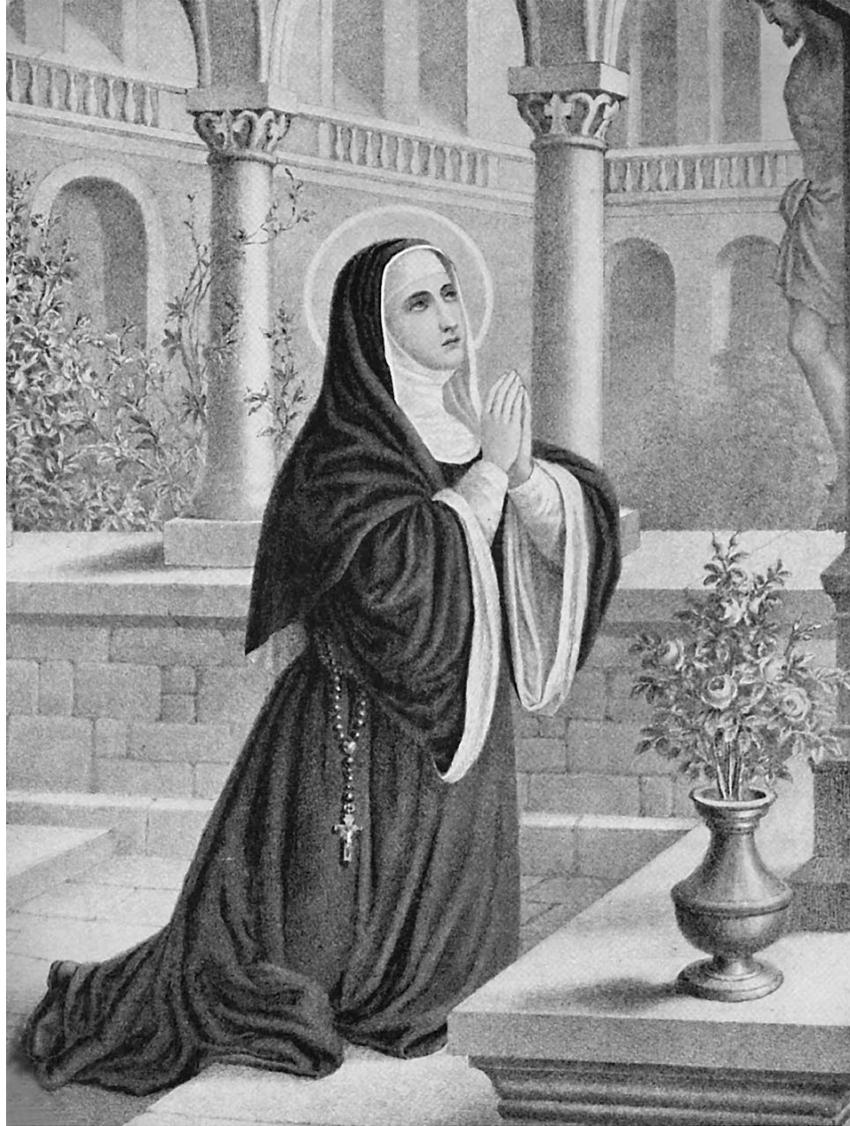




St. Gertrude the Great



St. Gertrude, 19th century lithograph

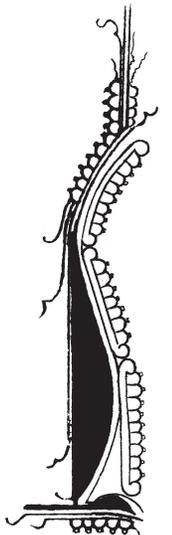
BORN 1256; DIED 1301 OR 1302
VIRGIN AND RELIGIOUS
FEAST DAY: NOVEMBER 16

IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, in the hiddenness of a convent, God raised up St. Gertrude the Great as the “prophetess of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus,” an early flowering of one of the Church’s greatest means of encouraging devotion to our Lord among faithful Catholics.

Gertrude was entrusted to Benedictine nuns at the town of Helfta southeast of Eisleben (in

the modern north-central German state of Saxony-Anhalt), at an early age for her education. Nothing is known of her parents. She had an exceptional intellect and became a fine Latin scholar, putting all her energy into the life of the intellect. When she matured, she made her vows as a nun in the same cloistered community in which she had been educated. Nevertheless, by her own acknowledgment, she was merely lukewarm in her life of prayer. She had given her life, but not yet her being, to God.

In her mid-twenties, she began to receive a se-





ries of visions and private revelations from our Lord. From that point on, she began to seek perfection and intimacy with God. She who had been an exceptional student turned her great intellect from literature and philosophy to things divine, becoming thereby a theologian, but a theologian whose knowledge came not from systematic intellectual pursuit but from the reading of Sacred Scripture, the writings of saints, and her own prayer life. Her devotional life focused on the Incarnation of Jesus, most especially on his Sacred Heart and in the Eucharist, and she became a great contemplative.

When she was granted a vision of our Lord's Sacred Heart, the graces flowing from his Heart seemed to be like a river of the most pure water that flowed over the world. One of her prayers reads: "Through thy Wounded Heart, dearest Lord, pierce my heart so deeply with the dart of thy love that it may no longer be able to contain earthly things but may be governed by the action of thy Divinity alone."

Gertrude wrote several books on spiritual subjects, which were unknown for over two centuries following her death. She recorded not only her own mystical experiences but those of her teacher and mentor St. Mechtilde, whom she imitated in her devotion to the Sacred Heart. One of her writings, called *Herald of Divine Love* (also called *Herald of God's Loving-kindness* or *Revelations of St. Gertrude*) (a set of five

books, the second of which is the only one she herself wrote) takes its title from the fact that Jesus called her this in his private revelation to her. Her *Exercises* offers wonderful instruction on conversion of the heart, gratitude to God, praise and love of God, redemptive suffering, and preparation for death. In general, her writings display a tremendously deep understanding, not merely of the intellect but of the heart and soul, of the two central mysteries of Christianity, the Trinity and the Incarnation. She and St. Mechtilde wrote prayers that helped spread devo-

tion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus (some prayers commonly attributed to them were not, however, written by them).

Among Gertrude's mystical experiences was that of spiritual marriage. While little is known of her daily life, it cannot have been easy since she wrote that "adversity

is the spiritual ring with which the soul is betrothed to God." For about a decade, Gertrude suffered from ill health, which she accepted as something meant for her further perfection. She never feared an unattended death, since she felt that, whether or not she received the last sacraments, she would not lack God's mercy which was in any case necessary for her salvation. Her death in her mid-forties was noticed by no one but her own sisters, but her writings are among the Church's greatest treasures on contemplative prayer.

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dearest Lord, pierce my heart
so deeply with the dart of thy love
that it may no longer be able
to contain earthly things
but may be governed
by the action
of thy Divinity alone."*

