



Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of December 25, 2014,
Christmas Day

Dear Friends,

IN his Apostolic Letter *Spes Ædificandi* of October 1, 1999, Saint John Paul II proclaimed Saint Bridget of Sweden the co-patroness of Europe, writing: "Her profound union with Christ was accompanied by special gifts of revelation, which made her a point of reference for many people in the Church of her time. Bridget was recognized as having the power of prophecy, and at times her voice did seem to echo that of the great prophets of old."

Bridget was born in June 1303 at the castle of Finstad, not far from Uppsala, Sweden. She was the daughter of Birger Persson, a senator of the kingdom and seneschal of the province of Uppland, and of Ingeborg Bengtsdotter, from a royal Swedish family. The night following her birth, the parish priest received a revelation from Heaven: "There is born to Birger a girl whose voice will be heard throughout the world." At a very early age, the little girl showed an ardent devotion and an attraction to liturgical celebrations.

She was ten years old when Our Lord appeared to her on the Cross: "O My sweet Lord, who dared do this to You?" she asked. "All those who scorn and forget My love," JESUS answered her. This vision left Bridget with a devotion to Christ's Passion, which would develop over the years. One day the Virgin MARY would reveal to her: "There are two paths to reach the heart of God. The first is the humility of true contrition. The other is the contemplation of the sufferings of My Son." Of the Passion of Christ, Bridget would declare: "See the love of your God. If He could, He would suffer again for each one of you what He suffered for all men. Gladly would He redeem you, you alone, at the cost of His Passion. Will your love not respond to such love?"

A domestic Church

Bridget was twelve years old when her mother died. Her maternal aunt assumed responsibility for raising her and her little sister, Catherine. In 1318, the fifteen-year-old girl was given in marriage to the twenty-year-old seneschal Ulf Gudmarsson, also of Swedish high nobility. Even though she felt called to religious life, Bridget acquiesced. Nevertheless, she asked her spouse to wait two years before consummating their marriage, so that they might discern God's will on a possible vocation to a more perfect state of life. They recited the Office of the Blessed Virgin MARY together, went to confession every Friday and received Communion every



Saint Bridget of Sweden

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Sunday. After a great deal of prayer and the counsel of their confessor, the young married couple understood that they were called to serve God in the holy state of matrimony, begetting and raising children for Heaven. During the twenty-eight years of their life together, they would have eight children, including the future Saint Catherine of Sweden. Bridget received spiritual direction from a monk who introduced her to the reading of Scripture. Her family became a true "domestic Church." The couple's social rank gave them important duties in the court to fulfill. Nevertheless, they adopted the Rule of the Third Order Franciscans and generously devoted themselves to works of charity for the poor. But Bridget devoted most of her time to the raising of her children and the Christian formation of the domestic staff of the family castle. She had a hospital built on their property for the poor and the sick, whom she cared for herself with her children. Under her influence, Ulf's character improved and he advanced in the Christian life. She convinced him to devote himself more to study, in order to better perform his duties in the country.

In a talk dedicated to the Swedish saint, Pope Benedict XVI emphasized, "This first period of Bridget's life helps us to appreciate what today we could describe as an authentic 'conjugal spirituality': together, Christian spouses can make a journey of holiness sustained by the grace of the sacrament of Marriage. It is often the woman, as happened in the life of St. Bridget and Ulf, who with her religious sensitivity, delicacy and gentleness succeeds in persuading her husband to follow a

path of faith. I am thinking with gratitude of the many women who, day after day, illuminate their families with their witness of Christian life, in our time too. May the Lord's Spirit still inspire holiness in Christian spouses today, to show the world the beauty of marriage lived in accordance with the Gospel values: love, tenderness, reciprocal help, fruitfulness in begetting and in raising children, openness and solidarity to the world and participation in the life of the Church" (October 27, 2010).

In 1335, Bridget was given the responsibility of introducing to Swedish customs Blanche of Dampierre, the daughter of the Count of Namur, whom King Magnus Eriksson had just married. This role gave her a certain influence in the court. In fact, she often stayed in the royal castle in Vadstena. During these absences from her husband, Bridget devoted herself even more to the interior life and to mortification, to the point of sleeping on straw, or even on the bare ground. In 1341, Bridget and Ulf left for Santiago de Compostela. This pilgrimage was the occasion of great spiritual progress for the couple, who had already committed to maintaining complete continence so as to better serve God. Shortly after their return to Sweden, Ulf, at the urging of the Holy Spirit, withdrew to the Cistercian abbey in Alvastra, where one of their sons was a monk. Ulf died in 1344, before he had even completed his novitiate. On his deathbed, he implored his wife to pray, and to have others pray, to shorten his time in purgatory.

A contemporary spirit

Bridget, forty-one years old, was determined to deepen her union with the Lord through prayer, penance, and charitable works. She renounced the idea of a second marriage. "What a contemporary spirit Saint Bridget had!" wrote Saint John Paul II on September 8, 1991. "Her religious experience was marked by the desire to be united with and to belong to JESUS, God and man, to Whom the saint spoke with tender and inspired confidence. Her love for the Virgin MARY, 'Mater gratiae' (Mother of grace) was the intense love of a daughter. So rich a model of asceticism has inspired many popular pious practices over the centuries which even now maintain the freshness of their appeal. The spiritual current of Saint Bridget was simple, considering JESUS her Spouse and her daily companion" (Apostolic Letter on the occasion of the 6th Centenary of the Canonization of Saint Bridget).

One day when she was having alms distributed to many poor people, her steward protested, "Madame, do you wish to reduce yourself to poverty? Is it not the height of perfection to give with one hand and still be able to offer with the other?"—"Let us give all we possess," the widow replied, "for we have a good and generous Master. I belong to these poor—they have none but me in their destitution. As for myself, I abandon myself to the divine will." She explained to her confessor: "I

desire with all my heart to be poor. I would like even to beg for my bread for the love of God. A day will come in which I will be forced to abandon everything—there is greater merit in detaching myself from them now." In fact, she gave her possessions to the poor and moved into an outbuilding of the abbey in Alvastra. There began the divine revelations which would accompany her for the rest of her life. Bridget dictated them to her confessors, who, after having helped her discern what really came from God, translated them from Swedish into Latin and gathered them into an eight-volume edition titled *Revelations*.

The infinite love of God in the Passion

Saint Bridget's *Revelations*, said Benedict XVI, "have a very varied content and style. At times the revelations are presented in the form of dialogues between the Divine Persons, the Virgin, the Saints and even demons; there are dialogues in which Bridget also takes part. At other times, instead, a specific vision is described... Reading these *Revelations* challenges us on many important topics. For example, the description of Christ's Passion, with very realistic details, frequently recurs. Bridget always had a special devotion to Christ's Passion, contemplating in it God's infinite love for human beings. She boldly places these words on the lips of the Lord who speaks to her: 'O my friends, I love my sheep so tenderly that were it possible I would die many other times for each one of them that same death I suffered for the redemption of all' ... In receiving these charismata, Bridget was aware that she had been given a gift of special love on the Lord's part: 'My Daughter'—we read in the first book of *Revelations*—'I have chosen you for Myself, love Me with all your heart... more than all that exists in the world' (c. 1). Bridget, moreover, knew well and was firmly convinced that every charisma is destined to build up the Church. For this very reason many of her revelations were addressed in the form of admonishments, even severe ones, to the believers of her time, including the religious and political authorities, that they might live a consistent Christian life; but she always reprimanded them with an attitude of respect and of full fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church and in particular to the Successor of the Apostle Peter."

Bridget, notably, was ordered to write to Pope Clement VI to point out to him some negligences in the service of God and urge him to correct them with a greater zeal for the reform of the Church, which at the time was afflicted by the ambition and greed of certain clerics. Addressing herself to the Swedish bishops, she specified, "The priesthood is not at all a position to be sought for the honors that it gives. It is a responsibility that, if not borne in this life, will oppress you for eternity. The bishop is the watchman posted by God. He guards souls; he encompasses them with his charity. As a good shepherd draws his sheep by holding out a spray of fragrant flowers, the bishop draws his people with

words of love. For their salvation he would suffer anything, the tribulations of life and death.”

The Order of the Most Holy Saviour

Bridget was tasked with telling the king of Sweden that he must restore the faith in his kingdom by surrounding himself with holy people. To certain courtiers she gave this advice: “Your efforts are aimed at making you and your children richer. You pass your greed on to them. If you had a certain estate,” the mother suggests to her son, “you would be like your father. You inflate them with ambition for honors... Atone for your avarice through charity, by joyfully spreading abundant alms. Atone for your impurities through prayer, your gluttony and drunkenness through abstinence, your pride through humility.” Bridget’s warnings became even more forceful as she was favored with visions of souls suffering in purgatory. She also received terrifying revelations about the sufferings of hell into which fall “those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1034). To work for the salvation of sinners, in 1346 she founded the monastery of Vadstena in honor of Christ and His Mother. It would become the birthplace of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour. This order, intended to save the Scandinavian peoples, would expand throughout the world to spread the reign of God. The nuns, called “Brigittines”, lived the spiritual atmosphere of the early Church, gathering in prayer around MARY in the Cenacle. To this day their veil resembles a helmet, to show their intent to wage spiritual battle. The abbess had authority over the cloistered nuns and also over the small community of men religious established nearby to administer the sacraments. These non-cloistered religious took on various apostolates, including preaching in parishes. Bridget, who did not share the life of the Sisters, nevertheless led a very ascetic life.

In 1349, Bridget went on pilgrimage to Rome. She wanted not only to take part in the Jubilee of 1350, but also to obtain the Pope’s approval of the Rule for the Order of the Most Holy Saviour (this would be granted by Urban V, in 1370). Cardinal Hugues de Beaufort, who lived beside the Church of San Lorenzo in Damaso, offered the foundress lodging. For four years she stayed in this house, which was organized into a veritable convent. Her daughter, Catherine, joined her there. Rome became for Bridget a second homeland. She saw the city as a field with gardens filled with roses—these were the places sanctified by the saints. But she saw it also as it was in the fourteenth-century, filled with worldliness and sins, especially those of clerics. This was an age of great trials for the papacy—the Pope, exiled in Avignon, was in a way a prisoner of the king of France. The authority of the Holy See was less respected, and its mediation between enemy princes did not have the power it had before. In fact, wars and calamities ravaged Europe, shortly before the great schism of the West. Strengthened by her intimacy with Christ, Bridget

begged the Supreme Pontiff to put an end to his hesitations dictated by earthly prudence and worldly interests, and to return to Rome, near the tomb of Saint Peter. When Blessed Urban V returned to Rome in 1367 she thought she had succeeded, but he would be forced to return to Avignon three years later.

To carry on the work of Redemption, Our Lord founded the Holy Catholic Church, where all the faithful are gathered in the bond of a single faith and single charity. He placed Saint Peter above the other apostles and established in his person the lasting principle and visible foundation of this double unity. As the First Vatican Council stated: “Therefore, it has always been necessary that each Church—that is, those who are the faithful everywhere—should agree with the Roman Church, because of the greater power of the principality that she has received, in order that, all [be] joined together in the unity of that See” (Constitution *Pastor æternus*, ch. 2).

The Holy Land

In 1353, Bridget moved into the home of a wealthy Roman woman, on what is now Piazza Farnese. She made this home into a guest house for pilgrims, especially Scandinavian pilgrims, and would live there until her death. Her economic situation was precarious, and sometimes only at the last minute did she providentially receive what she needed to live on. She often made “urban pilgrimages” on foot to churches and the tombs of the saints, despite being advanced in years and weakened by her great mortifications of the flesh. She aided the poor, visiting them and caring for them herself in the hospitals. Through revelation, she had the ability to read consciences, which she used to win souls for JESUS CHRIST. Her activity extended to the good of nations—she used all possible means to promote peace in Sweden, France, England and Italy, traveling through the cities of these lands. After all these travels, which had reduced her to extreme weakness, Our Lord asked her in 1371 to go to Jerusalem to visit the places where He had accomplished the mysteries of our Redemption. He assured her at the same time that He would give her the necessary strength. The pilgrims embarked for the Holy Land from Naples in March 1372. Once there, Bridget did not omit any of the places the Saviour had sanctified with His presence, and she received many lights, especially on the passion and death of JESUS CHRIST. God also revealed to her the state of several kingdoms, such as the state of devastation of the kingdom of Cyprus, and the imminent fall of the Byzantine Empire. She addressed a letter to the king of Cyprus and his people. To the schismatic Orthodox, she did not hesitate to say, on God’s behalf, that they would be delivered to the power of their enemies if they did not submit to the Vicar of Christ with true humility and sincere love. Considered an “old fool”, Bridget was not listened to. She also repeated her warnings to Pope Gregory XI, still in Avignon.

In February 1373, the queen and the archbishop of Naples subjected Bridget to an inquisitorial examination on her doctrine. The conclusion was favorable—Bridget could continue to publicly proclaim the indefeasible rights of God, and the duties that creatures owe Him. She then relayed these words of Christ: “Why have you not meditated on My Passion? Why have you not thought about how I was tied naked to the column, cruelly whipped, hung on the Cross, lacerated with wounds and covered with blood? When you paint your cheeks, you do not think of My face covered in blood. (...) You do not reflect on the sufferings I endured and how I was hung for you, allowing Myself to be insulted and mocked by all, so that you may be led to love Me, your God, and escape the snares of the devil, in which you allow yourself to be imprisoned.” These reproaches were followed by an offer of mercy from the Lord: “If a soul converts, I will go to meet him like the father went to meet his prodigal son. I will have mercy on him and I will be in him and he in Me, in eternal joy.”

Saint Bridget sought God in contemplation. In his apostolic exhortation of November 25, 2013, Pope Francis recommended we devote ourselves to contemplation: “How good it is to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in His presence! How much good it does us when He once more touches our lives and impels us to share His new life! ... The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew

that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others. JESUS’ whole life, His way of dealing with the poor, His actions, His integrity, His simple daily acts of generosity, and finally His complete self-giving, is precious and reveals the mystery of His divine life” (*Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 264 and 265).

What death is

Those who met the holy widow in the final years of her life unanimously testified to her radiant interior joy and her gentle humility. On July 17, 1373, Our Lady appeared to her: “According to the doctors, you will not die. Do they know what death is? He dies who, separating himself from God by attachment to sin, loses faith and love. He who fears the Lord and continually purifies himself through confession lives forever.” The day of her death was predicted to Bridget, and on the morning she was to die, July 23, Our Lord came to console her. Mass was celebrated in her room and she received Communion with great fervor, and then died saying, “Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.” Her children, Burger and Catherine, transported her remains to Sweden, to the abbey of Vadstena that their holy mother had founded almost thirty years earlier and where her tomb remains to this day. Saint Bridget of Sweden, canonized on October 7, 1391 by Pope Boniface IX, is particularly popular in Scandinavia, Germany, Poland, and Hungary. Today, 700 years after they were founded, the “Brigittines” are present in Rome, Switzerland, and Sweden, as well as in India and Mexico.

Saint Bridget “stands as an important witness to the place reserved in the Church for a charisma lived in complete docility to the Spirit of God and in full accord with the demands of ecclesial communion. In a special way too, because the Scandinavian countries from which Bridget came were separated from full communion with the See of Rome during the tragic events of the sixteenth century, the figure of this Swedish Saint remains a precious ecumenical ‘bridge’, strengthened by the ecumenical commitment of her Order” (Saint John Paul II, *Spes Aedificandi*). Let us pray to Saint Bridget for Europe, that it might recover its Christian roots, and particularly for the return of Christian Scandinavians to the Catholic faith and to full union with the Catholic Church.

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