



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of May 13, 2015,
Feast of Our Lady of Fatima

Dear Friends,

“WHAT is the point of the consecrated life? Why embrace this kind of life, when there are so many urgent needs in the areas of charity and of evangelization itself, to which one can respond even without assuming the particular commitments of the consecrated life?” asked Saint John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation on religious life. “But such questions have always existed, as is eloquently demonstrated by the Gospel episode of the anointing at Bethany: *Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment* (Jn 12:3). When Judas, using the needs of the poor as an excuse, complained about such waste, Jesus replied: *Let her alone!* (Jn 12:7). The precious ointment poured out as a pure act of love, and thus transcending all ‘utilitarian’ considerations, is a sign of unbounded generosity, as expressed in a life spent in loving and serving the Lord, in order to devote oneself to His person and His Mystical Body. From such a life ‘poured out’ without reserve there spreads a fragrance which fills the whole house” (*Vita Consecrata*, March 25, 1996, no. 104). In the thirteenth century, Saint Gertrude gave a beautiful example of a life consecrated to the Lord.



Saint Gertrude

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Trutta

Gertrude, called “the Great” because of her spiritual influence, is one of the glories of Germany. The beautiful fragrance of the life of this humble nun has spread throughout the centuries, to the point that she is a popular saint as far away as South America. She was born on January 6, 1256. Little Trutta, as she was affectionately called, was entrusted to the monastery in Helfta when she was five years old, in keeping with the custom, widespread from the tenth century on, of having girls raised in convents. At the time, noble families liked to establish monasteries and convents on their properties, to benefit from continual prayer. Thus in 1229 Count Burchard von Mansfeld founded a convent of nuns near his castle, under the Rule of Saint Benedict, and with the customs of Cîteaux. These nuns, generously funded by the Count and his wife, were able to support themselves as well as the rather large staff which they needed. The convent moved to Rodersdorf in 1234, and then would move to Helfta in Saxony (northern Germany) in 1258.

Gertrude of Hackeborn (1232-1292), not to be confused with our saint, was at the time the abbess of the monastery in Helfta; her abbatiage would last for forty years. Endowed with a strong personality, a true teacher, and exemplary in all things, Mother Gertrude offered the nuns solid intellectual instruction, which enabled them to cultivate a spirituality founded on Holy Scripture, the

liturgy, the Church Fathers, the Rule, and Cistercian spirituality, with a particular emphasis on Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry. She named her own sister—the future Saint Mechtilde, nine years her junior—novice mistress, as well as giving her the responsibilities of cantor and director of schools. Mechtilde passed on to young Trutta the art of liturgical chant and taught her to read and write. Manuscript calligraphy, including illustrations and the correction of any errors, was held in great honor at the time in Helfta. As the child, who shone with the sharpness of her intelligence and her exuberance, progressed, Mechtilde added on the subjects of the *trivium* (grammar, logic and rhetoric), and then of the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). Among the spiritual authors, Gertrude particularly appreciated Saint Augustine and Saint Bernard for their forceful eloquence. These studies were crowned with classes in theology, assisted by the Dominicans of Halle. Established in the region for over thirty years, the Dominicans had established close ties with the monastery in Helfta and provided spiritual direction to the nuns. Mechtilde held in great esteem the illustrious doctors of the Order: Saint Albert the Great and Saint Thomas Aquinas.

In her writings, Gertrude recalls that the Lord had protected her with compassionate patience and infinite mercy, forgetting the years of childhood, adolescence and youth, spent—as she would write addressing the

Lord—"in such blindness, that if You had not given me a natural horror of evil and attraction to good, along with the wise counsel of those around me, I think I would have fallen into all the occasions of sin, without remorse of conscience, absolutely as though I had been a pagan... Yet You chose me from my earliest childhood, to grow up among consecrated virgins, in the blessed sanctuary of religious life." The young nun was endowed with a strong, determined, and impulsive character; she often recognized having been careless and humbly asked for forgiveness. Intellectual pursuits were her passion, and it was there she principally found her joy. Of course, she loved the Lord and was diligent in singing the Divine Office, but focused primarily on satisfying her musical sensibilities.

Tower of vainglory

Around the age of twenty-six, Gertrude went through a period of darkness during which her dear studies brought her no relief. Their limited nature appeared to her clearly—it all disgusted her and she felt alone. This torment lasted a month. Gertrude saw in it a gift from God "to tear down the tower of vainglory and curiosity erected by my pride, a mad pride, for I did not deserve even to bear the name and habit of religious life. Nevertheless, this was indeed the path that You chose, O my God, to reveal to me Your salvation." But with delicacy and gentleness the Lord finally calmed the distress that anguished her. On January 27, 1281, after the Office of Compline, she was favored by a singular grace:

"I saw before me," she later wrote, "a young man full of charm and beauty. He appeared to be sixteen years old, and such that my eyes could not have wished to ever see anything more attractive. It was with a face filled with goodness that he addressed these sweet words to me: 'Why are you consumed with this grief? Is it because you have no advisor that you let yourself be so beaten down by sorrow?' As he said these words, it seemed to me that I was in choir, in the corner where I usually pray so tepidly. There, I heard the following words: '*Salvabo te et liberabo te, noli timere* (I will save you, I will deliver you, do not be afraid).' I then saw his hand take my right hand as if to solemnly ratify these promises. Then he added: 'You have licked the ground with my enemies and sucked from thorns a few drops of honey. Return to me, and I will make you drunk in the torrent of my divine pleasure.' As he spoke, I looked, and I saw between him and me a hedge of thorns, extending so far that I could not see the end. I saw no way to reach the fair youth. As I hesitated, burning with desire and about to faint, he suddenly seized me and lifting me up without any difficulty, placed me beside him. It was then that I recognized on this hand which he had just given me in promise, the precious jewels of the sacred wounds that have cancelled all our debts (cf. Col. 2:14)... From that hour, my soul regained its calm and serenity. I began to follow the fragrance of Your perfumes (she said to the Lord), and soon I tasted the sweetness and gentleness of

the yoke of Your love, which I had until then found hard and unbearable."

The presence of a friend

From then on, Gertrude's life of intimate communion with the Lord intensified, particularly during the major liturgical periods—Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, the Marian feasts—even when she was ill and unable to go to the choir. One morning during the Paschal season, she entered the courtyard and sat by the fishpond. The beauty of the spot, the clear water surrounded by verdant trees, delighted her. Birds, particularly doves, abounded in this retreat where one enjoyed a delicious rest. "There," she confided, "I reflected on what could complete the charms of this place, and I found that it lacked only the presence of an affectionate and pleasing friend to cheer my solitude. It was then, O my God, that You gave me to understand that if, by continual gratitude, I lifted up to You the graces that you shower down on me; if I strove to grow in virtues; if further, scorning all that is earthly, I, like the doves, took full flight toward the things of Heaven; then would my heart become for You an abode full of charms. I spent the entire day meditating on these thoughts, and in the evening, kneeling in prayer, this passage from the Gospel immediately came to mind: *If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him* (Jn 14:23). At that moment, I felt that my heart of mud had become Your abode."

Gertrude understood that for a long time she had remained far from the Lord, dedicating herself too enthusiastically to liberal studies and human wisdom and neglecting spiritual knowledge, and thus depriving herself of the taste of true wisdom. The Lord, who had chosen her from her mother's womb and who had, from her childhood, arranged for her to take part in the banquet of monastic life, had led her by His grace "from exteriority to interior contemplation, from earthly cares to caring for spiritual things." Thus it was that she went from being a grammarian to being a theologian, filling her heart with the most useful and sweetest passages of Holy Scripture. So she always had the Word of God ready to satisfy those who came to consult her, and was able to refute any false idea with passages from Holy Scripture applied so appropriately that no objection was possible. Indeed, Gertrude devoted herself to writing and revealing the truth of the faith with clarity and simplicity, grace and persuasion, serving the Church with love and fidelity, to the point of being useful to and appreciated by theologians themselves. But her conversion also showed itself in her monastic observance, going from a life she described as negligent to a life of intense prayer, united with an extraordinary missionary fervor.

Intimacy with JESUS disposed Gertrude to become the apostle of frequent Communion, contrary to the general practice in the thirteenth century. One day the

Lord informed her: "My delight is to be with the children of men, and in the excess of My love I have instituted this sacrifice (the Mass) so that it might be frequently renewed in remembrance of Me. I have promised to remain in this mystery with the faithful until the end of the ages. Whoever endeavors to distance a soul who is not in a state of mortal sin from Communion is like a strict tutor who forbids the king's son from playing with poor children his own age, despite the pleasure the young prince would find in it." Gertrude received from the Lord, especially in the choir during the Divine Office, signal gifts that would always inspire within her profound songs of thanksgiving. She would later relate her mystical experience in lively and vivid language. "Spiritual progress," explains the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called 'mystical' because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments—'the holy mysteries'—and, in Him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God calls us all to this intimate union with Him, even if the special graces or extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting the gratuitous gift given to all" (CCC, no. 2014).

An astonishing preference

However, the Lord led Gertrude to holiness in stages, and, even after her "tower of vainglory" fell, she still had faults: she retained an inclination towards impatience, even anger, as well as a certain pride encouraged by her eloquence and skill in singing. She also sometimes let herself be tempted by resentment. Nevertheless, despite moments of dejection brought on by awareness that she had made little progress, she did not accept her faults, but fought them with perseverance. The outbursts of her temperament surprised some who had just been astonished at the preference the Lord gave her. But JESUS revealed to her one day: "Certain faults one sees in oneself keep one humble and contrite, and therefore help one advance on the path of salvation. I sometimes allow these faults to remain in my closest friends, so that they may exercise virtue." Deeply touched by Christ's gentleness, Gertrude addressed herself to Him in these words: "My soul has been often and sweetly moved at the sight of Your merciful love; never would threats and punishments have led me on so sure a way to the fear of sin and correction of my faults." Indeed, the Lord corrected her with a profound gentleness: "Taking a skillful detour, You showed me Your aversion for the shortcomings of those around me, and when I cast my eyes on myself, I saw myself much more guilty; Your gentle light thus enlightened my conscience; only a sign from You could have made me aware that You had even noticed a fault in me that could grieve You."

JESUS said: *As you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me* (Mt 25:40). Gertrude, who considered herself the littlest and least of creatures, offered to Christ present in her all that she allowed herself in

terms of food, sleep, or the use of anything whatever. One day the Lord revealed to her how pleasing all this was to Him. However, the nun experienced even more joy in giving something to her neighbor.

This book is Mine

On the Feast of the Purification, February 2, 1288, Gertrude was bedridden with an illness that would not leave her again except for certain moments of respite. On Our Lord's orders, she recounted in writing the heavenly favors she had been granted, fully realizing her vocation to be a witness for posterity to the treasures of the Heart of JESUS. "This book which is Mine," JESUS told her one day, "will be called *The Herald of Divine Love*, because in it one will receive a foretaste of the overabundance of My divine love." He also explained to her why she received so many various and ineffable graces that she exhausted herself in putting in writing: "If I have acted thus, it was that I made you a light to the nations, to enlighten a great many. In your book, everyone must find whatever is necessary for their consolation and instruction, according to their different needs." From her intense activity as a writer, only *The Herald of the Divine Love*, *The Revelations*, and the *Spiritual Exercises*, jewels of the spiritual literature, remain today.

Addressing JESUS, Gertrude wrote, "You have admitted me to the incomparable familiarity of Your tenderness, offering me the most noble ark of Your divinity, that is Your Sacred Heart, so that I might find therein my delights." One day she lamented not being able to avoid the imperfections that encumbered her life, and JESUS answered her: "See how I offer to the eyes of your soul My Sacred Heart, an organ of the adorable Trinity, so that you might pray to it to mend the imperfection of your life and to render yourself perfectly pleasing in My eyes." As Gertrude remained incredulous before such a precious offer, JESUS encouraged her in these words: "If you had," He said, "a sonorous and pleasing voice, and you loved to sing, while next to you was a person with a discordant voice, would you not be indignant if she wished to sing a melody that you could render with so much greater ease and charm? In the same way, My Sacred Heart awaits and desires that you invite it, be it with your words or even a sign, to accomplish and perfect with you the actions of your life. It desires to render you this service with a joy full of love."

In devotion to the Sacred Heart, which has developed over the centuries, our faith honors Christ's humanity. The Sacred Heart represents the deepest core and fullness of the love of the person of Christ. "In the Bible," Pope Francis explains, "the heart is the core of the human person, where all his or her different dimensions intersect: body and spirit, interiority and openness to the world and to others, intellect, will and affectivity. If the heart is capable of holding all these dimensions together, it is because it is where we become open to truth and love, where we let them touch us and deeply

transform us" (Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, June 29, 2013, no. 26). In His Heart, JESUS intimately unites love and truth, which must not be separated, for love, although it touches our affectivity, is not linked first and foremost to feelings, but to truth: "Love is seen as an experience associated with the world of fleeting emotions, no longer with truth," the Pope continues. "Love cannot be reduced to an ephemeral emotion. True, it engages our affectivity, but in order to open it to the beloved and ... to build a lasting relationship; love aims at union with the beloved. ... If love is not tied to truth, it falls prey to fickle emotions and cannot stand the test of time. True love, on the other hand, unifies all the elements of our person and becomes a new light ... Without truth, love ... cannot liberate our isolated ego or redeem it from the fleeting moment in order to create life and bear fruit. ... Love and truth are inseparable. Without love, truth becomes cold, impersonal and oppressive for people's day-to-day lives. The truth we seek, the truth that gives meaning to our journey through life, enlightens us whenever we are touched by love" (*ibid.*, no. 27).

Gertrude had scarcely completed her task of writing when Mother Gertrude of Hackeborn died. Sophia von Mansfeld, the founder's daughter, was then elected abbess. In 1294, the convent was overrun by soldiers during a conflict that was ravaging Thuringia—the war that pitted the children of Albert of Saxony against Adolph of Nassau, the newly-elected emperor. On this

"St Gertrude's life," said Pope Benedict XVI on October 6, 2010, "lives on as a lesson of Christian life, of an upright path, and shows us that the heart of a happy life, of a true life, is friendship with the Lord JESUS. And this friendship is learned in love for Sacred Scripture, in love for the liturgy, in profound faith, in love for MARY, so as to be ever more truly acquainted with God Himself and hence with true happiness, which is the goal of our life."

Dom Antoine Parie
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occasion, JESUS asked Gertrude to pray for her enemies and her persecutors who were in danger of damnation, and to beg His mercy and the grace of conversion for them, rather than to speak ill of them.

The most salutary preparation

Gertrude's inexhaustible confidence in God inspired in her a desire for death tempered by union with the divine Will, such that she was indifferent as to whether she lived or died. In death, she hoped to enjoy beatitude, but life was for her an opportunity to give yet more glory to the Lord. One day, she was asked if she was not afraid of dying without the sacraments of the Church. "In truth," she replied, "I desire with all my heart to receive the sacraments; but the will and order of my God will be for me the best and most salutary preparation. I will therefore go with joy towards Him, whether by a sudden or foreseen death, knowing that I will never lack for divine mercy, and that without divine mercy we will not be saved, whatever the manner of our death." As she waited on her sickbed, Gertrude prayed for others. Simply by saying their name, she recommended each person to this love that made the only Son of God the Father come down to earth to save mankind. Warned of her imminent death, she prepared for it with exercises she had composed herself, and rendered her spirit on November 17, 1301 (or 1302), fully surrendered to the divine goodness in which she had placed all her hope.

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