

Gertrude the Great, OSB



Born in Eisleben, Thuringia, Germany, on January 6, 1256; died at Helfta in Saxony, c. 1302.

"O Lord Jesus Christ, in union with Your most perfect actions I commend to You this my work, to be directed according to Your adorable will, for the salvation of all mankind. Amen." --Saint Gertrude
Almost nothing is known about one of my favorite saint's birth or death. Saint Gertrude was probably an orphan because at age five she was received by the Cistercian nuns of Helfta and placed under the care of Saint Mechtilde (see below) of Hackeborn, mistress of novices. (Helfta was actually a Black Benedictine convent, which had been falsely designated as Cistercian for political reasons in many early records.)

The intellectual level was high in the castle convent of Helfta, which was then run by the noblewoman, Saint Gertrude of Hackeborn (1232-1292). Even so, Saint Gertrude was considered an outstanding student, who devoted herself to study, especially literature and philosophy. Eventually she became a professed nun but still she concentrated on the secular.

God, however, is a great teacher. Gertrude learned that when she began to get carried away with her love of learning. She didn't go so far as to neglect

the Lord completely, but she did push him off a bit to the side. Her mind was growing, but it was growing faster than her heart.

Gertrude's life has a lesson for intellectuals who will profit from her example. If a syllogism moves you to ecstasy and a dissertation about the love of God makes you speechless with joy, then beware. They are a trap. Gertrude learned not to prefer things to people, ideas to reality, the study of divine learning to the pursuit of love. She teaches us to avoid entanglement in the net of our words that save us from believing in the living God, from dressing up God in the latest fashions and making him into a latter-day golden calf, an idol that only serves to hide the real Lord. Love means another person--the beloved--and another person always upsets the neat constructs built by the mind.

But the Lord Himself saw to it that she was set on the right path of devotion. Once touched by the Spirit of God, Gertrude was converted from innocence to holiness, and swiftly ran in the paths of perfection, devoting herself to prayer and contemplation. Thus, her ecstasies began when she was 26.

Then she redirected her energies from secular studies to scrutinizing the Bible and the writings of SS Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard.

Many of her writings are lost, but fortunately she left to the world an abundance of spiritual joy in her book *The Herald of Divine Love*, in which she tells of the visions granted her by our divine Lord. She wrote this excellent, small book because she was told that nothing was given to her for her own sake only. Her *Exercises* is an excellent treatise on the renewal of baptismal vows, spiritual conversion, religious vows, love, praise, gratitude to God, reparation, and preparation for death.

She began to record her supernatural and mystical experiences in what eventually became her *Book of Extraordinary Grace* (Revelation of Saint Gertrude), together with Mechtilde's mystical experiences *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, which Gertrude recorded. Most of the book was actually written by others based on Gertrude's notes.

She also wrote with or for Saint Mechtilde a series of prayers that became very popular, and through her writings helped spread devotion to the Sacred Heart (though it was not so called until revealed to Margaret Mary Alcoque).

When in a vision the Lord asked Gertrude whether she would prefer health or sickness, she responded, "Divine Lord, give me whatever pleases You. Do not consider my wishes at all. I know that what You choose to send is the best for me."

What value should be placed on our suffering? All the saints looked upon it as a gift that brings great merit. Moreover, it is better to bear the sorrows God allows. Gertrude says, "It is the most dangerous kind of impatience if a person desires to choose his own sufferings. Whatever is given to him by God is the best."

What if sickness comes? Our Lord said to Gertrude:

"When man, after applying the remedy for his suffering, patiently bears for love of Me that which he is unable to cure, he gains a glorious prize." And later:

"If a man can, with the help of grace, praise and thank God in time of suffering, he obtains a treasure from the Lord, because thanksgiving when sorrow comes is the most beautiful and precious crown of the soul." (Note the similarity to the Book of Job.) Saint Gertrude learned that every tear shed on the death of a loved one earns a rich reward if offered to God in obedience to His holy will. The deep sympathy our Lord shows for the sorrows of men was thus revealed to her. Gertrude found her strength in the Holy Eucharist. I think this passage from Herald of Divine Love shows us how much Jesus prizes diversity in worship.

"Once Gertrude felt slightly provoked when she noticed a certain religious approach Holy Communion with extreme timidity. Our Lord rebuked her, however, saying, 'Dost thou not realize that I deserve reverence equally as much as love? But as human frailty is incapable of rendering both, I inspire one with reverence, and to another I give the unction of My love.'" Regarding frequent communion, Jesus told her:

"It is a time honored custom that one who has twice held the office of governor excels in honor him who has filled the office but once. Likewise, they shall be more glorious in heaven who shall have received Me oftener on earth . . . "In communicating but once, the Christian receives Me for his salvation, with all My goods--that is, with the united treasures of My Divinity and

Humanity; but he does not appropriate the abundance of these treasures except by repeated Communions. At each new Communion, I increase, I multiply the riches which are to constitute his happiness in heaven! . . . In the end, he who approaches Me with fear and reverence is less eagerly welcomed than he who comes to Me from a motive of pure love."

The depth of His love was shown to Gertrude in several visions. One day she saw Jesus during Holy Communion placing beautiful white robes on some of the sisters. Precious jewels, shaped like violets and giving out a delightful fragrance, adorned the robes. A rose-colored garment with golden flowers was also given them as a sign of Christ's passion and His infinite love for man. Our Lord wishes people to pray for the souls in purgatory. He once showed Gertrude a table of gold on which were many costly pearls. The pearls were prayers for the holy souls. At the same time the saint had a vision of souls freed from suffering and ascending in the form of bright sparks to heaven.

In one of my favorite passages, Our Lord tells Gertrude that he longs for someone to ask Him to release souls from purgatory, just as a king who imprisons a friend for justice's sake hopes that someone will beg for mercy for his friend. (I've posted this long passage previously.) Jesus ends with:

"I accept with highest pleasure what is offered to Me for the poor souls, for I long inexpressibly to have near Me those for whom I paid so great a price. By the prayers of thy loving soul, I am induced to free a prisoner from purgatory as often as thou dost move thy tongue to utter a word of prayer." To her was granted the privilege of seeing our Lord's Sacred Heart. The graces flowing from it appeared like a stream of purest water flowing over the whole world.

These visions continued until the end of her life. Jesus said to her at the last: "Come, my chosen one, and I will place in you My throne."

Saint Gertrude was "the Great" because of her single-hearted love for the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the souls in purgatory. Though she was never formally canonized, Pope Clement XII in 1677 directed that her feast be observed throughout the Church. It is interesting to note that Saint Teresa of Avila had a great devotion to Gertrude (Attwater, Benedictines, Delaney, Encyclopedia, Martindale, Melady, White)

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In art Saint Gertrude is depicted as a Cistercian (white) abbess wearing seven rings on her right hand and holding a heart with the figure of Christ in her left. She was neither an abbess nor a Cistercian (but rather a Black Benedictine), but is often portrayed as such. Sometimes seven angels ring her head and the Christ-Child is over her heart (Roeder).

She is known as the 'prophetess of devotion to the Sacred Heart.' She is the patroness of the West Indies. Venerated at Helfta, Saxony (Roeder).