gently draw her to Himself, "as the sun in its mid-day heat draws to itself and makes to disappear the little drops of dew." Thus, rapt in ecstasy, we may believe, did she pass to a full and everlasting enjoyment in Heaven of those celestial favours, which she had already tasted on earth.

Saint Gertrude died on October 17th, 1301 or 1302, aged 45 or 46 years. Her burial-place is unknown, but no doubt, she was laid to rest at Helfta, where she had spent nearly the whole of her life. For a long time, in the secret designs of God's providence, her name remained in obscurity. Before her death, Saint Gertrude's remarkable writings had been submitted by the authorities of Helfta to a thorough examination by theologians of the Dominican and Franciscan Orders, who gave them their entire approbation. Copies of her works were doubtless made from time to time in the monasteries and convents but they did not become generally known until the pious Carthusian Lanspergius, of Cologne, brought out a Latin edition of "The Herald of Divine Love", in 1536. Only then did Saint Gertrude begin to exert an appreciable influence in preparing the ground for the general adoption of the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Her cultus spread.

In 1677, her name was inscribed on the Roman Martyrology and her Office was made obligatory on the Universal Church. Saint Gertrude was declared Patron of the West Indies, at the petition of the King of Spain. Peru cultivated a particular devotion to her, and in New Mexico, a town was built in her honour and named after her. Saint Gertrude's Feast is kept by the Benedictine and Cistercian Orders on November 17th, but by the rest of the Church on November 16th.

Among the countless holy men and women who have felt an especial attention to this saint of the Sacred Heart, the great spiritual writer, Abbot Louis of Blois (or Blosius or de Blois), occupies a foremost place. He composed in her honour the following prayer, with which we may conclude: -

"O sweetest Lord Jesus Christ, I praise You and give You thanks, with all the devotion of which I am capable, for all the benefits You did bestow on the virgin Gertrude, Your beloved spouse; and by that love with which You did from eternity choose her out for Your special favour, and in Your Own good time did sweetly attract her and familiarly invite her to Yourself, and joyfully abide in her soul, and end the course of her life by a blessed death, I pray and beseech You that You will have mercy on me, and render me pleasing to You, and lead me into eternal life. Amen."

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