

# St. Mechtildes, Virgin and Abbess

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THE TWO holy sisters, SS. Gertrude and Mechtildes, were countesses of Hackuborn, cousins to the Emperor Frederic II. and born at Islebe, in Upper Saxony. From seven years of age Mechtildes had her education in the Benedictin monastery of Redaresdorff, or Rodersdorff, in the bishopric of Halberstade, secularized and yielded to the elector of Brandenburg at the peace of Westphalia in 1648. She lived always a stranger to the vices and vanities of the world, and from her infancy practised obedience with such cheerfulness, that she was always ready to

perform every command of her superior. Though often sick, she denied herself the use of flesh-meat and wine, and studied to retrench every superfluity. She endeavoured to conceal her virtues as industriously as others labour to hide their most heinous sins. She made her religious vows in the same house, and while yet young was removed to Diessen near the lake Ambre in Bavaria, where she was appointed superior of the monastery of that name, which seems to have been, at that time, of the Order of St. Benedict, though it has long been a house of regular canonesses of St. Austin's Order. It was founded in 1132 by Bertkold, Count of Andechs, and afterwards endowed with great revenues by St. Otho, bishop of Bamberg. This monastery Mechtildes rendered a perfect school of all virtues, and knowing that a strict discipline and a steady observance of rules are the means by which religious persons are to attain to the sanctification of their souls in their state, she taught all her sisters rather to anticipate by diligence every monastic duty, than by coming one moment too late to give signs of the least sloth in the service of their heavenly king. The noble monastery of Ottilsteten, or Edelstetin

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in Suabia, situated between Ausburg and Ulm, being fallen into great remissness, in order to restore becoming discipline therein, Mechtildes was commanded by the bishops of the country to repair thither, and to take upon her the direction of that house. She urged that it was enough for her to stand arraigned at the bar of Christ for the neglect of her own vineyard. But neither her tears nor those of her dear sisters could prevail. In this new situation she laboured to sanctify her own soul, as if she had hitherto done nothing towards the subduing of her body in order thereto: and the happy effects of her humble endeavours and sighs for others appeared by the perfect regularity and exemplary piety which began soon to be evident in that community. None could resist the charms of her sweetness and example; for her virtue was mild to others, though austere to herself. She neither screwed up the strings of government too high, nor let them drop too low. She did not mollify the severity of the maxims of the gospel, nor the obligations of a religious state: but the manner in which she inculcated them, rendered them light and easy by the charity with which she seasoned her commands.—She prohibited the enclosure of her house to secular visitants, and by her abhorrence of worldly news and discourse, banished out of her community that dangerous spirit which introduces the world into the solitude of the recluse. Her bed was a little straw, her diet most austere and slender, and her employment manual labour, prayer, and pious reading. For one superfluous word which she spoke to a sister, she immediately burst into tears, condemning herself on account of an unnecessary breach of silence; for which she punished herself with fasts and watching for several days. The perpetual fountains of her tears were nourished by the deep compunction of her heart. In the court of the emperor, to which she happened to be called on account of the affairs of her monastery, she observed all the rules of her house. Once when confined to her bed by sickness she complained to her Redeemer, that, like an excommunicated person and altogether unworthy, she was excluded from joining her voice with her sisters in singing his praises at the midnight office: but he in a vision assured her that he was more glorified by her desire and obedience to his will than by any other sacrifice she could offer him. Some time before her death, which she foresaw, she returned to her dear monastery of Diessen, in which she departed to our Lord on the 29th of March, some time after the year 1300, before her sister St. Gertrude, who in her writings mentions the death of St. Mechtildes. Her name has never been inserted in the Roman Martyrology; but occurs in several particular calendars both on this day, on the 30th of May, and on the 29th of March. See her life compiled by

Engelhard, an abbot who was acquainted with her, in Canisius, *Lect. Antiq.* Chatelain's *Martyrologe Universel* on the 30th of May. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Trithemius mentions another holy virgin called Mechtildes, who coming from St. Alban's to Spanheim, lived there a recluse, and died in great reputation for sanctity in 1154. See Trithem. in *Chron. Hirsaug. ad an. 1154.* ed. Freher. p. 136. Also the same Trithem. in *Chron. Spanheim.* on the same year. Fabricius (*Bibl. Med. et infirmæ ætatis*, l. 12. p. 193.) and some others confound Mechtildes of Spanheim with St. Mechtildes of Diessen. Though the latter was born several years after the death of the former, not to mention other repugnances.

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