

*Gift of
Margot King*

ST. BENEDICT'S, ROME

THE LIFE
OF
ST. MECHTILDIS



ROME

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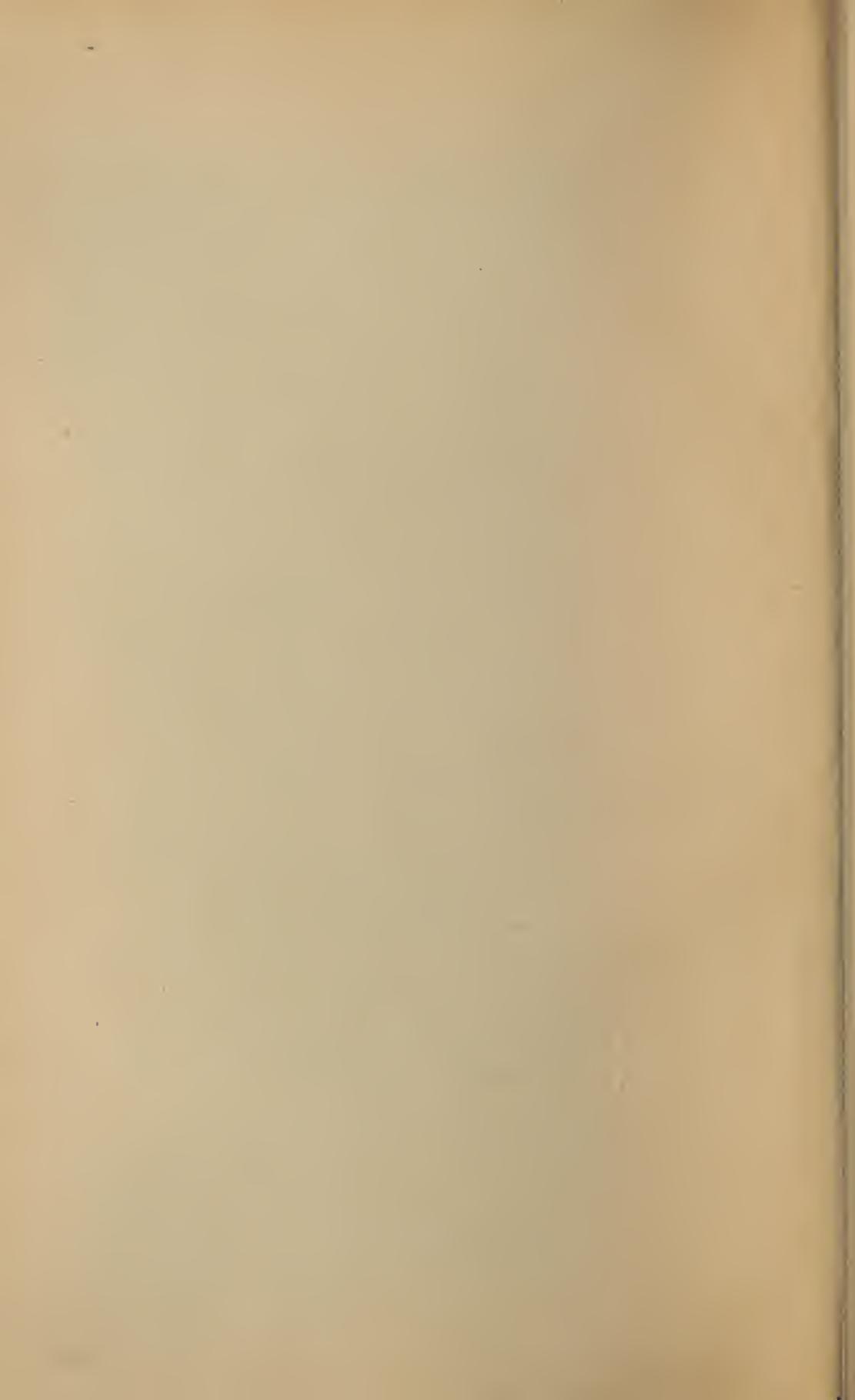
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S. MARGARETIS.

ST BEN EDICT'S ROME



TO

ALL THE SINGERS

SET BEFORE THE ALTAR

TO

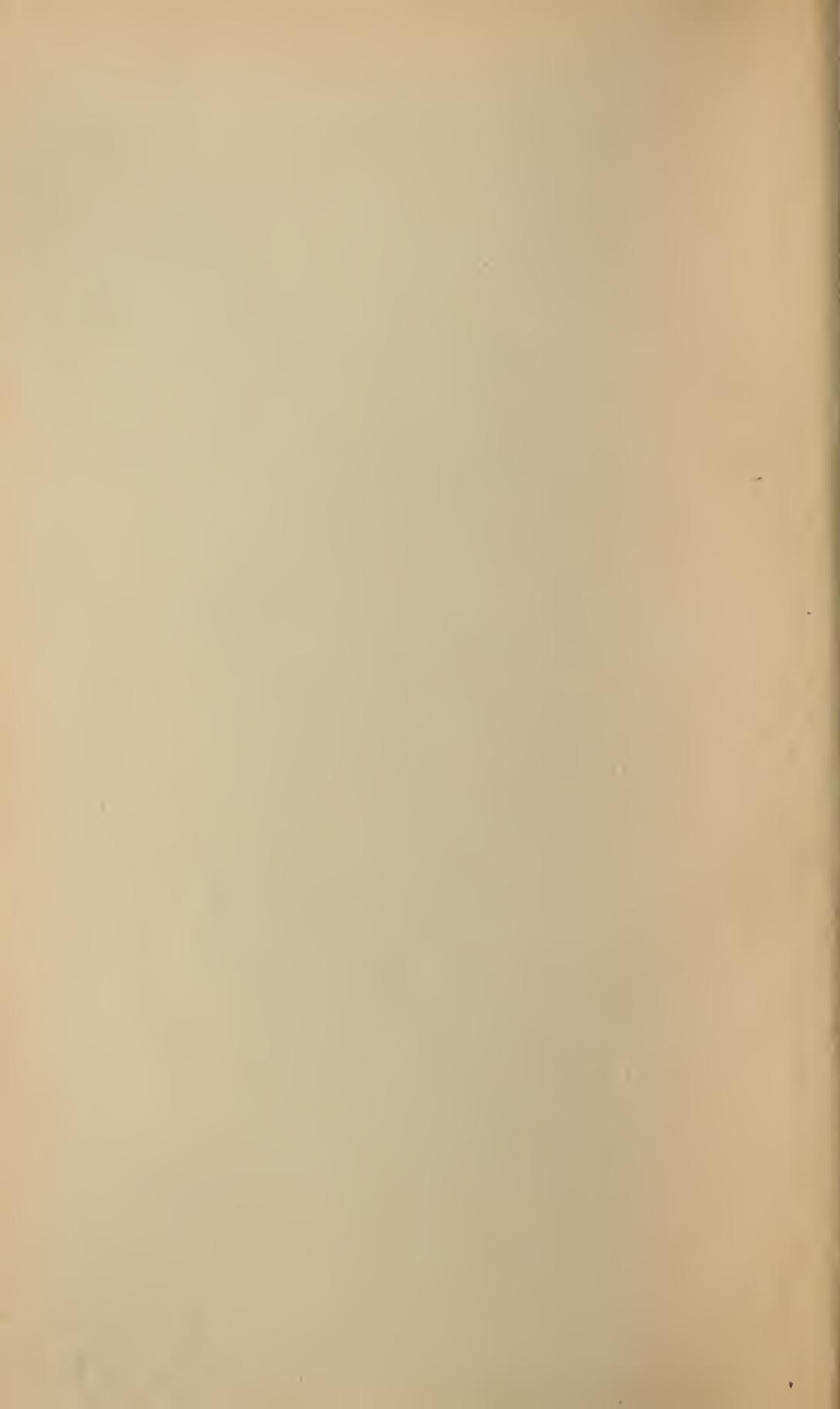
ALL LOVERS OF BEAUTIFULNESS

LIVING AT PEACE IN THEIR HOUSES

THIS LITTLE WORK

IS

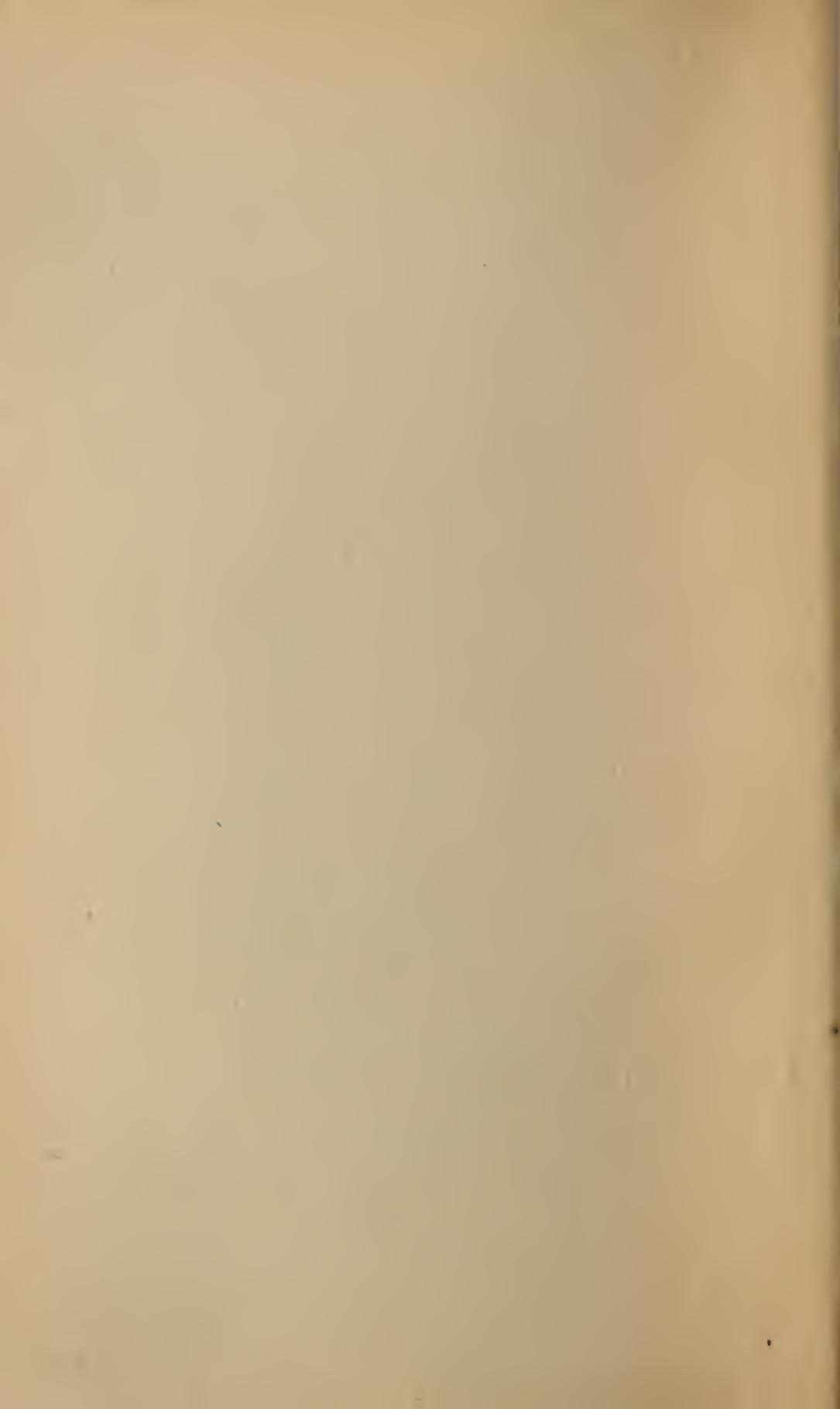
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PREFACE.

The materials for the following Life have been taken from the only possible source, i. e. the Revelations of St. Mechtildis and of St. Gertrude. The Edition principally used has been that published at Solesmes in 1875, with its valuable prefaces and appendix. These last have been freely consulted and used. The Editor does not seem to have known of the Edition of St. Mechtildis' Revelations published at Cracow in 1639.

The question as to whether St. Mechtildis may have been the Matilda of Dante has not been gone into, as it would require special study and more research than can be given at present.



CHAPTER I.

SS. Gertrude and Mechtildis — Contemporaries of St. Mechtildis. — Spirit of St. Benedict living in the active work of the Order. — Birth, parentage and family of St. Mechtildis. — Prophecy of chaplain at her birth. — Her sister Gertrude enters neighbouring Benedictine Convent. — She is visited by her mother and little sister Mechtildis. — Mechtildis refuses to return with her mother. — Holy Rule on the offering of children. — Abbess Cunegund. — Her death in 1251. — Election of Gertrude. — Clothing of St. Mechtildis. — Ceremony of Holy Profession.

The names of Mechtildis and Gertrude stand out in the monastic history of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries almost as solitary figures on the glorious background of the Rule which for already eight centuries had peopled the Church of God with saints. Most, if not all, of the great writers of Benedictine lives have stopped short in their annals about that time, for indeed it was more than one life's work to go further, and so it happens

that many great saints are either forgotten or but little known, even in the very places where they lived.

The contemporaries of St. Mechtildis were many and did a great work, especially in Italy. There were, for instance, the two Beatrices d'Este, aunt and niece, both honoured by the Church with the title of Blessed, whose bodies are venerated to this day, one in the church of Santa Sofia at Padua, the other in the Benedictine monastery of Sant' Antonio, at Ferrara, founded by her; Blessed Juliana of Collalto, the friend and companion of the former, whose body rests also incorrupt in the church of Santa Eufemia in Venice; Blessed Justina Francucci Bezzoli of Arezzo, who lies under the altar of the monastery of Santo Spirito at Arezzo, still in the body in which she served God on earth; Blessed Santuccia Terrebotti, who worked so actively and successfully for the stricter observance of the Rule all over Italy and who was employed by the Pope himself to go from one monastery to another as Abbess-General, and who died in Rome; Blessed Philippa Guidoni, and so many others that time and space would fail to even enumerate them.

These names suffice to show that the spirit of St. Benedict was living and bearing fruit not only of holiness but of active work; and although it was no longer the only power of its kind in the Church, it still took a very important part in what was being zealously carried on—as it had been undertaken under necessity—by the Mendicant orders. But it was a part small indeed compared with that done for the first five or six centuries after the death of St Benedict, when not only the evangelizing but the civilization of Europe depended on his sons and daughters. It cannot but be admitted that the new Orders would possibly never have arisen had the Monastic Order continued in the work it had begun, and it is significant that in England where the tradition and reality of apostolic work, with its attendant self-sacrifice, has never died out in spite of heresy and three hundred years of persecution, the Benedictine spirit has always been so strong as to have become almost national. Mankind stood, as it always stands, in want of apostolical, charitable, and educational work. SS. Dominic and Francis arose to do it. With the sons of these, especially the former, the Benedictine convent at Helfta

had constant intercourse, and in the course of this biography we shall find reference to these relations, a source of direction on the one side, of edification on the other, and of mutual help.

St. Mechtildis was born in the year 1241 of the noble family, now extinct, of the Counts of Hackeborn, a name indissolubly connected with the monastery from its foundation. The names of Albert and Louis of Hackeborn as the elder and younger sons constantly recur during many generations in various documents; Mechtildis was the daughter of one Albert and sister of another, whilst her second brother was according to custom Louis. She had two sisters, Gertrude who was nine years her senior and later on abbess in the neighbouring Benedictine convent, and Lutgarde who died whilst still a child. In after years St. Mechtildis had the happiness of seeing in vision this little sister in heaven amidst the choirs of virgins; she had been, we are told, "beloved by God and man."

"So greatly," says the story of her life written by her dearest friend St. Gertrude, "was Mechtildis prevented by blessings from God that her temporal and spiritual birth nearly coincided." It was thought by those present

at her birth that she was coming into this world only to leave it, and she was taken in great haste to be baptized by the priest who was about to celebrate Mass, probably, from this circumstance, in the castle and chaplain of the family. ' He was a man of remarkable holiness, and after he had performed the ceremony he turned to those around who trembled for the infant's life and said: " Why are you afraid? this child will not die, but will become a holy nun in whom God will work great marvels, and she will finish the days of her life in a good old age. " Many years after, when Mechtildis had been long consecrated to God's service, she was told by Him that He had thus hastened her baptism in order that her soul might become without delay a temple consecrated to Him, and that He might take complete possession of her from the womb of her mother.

The Countess of Hackeborn, as well as her little daughter, recovered, and for nearly seven years the child grew up in the ancestral home under her loving maternal care. Sometime during these years her elder sister Gertrude left the family circle, and young as she was, entered the monastery of the Benedictine nuns so near

her own home, and so full of family associations.

One day the Countess went to see her nun-child and took Mechtildis, who was then seven, with her. Gertrude was a young nun of sixteen, full of the spirit of her vocation, and, notwithstanding her youth much looked up to by her sisters in religion. Perhaps her conversation and enthusiasm appealed to the little Mechtildis, but, whatever the reason, she refused to leave the monastery in spite of the remonstrances of her mother, and with the engaging simplicity of childhood went to each member of the community to coax her to say she should be received. After this neither the threats nor the persuasions of her parents availed, and her determination at length prevailing, they let her remain.

St. Benedict legislates in chapter LIX of the Rule (1) on the course to be followed in such cases as this. He says: "If any nobleman shall perchance offer his son to God in the

(1) *Life and Rule of St. Benedict*, St. Benedict's Rome, 1895.

monastery, let the parents, if the child himself be under age, make the aforesaid promise for him, and together with the oblation let them wrap that promise and the hand of the boy in in the altar cloth, and so dedicate him to God. But with regard to his property, they shall in the said document promise under oath that they will never either give or furnish him with an occasion of having anything, either by themselves or by any other person or means whatsoever. If they will not do this, but wish to offer something as an alms to the monastery by way of acknowledgment, let them make a donation of whatever they please, and reserve the income of it to themselves. Let matters be so managed that no expectation remain with the child, whereby being deceived he may perish, (which God forbid) as we have learnt by experience in the case of others. Let those who are poorer act in the same way. But such as have nothing whatever, shall simply make the promise, and with the oblation give up their son before witnesses. ”

How this chapter of our Holy Father’s Rule was carried out we have innumerable examples. It will suffice to recall to mind SS. Maurus and

Placidus, Venerable Bede and St. Editha, whose beginnings of monastic life bear a resemblance to the sisters Gertrude and Mechtildis. "Such innocent souls threw a grace over the stern features of monastic ascetism, and peopled the silent haunts of penance with a crowd of innocent faces" (1). But Mechtildis was seven years old, an age which entitled her to commence her education and to "commit to memory her first lesson." That lesson was the Psalter, "that wonderful manual of prayer and praise, which from the time when its various portions were first composed down to the last few centuries, has been the most precious viaticum of the Christian mind through the wilderness." What effect this had on the spiritual life of Mechtildis her whole life shows.

The abbess of the monastery at this time was Cunegund of Halberstadt, a woman of great piety and fear of God. She had been taken together with seven religious in 1229 from the monastery of SS. James and Burchard at Halberstadt, for the foundation at Mansfeld, made

(1) Card. Newman, *Historical Sketches*, Vol. II. part V.

in their own castle by Burchard Count of Mansfeld and his wife Elizabeth of Schwartzenburg; five years later the little community was removed to Rodardsdorf, not far from the episcopal town of Halberstadt, where both Gertrude and Mechtildis entered. The community counted amongst its members a great number of the daughters of the noble and even sovereign families of the surrounding country: de Mansfeld, de Querfurt, de Hackeborn, de Wipra, de Stolberg, all found representatives in the community which must have increased rapidly in numbers, as we find that in November of 1253 a colony of twelve nuns was sent on a foundation which shall be mentioned later, and that during Abbess Gertrude's government the community numbered considerably over a hundred.

In 1251, very shortly after Mechtildis' entrance into the monastery, the Abbess Cune-gund died, having governed the community for seventeen years. Before her death she had predicted that the young nun, Gertrude, although only nineteen years old would be unanimously elected to succeed her. This happened exactly as she foretold, and it is not difficult to imagine the joy that the event gave to Albert of

Hackeborn, her father, who both loved and protected the house.

We do not know how soon after her entry the little Mechtildis was solemnly clothed in the Habit of St. Benedict, and consecrated to her Lord's service by the beautiful rite of the Consecration of Virgins, but we need only study the Exercises of St Gertrude to have the ceremonies and the spirit in which they were gone through, and in after years commemorated, before our eyes.

In the time of St. Benedict, as we see in chapter LVIII. of the Rule, it was usual to receive the monastic habit and make profession at one and the same time. This practice was soon changed, and the putting on of the Habit became the real beginning of the noviceship. Beautiful are the affections written by St. Gertrude for the anniversaries of these actions, and they end with the words set apart for the consecration of virgin souls from the time of sweet St. Agnes, the Roman virgin: "The kingdom of this world and all its pomps have I despised, for the love of Jesus Christ, my Lord; whom I have seen, whom I have loved; in whom I have believed, to whom I have given my love."

With the betrothal, the year of trial of vocation began, and in that fervent community no recommendation of St. Benedict was unheeded. The novice was watched over by one who had "the address of winning souls to God, to discover if she truly sought God, and was eager for the Work of God, for obedience and for humility." All the rigour and austerity by which we "tend towards God" in the beautiful and expressive words of St. Benedict were laid before her. Then came one after the other, at stated periods, the all-suggestive ceremony of formally laying before the novice the requirements of the rule she desired to embrace. The whole of the Rule was read to her, first at the end of two months, with the addition of these words: "Behold the Law under which thou desirest to fight; if thou canst observe it, enter in; if thou canst not, freely depart," then having been again tried in all patience, after six months it was read to her again "that she may know unto what she has come" and lastly after four months more of trial it was read for the third time. From this it will be seen how earnest St. Benedict was that the obligations of monastic life should be fully understood before they were undertaken.

After all this preparation and deliberation the time arrived for the final step, when the Bishop of Halberstadt came to give to God and His direct service another virgin soul. We have no need to imagine what Rite was used, there was but one that could be taken: that needless to say had been in use from early centuries in the Church. Comparing it with St. Gertrude's Exercises, we see how faithfully and in what detail it was carried out in that Suabian monastery, and how every prayer and ceremony had their full significance, and were made in after years a part of the nuns' spiritual food.

Although the Rite was performed as in the Pontifical, yet the three-fold *Suscipe* was added according to the Rule of St. Benedict. The devotion that lay underneath the choice of his Rule is touchingly alluded to in the Renewal of Religious Profession: "by the intercession of Blessed Benedict our venerable founder, mayest Thou deign to look down with the eyes of Thy charity and Thy mercy on this poor withered branch, that it may be quickened by Thee with restored life, and bloom and flourish again in true holiness. O make me to observe with

most scrupulous fidelity the rules of holy religion and the duties of the spiritual life: O thou friend of God and my father, obtain for me such energy and constancy in the spiritual life, that I may be admitted with thee to the reward of life everlasting. ”

Of deepest interest to us is a reference in the Exercises to the Register of Profession; we long to know the form, and what would we not give to see the original; there can be but little doubt that it either perished in the flames when the monastery of Helfta, where the Saint died, was destroyed in 1342 by the soldiers of Albert of Brunswick, Bishop of Halberstadt, or in the devastation and pillage of the sixteenth century.

One word more about the ceremony of profession. When all was over the Bride was given by the Bishop to the Abbess with solemn words: “ See that you keep this consecrated virgin for God, and give her back to Him without spot; knowing that you have to give an account for her before the tribunal of her Spouse, the Judge to come. ” We can understand the exceeding and solemn beauty of this, all the more when we remember that this time

the spiritual daughter was the sister of her to whom so great a responsibility was committed.

Of the outward grandeur and ceremony of that day we can imagine a little. The retainers of the castle, the friends of the family all assembled, the joyous bells from the towers of castle and monastery answered each other's peals, for it was what every Benedictine festival is, a family feast, accentuated in this case by the relationship, not only spiritual but temporal, between those in the world and those in the cloister.

And so finishes the preface as it were to St. Mechtildis' life. After years showed how perfectly her sacrifice had been made, how fully complete was her offering, and yet we are told that long after, on a certain feast of St. Agnes, Mechtildis began to weep and complain to our Lord as she meditated on the young Saint's words of love, and to accuse herself that although she too had given herself to Him in her childhood, yet that she had not loved Him as St. Agnes with all her heart. And our Lord to content her humility promised her a participation not only in the merits of the Saint, but

in those of His holy Mother, and He gave her the following instruction: "The virgin whom I choose for My spouse should be noble in her humility, looking on herself as nothing, as beneath every other creature, desiring in all sincerity contempt and abjection; and the more humble she is on earth, the more noble will she be in the glory of heaven; and to her humility I will add Mine own, which will confer on her the highest nobility." And on another occasion He said to her: "He who is joyous under contempt, who is made happy by troubles and contradictions, who is glad to be able to add to My humility and My Passion, and to have something to sacrifice to Me, he it is who is patient and humble of heart."



CHAPTER II.

Benedictine life essentially Family life. — Foundation at Hedersleben under Cunegund. — Dedication of church to our Lady and St. Gertrude of Nivelles. — Community remove to Helfta, 1258. — Foundation stone laid by Vulrad, Bishop of Halberstadt. — Profession of Novices. — Community removed to Neu-Helfta, 1346. — They assist at the funeral of Count Burchard XII. — St. Mechtildis is favoured with our Lord's company while *in via*.

The life that St. Mechtildis had undertaken was in all its principal points the life led in every Benedictine monastery, in which the Rule is always the same, with the differences consequent upon the fundamental idea of a family. We should never forget that St. Benedict legislated with a very definite idea, that embodied the Roman family life of the day, and was the outcome of his own family life and surrounding. This again, in the form in which it was moulded by Christianity, was a development from the great examples of patriarchal times. Monastic

life is essentially family life. General legislation, like the law of the land, gives broad lines of conduct; but the family life is guided and legislated for in the intimacy of the family. Unless this is understood, it is impossible to apply or understand the Benedictine Rule or spirit. There is often even amongst spiritual persons the mistake of thinking that spirituality means the annihilation of the natural character. Nothing could be more untrue of the result of Benedictine principles: "We would not be" says St Paul, "unclothed but clothed upon, that that which is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now He that maketh us for that very thing is God."

In studying the life of St. Mechtildis we catch sight of many glimpses of her daily duties, and of her personal character as fashioned by divine grace; and after six centuries one may be pardoned for attaching importance to the smallest detail that gives us an insight into the past, and brings the monastic life of the thirteenth century into touch with us now. After all, that life was not so far from the days of St. Benedict as our lives are now from it, and the results are far too great to make the details unimportant.

Perhaps it will be better to take events as far as we can in chronological order. One of great importance was a foundation made in 1253 by Abbess Gertrude, who on October 18th sent twelve of her nuns to Hedersleben under the government of Cunegund, who became the first abbess. The new monastery owed its temporal beginning to Albert and Louis of Hackeborn, the brothers of Gertrude and Mechtildis. The church was dedicated to our Lady and St. Gertrude, most probably the popular St. Gertrude of Nivelles who was the daughter of Pepin of Landen, mayor of the palace to the French kings of Austrasia. As she early resolved to give herself to God's service in the monastic state, St. Amandus was asked by blessed Itta the Saint's mother to superintend the building of a monastery at Nivelles for her. Here Gertrude ruled as abbess, and was remarkable for her prudence and charity as well as many other virtues, being a perfect model of religious observance. Devoting herself to the study of divine things, she explained the most obscure parts of holy Scripture to the greatest satisfaction of her hearers. She built several almshouses and other places of charity, where the

needy and miserable might come for food and help, and she ministered to the wants of these sufferers with her own hands. Her humility was not less remarkable than her holiness, and she sought nothing with greater eagerness than contempt and confusion. But God, who desired the fame of her virtues to be spread abroad, deigned on several occasions to give assistance to those who invoked her help in adversity, bestowing His gifts upon them proportionate to their needs. Moreover those who appealed to her prayers before setting out to sea were miraculously saved from shipwreck, although overtaken by storms and tempests. After Gertrude had been abbess for some years, she resigned her office and spent the rest of her life in preparing for death; which took place on the 17th of March in the year 664.

In the year 1258 the community found they could no longer remain in their present monastery, for, as the old account tells us: "The abbess, while she paid every attention to the spiritual needs of her children, was no less solicitous for their temporal comfort." Now the situation of Rodardsdorf, on account of a scarcity of water, made it difficult to continue

there ; so she entered into an agreement with her brothers, always generous where the glory of God and the Order, as well as the good of their sisters, was concerned, for the concession of a large piece of land for a new convent in the place called Helfta. The situation was very beautiful, the soil was fertile, plentifully watered by streams that continually flowed from perennial springs. On the side of a valley which gently sloped through most lovely fields towards the lake of Seeburg, stood the new Benedictine home. It was planted around with various kinds of fruit trees, amongst others the cherry and plum, which have grown to such an extent in our own day as to hide the spot in a thick wood, where still some traces can be found of the ancient Benedictine convent.

A few other details can be gathered from the lives and revelations of those holy souls who dwelt therein, who loved " that tabernacle of God , where He would dwell with them, where they would be His people and He Himself would be their God. " For instance St. Gertrude tells us, in describing the place where she received some special graces , that after Prime she entered into the court of the mon-

astery and sat herself down beside the fish-pond" — this pond can still be seen, it is fed by a little stream that waters the valley, and is now royal property — "I was," continues St. Gertrude, "ravished with the beauty of the place, where limpid water flowed, where green trees lifted up their heads, and the birds, especially the doves, flew about in perfect liberty; above all I was attracted by the hidden repose which I enjoyed in this retreat." And so Helfta had every advantage for bringing souls to greater union with God: for nature is no small means to the supernatural, as we see by the very parables of our Lord, who used the things around Him to illustrate some of His greatest and most solemn truths.

The removal to Helfta took place on the Sunday following the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, Vulrad being Bishop of Halberstadt. He it was who laid the foundation stone of the church which was dedicated to our Lady, and said the first Mass for the nuns. The monastery, as was fitting, was dedicated to St. Benedict. The translation was accompanied by great ceremony and concourse of people. Rupert, Archbishop of Magdeburg, was present

with many other ecclesiastics of distinction: then there were the relations of the nuns, amongst whom were the Counts Herman of Mansfeld and Burchard of Querfurt, who had married Gertrude and Sophia, daughters of the first founder, whose own children, Sophia and Elizabeth, were then members of the community. From the account given us by Sophia of Stolberg, eleventh abbess of the community, who wrote in 1451, we find that during the Mass celebrated by Vulrad some novices were professed, and others received the veil of the spouses of Christ.

The community remained at Helfta until 1346, that is ninety years, when on account of the wars between the neighbouring families which involved the monastery, the nuns were obliged to remove to Neu-Helfta. There are to the present day some remains left of the place consecrated by the profession, life and death of St. Mechtildis.

The constant change from place to place must have been a trial to the community, but not such a trial as to enclosed nuns, who naturally cling with more tenacity to their immediate surroundings. Here it will be well to

recall various instructions given by our Lord to His faithful spouses on the way in which they should comport themselves when outside the "enclosed garden" of the monastery.

Once we are told that St. Mechtildis with all the community accompanied processionally the funeral of the young Count Burchard XII, son of Gebhard of Mansfeld and of Irmengarde of Schwarzenburg, who died in 1294, after having left to the monastery twenty nine acres of wooded ground: and "the Servant of God looking on the broad stretch of country took great pleasure in the view." That night, as she could not sleep, and illness prevented her from rising to pray, our Lord appeared to her clothed in white, and seating Himself near her sweetly consoled her for her many pains and infirmities. And she answering Him said: "O my Lord, would that it were permitted to me to walk with Thee in such fields as I passed through to-day . . ." After they had so spoken together "as a man is wont to speak to his friend" she continued: "My Lord, what fault did I commit in looking about me and taking pleasure at beholding the extent of the fields?" And He answered: "You acted against obedience, and you were not

attentive to My presence; and then you neglected to pray for the soul of the dead;" and she: "Teach me O my Beloved, what we should do when we have to go out?" He answered: "When first you leave the choir say this verse: *Deduc me Domine, in via Tua, et ingrediar in via Tua. Laetetur cor meum ut timeat nomen Tuum* (Ps. LXXV, 11), and so go forth in My fear, taking Me as your companion on the way, as a staff by which you may be sustained. And going forth in this manner you shall bless in My power the houses, the road and all that you shall meet, and they shall be blessed. For when a man is filled with vain joy his heart afterwards becomes heavy; but when the heart is filled with My fear it shall not be saddened but be filled with true joy. Hence, when you go to meet a funeral you may call to mind that procession in which all shall come forth to meet Me in their bodies on the day of judgment, and I with ineffable glory and majesty, surrounded with the whole multitude of angels and saints, shall go forth to meet them. You should also pray for the soul of the deceased, that if it be in suffering it may be speedily absolved; if any impediment is between Me and

it, it may be without delay united with Me and My Saints; and that it may be made worthy of future glory, and with joy and glory presented to Me in that tremendous day ” (1).

Going out does not indeed appear to have been anything but a fresh means of union with God for these holy souls, for we read two anecdotes of St. Gertrude which show us how she found her Beloved no less on the road than in the cloister. One day as she walked on the road, it happened to her to fall from a certain height; immediately filled with wonderful exultation of soul she said in spirit to our Lord: “ Well would it have been for me, O my Beloved, if this accident had been the means of my coming quickly to Thee. ” And as her companions asked her all astonished if she did not fear to die without being strengthened by the sacraments of the Church, she answered: “ I do indeed desire with all my heart to be strengthened with the saving Sacraments, but yet the will and ordinance of my Lord seems to me the best and most salutary preparation: there-

(1) *Liber Specialis Gratiae* II. 22.

fore in whatever way He wishes me to go to Him, whether it be suddenly or by a provided death, I will go most willingly, certain that by whatever death I die the mercy of my Lord will never be wanting to me, without which I know that I can by no means be saved, whether I die suddenly or after long preparation ” (1). Another time this same Saint being *in via* said to our Lord in a spirit of great abasement: “ The greatest of Thy miracles O Lord I consider to be that the earth bears the weight of so great a sinner ” and our Lord, who loves to exalt the humble, replied: “ Willingly may the earth bear thee, when the whole dignity of heaven expects with immense exultation that most joyful hour when the honour of bearing thee shall be given it ” (2).

Sophia of Stolberg tells us that the changes of locality for the community, first from Mansfeld to Rodardsdorf in 1234, then from Rodardsdorf to Helfta in 1258, and from Helfta to Neu-Helfta in 1346, were signs of God’s special love, as our Lord Himself some years before,

(1) *Legatus Divinae Pietatis* I. 10.

(2) *Id.* I. 11.

“ deigned to reveal to one of the seniors, His most familiar friend, one whose example and life edified many, and who was one of the strong ancient columns of religion; ” predicting that the monastery should four times be removed to different places, for a sign that, out of regard for those holy souls, He would pour out upon the world streams of grace, like the four rivers of Paradise, to benefit the living and the dead. The writer adds: “ The testimonies of these venerable sisters of ours *credibilia facta sunt nimis*, through whom we have seen examples of holiness and works of all perfection ” (1).



(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr. Doc. II.*

CHAPTER III.

Community life at Helfta. — St. Mechtildis a power for good to others. — Instructions upon the training of Novices. — Profession of the Novices. — Love and fidelity in her office as Chantress. — Her patience in constant and terrible suffering.

Very busy were the nuns in the community at Helfta. Besides the Divine Office, the Work of their lives, the special work for which they had each one been professed, the work to which nothing could be preferred day or night, — for they rose to Matins — (1) there was much else to occupy their time; the school was in itself an employment of no small importance, not only for the work done for each intelligence and each soul, but in its effect on the world outside. Many of the pupils doubtless entered the monastery later, but many more returned to their families, the noblest in the land, and married, and thus carried the teaching they had received

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* II. 6, etc. *Leg.* IV, 1, 2.

into the world and taught it to those around them, and in after years to their children (1).

Great indeed and wide was the apostolate of the nuns, and of the utmost importance to the Church and to society. We cannot therefore be surprised that the education of the convent pupils should have formed the subject of one of our Lord's familiar instructions to St. Mechtildis, who was especially employed amongst them. She had asked Him why He had chosen the age of twelve to appear amongst the doctors in the Temple, and He deigned to answer her in the following words: "Because then, in the ordinary course of nature, I chose to show forth my wisdom increasingly from day to day, as though it grew, while all the time I was equal to God the Father in Eternal Wisdom. Therefore when children have attained the age of twelve, you should instruct them in all good, and seriously correct them for what is evil. If this were done there would not be so many souls lost in Religion, and spiritual lives wasted" (2),

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* vi, 1. *Leg.* v, 1.

(2) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* i. 9.

By means of the school the nuns' relations with externs were naturally increased, and visits to the parlour seemed not to have been discouraged at Helfta. St. Mechtildis exercised a great influence amongst visitors to the monastery, an influence shared by St. Gertrude. So popular were the two friends and so much sought after, that comparisons were made between them; and in the Revelations of St. Gertrude we read: " that a person of great authority with regard to divine revelations had a conversation with Dame Mechtildis, our Chantress of blessed memory, which pleased her very much, her words being seasoned with the sweetness of the honey of the Holy Spirit " (1). It is supposed that Sister Mechtildis of Magdeburg was the visitor thus impressed by the holiness and sweetness of St. Mechtildis; of her more will be said later. The number of guests we know to have been very great in the monastery, as we are told that one day the Saint was moved by compassion to pray during Mass for the portress, who was overwhelmed

(1) *Leg.* 1. 3.

with work on account of the number of the people who came, and our Lord said to her: "Every step taken by obedience is a coin put into My hand, which increases merit" (1).

Once there came a man from a great distance to the Servant of God to speak to her about his soul, which was in great trouble. He had been to many other persons, to Friars and other holy men, without obtaining help; she spoke kindly and consolingly to him, and sending him away prayed most fervently for him. The next day he returned to render her his most grateful thanks, for his temptation had completely vanished, and she had strengthened and consoled him as no one had ever done (2). It was no wonder that she was such a power for good to others, for she had the habit of consulting our Lord in all that she did, whether it were of little or great importance, and in every thing she sought only His will and good pleasure (3).

There can be no greater or more serious work in a community than the training of its

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 45.

(2) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 39.

(3) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 42.

future members, and no one realized this better than St. Mechtildis; she interested herself in the novices, she constantly prayed for them, especially asking our Lord to confirm them in the profession of holy religion and of true sanctity; and once He answered her thus: "I will dwell in them, and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (2 Cor. vi. 16) I will walk among them by their holy desires and their good will. And I will dwell among them by the union of love. And they shall be My people by their good and praiseworthy conversation, and by the profit and increase of Holy Church. For all those whom they attract by their good example, their virtues, their teaching, and whom they gain by their prayers, praying for the Church and her progress, that sinners may be converted, that the souls in purgatory may be delivered, all these shall be counted among the number of their people. Let them apply themselves to study; pray often and devoutly; willingly read and hear Holy Scripture; labour carefully; observe most diligently obedience and the Rule, and whatever else is commanded them; have perfect humility in all things, comparing themselves to no one and

never despising any one : thus praying I will show them My Divine Will, and whatever is necessary for them ; and in reading I will make them taste My sweetness. In their labours also will I sanctify them ; in the observance of obedience and the Rule I will compassionate and help them ; and I will take My repose in their humility ” (1).

As the day of Profession approached, the Saint redoubled her prayers, and received in answer the following instruction from our Lord : “ They should pray to Me that I may give them the eyes of intelligence, with which they will behold Me and understand what is salutary for themselves and true ; ears of obedience ready for every command and will of their superior ; a mouth of wisdom which will always praise Me, and which will know how to speak, and how to teach those things helpful to their neighbour. Let them beg to be given a loving heart, with which they will love Me and all things in Me, and on account of Me purely ; and lastly, the hands

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 16.

of good works, that all they do may be done carefully and attentively ” (1).

Happy novices to have had such an ambassador to their Betrothed, and faithful too must they have been, for on the day of their Espousals she beheld, while the Litanies were being sung, the Blessed Virgin and each one of the saints as he was invoked kneel reverently before God and pray for them. And when they made their Profession the Lord Jesus most lovingly received them to His embrace, holding out His right hand to help them to keep their vows, and protect them from evil. And when each one approached to receive Holy Communion, He “ kissed them with the kiss of His mouth ” and thus consummated their happy union with Himself (2).

How lovingly He keeps those vowed to His service, our Lord revealed to her another time. “ Once touched with compassion for a certain person who could not make up her mind to submit herself fully to the will of her superior,

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 17.

(2) *Ib.* iv. 17.

she prayed our Lord to deign to illuminate the mind of this person with His grace and incline it to obedience. And behold, she saw the Lord Jesus standing and supporting with His right arm the person for whom she prayed and saying: ' From that hour in which she consigned her own will to Me in the hands of her superiors, I received her to My embrace, and I will never give her up, unless perchance she should leave Me spontaneously and go back; and if she should do so, she can never regain her first place except by submitting herself. ' From these words she understood that God on the day of each one's Profession receives her to the closest union, from which she is never released unless by her deliberate will she goes against obedience; then, indeed, she as it were withdraws herself from the right hand of God, who cannot again take her to Himself, until by true penitence and worthy satisfaction she humbly prostrates before Him, solemnly promising to obey from henceforth " (1).

Inside her monastery St. Mechtildis was lovingly and brightly helpful, first to her

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 18.

Abbess, and then to each of her sisters, who (1) never appealed in vain to her sisterly charity; but her great office, that will ever immortalize her name in the Liturgy of the Church and the history of the Order of St. Benedict, was that of Singer of the Praises of God: for forty years her voice was lifted up in His praise, until the day came when that voice was silent, and our Lord Himself sang to His dying spouse (2). O what flight of imagination or of poetry could equal the tender beauty of these secrets of the spiritual life, or rival the sweetness of that vision!

St. Mechtildis' office of Chantress was no sinecure, and her delicate health made the fatigue very great at times. Once when, as often happened, she had tired herself very much in singing, and her strength seemed to be giving way, it seemed to her as though she drew every breath from the Heart of God, and that therefore she did not sing in her own strength, but with Divine help (3). It was her custom

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* caput praeuv., IV. 24, etc.

(2) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* VII. 11.

(3) *Ib.* III. 7.

to sing to God with all her strength and with so fervent a love, that she felt she would not stop singing even if it cost her life (1). Again, when she was thus singing with God and in God, the Lord said to her: "As thou dost seem to draw each breath from My Heart, so every one who sighs after Me in love or desire shall draw her breath not from herself, but from My Divine Heart" (2). So completely was the memory of the Saint connected with her singing and her beautiful voice, that after her death she used to be spoken of in the community as "Dame Mechtildis, our Chantress of blessed memory" (3). Two very beautiful revelations show us how lovingly our Lord received the homage of her praise.

She was singing the praises of God, when she heard the sweet voice of the Chief Singer Christ Himself intone: *Laudem dicite Deo nostro, omnes sancti eius.* (Apoc. xix, 5) In the word *Laudem* she understood how God

(1) v. 30.

(2) *Leg.* 1. 3.

(3) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* 1. 1. *Leg.* 1. 3.

gives to Himself perfect praise without end : in *dicite* she saw how God gives to all beings in heaven and earth power to praise their Creator. In *Deo nostro* she beheld the human nature of the Son giving honour to His Father in His own words : *Deum meum et Deum vestrum* (Ioan. xx, 17). Lastly, *Omnes sancti eius* showed to her all the saints in heaven and on earth sanctified by Christ (1).

On another occasion when the Saint said to our Lord : “ Nothing for mine own use do I desire, nothing do I seek, nothing do I wish for, save that Thou shouldst be praised by Thyself and through Thyself, as fitly and perfectly as Thou canst possibly be praised, ” she saw, as it were, a harp go forth from the Heart of God ; the harp itself was our Lord Jesus Christ, but the chords thereof were all the elect, who through love are one in God. When Jesus, the most high Singer of all singers, struck the harp, all the angels in most sweet melody sang : “ Praise we the King of Kings, one God in three Persons, who hath chosen thee for His daughter and

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* i. 1.

spouse. ” Then all the saints sang in God with sweet harmony: “ Now give we thanks to God the Father for this harmony with which His grace has enriched us ” (1).

In this chapter nothing is said of the daily life led by every nun of the community, of which we have many indications in the Revelations ; that will be reserved for the next chapter: it has only been the intention here to point out the special offices held by the Saint. And all that she did was done in spite of constant ill-health and severe suffering, which indeed frequently necessitated dispensations from her duties, but never entirely laying them aside. On this subject we have some words of our Lord to her, which are not without their lesson for us. She said to Him: “ O most sweet God, although it is very painful for me not to be able to follow community duties on account of my illness, yet I give Thee many and great thanks that Thou hast delivered me from a multitude of occupations: ” to this the Lord replied: “ When you were usefully occupied in

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* II. 2.

necessary convent duties you always feared they would interfere with your spiritual life, and with the gift which I have bestowed upon you, and now in your infirmities you are afraid of accepting more dispensations than are required by necessity. Thus the just man always fears in all his works, as is written in the Book of Job, to whom I rendered testimony that there was no one found like to him on earth, fearing God and avoiding evil; and yet he said of himself, 'I feared all my works.' (Job. ix. 28). Man should receive all necessary and fitting things for the body, first, in union with that love with which I created all things on earth for his use; secondly, in union with the love with which when on earth I used all creatures for the glory of My Father and the salvation of man; thirdly, the labour and the service given to one by others is to be accepted in a union of love, in which one is served for the honour of God, and in order that those who so serve may be sanctified and rewarded" (1).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 45.

Far from ordinary were the illnesses of St. Mechtildis: she suffered from stone, a malady terrible now, but probably far less amenable to remedies then, and she was also tortured by a continual inflammation of the liver and constant headaches (1). From the quotation just made it will be evident that the necessity for dispensations was a still greater cross to the Saint than were her sufferings. Again and again do we read of her anguish at being obliged through obedience to renounce assisting at the Divine Office, Mass, or Holy Communion by reason of illness. So often did these dispensations occur, that they became part of her spiritual life, of her daily sanctification.

And now, to have a general idea of our Saint's character, it will suffice to recall the instruction our Lord once gave her: "If you wish to become a most dear daughter to Me, and resemble Me closely, follow Me in the spirit of these words: 'I think the thoughts of peace and not of affliction.' As My thoughts are thoughts of peace and not of affliction, so should you study to have a quiet heart and

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* Caput prae v.

peaceful thoughts, contending with no one, but submitting humbly and patiently. And as I listen to those who invoke Me, so should you show yourself benevolent and ready to hear every one. Strive to lead every one out of the captivity in which she is, by bringing help and consolation to all those who are in affliction and temptation ” (1).

How the Saint carried out these instructions of our Lord, the judgment of her sisters in religion will show: “ She was fervent in the love of God and of devotion, and her spirit constantly exulted in God with a marvellous sweetness. Perfecting herself in Conversion of Manners from day to day, she attained to the height of all virtue. She was of a most marvelously sweet character, deeply humble, very patient, a true lover of poverty, remarkable for her fervour and devotion; but above all she was great in charity both towards God and man; she showed herself amiable and tactful to every one, she was moved with a real zeal of loving kindness towards those who were troubled or tempted, showing herself a

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 39.

true mother to all, ministering consolation and help so that every one who came to her went away consoled and instructed. Every one loved her and wished to be with her, and this ended by giving her a great deal of trouble ” (1).

Surely it would be difficult to find in the annals of the Order a more beautiful, or more complete portrait of a daughter of St. Benedict; and was not her holiness the result of faithful obedience to the highest counsels? “ The more, ” said our Lord to her, “ you detach yourself from every creature rejecting its consolation, so much the more will you be lifted up to the inaccessible height of My Majesty. The more your charity extends itself to every creature, dilating itself by compassion and mercy, so much more closely and sweetly you will be surrounded by My immeasurable breadth. So much as you contemn yourself and humble yourself beneath every creature, so much more deeply will you plunge yourself in Me, and with so much more sweetness and familiarity will you be inebriated with the torrent of My divine pleasure ” (2).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* cap. praev.

(2) *Ib.* II. 34.

CHAPTER IV.

Daily life of the nuns at Helfta. — Vision of Divine Infant and St. John awakening the Community for Matins. — Our Lady bows with the Community at the *Gloria Patri*. — Vision of the Heavenly Spouse during the ceremonies of the Divine Office. — Instructions for Holy Communion. — Prayers of St. Gertrude whilst eating and drinking. — Recreation. — St. Mechtildis unable to sleep in an illness, is comforted by her Beloved. — Chapter held on Christmas Eve. — Liturgical Processions. — Confession. — Efficacy of prayer with arms extended. — Spiritual Cloister. — Little practices of the Community at Helfta.

It is comparatively easy to reconstruct from the revelations of St. Mechtildis and St. Gertrude the daily life of the nuns at Helfta, and to do this must be of paramount interest to those living their life and following closely in their footsteps.

The community rose from their sleep to say, or sing Matins, as the case might be; and the bell was rung at three different intervals (1)

(1) *Leg.* iv. 2.

to summon them to church from the dormitory in which they slept. Once, on the feast of St. John the Evangelist, St. Mechtildis beheld our Lord Himself in the form of a child of twelve years awakening the sisters joyously. St. John accompanied Him, and stopped for a moment before the bed of one who bore him a special love. One of the Seraphim, beautiful and dignified, preceded the Saint bearing a light, and was followed by an innumerable multitude of angels who conducted the nuns to the choir; and those who had arisen with alacrity and joy received a glory far greater than those who did so only through constraint (1). We read very often that the Saint was dispensed through illness from being present at Matins, and that not only did she lose no grace on that account, but frequently our Lord recompensed her for the deprivation by marks of special love. In the morning, after the nuns had finished Lauds a bell rang for the breakfast of all the workmen on the convent grounds (2), for there was much farm and other work at Helfta, and

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* i. 6.

(2) *Leg.* iv. 14.

the convent seems to have been the centre of quite a town, in which, too, Oblate-brothers were employed (1).

We have our Lord's own instructions to St. Mechtildis for her morning Offering: " In the morning, when thou dost first arise, salute the fair and loving Heart of thy most sweet Lover, from whom all joy, all good, and all happiness have flowed in heaven and on earth, and will flow for ever; endeavour with all your strength to plunge your heart into His, and say: " I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify and salute Thee, O most sweet and loving Heart of Jesus Christ, my true Lover: I give Thee thanks for faithfully guarding me and protecting me this night, and for never ceasing to give praise, and thanks and all the service I owed to God the Father, in my behalf. And now, my only Love, to Thee I offer my heart as a rose, to delight thy Divine Heart, blooming in its beauty and its fragrance before Thee all this day. I offer to Thee likewise my heart, as a goblet for Thy use, from which Thou mayest drink of Thine own

(1) *Ib.* v. 11-15.

sweetness, together with all Thou deignest to operate in me this day. Again I offer my heart as a pomegranate of exquisite flavour, fit for Thy royal Table, to be swallowed and transformed into Thee, so that in Thee it may find all its happiness: and I pray that every thought, word, action, and desire of mine may be directed to-day according to Thy most loving Will. ” And our Lord added: “ Then sign thyself with the sign of the Cross, and say: ‘ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Holy Father, in union with the Love of Thy most loving Son, I commend to Thee my spirit. ’ Repeat this word at each of thy actions, when thou beginnest them, or when thou enterest the choir, and beginnest the Hours, or when thou wishest to pray; and have confidence in God, that the work which thou art then doing can never perish. Commend, also, thy sight, both inward and outward, to the Wisdom of God, and pray that He may give thee the light of knowledge, whereby thou mayest be able to recognize and fulfil His Will, and all His good pleasure. Thy hearing, too, commend to the Divine Mercy, that it may give thee understanding of all the things which thou art

to hear during the day, and guard thee from seeing and hearing what is hurtful to thee. Thy mouth also, and thy voice, commend to God's faithfulness, and pray that He may pour into thee the taste of His own Divine Spirit, whereby all that thou mayest utter during the day may have for thee a good savour, and that He may open thy mouth to praise and give Him thanks, and guard thee from all sin. Moreover commend thy hands to God's faithful care, and pray that uniting thy works to His He may sanctify and fulfill them, and draw thee away from every evil deed. Thy heart also commend to God's love, and pray that He may draw it with all sweetness into His own Heart, and so set it on fire with His love, that never more may it be able to feel earthly joy or delight. In like manner, at Mass, offer thy heart to God, and before the Secret, cleanse, prepare and free it from all earthly things, that it may be able to receive the outflowing of the Heart of God, which ceaselessly influenceth and filleth the hearts of all present " (1).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 17.

Beautiful was the instruction given to the Servant of God by her sister—virgins in heaven about the merits to be gained during the course of even one single day. “ O how happy are you on earth and how much merit may you gain, for if a man knew how much merit he could gain even in one day, his heart would be so enlarged with joy that such a day had dawned upon him, during which he could live to God and by God’s grace increase his merit to God’s praise, that the whole of that day he would be more prompt and strong in doing and suffering all that he ought to do and suffer ” (1).

Meditation was an easy, nay, the sweetest task to one whose great delight was to think on her Lord and speak to Him. He, the best of Masters, instructed her one day on a daily subject for meditation. “ I will teach you ” He said “ three things on which you shall daily meditate, turning them over in your mind and from which you will reap much fruit. First, recall with thanksgiving the graces I have given you in your creation and redemption, that I

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 9.

have made you to My image and likeness, that for you I became man and after having borne innumerable torments suffered the most bitter death for your love. Secondly, gratefully recall to mind how many benefits I have bestowed upon you from the day of your birth until now: through a special love for you I called you from the world, I have times without number come to your soul in love, filling it and inebriating it with the sweetness of My divine grace, enlightening it by knowledge and inflaming it by love; daily do I come to you in the Mass ready to fulfill all your desires and your will. Thirdly, recall with praise and thanksgiving what joys I shall bestow in heaven throughout eternity, what affluence of all good things far beyond what you can believe or imagine when I shall have heaped up upon you all good things. And I tell you in truth that it pleases Me greatly when men confidently expect from Me great things" (1).

On Sundays after Tierce there followed, as now, the Asperges (2), and on Sundays and Feasts

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 5.

(2) *Ib.* II. 2.

the liturgical procession before the principal Mass of the day (1), the community making the circuit of the cloister and returning to the church, which seems to have been at a little distance from the monastery (2). It was the time of this procession that our Lord often chose to give special graces to His beloved (3). We find that the number of Masses at which the community assisted varied as now according to the rubrics (4). During Mass there were the usual ceremonies which united those in choir with the sacrificing priest at the altar. Ceremonies indeed formed an integral part of the lives of these nuns: for were they not, by their profession, courtiers of the King of Kings? When we read that "During Mass she saw that a great number of angels were present and each angel in guise of a lovely youth stood by the side of the virgin committed

(1) *Leg.* II. 2, 11, 21.

(2) *Leg.* I. 13.

(3) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I. 19, 20, 27: II. 2: *Leg.* 11. 21: IV. 2. (procession with image and relics, after Vespers) 3, 23, 28.

(4) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I. 26, III. 19: *Leg.* III. 10, 16, 17, 38; IV. 48.

to his care, some holding flowering sceptres, others golden flowers, and that as the maidens bowed they laid their lips upon the flowers in sign of everlasting peace, and that these angels ministered with highest reverence during the entire Mass" (1), do we not know that the symbol failed to give the reality? If God indeed rewards every thought, word, and act done out of faith in Him, can we doubt that He would give to these who not only believe but realize, who live for, look to and walk with Him ever, graces that have but a poor parallel in the marks of love which those who love on earth are wont to bestow on each other?

Once she was astonished to behold our Lady make the deep bow in the same way as the community at the *Gloria Patri*. It was revealed to her that as our Lady was chosen before and lifted above all other creatures, so was she more than any other filled with gratitude for the gifts of God (2). Again, speaking of ceremonies, our Lord asked her why she

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I. 30.

(3) *Leg.* I. 39.

bowed after entoning an antiphon, and Himself explained that it was done in order to receive with praise and thanksgiving the grace which He pours into the soul. Another time the Saint had to read a lesson at Matins, and as she bowed down before the lectern "He who is the most beautiful amongst the sons of men" embraced her and drew her to Himself (1).

Such examples abound, but we have others which show us that with all her holiness, her zeal for the Work of God, and her union with Him, she had her very human difficulties; once during the ceremonies of a Solemn Mass she gave way to sloth and sleepiness, and afterwards being much ashamed of herself she bewailed her negligence with sorrow to God, who answered her: "If you found nothing to displease you in yourself, in what would you recognise My goodness?" (2). And surely the little faults of so great a Saint are a great encouragement to us, they put her more within reach of our imitation, and draw our attention to that spiritual

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* II. 4.

(2) *Ib.* III. 14. (Cf. III. 20).

teaching which assures us that perfection and holiness are not always synonymous.

Frequent Communion was the rule at Helfta (1). It was the custom for each of the nuns to put up her name as a sign that she was going to the holy Table (2). We have two instances of this practice in the Revelations, which were occasions of special graces to St. Mechtildis. The bells rang when It was about to be given, and the sisters sang in preparation (3).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 26; IV, 5, 47, 48.

(2) *Ib.* III. 23.

(3) *Leg.* III. 18 (*Viaticum Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 38.)

“ But now instead of an antiphon an anthem has been substituted, which is sung only once and that after the Communion. We gather however from Liturgical books of the ninth century that a real antiphon was still in use, while the whole of the Psalm, or only part, was sung during the Communion, according to the length of time it took to distribute the Sacred Species: it terminated with the doxology *Gloria Patri*, etc. and then the anthem was repeated. Like that of the Offertory this style of singing at the Communion seems to date back as far as the fourth century. While the faithful communicated the choir sang the the antiphon *ad communionem*. ” Duchesne, *Origines du Culte Chrétien*.

The Saint had often to give up her place at the Sacred Banquet through ill-health but her happiness in receiving It and seeing others receive It, was deep as her love for her Lord. We read in her revelations that one day "While the community were approaching the Altar she seemed to see our Lord with His Virgin Mother, seated at a large table, and together with Him were all those who had communicated at the first Mass, while angels reverently lead thither those who were about to communicate." Our Lord was giving to each one a morsel of bread divided into five parts, from which she understood that on the day of holy Communion one should exercise oneself especially in five things, thus preparing a banquet for God.

"In the first place, let him, as far as in him lies, extol God's praises, and in union with the praise of Christ, whereby He offered all His actions to the praise of God the Father, let him also offer all he does for the love of God and the increase of His glory. Secondly, in union with the gratitude of Christ, who took upon Himself our nature and joyfully for our sakes suffered death, and in union with that great love, with which giving thanks to God the Fa-

ther, He bestowed this great gift upon us, let him filled with gratitude all that day return thanks to God for the institution of so great a Sacrament. Thirdly, let him multiply holy desires, that he may not seem inattentive in the presence of so great a guest. Fourthly, let him direct all the good that he does that day to the spiritual profit of the whole world: and fifthly, let him offer the merit of all the sufferings and actions of the day for the perseverance of the just". She was also inspired to know that the practice of the following by religious is especially pleasing to God, namely that they "keep a guard upon their thoughts, entertain holy desires, practise works of charity and show kindness in their intercourse with each other" (1).

Besides prayer there was a great deal of intellectual and manual work in the community. Study of the Holy Scriptures (2), the works of the Fathers, even the classic writers, occupied the time of some; others were engaged in copying manuscripts, or in illumination.

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I. 26.

(2) *Lib. Sp. Gr.*, cap. praev., IV, 31, VI. 1. *Lib.*

I, 1, 4, 7.

We read that Elisabeth, the second daughter of Count Mansfeld, who became a nun at Helfta, and later on Prioress, was a painter, and diligent in ornamenting the books in use for the Liturgy; while we also know that her sister Sophia, afterwards Abbess, transcribed and composed many books (1). Spinning (2), besides other and harder manual work, was also done in obedience to the Rule of St. Benedict who says: "Then are they monks in very deed when they live by the labour of their hands".

It was in the refectory that St. Gertrude sitting, as she tells us, one day in winter at collation after Vespers near a person to whom she had discovered some of the secrets of her soul, received the impression on her heart of the Sacred Wounds (3). We cannot doubt that her best friend and guide Mechtildis found it no less a place of sanctification. The following prayers, composed by St. Gertrude to be said whilst eating and drinking, were no doubt in common use in the community.

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* Doc. III.

(2) *Ley.* III. 32.

(3) *Ib.* II. 4.

Whilst eating she was taught to say: —
“ May the virtue of Thy Divine love incorporate me wholly into Thee, O my most loving Jesus. ”

And whilst drinking: — “ O most loving Jesus, pour into my heart, and preserve within me the energy of Thine own most glowing charity; may it pervade all my substance, and flow evermore through every faculty of my body and soul, to Thine eternal praise and glory ” (1).

We must not forget to mention the little detail of monastic observance, in the washing of the hands before going to table (2), nor the observance of the Rule of St Benedict which prescribes reading during meals; for these, as well as for anything else described in this life we have always the authority of the members of the community themselves (3).

Again we find that after supper the nuns sometimes went to the court to work; for one

(1) *Leg.* IV. 23,

(2) *Ibid.* II. 17.

(3) *Leg.* III. 20.

evening during the harvest, when it was necessary to finish some task, a storm threatened which, through St Gertrude's prayers, was suspended until the work was finished (1).

The dormitory too was sanctified, not only by the fidelity of those who slept there, but by the often manifested presence of our Lord. How often did not St. Mechtildis when she lay awake at night through illness, spend the hours in loving converse with Him, "in the night time seeking Him whom her soul loved." Once she saw her own soul in the likeness of a leveret that seemed to sleep, but with its eyes open, in our Lord's bosom. And she said to our Lord: "O my Lord God, grant unto me that, like this little animal, when I sleep with my body I may watch before Thee in my mind." Our Lord answered her: "As the hare is said to ruminare and sleep with its eyes open, so ought man, when he goeth to sleep, to ruminare on this verse: 'Let my eyes take sleep; but my heart, let it watch before Thee; let Thy right hand protect Thy servants who

(1) *Leg.* 1. 13.

love Thee ' (1); or let him meditate God , or speak with God ; and thus, when he falleth asleep, his heart will watch before Me, and if any evil happen to that man in his sleep, if he feel anything troubling him, he will never be separated from Me. Likewise, when a man wisheth to sleep, let him draw a sigh, as it were, from My Divine Heart, in union with the praise which flowed forth from Me upon all the saints , to supply for the praise with which every creature is bound to praise Me. Secondly, let him sigh again in union with that gratitude which the saints draw from My Heart, and with which they give thanks to Me for the gifts bestowed upon them. Thirdly, let him sigh for his own sins, and the sins of all mankind, in union with that Passion by which I took away the sins of all. Fourthly, let him sigh in affection and desire of all the good which man stands in need of for the praise of God, and his own benefit,

- (1) *Oculi somnum capiant,*
Cor ad te semper vigilet, etc.

from the fourth verse of the hymn then sung at Compline.

in union with that Divine desire of Mine, which I had on earth for man's salvation. Fifthly, let him sigh in union with all the prayer which I poured forth from My Divine Heart upon all My saints, for the salvation of all, both living and dead, desiring that I should receive every breath which he breathed that night, as if with a like intention he sighed before Me without ceasing. Then I, who can refuse nothing to the prayers of a soul that loveth Me, will fulfill his desire in My Divine truth " (1).

Three centuries before the time of St. Mechtildis, St. Peter Damian had introduced the practice of self-flagellation, both in honour of our Lord's scourging and in expiation of sin. This practice rapidly spread in the Church, and soon became a custom in religious communities, especially those that desired to emulate the fervour of the new reforms in the Order. At Helfta it was part of the regular life and we read in the revelations of the Saint that " once when the community were taking the discipline in common, for the salvation of

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 34.

mankind, she heard the sound echo in heaven with most sweet melody; and the angels hearing, applauded and trembled with joy, the demons engaged in tempting and torturing souls fled, souls were delivered from their sufferings, and the chains of their sins were broken asunder." And Sister Mechtildis tells us that once when our Lord was instructing her about the way in which the nuns should fulfill their duties, He said: "I was scourged with them, let them be mindful of Me when they take the discipline" (1).

Of the holding of Chapter and its attendant graces, it would be easy to write many pages; but one most beautiful incident told by both SS. Mechtildis and Gertrude cannot be omitted. Once, the community going to Chapter on the eve of the most sweet Nativity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, St. Mechtildis saw a multitude of angels who, bearing torches, accompanied each of the nuns. Our Lord reposed in the place of the Abbess on an ivory throne, from which a limpid torrent gushed, which at the first *Miserere mei Deus* bathed the faces

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* II. 26.

of each of those assembled ; at the second *Miserere* each one approaching the Lord, offered to Him the prayers which she had then poured out for the Church ; at the third the Lord bearing a golden chalice presented it to each of those persons who had been named by the sisters in their prayers , and the Lord said : “ Each year will I hold this Chapter ” (1).

So faithfully did He keep this promise that St. Gertrude tells us : “ When she heard the bell ring for Chapter, she gave praise to God for deigning to preside at it in person, as He had revealed to Dame Mechtildis of blessed memory. Then she was inspired to see that our Lord was so pleased with the eager desire of many of the nuns to be present at that Chapter , on account of the revelation made to St. Mechtildis, that He seemed to await the arrival of the whole community with intense joy. He was seated in the place of the Lady Abbess, in whose person He, appeared to preside, and yet reigned as it were on a throne above her, in all the glory of His Divine Majesty, surround-

(1) Ib. 1. 5.

ed by a multitude of all the Orders of blessed Spirits, whilst the Choir of Thrones supported the royal chair. As soon as the community had gone to their places, our Lord, seeming as if He could no longer contain His happiness, said with a certain calm joyousness: 'I see all My friends have now arrived.' As a sister asked the blessing: *Domne, iube benedicere*, and the Abbess replied *In viam mandatorum suorum etc.* our Lord stretching forth His adorable hand blessed the community and said: 'In the omnipotence of God My Father I approve all that is done here.' Then as the sister went on to sing the Martyrology, at the words *Jesus Christus Filius Dei vivi in Bethlehem Judae nascitur*, all the choirs of angels, hearing announced the most sweet Nativity of the Lord God their King, were filled with unutterable joy and prostrated in reverence to adore Him.

“When the community according to custom prostrated at the Psalm *Miserere mei Deus*, the guardian angels of each one gladly presented to our Lord the heart of her who had been committed to his protection, and each time the *Miserere* was repeated our Lord seemed to take from each of them a twisted knot which

He placed in His own bosom. When the hearts of those were offered who loved most fervently, the angels from the Choir of Seraphim attended on our Lord, supporting His arms and arranging the hearts for Him; but the Cherubim took their place when the hearts of those were presented who were most enlightened in the knowledge of God; whilst the Choir of Virtues rendered their services when the hearts of those were offered who had exercised themselves most in virtue. Thus each of the angelic Choirs ministered to the Lord, according as they saw presented the hearts of those who excelled in those virtues of which they were the representatives. But the hearts of those who were not inflamed with special desire, on account of the aforesaid revelation, were not presented to our Lord by the ministry of the angels, but were seen in their bodies as they lay prostrate on earth.

“ Then the writer in humility of heart approached our Lord offering Him the first *Miserere*, it being the custom to recite the Psalm for each one separately, and this one belonged by right to her; and as she presented it she said: ‘ Behold, my most beautiful Spouse,

I offer Thee this Psalm to Thy eternal praise and glory, freely renouncing even the smallest right to it, and asking Thee through it to benefit all those who are Thy special friends and mine, according to the pleasure of Thy Divine goodness.' Our Lord received this gift as a bright gem of the purest water, and placed it in the centre of a necklace which He wore, wondrously set round with precious stones mingled with golden flowers of every kind. Then He said to Gertrude: 'I have so honoured this gift of thy love as to place it in the centre of this necklace, that all those who commend themselves, to thy prayers, or even in desire only look to thee for help, may obtain a relief as certain as did the Jews who, when tormented by the plague of serpents, raised their eyes to the brazen image which Moses erected by My command in the wilderness.'

"When the Psalms were finished and the sisters ceased prostrating, there approached two princes of the heavenly court bearing a golden tablet, which they placed in front of our Lord; and as He undid the knots which He had placed together in His bosom, there appeared on the tablet in the form of precious stones the words

of all the Psalms and prayers which the community had just offered up; these stones were of wonderful variety, and not only shone with unwonted splendour, but gave forth also a most sweet sound. By the splendour they seemed as it were to approach our Lord in a loving caress, whilst the sweet sound prevailed upon Him to render back a hundredfold for each word to those who had made the offering of their prayers for the universal Church. And she understood that our Lord had been pleased to bestow all these graces on the community in reward for the special devotion they had at the Chapter, believing that on that day He would always preside amongst them.

“ When the names of those who were appointed to sing or read at Matins were read, our Lord most sweetly smiled upon those who listened eagerly for what might be prescribed them; and when hearing their names they bowed their heads, our Lord reverently bowed His also, to salute them with a sweetness that no human language could describe. And as some were grieved that they had not been allotted certain Responsories which had been given to the others, our Lord tenderly touching their cheeks

most sweetly consoled them. Then the writer seeing all this in spirit said to our Lord: 'O Lord, if this community knew how lovingly you regard each one of them they would indeed be sad if they did not hear their names read.' And He replied: 'If any one desires to sing or read and is incapable of doing so, I will accept her good will instead, and treat her with the same loving kindness.' Then He added: 'Moreover, I am so drawn by the tenderest love to all those who bow their heads when they hear what is assigned to them, and offer it to Me that I may assist them to accomplish it worthily to My glory, that I cannot refrain from bestowing a most sweet kiss upon them each time they do this.'

“When the Prioress in the name of the community, according to the Constitutions, made an accusation of faults in presence of the Lady Abbess, and all knelt down to receive pardon, our Lord said with sweetness and gentleness: 'I also on My part absolve you from all the failings of which you have just accused yourselves in My presence, and I promise that even if you should again fall in the same way through human frailty, I will deal gently with you and

quickly pardon you.' Then as the seven Penitential Psalms were read according to custom in reparation for the faults and negligences of the community, each word appeared on the tablet in the form of pearls, but these pearls did not shine, and looked dark beside the other precious stones of unwonted splendour and brilliancy. And the writer understood that these Psalms were seen on the tablet in the form of dark coloured pearls, because they were recited from custom, and did not excite in the hearts of those present any special devotion. Thus we see that although God rewards a duty accomplished through custom, and thereby increases our merits, yet what is offered to Him out of love is infinitely more pleasing in His sight, and merits a far higher reward" (1).

Then we read of the Processions on great feasts (2), of that of St. Mark (3), of None being said at mid-day on the feast of the

(1) *Leg.* iv. 2.

(2) *Ib.* iv. 9, 23, 48. (for fair weather. iii. 31.)

(3) *Ib.* iv. 33.

Ascension (1), of the *Veni Creator* being sung at Tierce on that of Pentecost and its octave (2); we have the Rule fast referred to (3); we see that sermons were frequently preached in the church, and judging by some of the subjects, a considerable secular congregation assisted at the discourses (4).

Confession was of course frequent, and a very beautiful examination of conscience before confession is given to us by the Saint herself. "Before confession," she says, "a man should strip himself bare, examining his real state, as Christ stripped Himself before His flagellation and crucifixion. And as Christ bared Himself to be ready for blows, so he should lay himself bare by accusation. Thus before confession it behoves him to look at the face of his soul in the mirror of the virtues of Christ. And in the mirror of the humility of Christ let him diligently consider his own humility whether he has disfigured his face in any way by pride

(1) *Ib.* iv. 36.

(2) *Ib.* iv. 38.

(3) *Ib.* i. 2.

(4) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 29. 52. *Leg.* III. 18. v. 25.

or conceit. In the mirror of the patience of Christ let him prove his own patience, if he can discover any spot in Himself of impatience. In the mirror of the obedience of Christ let him scrutinize his own countenance, lest there should be found on it a spot of disobedience. In the mirror of the love of Christ let him examine how loving he is towards his superiors, how peaceful with his equals, how meek with his inferiors (1). And if in any of these or similar things he finds on the face of his soul the stain of anything reprehensible, let him study sweetly to cleanse it with the soft cloth of the Humanity of Christ, remembering that Christ is our brother who is so loving that when a man acknowledges his sin, He mercifully forgives it. Let him therefore beware of washing out his stains with

(1) Here we are irresistibly reminded of the words of St. Benedict in the seventy seventh Chapter of his Rule: "Let the Monks show unto each other all brotherly charity with a chaste love. Let them fear God, love their Abbot with sincere and humble affection, and prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may He bring us to life everlasting."

too much harshness, that is without calling to mind the Divine goodness; for he who cleanses too roughly wounds rather than heals" (1). These last words of St. Mechtildis are simply in a slightly different form those of St. Benedict, who says, speaking of the abbot, that he must act with prudence, "lest while too eagerly scouring off the rust, the vessel itself be broken".

One little sentence from an instruction of our Lord to the Saint must be quoted on the subject of confession, as it is so practical. One day she complained to Him that she could not get a confessor, although she did not dare to receive Him in Holy Communion without going to confession first. Our Lord said: "When a powerful king is about to come to a house it is speedily cleaned and put in order, so that nothing may offend his eye; but if he is so near at hand that there is no time to throw away the rubbish, it is collected in an out of the way corner, that it may be thrown away after he has gone: so when you have a real will and desire of confessing your sins, and of

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 51. (Cf. II. 30, III. 6.)

not committing them again, they are so completely effaced from before Mine eyes that I do not remember them afterwards : but you must recall them when next you go to confession" (1).

How and in what spirit St. Mechtildis carried out the various actions of the day we can easily judge, for once when she asked our Lord to tell her what she was to do at every hour in order to please Him, He thus instructed her : " In the morning on rising offer your heart to Me , that I may pour into it My Divine love. At Mass you should be with Me as if at a banquet, where all meet together without exception, but where all bring their own provisions, that is their prayers; where I the Lord in the liberality of My Divine Majesty heal all wounds, absolve all sins, enrich poverty with all virtues and ease all sorrows." Then she said " O Lord what dost Thou do when I pray, or when I read Psalms? " and He replied; " I listen; but when you sing I unite My chords to yours, when you work I repose; and the more you work with zeal and diligence the more sweetly

(1) Ib. II. 14.

do I take My rest in you. When you eat I labour, for I nourish you and you Me; when you sleep I watch, and I protect you”.

And again on another occasion she said to Him: “O most sweet God, what should those happy virgins be whom Thou hast called to so great a prerogative?” He answered: “Noble, beautiful and rich. The virgin whom I choose for My bride should be noble in humility, looking on herself as nothing, and esteeming herself inferior to every creature, eager from her very heart to be despised and contemned: thus acting she will be noble in the glory of heaven in proportion to her humility, and I will add My humility to hers, and thus bestow upon her the highest nobility. She must also be beautiful, that is patient; for the more patient she is, the more beautiful will she appear on account of My Passion, and her patience (1). Beyond this I will add the Divine Brightness I had from the Father before the world began,

(1) Here we cannot but remember those words of St. Benedict, “By patience we participate in the sufferings of Christ.”

and thus clothe her with perfect beauty. It behoves her also to be rich in virtues, gathering to herself the riches of all virtues, to which I will add the incomparable wealth of My holiness, from which shall flow out and superabound delights everlasting " (1).

It is a common practice now to pray with the arms extended in the form of a cross, so as to honour our Crucified Lord, whose sacred arms were stretched out for our salvation on the cross. But how many know that this may be called a Benedictine devotion, and that its practice comes to us in a special manner from that Suabian community, whose members loved to unite themselves in the tiniest details to the Sacred Humanity. " Instruct me ", said St. Gertrude once to our Lord, " O most excellent Teacher, in at least one practice that we may especially perform in honour of Thy Passion ". And He answered: " I say to you, pray with your arms extended, and thus present to God My Father a remembrance of My Passion for the good of My whole Church, and in union

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* III. 16.

with that love with which I spread out My hands on the cross ” and she said to Him: “ If any one would do this, he will have to do it in corners for it is not the custom, ” and He replied: “ This very seeking out of corners would be pleasing to Me, and would beautify such an act of devotion as with a setting of precious stones ; but, ” He added, “ if any one shall make it a custom to pray with outstretched arms without human respect he will give Me the same honour as one who solemnly enthrones a king ” (1). And our Lord, it is said, rewarded especially a certain person who had enabled St. Gertrude to popularize this devotion. “ This certain person ” seems to have been St. Mechtildis, who as we shall see later, was her senior in religion and her guide and friend in the spiritual life.

An idea of the employments, and the way in which they were carried out at Helfta, can be gained from a quaint page in Sister Mechtildis’ revelations entitled “ Of the Spiritual Cloister ”:

“ I desired of the Lord that He would signify His will that I should not write any

(1) *Leg.* IV. 16.

more. Why? Because I know Myself to be now more vile and unworthy than I was thirty years ago, even more than when I first began.

“ Then the Lord appeared to me holding a bag, and said: ‘ Some few roots still remain to Me. ‘ And I said: ‘ Lord, I do not know those roots. ‘ He answered: ‘ You will know them easily when you see them. They are the infirm who are to be tended, the strong who are to be strengthened yet more, the dead to be raised, the good to be perfected in holiness. ‘ After this I saw the Spiritual Cloister which was built up of virtues.

“ The Abbess is true Charity, whose holy senses are the loving care with which she watches over the Community in temporal and spiritual things, solely for the glory of God, and distributes to her children an abundance of holy teaching, that in everything the will of God may be done, and thus preserves in her own soul a holy liberty.

“ The Chaplain of Charity is Divine Humility which always keeping subject to Love allows no place for arrogance.

“ The Prioress is the holy Peace of God, at whose bidding patience is given by which to

teach the community divine wisdom, that whatever it applies itself to may be for the glory of God.

“ The Sub-prioress is Amiability, which gathers up the little fragments, that is the small defects, and by kindness reduces them to nothing; which cannot bear that any one should not be well, but desires every one to become better by God’s help.

“ The Chapter must consist of four: first to manifest the holiness that accompanies God’s service; then labour gladly borne, by which great punishment is inflicted on the enemy, glory is given to God and abundant consolation to the soul; vain glory must be also avoided, and our neighbour’s honour preferred to our own; our service is to be performed with diligence, whereby we may merit a reward equal to God Himself.

“ The Chantress, who is Hope, filled with a holy and humble devotion in the languishing of her heart, intones such sweet melodies before God, that the notes resounding in the depth of the soul give Him delight. Whoever sings with her shall enjoy the same reward in heaven.

“ The Mistress of the school, who is Wisdom,

carefully and willingly teaches the ignorant, thereby bringing much holiness and honour to the monastery.

“ The Cellarer is the pouring out of the gift of Help, which she dispenses in the joy of God, and so through the divine gifts gains the soul. To all who ask any thing from her she gives what they require without a murmur, while the gifts of God flow into her own heart, and those who assist her gain for themselves the same reward.

“ The Dispenser, who is Meekness, is always doing good in well ordered measure ; what she has not herself her good will supplies, which is in itself a special gift from God. When those to whom something has been given, are deeply grateful to God, her heart is delighted as if she had tasted a precious drink out of a clear goblet.

“ The Infirmarian, who is diligent Mercy, is always craving to give unwearied attendance to the sick, helping them, keeping them clean, feeding them, and entertaining them with bright conversation, comforting them and treating them tenderly and lovingly like her best friends. She receives from God in reward the greatest good

will always to do this, and the same is given to her assistant.

“ The Door-keeper is the perfect guard of every movement with which she performs her office; her labour and work do not perish, for she is ever ready to come to God as soon as He desires it. God abides with her in tranquil silence. If at any time out of trouble of heart she complains of the difficulty of something commanded her, holy obedience lightens it all, and she submits herself joyfully.

“ The Mistress of Discipline is the holy temper of mind, which like a taper always burning, never loses heavenly freedom, making us bear sweetly every disturbance of mind to the end.

“ The Preposita (prövost) is divine Obedience, to which all other virtues must be subject, if the Cloister is to stand firm in God, now and unto eternal life. Well may it be to them who persevere in it ” (1).

What we may call little practices were as familiar then as now, and as full of grace to those who carried them out in a spirit of faith. For

(1) *Lux Divinitatis* VII. 36.

instance, the Rule of St. Benedict prescribes the courteous reverence that should be shown by a younger nun to an older on meeting. It was whilst performing this act of respect that St. Gertrude had her first visible manifestation of her Lord's love for her, and we are expressly told that she was doing it *secundum reverentiam Ordinis* (1). Then we find the custom of bowing before the altar of our Lady (2); of saying her Little Office (3), that the Breviary used at Matins was very large, for St. Mechtildis can think of no larger book. She was wont often to say: "If I were obliged to write all the graces that have come to me from the most loving Heart of God, a big book such as we use at Matins would not suffice" (4). We learn too, from what St. Mechtildis describes of a certain feast of the Purification, that the *Benedicamus Domino* was sung at the end of Matins by all the chantresses led by the chief chantress (5). We

(1) *Leg.* II. 1.

(2) *Ib.* III. 20.

(3) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I. 43.

(4) *Ib.* II. 19.

(5) *Ib.* I. 12.

know also that the nuns had tablets at their sides, and that the cowls had wide sleeves like ours at the present time, for one day as the Saint was wondering what was signified by the width of the sleeves, our Lord said to her: "that the wide sleeves were to show that the religious should have large and generous hearts ready to fulfill every command." (1).

These are amongst a few of the details that we can glean, and surely it is detail that brings those lives into touch with us. It is easy to realize that we are one in great things with those who passed so long ago into the other world: what pleases and interests us is to see that even in little things we do as they did: it is another lesson on the importance of tradition which, if it carried down for so many centuries things so unimportant in themselves, is not likely to have failed in what is of real importance.

(1) *Leg.* I. 11, v. 34.

CHAPTER V.

Three different ways in which our Lord dwells in a Community. — Revelations of St. Mechtildis concerning her sisters. — Devotion to the Sacred Humanity. — Vision of departing soul of Dame B. de Bar. — Friendship in the cloister. — SS. Mechtildis and Gertrude. — First outward manifestations of Divine love to St. Gertrude. — Picture of St. Gertrude's life. — Sister Mechtildis. — Blessed Albert. — St. Thomas of Aquin and other Dominicans.

One of the points of unfailling interest in biography, whether we study lives out of curiosity or devotion, is their friendships, the persons who make their surroundings and give them colour. It is very evident that the community at Helfta was composed of souls whose one thought was to live for God alone, and to whom the significant word *Profession* was a reality, with grave responsibilities and consequences. "They were gathered together", says Abbess Sophia "from all parts of the earth, that day and night they might sing the

Divine Praises, wholly intent on the service of Almighty God, to serve whom is to reign ” (1).

Once our Lord said to St. Mechtildis: “ I am in the midst of you as one who serves ” and she was told that, “ He dwelt in the midst of the community in three different ways, in some by the sweetness of grace, in some by the intelligence of the Scriptures, in others by the reception of doctrine ” (2).

Examining the subjects of her prayers one obtains a considerable knowledge of the individual characters of those who composed the community in which St. Mechtildis lived. Once she prayed for one of her sisters who was ever ready to take upon her all kinds of work, especially what was most humiliating, and she was given to understand that the labour of this nun was especially pleasing to God, for she carried out the sixth degree of St. Benedict’s ladder of humility which is to “ be content with all that is meanest and poorest ”, and He counselled her to make a habit of saying while employed in

(1) Doc. II.

(2) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 1.

active work the antiphon *Gratias tibi Deus, gratias tibi, vera, una Trinitas, et trina Veritas, trina et una Unitas*, or *Ex quo omnia, per quem omnia, in quo omnia, ipsi gloria in saecula* (1).

Again, when the Saint prayed that an assurance of eternal happiness might be given to one of the nuns who was in her last illness, she received this answer: "Who is the mariner that after having happily brought his goods into port would throw them into the sea? Since her infancy I chose her for religious life, I held her with My right hand, and I led her in the way of My Will; and when I shall have perfected My work in her, I shall take her to Myself with glory" (2). As she prayed for one in tribulation, God answered her thus: "I walked in three paths in this world in which, if any one wishes to follow Me perfectly, He also must walk. The first was hard and narrow; the second bright with flowers and planted with green trees; the third was thick with thorns and tribulations. The first is the way of voluntary poverty, which

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 34.

(2) *Ib.* IV. 35.

I followed and loved all the days of My life; the second is My praiseworthy and holy life; the third My hard and bitter Passion. Therefore every one who desires to follow Me must, embracing poverty, desire to possess nothing in this world; secondly, he must lead a praiseworthy life; and thirdly, willingly bear for My love pains and trials" (3).

The note of the spiritual lives of the nuns at Helfta was their realization of and love for the Sacred Humanity: this reached its perfection in SS. Mechtildis and Gertrude: but there were many souls in that monastery little inferior to them in the intensity of their love. We have only to notice the objects for which they asked prayers, the subjects of their temptations, the accounts of their saintly deaths, to see how God alone was the object of their lives. One of them complained bitterly to St. Mechtildis of what she suffered, because she did not love Him as devoutly as she ought; and the Saint in praying for her became convinced that she too was in the same case, and forgetting her friend

(3) Ib. iv. 36.

accused herself with great sadness of her utter uselessness, and her little love for God although He had conferred such great benefits upon her. He told her when she wanted to love or praise Him, and found that she could not keep this desire continually before her to say: " Good Jesus I praise Thee, and whatever is wanting to Me I pray Thee to supply for me." " And when you desire to love Me, say: ' Good Jesus I love Thee, and for whatever is wanting to me I offer to Thy Father the love of Thine own Heart.' " And He added: " Tell this to her for whom you pray: and if she repeats this a thousand times in the day, so often will I offer Myself to the Father for her, for I can never weary or tire " (1). Another time He told her when she was again praying for one of her sisters, to tell her when troubled to prostrate herself at His feet, and say the prayer *Respice quaesumus Domine super me famulam Tuam pro qua Dominus noster Jesus Christus non dubitavit manibus tradi nocentium, et crucis subire tormentum* (2). Yet again another begged her to pray

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 23.

(2) *Ib.* IV. 25.

that she might obtain a pure, humble, willing, loving and spiritual heart. And He told her that she would find in His Sacred Heart all that she was in need of. Then St Mechtildis said to Him " My Lord, I beg of Thee to deal mercifully with her in her last moments, giving her the certainty of being eternally with Thee." And the Lord answered " What wise man would throw away and lose a treasure which He loved, and had gained by his labour? " Again she prayed for one whose only desire was to know what God desired most from her; and we have many examples of the same kind.

When we come to the deaths of the inmates of that favoured community, as recorded by St. Mechtildis, we get other proofs of their close union with God. Dame Beata de Bar was dying, and the Saint beheld our Lord present. He appeared to hold a pure white cloth before the mouth of the nun, as if to receive her soul; and during the Mass celebrated for the repose of her soul, He showed Himself over the altar at the Elevation, and bowing down towards the celebrant, said: " Your will is My will. " And she knew that the priest had desired the instant release of the soul from purgatory.

After the *Agnus Dei*, when he had received the Body of the Lord, the soul approached the altar in the form of a very beautiful maiden, and the Lord, inclining Himself towards her, embraced her and in that sweet embrace received her into heavenly joys. When Mass was finished there was heard in the air the voices of singers accompanied by tambours, harps and other musical instruments as is the custom at royal weddings. And angels and saints watched with ineffable joy above the monastery so long as the body lay there. "Happy soul" says the writer "whom the grace of God and thy name declared Blessed." She must have been quoting the words used by St. Gregory of her Father Benedict: *Gratia Benedictus et nomine.* "For the singular purity and innocence of thy life thou art united to the Lord of Angels in an indissoluble bond of love, following the Lamb wheresoever He goeth! Be mindful of us also in the abundance of thy joy" (1). Such deaths were as common at Helfta as the holy lives, and it is only necessary to read the re-

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* v. 5.

relations of SS. Mechtildis and Gertrude to find the most beautiful and touching description of the manifestations of the love of the Incarnate Word for His chosen Brides.

Amongst the nuns some were more especially united with St. Mechtildis in holy friendship. "What a charming book" says Montalembert "might be written on friendship in the cloister! What endearing traits, what delightful words might be collected from the time of that Spanish Abbot of the eighth century, who said; I have left but one brother in the world, but how many brothers have I not found in the cloister! In seeking under the robe of their brethren for tender, disinterested and faithful hearts, they followed both the teaching of the Divine law and the example of the God-man. The holy Scriptures, on which they meditated every day in the psalms and lessons they chanted in their choral liturgy, presented to them immortal examples of the affection which might exist among the elect. . . . religion does not interdict either the warm impulse of affection or the endearing accents of the most penetrating sympathy to souls united in God. Let us ever listen to the sounds which are

audible in that sacred silence: they will reveal, perhaps, some sweet and touching mystery of the history of souls. Let us give ear to the gentle and perpetual murmur of that fountain which every cloister once enclosed—an emblem and an echo of the spring from which gushed such inexhaustible love. They loved God and they loved each other in Him with that love which is strong as death. If we would seek the natural consequence, the general condition and the best proof of all this happiness, we recognise it without difficulty in that external and internal peace which was the predominant characteristic of their existence. A sweet and holy peace which was the radiant conquest, the inalienable patrimony of those monks who were worthy of their name, and of which no one else, in an equal degree, has ever possessed the secret or the understanding! St. Benedict, the greatest of monastic legislators, has received no nobler title from a grateful posterity than that of Founder of Peace, *Ipse fundator placidæ quietis*” (1).

And amongst the countless examples of monastic friendship none is more beautiful and instruc-

(1) Introduction to *Monks of the West*.

tive than that of SS. Mechtildis and Gertrude. It was on January the 6th in the year 1256 that Gertrude, destined in after years to be the disciple and friend of St. Mechtildis, was born (1), and five years, later (2) in 1261, she entered the monastery at Helfta. We know absolutely nothing of her family; it would seem not to have been noble, and she had no relative amongst the nuns in the community which she was to make famous by her holiness. Father Faber has said of her " No one can be at all acquainted with the old-fashioned Benedictine school of spiritual writers, without perceiving and admiring the beautiful liberty of spirit which pervades and possesses their whole mind. It is just what we should expect from an Order of such mature traditions, St. Gertrude is a fair specimen of them. She is thoroughly Benedictine A spirit of breadth, a spirit of liberty, that is the Catholic spirit; and it was eminently the badge of the old Benedictine ascetics. Such was the Saint, the special Saint of praise and of devout desires! Oh, that she could be

(1) *Leg.* II. 23, Cf. *praef.* ad *Leg.* VIII.

(2) *Leg.* I. 1.

in the Church once more, as she was in ages past, the doctress and the prophetess of the interior life, like Debora, who sat beneath her palm in Mount Ephraim, uttering her canticles and judging Israel ” (1).

But the friendship of SS. Mechtildis and Gertrude was wholly spiritual. The latter in her biography of the former tells us that she avoided as deadly poison every human affection that had not its foundation in God, and she was on her guard not to receive as acts of human affection the love given her by others.

On the Monday before the Purification in the year 1281 which fell that year on January the 27th, St. Gertrude received the first outward manifestation of her Lord’s love (2). It was after Compline, and the shades of night were falling, the Saint was in the dormitory when, one of the older religious passing, she bowed to her in obedience to the Rule, and looking up she beheld Him whom she loved and to whom her life was dedicated (3). The particulars of this

(1) All for Jesus, Ch. VIII.

(2) *Leg.* II, 1, 23.

(3) *Leg.* II. 1.

vision need not be given here, it is sufficient to say that it was the occasion of St. Gertrude going to St. Mechtildis for help and counsel, for she had long been acknowledged as a safe and sure guide in all spiritual matters.

“ Considering her unworthiness and vile-ness ” says her life “ and knowing herself utterly unworthy of such great favours from God as He lavished upon her, she went to Dame Mechtildis of happy memory who was most noted and revered for her grace of revelation, humbly begging her to consult our Lord about the graces she had received ” ; another time she asked her “ to obtain for her from God the grace of patience and of meekness, feeling that these were the virtues most wanting to her ” (1). And if St. Gertrude thus came to St. Mechtildis in all humility and simplicity, our Lord did not fail to enlighten the latter on the marvellous holiness of the former (2).

Here is a picture of Gertrude's life. One day when St. Mechtildis was singing in choir, she saw Jesus sitting on a lofty throne, and

(1) *Leg.* I. 16.

(2) *Leg.* II. 11, 14, 15.

Gertrude walking up and down before Him, without ever taking her eyes off His face, whichever way she walked, and at the same time she seemed busily occupied with a host of exterior duties. While Mechtildis was gazing in astonishment on the vision, she heard our Lord say, " This is the image of the life which My dear Gertrude leads before My eyes. She walks always in My presence. She allows no rest to her desires, no truce to her anxieties, to find out what is nearest and dearest to My heart; and as soon as she has discovered it, she executes it with care and fidelity. But the great thing is, that she does not rest upon it, but is off again, always seeking some new thing in My will, in order to redouble her zeal by new actions and fresh practices of virtue; and thus her whole life is nothing but a linked chain of praises consecrated to My honour and glory ". St. Mechtildis thought at once of the besetting infirmity of active and zealous piety: for she had seen it, so she believed, in her dear Gertrude; and she ventured to say, " But, Lord, if Gertrude's life is so perfect, how is it that she cannot bear the defects of others, and exaggerates them so much? " Our Lord with

admirable sweetness replied. " It is because she cannot bear the least stain on her own heart, that she feels so keenly the failings of her neighbours " (1). Such was the chosen friend and confidant of St. Mechtildis.

Although much her senior in age, Sister Mechtildis, who entered the community about 1268, already much advanced in life, was bound closely to her namesake, St. Mechtildis, in the bonds of spiritual friendship. Her life had been very unusual before God called her to monastic life. At the age of twelve she was favoured with her first spiritual revelation, and very soon after was inspired by God to leave her home, her relations and even the necessaries of life, and went to Magdeburg, from which circumstance she was afterwards called Mechtildis of Magdeburg. Here she found one friend and lived a devout life under rule in the world, giving herself up entirely to works of piety, living alone in poverty and in exile, and, God so disposing, without friends. After Sister Mechtildis' entry at Helfta she lived twelve years, and wrote the seventh book of her revelations,

(1) *Leg.* i. 11.

which bears a liturgical character not found in her earlier writings. She was directed by the Dominicans for whom she conceived the greatest veneration, and whose holiness of life gave her great devotion to St. Dominic, whom she was then accustomed to call her Father. She had a brother Baldwin to whom she communicated this devotion, and who entered the Order of Preachers and lived so fully up to the spirit of his vocation that he was later sub-prior in their monastery at Halle; there he made a complete copy of the Bible which was used for reading in the refectory. He died before his holy sister.

It was through the Dominicans that Sister Mechtildis entered the monastery at Helfta, for they were closely connected spiritually with the community, as every page of their revelations show. Constantly we read of their visits, their sermons, and of many revelations made to St. Mechtildis and St. Gertrude of the state of their souls after death. The former saw the souls of " Dom Albert and of Brother Thomas of the Order of Preachers, of venerable memory, enter heaven as most noble princes " (1). These of

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* v. 9,

course were B. Albert who died in 1280, and St. Thomas of Aquin who died in 1174. Another is spoken of as an "intimate friend" of the monastery (1) and so on. We read too, of others of the order constantly asking the prayers of the Saint, and once after she had prayed for one of these our Lord said to her: "I have chosen him for Myself and will keep him for ever; and wherever he may be I will direct him, and I will co-operate with him in all his works. I will be his protector, his comforter and the procurator of the house where he dwells. Let him when he preaches take My Heart for his trumpet; when he teaches let My Heart be the book he uses; let him study to teach the Brethren these three things: first let them fly all human pleasure as much as they can; secondly let them fly honours and being lifted up; thirdly let them not seek in temporal things anything beyond what is necessary. If the Brethren do not heed his warnings he must nevertheless not cease to admonish them, that he may be able to say with the prophet: *Justitiam Tuam non abscondi* (Ps. xxxix. 11). All honour

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr. v. 7.*

that may be given to him let him refer to Me, and let him receive every commodity for his body as if he were giving it to My body ” (1). The community to which so many of the Dominicans belonged who frequented Helfta and helped spiritually their Benedictine sisters was situated at Halle.

Such then were some of the chosen souls in that school of holiness. They make us realize what St. Benedict has written of this life of labour and the next of repose, when after putting the highest perfection before us he says: “ Behold these are the tools or instruments of our spiritual profession; if we constantly employ them night and day, and have them signed with approval in the day of judgment, that reward shall be given us by our Lord as a recompense which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God hath prepared for those who love Him. The workshop where all these things are to be done is the cloister of the monastery, and steadfast abiding in the congregation ” (2).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 40.

(3) *Reg. cap.* IV.

CHAPTER VI.

Deed of foundation of Hedersleben. — Chapel of SS. John Baptist and Evangelist erected by Burchard of Querfurt. — Exterior life of nuns at Helfta. — Power and efficacy of St. Mechtildis' prayers. — Love of the Liturgy. — Devotion to the Sacred Heart and Passion.

It may be remembered that in 1253 a foundation had been made from Rödardsdorf to Hedersleben, when twelve of the nuns were sent to begin a new monastery. For some reason or other which we do not know, it was considered advisable in the year 1262 to draw up a document which will be best understood if we give it in full.

“ To all the faithful of Christ who now or in the future shall come to a knowledge of this writing, Otto, by the grace of God, Provost, Gertrude by the grace of God, Abbess, and the whole Chapter of the church of St. Mary in Helfta, perfect charity in the Lord. Seeing that what has been done is clearly for the praise and glory of Almighty God, we desire to make known

that seeking still more the honour of our Creator, we destined for the place called Hedersleben twelve of our beloved sisters to praise the Lord there for ever, and to give Him the perpetual homage of their worship. To these our twelve dear sisters whom we sent forth from our community to do this work of love, the gates of our monastery shall be open for their reception, if perchance in time through the too great pressure of want, or the total destruction of the place which they now possess, they ever desire to return to us. In order therefore that in this reception of these our said sisters there may be evidence of our consent, we have ratified the present Deed with our seals. This year of our Lord 1262 the sixteenth of the Kalends of April. Given at Helfta ” (1).

Foundations were not unfrequently proposed to this fervent community. Once, but we are not told at what time, St. Gertrude relates that there arrived at the monastery a nobleman who wished to have a certain number of the nuns to make a foundation in another place. There

(1) *Praef. ad Leg.* vi.

appears to have been some idea of the Saint herself going, for she was ever ready to do the will of God, and although she was physically unfit for the work, yet, full of zeal for the Divine praise which would thus be extended, she threw herself on her knees before the Crucifix in fervour of spirit and offered herself to God for " His everlasting praise " and to perfect His will in her both in her body and soul (1). We do not know whether this foundation was ever made, but we see very clearly that the end of a monastery could be nothing else to these children of St. Benedict but a new choir for the praise of God.

Meantime the monastery at Helfta continued to flourish, and the great families of the country thought they could do no nobler work than to beautify it. In 1265 Burchard of Querfurt, son-in-law of the founder, completed a chapel erected in honour of SS. John the Baptist and the Evangelist which was to be the resting place of his family after death; and it would seem from the revelations of St. Gertrude that it was con-

(1) *Leg.* III. 64.

secrated, for the feast appears to have been kept annually (1).

The exterior life of the nuns at Helfta, like the interior life of each individual, had its lights and shades. The times were times of war and of disturbance, and the monastery, for the very reason that its members were recruited from the great families around, came in for all the fortunes of the petty wars so continually fought. When danger menaced the nuns, their immediate recourse was prayer, and wonderful were the answers they received. St. Teresa said once " This is not a time to pray to God for trifles ", and indeed the nuns of Helfta had serious causes for prayer even about temporal things, and this not occasionally, but frequently.

Very often when great danger threatened, public prayers, sometimes of great length, were imposed on the community, and it was not unusual for them in their simple faith to confide the offering up of these prayers to St. Mechtildis. Once, we are told, in a certain necessity of the monastery, as the community gave the Psalter

(1) *Leg.* iv. 59.

which they had recited to the Handmaid of God to offer to Christ, she said to her Angel: " Beloved Angel, who knowest even as thou art known, whilst I know but in part, offer I pray thee, this prayer to thy King, whom thou dost serve in beauty and in delights ". To whom her angel thus replied: " By no means do I know as I am known ; for He who made me knows me as the highest wisdom, as the highest power, as the highest love ; but I know Him only as a creature can. I rejoice more in presenting thy message to God than a mother could rejoice in the honour and riches of her only son ". Then the Angel presented with much reverence and joy to God, in what appeared to be a snow-white cloth, the prayers that had been offered, represented as living larks. Some of them seeming as if they would fly away, rose in the air, but again returned to their former place. And our Lord said to her: " As often as persons recite these prayers, so many times will I look upon them with the eyes of My mercy, and I will incline towards them the ears of My clemency " (1).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* .iv. 22.

The Psalter of which mention has been made was recited thus :

“ In the first place, we must ask on bended knees pardon for our sins, in the following manner : ‘ I offer Thee, O most sweet Lord Jesus, this psalter to Thy praise and glory, uniting it with that celestial praise with which the all-glorious Trinity alone gives Itself perfect praise, imparting it also to Thy blessed Humanity, to Thy glorious Mother and all the angels and saints, and seeking again the abyss of Thy Divinity whence it flowed forth. And in the name of the whole world I adore, salute and bless Thee, and give Thee thanks for the love with which Thou didst deign for our sakes to become man, and be born, enduring for thirty years hunger and thirst, fatigue and suffering; and moreover for that great love with which Thou didst leave Thyself in the Blessed Sacrament ; beseeching Thee that Thou wouldst unite to the merit of Thy most holy life and conversation, this psalter which I offer for the souls of (whether you wish to pray for the living or the dead) and that Thou wouldst supply from the abundance of its merits and perfectly atone for their negligence and omission in praise, thanksgiving, love,

prayers, good works and homage which are Thy due, all of which through Thy grace they might have accomplished, and which they have either neglected entirely, or performed imperfectly or from unworthy motives'.

“ Secondly, having asked pardon for our sins on bended knees, we must say: ‘ I adore, salute and bless Thee most sweet Lord Jesus, and give Thee thanks for the great love with which Thou, the Creator of all things, didst deign for the sake of our Redemption to be taken prisoner by men, bound, betrayed, trod under foot, beaten, spit upon, scourged, crowned with thorns, condemned, and carrying Thine own cross didst undergo a most bitter death, being crucified naked and then pierced with the lance. And in union with this same love I offer Thee these my unworthy prayers, beseeching Thee, through the merits of Thy most holy Passion and death to utterly wash away the faults of thought, word and deed, that those souls for whom I pray may have committed; imploring Thee also to offer to God the Father all the cruel pains that Thou hast suffered in Thy body and soul, with all their merits and exercises to satisfy for whatever those souls stand indebted to Thee’.

“ Thirdly, stand and devoutly repeat the following prayer : ‘ I adore, salute and bless Thee, my most sweet Lord Jesus Christ and give Thee thanks for that love with which, having conquered death, Thou didst glorify our flesh by rising from the tomb, and ascending into heaven didst honour it by placing it at the right hand of God the Father: begging of Thee to make those souls for whom I pray partakers of Thy victory and glory ’.

“ Fourthly, having again implored pardon, say: ‘ Saviour of the world, grant us all salvation. Holy Mother of God, Mary ever Virgin, pray for us, and through the intercession of all the holy apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins, protect us from all evil and help us to exercise ourselves in all deeds of virtue, now and for ever more. I adore, salute and bless Thee most sweet Lord Jesus Christ, giving Thee thanks for all the graces Thou hast ever conferred on Thy glorious Mother and all Thine elect, in union with that gratitude with which all Thy saints give Thee thanks for Thy most holy Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection, beseeching Thee also through the united merits and intercession of this most blessed Virgin and all the saints, to

supply whatever is wanting in merit to those souls for whom I offer these prayers'.

“ Fifthly recite devoutly and in order the one hundred and fifty Psalms that compose the Psalter, adding after each verse the following prayer; ‘ Hail, Jesus Christ, Splendour of the Father, Prince of peace, Gate of heaven, Bread of life, Son of a Virgin and Vessel of the Deity ’. At the conclusion of each Psalm say on bended knees the following: ‘ Grant to them O Lord eternal rest, and let perpetual light shine on them ’. Then say, or have said one hundred and fifty Masses, or fifty, or at least not less than thirty, or communicate so many times instead. Also give alms one hundred and fifty times, or if this is not in your power recite for the conversion of sinners the *Pater noster* and the prayer *Deus cui proprium est. . . . suscipe deprecationem nostram, et quos delict. etc.* Perform also one hundred and fifty acts of charity, these being any kindness done to one’s neighbour for the love of God, whether it be a prayer offered for him or some assistance rendered him, or even only a kind word or thought ” (1).

(1) *Leg. v. 19.*

Another time the Saint betook herself to prayer in order to stave off some trouble from the monastery, and our Lord said to her: "Thou art My joy and I am thine; and as long as thou livest, and I continue to have the delight of My Heart in thee, such misfortunes will never happen to this cloister". And she answered: "Ah, my Beloved, why dost Thou speak thus to me when there is nothing good in me?" Who answered her: "If honey is mixed with vinegar it loses its sweetness, but My sweetness can never be so mixed as to lose its sweetness". "Consider, therefore, O my beloved", says her biographer St. Gertrude "the value of the assiduous prayer of the just, what graces God gives to men on account of His friends. Greatly indeed are Thy friends honoured, O God, never can they be sufficiently sought after and loved, and revered; often do they mitigate Thine anger over us, many times do they heap benefits upon us. Who will give", she continues in her anguish at the remembrance of the death of her holy and beloved friend: "Who will give water to my head, and a fountain of tears to our eyes (Jer. ix. 1) that we fitly bewail the loss of such an intercessor; for love of her the Almighty

God has many times spared us, for how many times have we not experienced the effect of her prayers? For she, burning with divine love, inflamed others with the same fire and by her example incited many to the love of God. Alas! when shall we again find such an one, now that she has entered into the powers of the Lord, has been introduced into the bride-chamber of the great King, and rests under the shadow of her Beloved?" (1) It would be difficult to find a more beautiful eulogy written by one saint of another. "We walked together in the house of God," says David, "with consent. I grieve for thee, my brother Jonathan, exceeding beautiful, and amiable to me above the love of women. As the mother loveth her only son, so did I love thee". And O the sense of loneliness when death separates such friends. The one, gone inside the veil, entered into eternity, into the fulness of peace, the fruition of her Beloved; the other left to carry on the battle, to wait.

Again, when St. Gertrude in her quality of biographer of St. Mechtildis has given another example of the wonderful power of her prayer,

(3) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 13.

she breaks out thus : “ O wonderful and divine condescendence of loving kindness , which so generously and with such and so great consolations comes to the assistance of the miserable ! I counsel you whoever you are who read or hear read the consolations which God has granted to men by His beloved, to strive to obtain these for yourselves ; because God has revealed that He is pleased exceedingly when one desires for himself the favour accorded to another. Numbers of persons received from her many great spiritual consolations ; but she always put these things before them in the form of instruction , and sometimes told of things as if she had learnt them from others. May God be for ever blessed who established with Himself such a mediator for us, who by her continual prayer, her continual teachings and consolation showed herself to be a loving mother of those in trouble ” (1).

It was not in spiritual blessings only that the power of our Saint’s intercession was felt, she obtained temporal goods as well. It was a serious matter for the nuns, who held so much

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 38.

land under cultivation, if rain failed. Once the drought had continued so long that the whole country round was suffering; St. Mechtildis set herself to pray for rain and our Lord answered her thus: " This very day will I give you rain ". But she judging by the cloudless and bright sky, was doubtful, until towards evening the rain began to fall in great abundance (1).

Although St. Mechtildis devoted herself so entirely to the Divine office, she seems to have had a rather marked attraction for vocal prayers. For instance, it is to her we owe the devotion of the recitation of the five thousand four hundred and sixty *Pater noster*. This devotion is in honour of the most sacred wounds of our Lord Jesus Christ, and was revealed to the Saint by our Lord Himself. Once when the community had completed this offering, dividing the number of Our Fathers amongst themselves, they asked St. Mechtildis to present it at the throne of grace. And our Lord appeared to her with outstretched hands and open wounds, and said to her: " When I hung on the cross all My wounds gaped, and each one called on God the Father for

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 12.

the salvation of mankind; and in like manner unto this day do they send forth a cry to induce Him to mitigate His anger towards sinners. And this I say to you, that never could a beggar so rejoice at receiving an alms which he has gained by persistent clamour; as I exultingly accept a prayer offered in honour of My wounds. And this also I tell you, that such a prayer can never be said with fervour and devotion without putting the person who prays in a state of grace". Then she said to Him : " My Lord in what way dost Thou wish such a prayer to be said ? " He answered : " Such words should be said attentively, not only with the mouth, but with the heart; and after every five *Pater noster* commend them to Me ". And then it was made known to her that at the end of each five she was to add these words : " O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, receive this prayer in that most excellent love wherewith Thou didst suffer all the wounds in Thy most holy body ; and have mercy upon me and upon all sinners, and on all the faithful both living and dead " (1). Such is the origin of a devotion practised to this day

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 56. •

in many Benedictine monasteries, a devotion offered up for the good of that soul amongst those who have said the prayers, who will be the first to die; and when she has entered into her rest, the five thousand, four hundred and sixty Paters are again said for the same intention; thus there is ever laid up a treasure ready for the unknown soul destined to be the first to go forth from the monastic family on earth, to join that large assembly in the next world.

The nuns at Helfta lived in the Liturgy and grouped all other devotions round it. It suggested to their minds or brought to their memories other acts of devotion; and we find that there is hardly a devotion now approved in the Church, and very often looked upon as modern, which their love for the Sacred Humanity had not suggested to them. Take for instance that of the Sacred Face and the Sacred Heart: the revelations of both St. Mechtildis and St. Gertrude are full of them. In those of the former we read: " On Sunday *Omnis terra* when the veil on which is impressed the Sacred Face of our Lord Jesus Christ is exposed for veneration in Rome, a vision was vouchsafed to her " (1). . .

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I. 10.

After having related it, her biographer, St. Gertrude, adds: "Let us therefore hasten with desire, and venerate that most sweet Face which will be to us in heaven all that a loving soul can desire. This handmaid of Christ", she continues "taught her sisters how they could go spiritually to Rome on the day that this holy relic is exposed, on the second Sunday after the Epiphany", a practice instituted by Pope Innocent III. in the year 1223. They were to recite as many *Pater nosters* as there are miles between the two places. Arrived in Rome they were to confess their sins to the Sovereign Pontiff, that is to God, in prayer, receiving from Him the remission of all their sins, and receive the Communion of the Body of the Lord on Sunday. Then at some convenient time they were to pray in words which she dictated to them, and suppliantly adore the venerated image. It was after they had carried out her directions that she had the vision referred to above of our Lord's favourable acceptance of the devotion.

References to the Sacred Face occur very frequently in the revelations of St Mechtildis, and it is very evident that she loved to think

on the features of Him who was "the most beautiful amongst the sons of men".

But her devotion to the Sacred Heart, the source of all the treasures of divine and human love poured out upon her by her Spouse, was even deeper. St. Bernard, who had died a century before in the year 1153, had spoken of that Divine Heart in words so glowing and so beautiful that they have been chosen by the Church as the lessons of the second nocturn of its feast. "Now that we have once reached the most sweet Heart of Jesus, and since it is good for us to be here, let us never allow ourselves to be separated from Him of whom it is written: 'They that depart from Thee shall be written in the earth'. But what is the portion of those who draw nigh unto Thee? Thou Thyself hast said to them: 'Rejoice, for your names are written in heaven'. Let us therefore draw nigh unto Thee, filled with gladness and joy as we remember Thy Heart. O how delightful and sweet it is to find a dwelling in this Heart".

The devotion of St. Mechtildis to the Sacred Heart of our Divine Lord shows itself in almost every page of her Revelations. In it she sees the Majesty of God enthroned; Father, Son and Holy

Ghost operate through it on the soul (1). To her it is the organ of praise (2), the messenger of thanksgiving (3), the voice of prayer, the trumpet of instruction (4). It is a burning furnace melting the soul, and assimilating it to itself (5); a breath that inspires the chantress to sing the praises of God (6), a chain of love that unites the virgin to her Divine Spouse (7). It is the sweetness of all the saints (8), the source of their fervour (9), the pledge of their glory (10). To St. Mechtildis it is her dwelling place (11), her chamber (12), her nest (13), her home (14). It is the treasure house

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- (1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I. 19.
 - (2) *Ib.* I. 1. 2, 16, II. 35.
 - (3) *Ib.* I. 1, II. 17, 32.
 - (4) *Ib.* IV. 40.
 - (5) *Ib.* I. 19. etc.
 - (6) *Ib.* III. 7.
 - (7) *Ib.* I. 31.
 - (8) *Ib.* I. 23.
 - (9) *Ib.* I. 22.
 - (10) *Ib.* I. 19.
 - (11) *Ib.* I. 19, II. 6. III. 1.
 - (12) *Ib.* II, 33.
 - (13) *Ib.* II, 24.
 - (14) *Ib.* I. 20, II. 25.

of the Divinity. Into it she pours all her love (1), her hope (2), her sorrow (3); and from it she receives consolation (4), grace (5) and blessing (6). From our Lord she hears the assurance, that nowhere out of that Divine Heart shall her everlasting dwelling be appointed (7).

Her devotion to the Sacred Passion was very deep and tender, and one very beautiful instruction given to her by our Blessed Lord on a certain Good Friday is too full of practical instruction for those consecrated to a life of close following in the footsteps of Him who, humbling Himself "was made obedient unto death even the death of the cross" to be omitted (8). On that day she said to Him: "O my most sweet God, in what manner can we make up to Thee for having been on this day taken and bound for our sal-

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* I, 20, 25, 26.

(2) *Ib.* IV, 69.

(3) *Ib.*, II, 66 etc.

(4) *Ib.* I. 19, II, 27, 36.

(5) *Ib.* I, 2.

(6) *Ib.* I, 19.

(7) *Ib.* I, 18.

(8) *Ib.* I. 18.

vation ? ” And He answered her : “ Let a man be bound for love of Me willingly and freely by the bond of obedience ”. And she said : “ What homage can be given Thee for the vile spittle and blows of the Jews ? ” And He answered : “ I say to thee in truth that all those who despise their superiors spit in My face. If therefore any one wishes to make reparation to Me for this indignity let him honour his superiors ”. The soul said : “ What thanksgiving wilt Thou accept , O most loving One, for the blows which Thou didst receive ? ” He answered : “ The faithful and strict observance of the customs and constitutions of his Order ”. And the soul enquired : “ What homage , O most faithful Friend, can be given to Thee for the suffering Thou didst endure when the crown of thorns was pressed upon Thine imperial head so that the crimson blood covered that beauteous face on which the angels desire to look ? ” And He answered her thus : “ That one who is tempted should resist strongly with all his strength ; and as many temptations as he overcomes in My name, so many precious gems will be put into My diadem ”. Then the soul said : “ And what, O most wise of Masters,

what can be done to atone for the white garment with which Thou wert clothed, and in which Thou wert mocked ? ” And the Lord answered : “ Let a man seek in his clothing nothing ornamental or precious, but only that which is necessary ”. And she said : “ And what thanksgiving can be rendered for Thy cruel and barbarous scourging, O only Beloved of my heart ? ” And the Lord replied : “ That he continue with Me in perfect fidelity and patience, as well in adversity as in prosperity ” And the soul said : “ What O most Beloved, wilt Thou accept in reparation for Thy feet having been fastened to the cross ? ” And the Lord answered : “ That every desire should be towards Me ; and if he cannot feel desire, let him have the desire of having the desire, and I will receive the will for the deed. ”. And the soul said : “ And what for having Thy hands fastened to the cross ? ” The Lord replied : “ That a man should exercise himself in all good works, and avoid all evil for My sake ”. And the soul : “ What thanksgiving can be rendered to Thee, O only sweetness, for that wound of love which Thou didst receive on the cross for man, when love pierced Thy most sweet Heart with the dart of unconquerable love, whence

flowed for our salvation water and blood; and thus, vanquished by the greatness of Thy love for Thy Spouse, Thou didst die a death of love?" And the Lord answered: "That a man should conform his entire will to Mine, and that My will should content him in and above everything".

We may add here that amongst the practices observed at Helfta on Good Friday were those of going to Communion, and the burial of the Cross in the Sepulchre. We read that on one occasion the Saint, after having begged our Lord in the morning to bury Himself in her heart, heard the Blessed Virgin saying to her, just before Compline: "Receive my Son, and bury Him in thy heart". Immediately she beheld her heart in the form of a silver sarcophagus having a golden cover, and she understood the silver to signify purity of heart, and the gold that love which keeps and preserves God in the soul. When therefore she saw, as it seemed to her, Christ in her heart, He said to her: "Here shalt thou always find Me in thy heart: and behold, I give to thee the assurance of eternal life, and to all those for whom thou hast prayed this day" (1).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* i. 20, 25, 26.

More than this it is unnecessary to say of the devotions of St Mechtildis: they were the devotions of the Church and of the Order. The Blessed Trinity, the holy Mother of God, the Angels, the Saints, especially St. Benedict her glorious father, St. John the Baptist, St. John the Evangelist, St. Mary Magdalen, St. Bernard, St. Agnes and many others were the objects of her loving devotion; the next world and its inhabitants were more present to her mind than this: and most truly in her were the words of Holy Scripture verified, *Nimis honorati sunt amici Tui Deus.*

CHAPTER VII.

Monastery attacked by Gebhard, 1284. — He dies in 1285. — He is buried at Helfta, 1290. — Death of Sister Mechtildis, 1290, related by St. Gertrude and St. Mechtildis. — Visions of St. Mechtildis.

Even the spiritual joys to which those who have left all and have taken up their cross to follow Christ have a certain right, were not always to be the lot of the nuns at Helfta. Sometimes the quiet life of the Cloister was interrupted for one cause, sometimes for another.

In the year 1284 Gebhard, brother to Sophia of Mansfeld, one of the nuns who has been already spoken of, attacked the monastery and inflicted on it such grave injuries that he drew upon himself excommunication from Pope Martin IV. With a number of servants and followers of the worst description, he invaded the Cloister, heaped injuries upon the nuns, eating flesh meat on Good Friday, and otherwise behaving in an outrageous manner. We are not told what induced him to this barbarous act, but probably

it was one of those family quarrels so common among the German Barons, whose sisters and daughters formed a great part of the community, and were nearly always dragged into these feuds, as their monastery was built, endowed and constantly benefited by them.

Gebhard died the following year of a blow from a stone, and in 1290 his widow Irmengarde of Schwarzburg prevailed upon Abbess Gertrude to allow the body burial within the monastery he had injured, probably because his father Burchard had built a mortuary chapel there some years before for the members of his family.

About the year 1290 Sister Mechtildis, having lived in the community for twelve years and edified it by her holiness and supernatural gifts, died. Her death has been related both by S. Mechtildis and St. Gertrude, as well as some visions of which she was the subject; and no words could better describe this blessed passing away from earth, than those of her saintly sister biographers. St. Gertrude gives us more details, and is therefore transcribed first. She heads her account :

THE HAPPY PASSAGE OF M.
OF BLESSED MEMORY.

“ When Sister M. of blessed memory approached her end, and the writer and others prayed for her, she said amongst other things to our Lord : ‘ Why O most loving Lord, dost Thou not hear us praying for her ? ’ And the Lord answered : ‘ Her mind is so separated from all human things that she cannot be comforted by you in any human manner. ’ And she said to the Lord : ‘ On account of what judgement ? ’ The Lord answered : ‘ I have My secret now in her as formely I had it with her ’. And when she asked Him how the difficulty would be resolved, the Lord replied : ‘ My Majesty will enthrone itself in her ’. She asked : ‘ In what way will she die ? ’ He said : ‘ My Divinity will absorb her, as the burning sun absorbs a drop of dew ’. When she enquired why it was permitted that her external senses should wander, He answered : ‘ To show that I am working in her internally, not externally ’.

And when she said: ' Our own hearts should teach us that '. He answered: ' And how shall they receive this favour who rarely, if ever, enter into their own souls, where alone grace is poured forth? '

" After this the writer of this account prayed to the Lord that after death blessed M. might be glorified by miracles, as a testimony to the reality of her revelations, and to silence those who did not believe. Then our Lord holding a book in His hands, replied: ' When it is necessary, I subdue peoples and kingdoms to Myself by signs and wonders; but in this case, what is felt by those who have tasted of like outpourings of grace will convince them that they can give faith to such things without imprudence; but I will not tolerate those who speak against these writings, and pervert their sense: over these, as over others, I will prevail '. From these words the writer understood that our Lord is pleased with those who readily believe that He pours out His grace copiously on His elect, not on account of their merit, but the generosity of His own Divine Heart.

" When they anointed this same Sister M. of blessed memory, the writer, urged by her de-

sire, *ducta desiderio*, saw the Lord Jesus touch with His own hand her heart and say : ' When this blessed soul, dissolved from the body shall be absorbed in her source, I shall pour out copiously on all those present from affection, the torrent of My blessing , *fluctus mellae beatitudinis meae* '. Hence, when the aforesaid M. was in her agony, the writer with others was intent on prayer for a long time, and she understood that the Lord enriched with a triple blessing those present. The first was the accomplishment of their good desires; the second that He would be their untiring helper in labouring to overcome their defects; and these two graces would be obtained more easily in that place by the merits of the blessed M.; and the third favour was the blessing which He gave with outstretched hands to those who were present.

“ As the writer received these benefits with exceeding great gratitude, she beheld after a short delay, the Lord of hosts, the King of Glory , more beautiful than all the sons of men or angels, standing at the head of the dying sister whose breath, like to a rainbow flecked with gold, ascended towards the Divine Heart. She contin-

ued to enjoy this vision for a long time, while the psalms *Deus, Deus meus, respice in me* (Psalm. xxi) and *Ad Te levavi animam meam* (Psalm. xxix) were being read; at the end of the latter the Lord embraced His spouse with marks of tenderest love.

“ After this, when they read the suffrages, at the antiphon *Ut te simus intuentes*, the Virgin Mother, the descendant of a royal line, appeared clothed in a purple robe; she lovingly bent over the dying spouse of her Son, arranging with her delicate hands the head of the sick nun, so that her breath might go directly towards the Divine Heart. And when amongst other prayers they recited the *Ave Jesu Christe, Verbum Patris*, the Lord appeared transfigured with a marvellous light, His face shining like the sun in its strength. At which the beholder was overwhelmed with admiration and rapt out of herself, but returning to herself, she saw the effulgent Rose of heaven, that is the Virgin Mother, who in rapture at the union of her Son to His new spouse, was folded in His embrace. By this she understood that the happy union was completed, and the thirsty soul introduced into the full cellars, yea happily immersed in the

abyss of true beatitude, from which she would never come forth" (1).

So far the narrative is in St. Gertrude: let us now turn to that in St. Mechtildis, and remember that both were written by the former.

" A certain sister (she is named further on) who had devoutly served God in holy religion all the days of her life, began to be ill; and for her St. Mechtildis prayed earnestly. And she saw the soul as it were kneeling before the Lord, and He showed His rosy wounds to her: She saluted them in these words which the Saint had never before heard: *O salutifera vulnera dilectissimi amatoris mei Jesu Christi, salvete, salvete, salvete; in omnipotentia Patris qui vos dedit, in sapientia Filii qui in vobis sustinuit, in benignitate Spiritus Sancti qui in vobis opus nostrae redemptionis perfecit.*

" When she was about to receive Extreme Unction, and the community had assembled in the house where the sick nun lay, she saw two angels who carried ewers. By the water in them she understood to be signified mercy and truth,

(1) *Leg. v. 7.*

in which the soul was to be washed clean of all its stains, according to these words : *miser cordia et veritas praece dent faciem tuam* (Psalm. LXXXVI, 15). After this she beheld four angels coming and holding above the head of the invalid a crimson drapery, which she understood to mean the merit and dignity which the soul was to receive when this world was over ; for as long as the soul remains in the body, she cannot know what that glory is with which God will crown her in heaven. Then Mechtildis was filled with a great sadness, not seeing the Beloved of her soul appear, but only the angels, who could not console her for His absence. And when she sought Him with the eyes of her heart in one corner after the other, she at last found the desire of her soul standing in the midst of the house, robed in a pure white vestment ornamented with gold shields. The white colour signified the purity of the life of the sick person, but the shields the persevering patience with which she had borne many sufferings and infirmities for God. And He, in honour of His spouse, had adorned Himself in this way.

“ Then the Lord took the place of the priest near the bed, and the Blessed Virgin stood at

the head; and when the priests recited the Litanies, the Lord signed her head thrice with the sign of the cross, saying: 'I bless thee for the health of thy soul, and the sanctification of thy body'. When the Virgin Mary was named in the Litany, she raised the invalid, saying: 'Behold, my Son, I give Thee this Thy spouse to Thy eternal embrace'. And each of the saints on being invoked by name, prayed for her on bended knees to the Lord. After this all the saints surrounded her bed as in a circle, but the Virgins were the nearest to God. Extreme Unction having been given, the Lord said to His Mother: 'Behold I commend this soul to bear her into My presence unspotted'.

"And when the hour of her blessed passing drew near, and she was very nigh the end, Mechtildis moved with compassion prayed with even more earnestness to God for the dying nun. And she beheld, as it were, an innumerable army of saints approaching towards her. The Martyrs placed themselves at her head, and were clothed in red garments sewn with golden shields, and they said one to another 'Let us put in movement our shields'. And moving them, so sweet a sound came forth that the suffering of

the dying nun was changed into joy. Then the most loving Jesus stood before the bed, having His Mother near Him. Then that blessed soul, dissolved from the bonds of the flesh, took its flight joyously into the arms of the Blessed Virgin, delivered from all pain, and to be eternally crowned. But the Virgin Mary gave her to her Son, who receiving her with loving tenderness, made her repose on His breast until Mass had been celebrated, and the Paschal Victim offered for her.

“ And the Lord recommended to the person who saw all these things to get a Mass sung for her as soon as possible; which was done, and the Mass celebrated before Prime. The Lord, in honour of His new spouse, wore a white vestment adorned with eagles. The white signified the purity and chastity of the soul; the eagles her contemplative heart. When the Mass began, the great High priest and true Pontiff celebrated it. Upon the altar was laid a most precious treasure; that is all the good that the Son of God did on earth for the salvation of man, and which He offered to His heavenly Father for the soul, to supply what was wanting to her. Then the glorious Virgin Mary led the soul to

the altar, giving her a golden casket, where was laid up the treasure of all the good works which the Blessed Virgin had performed on earth, and also those which the deceased herself had done when in this world, that she might offer it for all her negligences. At the Gospel, the Lord receiving it from her hands, said to her: 'I promise thee, My beloved, that thy flesh which has been utterly consecrated to My service shall rise all glorious in the day of the final resurrection'.

"The soul vested as a bride had a ring on her finger, and the stone seemed in the likeness of a human face; and her heart shone like a brilliant mirror, and when the Paschal Lamb of God was sacrificed to His Father there shone a light of such brightness from the Heart of God that the soul was surrounded by it. Thus radiant with the Divine splendour, and perfumed with the wondrous sweetness of the Holy Spirit, endowed richly with all heavenly things, she became one spirit with God in an inseparable union.

"When the body was taken out to be buried, she heard the sweet harmony of the saints resounding in honour of the bride of the immortal King, and saying: 'Blessed art thou, and well

shall it be with thee, O Mechtildis, illustrious spouse of Christ; for thou shalt rejoice with the saints, and thou shalt exult with the angels throughout eternity'. Many torches with great flames were borne before the body, and they signified the good works which by God's grace she had performed, and which preceded the soul to her everlasting reward. After this the king of Kings and the Lord of Lords, receiving His bride embraced her. And she making use of her power over Him, took His hand and with it blessed the assembled community. Thus did He translate His beloved to the heavenly kingdom with ineffable joy, followed by the glorious army of the saints. And the saint saw this blessed soul standing in the presence of the ever venerable Trinity, brilliant with ineffable beauty. And the Lord bent down towards her as if He would embrace her, yet did not do so. Upon this she who saw these things wondered, and the Lord answered her: 'By a kiss is signified peace; and as in heaven the Pax is not given, but there reigns eternal peace, therefore the kiss of peace is unnecessary'. And turning to the soul He said: 'Arise and as a daughter in her father's house throw thyself into the arms of thy Father,

rue amplexus'. And she embraced Him with joy. 'By this embrace is signified union', said our Lord, 'for the soul is united to Me with the everlasting chain of indissoluble love' (1).

So ends the chapter in the revelations of St. Mechtildis of the death of Sister Mechtildis: but scattered in other pages of the same we find other details.

"When" says St. Gertrude the biographer of the Saint "Sister M. of happy memory died, she appeared to her. And she saw her in the form of a beautiful virgin, clothed in a green drapery, crowned with a golden crown, and standing in the midst of a great number of Virgins and Saints, who received her amongst them with great marks of affection; and she knew in spirit that the soul was waiting for her glorification, which would be at the moment when the Sacred Host is offered at Mass. Then the Lord wished to give Himself in a special manner to that soul, in order to compensate her for the number of times that she had been deprived of receiving the Body of Christ when on earth, on account of her infirmities. Whilst

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* v. 6.

they sang the offertory, *Domine Iesu Christe*, and no one came forward to offer the oblation for the poor soul, she saw the King of glory Himself, the Spouse of virgins, approaching God the Father. He offered all His divine works, His prayers, labours and the Passion of His most Sacred Humanity, with the glory of His most excellent Divinity, for the increase of the glory and joy of His new bride. Then the Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors, Virgins, all the orders of saints approached and did the same. And when the Sacred Host was offered up there appeared from the east a marvellous and ineffable light, which represented the glory of the Divinity, in which that blessed soul was rapt; and she was received into that most happy union of which we spoke above, that true and most sweet association and fruition of God, that full and superabundant reward of all labours, of which it is easier for the human heart to believe anything than to think or to speak anything about it " (1).

Another time St. Mechtildis desired to know

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* v. 3.

from God what a certain Dominican Brother, who had lately died and had been " an intimate and faithful friend " to the community, would receive in reward for the faithful heart with which he had loved God's gift in Sister Mechtildis; this gift being her grace of revelation. And she saw a stream flowing from the Divine Heart, which flowed over his soul, and she understood that this same fountain would flow over the soul of any one who loved the gifts of God in others, of which they themselves were destitute. And then there appeared Sister Mechtildis in the midst of great joy, and surrounded by ineffable glory and brightness. Full of wonder the Saint said: " Make me know, I pray thee, something of thy magnificent adornment? " Who replied: " You cannot understand, for I now wear as many ornaments as there are threads in an earthly vestment; and all these have I received freely from the Lord my Spouse ". By these words she understood that the saints attribute nothing to themselves of their merits and glory but ascribe them to divine mercy and grace (1).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* v. 7.

Again, in a revelation which this same Saint had of the saints praying to God for the community, she beheld amongst the Confessors her blessed Father St. Benedict, who held in his hand the pastoral staff, and gave to drink from a chalice to all those of his Order who were present: then the Virgins arose, and sweetly sang a new song, in which they sang of the community; and she beheld Sister Mechtildis, who stood before the Lord, and from His Sacred Heart came a ray which pierced her own, because of the special gift of love which had been hers (1).

It was in 1290 that St. Mechtildis received from our Lord the solemn pledge that in the great Day of Judgement she was to be among those who should hear the consoling sentence: Come, Blessed of My Father. The event is thus described: " On Wednesday after Easter, as she intoned the Introit in the Mass *Venite Benedicti Patris mei*, she was filled with unusual joy, and said to our Lord: ' O that I were one of those happy souls who are to

(1) Ib. iv. 8

hear that sweet sentence.' Our Lord replied: 'Rest assured that thou shalt, and I will give thee My Heart in pledge thereof; and the day on which I redeem my promise, thou shalt give it back in witness to Me. I give thee likewise My Heart for a house of refuge, that at the hour of thy departure thou mayest find rest in My Heart alone' '' (1).

This marvellous gift was one of the first in the long series of extraordinary graces bestowed on the Saint. From this time dates her ardent devotion to the Sacred Heart; and almost on every occasion when our Lord afterwards appeared to her, He brought her a new gift from His Heart; so that she herself was accustomed to say, that if all the benefits that came to her from the loving Heart of God were written down, they would require a volume larger than the Choir book for Matins (2).

About all these visions with which not only St. Mechtildis, but so many others of her community were favoured, we can only say to those

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* II. 19.

(2) *Ib.*

who find them a difficulty: In what else but in earthly language could such scenes be described and how else could we who are earthly understand? Has not St. John the Evangelist given us in the Apocalypse a distinctly material description of heaven, and was not our Lord's own Language and teaching largely made up of parable?



CHAPTER VIII.

Illness of Abbess Gertrude. — St. Mechtildis. —
Grief of the nuns for the sufferings of their
Abbess. — Her virtues are praised by our Lord.

Abbess Gertrude had ruled the monastery of Helfta for forty years, although at the time of her death she was only fifty eight: for she had been elected, as has been already mentioned, when she was nineteen. During those years she had done great things for her daughters, both as regards the spiritual and temporal welfare of the house. She seems never to have forgotten the words addressed to her on the day of her abbatial Benediction, when the Bishop having enthroned her said: *Accipe plenam et liberam potestatem regendi hoc monasterium et congregationem eius, et omnes quae ad illius regimen interius et exterius spiritualiter et temporaliter pertinere noscuntur.* We shall see in the accounts left us of her last illness and death, that, added to her great mental gifts, was a personal holiness of an unusual character.

At the time of her death, which occurred, after an illness of five months, before Lent in the year 1291, St. Mechtildis was ill suffering from violent and continued headaches; and her grief for her sister's illness was softened to her, as our Lord allowed her to see the soul of her sister whenever she wished (1). We have an indication of how little credulity there was in the community in regard to supernatural favours; for we are told that, as the Saint suffered from violent headaches and consequent want of sleep, they doubted the truth of her assertion that God had so favoured her. Indeed, up to the time of Abbess Gertrude's death, the Saint kept secret the marvellous graces with which she was favoured, fearing that while her own sister was Abbess, they would find a more ready credence than would those of an ordinary nun: the death of Gertrude marks therefore the beginning of the publicity of her revelations; up to then St. Gertrude and the Abbess had been almost the only confidants of such favours.

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* II. 26.

St. Mechtildis, speaking of her beloved sister and mother, puts before us a lovingly drawn picture of her high moral and mental qualities. Her purity of soul from early childhood was such that she could never bear to hear a word which, in the slightest degree, cast a shadow of stain upon her heart; she was as it were a very mirror of virtue, knowledge and piety, fervent and devout towards God: she had drunk in of His loving tenderness for souls; and so, while earnest in self-mortification, looking on herself as the last and least, she was ever thoughtful for others. Uniting thus so many spiritual gifts with a rare discretion and wisdom, which had been displayed even in childhood, she was chosen by the community, when only nineteen, as Abbess of the monastery. She discharged this weighty office with sweetness and prudence, and edified all who knew her, her lovable gracious ways endearing her to all; and she was venerated as one very near to God, and loved as a Mother.

She was exemplary in her love of holy Poverty, and would not allow any superfluities in temporal things, either for herself or her nuns; this spirit of poverty led her to be very

careful of the goods of the monastery, remembering the words of St. Benedict that they shall be treated as the very vessels of the Sanctuary. She was also scrupulously tidy or orderly, and with her own hands would replace anything she found where it should not be, and in humility she would many a time assist in the most menial work, especially if anything had to be done in common. She swept the cloisters, and often was alone at such work till, inspired by her example or her winning words, the nuns hastened to her assistance (1).

Her care for the sick was like a reflection of our Lord's own tenderness; she never allowed a day to pass, however busy she might be, without visiting them one by one, asking them what they wanted, soothing and comforting them with loving attentions. Learning during her own last illness that one of her children had been obliged to take to her bed, she, although she was then unable to walk a step, suffering intense pains in her leg, and had lost her speech, shewed by signs that she desired

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* VI. 2, 6.

to go to see the sick nun; her attendants seeing it carried her to the the invalid's cell, and the hardest and coldest heart must have melted at the sight of her silent sympathy and tender pity, touchingly expressed by signs and loving looks (1).

Her two loving children, St. Gertrude and St. Mechtildis, tell us how devoted she was to the study of Holy Scriptures, and how anxious that the nuns should share this devotion; she exhorted them to learn them by heart, and to enable them to do this she procured all the good books she could find, or had them copied. She laid stress on teaching young girls to love study, and used to say that were that neglected, and the Holy Scriptures no longer understood, Religion itself would be lost: she was therefore strict in making the younger and less instructed among the community study diligently, and provided them with competent mistresses.

Her many occupations did not prevent her from giving herself much to prayer; her devotion and fervour were great, she rarely prayed

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* vi. 1.

without shedding tears; she was peaceful and tranquil in mind, and whilst in prayer her heart was so free and disengaged from all care and preoccupation, that when called to the parlour or to attend to business, as she often was, she no sooner returned to her prayer than she found all the same purity of devotion as before the interruption, leaving God for God. She had formed such a habit of prayer and union with Him that in her old age, when her strength and her mind were partly weakened, and she had lost the power of speech, her Communions were made with the greatest reverence and devotion, and with abundant tears as had been her wont all her life.

“ Like a marvellously beautiful rose, ” says St. Gertrude (1), “ she shed around her the sweet perfume of all these, and indeed of every virtue blooming before God and man in all heavenly loveliness, ” and happily governed the monastery for forty years and eleven days, as her children with loving accuracy record, when she was seized with apoplexy; after

(1) *Leg.* v. 1.

suffering much for more than a year she lost the power of speech; her sister St. Mechtildis believing her death to be very near, prayed with all the fervour of her ardent love that our Lord would do with her according to the good pleasure of His will, and the needs of her soul. "All who have known her" says St. Gertrude again, "can understand how the arrow sent from the hand of the Almighty to draw to Himself out of the field of earthly poverty and misery this noble soul rich in the fruits of virtue, pierced the souls of her children," to the very marrow for she adds: "We do not believe that in all the universe could be found another upon whom had been showered so rich a benediction of natural and gratuitous or even acquired gifts, as far as regards God". Her sister once accusing herself as for a sin, of the pleasure she took in being with her, fearing lest nature had too great a share in her love for her, consulted our Lord about it, and was given this answer: "You have committed no sin, for all her senses and all the motions that might lead her towards sin have lost their power. I have brought her to such a state that she cannot displease Me in any thing, and more than this;

nowhere unless it be in the Sacrament of the Altar will you find Me more really and surely than in her and with her. In her I find the most perfect conformity to My actions and virtues. ”

We may well imagine then what the grief of the nuns must have been as they were forced to realise that this incomparable Superior and Mother must soon leave them orphans. She had received and trained many more than a hundred persons in the monastic life, and her children testified of her, that she so made herself all to all, and cherished them with such maternal love that each thought herself the best beloved, nor could it be said that she showed any preference for one more than another, and it was difficult to distinguish those among them who were related to her by natural ties. Her manner was so gentle and winning that when in duty bound to reprimand a nun with severity, she would directly after in the very place speak as kindly and sweetly as though no fault had been committed. It was the same at Chapter, when necessary she would give a severe reproof, but when it was over, the delinquent would be sure of finding a kind

reception. She was never known to be severe upon any one without reasonable cause, or to give pain through any fault of character. There was not one of the young nuns but could go to her in all confidence to find help in any trouble. She attracted little children who were received into the monastery, by her loving manner, and they soon attached themselves to her more than to their own parents. With these she was indulgent, with young people she was ever holy and discreet, with older ones wise and very winning. "In short" says St. Gertrude "she was such and so great, and ruled herself and those under her in so praiseworthy a fashion, that if I dare say it, there seemed never to have been her like, nor could be again."

Once when St. Gertrude was praying for her, our Lord said: "I sometimes love to see My chosen one preparing gifts for Me, and then I give her pearls and flowers of gold: the pearls are her senses, the flowers the leisure moments, when she can prepare the choicest ornaments, for when she has time she applies herself to her office as fully as she can, anxious so to arrange all that can tend to keep up or in-

crease the monastic spirit that, after her death, her orders and example may abide like a firm pillar to sustain it to the eternal praise of My Name. But if she sees that this work is injurious to her health, she gives it up at once, and leaves it to Me to accomplish. It is this fidelity that touches My Divine Heart ” (1).

(1) For the quotations in this chapter, and in the following chapters IX. and X. cf *Leg. v. l. Lib. Sp. Gr. VI. l. - 9.*



CHAPTER IX.

Patience and resignation of Abbess Gertrude in sickness. — Her death.

During the earlier days of her illness Abbess Gertrude grieved very much at not being able to do any thing with her hands, fearing that she was wasting her time, for during her life she was never known to be idle, but was always employed either in intellectual or manual work. Turning in her wonted humility to St. Gertrude, whose answers gave her more comfort than any other, she asked some consolation from her, begging her to consult our Lord about it, and He gave her this answer: “ My Heart full of goodness accepts gladly the patience with which My chosen one bears her inability to work, and her readiness to further the life of religion as soon as her illness allows of it, and she can do it without injury to her health. ”

Another time she desired to resign her office of Abbess, thinking that she could not exercise it as she would for the good of the community. She again asked St. Gertrude to be her intermediary and to enquire what was God's will for her. He vouchsafed the following answer: " By this illness I consecrate My spouse in order to make in her My dwelling, even as a bishop sanctifies the church by consecration. The church during such a function is locked to keep out seculars, so by this illness I enclose her that her senses may admit no outside things, which although small, yet disquiet the heart and prevent its being altogether Mine. In the Book of Wisdom I have said ' My delights are to be with the children of men. So I use this illness as a sacrament by which to live wholly with her, as it is written: ' The Lord is nigh to those whose hearts are afflicted.' I have adorned her with her good intentions and goodwill, that I may dwell in her as a king who retires to the innermost part of his palace there to be at rest, and I take My delight in her for a while here ere leading her to the joys of heaven. I have left her senses partly free that I may speak

through her, and make known My will to her subjects. To the children of Israel I gave the ark as an oracle in which they might honour Me. Let her keep the manna in herself like the ark; that is the love and the words which are the consolation by which she encourages those under her. She shall also have the Tables of the Law; that is she shall prescribe or forbid at her pleasure and as she thinks fit. She shall hold the rod of Aaron for the correction of the self-willed and for the imposing of penances, deciding all promptly in her mind. I can, no doubt, Myself correct what is left uncorrected, either by speaking interiorly or by sending trials, but the correction which I give through her will increase her merit. And should there be any whom she reproves who will not amend, she will lose nothing, since she has done what she could. Man may plant and man may water, but only I can give the growth ”.

It seemed that the love of God and of souls was so much a very part of her being, that as soon as the name of God was mentioned in her hearing, however ill she might be, all sign of suffering passed, and she looked as happy as though she had no pain. She insisted

on going to Mass as long as it was not absolutely impossible, even when one leg was half paralyzed, and the other on which she leant gave her torture however gently it was touched, but she let no one know how intense her suffering was, fearing to be kept from Mass. Her Communion were made with abundance of tears, and once we read she was troubled lest sometimes omitting them together with prayers and other regular exercises she might be acting from negligence or sloth. On the other hand not being able through illness to prepare for Holy Communion as had been her wont, she feared to communicate unworthily. Our Lord Himself consoled her by the lips of St. Gertrude, saying: "When for My sake she abstains from Communion or other exercises which she would gladly fulfil were she able, My own goodness will bestow on her of its wealth what she refused to herself, for all the graces of the Church are Mine to bestow as I will."

With the scrupulous delicacy of a soul in which all virtue found its place, she feared there might be wrong where there was none, and was pained and grieved that those who waited on her should lose their time, for so

she deemed it, seeing they could give her no real alleviation or remedy.

But God who allows no one to be tempted beyond his strength, gave her comfort from the lips of St. Gertrude as He had often done before, and said: " She shall be served with reverence and kindness, with diligence and joy for love of Me, and for My glory, because I, God who dwell in her, have established her as head of the Community. Therefore all are bound to do her service even as the members to their head. Let her then rejoice that through her I increase the merit of My spouses, for all they do for her in the way of love, of word or deed I will recompense as done for Me. "

As she advanced in years Abbess Gertrude suffered very much from excessive corpulence, and was afflicted moreover in many other ways. For twenty two weeks before her death she was so utterly bereft of the power of speech that she could only utter two words: *Spiritus meus* which she repeated again and again, making efforts to express herself, as her attendants often found it very difficult to know what she wished to say. Seeing this and that those about her often did the exact con-

trary of what she desired, like a meek lamb she was silent, watching them doing the very things she did not want; and would sometimes smile, but never showed any impatience or vexation, bearing it all with the most admirable patience and gentleness, our Lord so dwelling in her and possessing her, that He ruled according to His good pleasure by His sweet spirit all that she did. On one occasion as she kept repeating only these two words, her sister said to her: "Who is your spirit, what order of angels is he?" To which she answered without difficulty: "My spirit is a Seraph."

Her zealous fidelity in keeping the Canonical Hours was touching and edifying: she would at once interrupt her sleep or her meals as soon as the time for an Office came, and the last time she was heard to say *Spiritus meus* was at the Hour of Compline, and directly after she fell into her agony.

Her sister St. Mechtildis one day entreated our Lord to remember with what fidelity and care the Abbess had been in the habit of urging frequent Communion upon her daughters, by gentle persuasion or if needful by reproof, bidding them bring thither loving hearts.

“ And now ” added the Saint in her loving anxiety, “ that her sickness prevents her from receiving Thy adorable Body, deign to give Thyself to her as becomes Thy royal bounty. ” He replied: “ I have given her Myself as her Spouse, her most faithful Friend and her only Consoler. ” “ How, dear Lord ” replied her sister, “ is it that Thou art her only Consoler while yet she seems to take pleasure in earthly things, and is pleased at receiving little earthly presents? ” “ Hast thou not noticed, ” answered the Lord, “ that when not understanding what she wants, you and others do just the contrary to her wish, she smiles with as much sweetness as if you had done her great service. Understand then that she is so firmly grounded and rooted in Me, that she takes all that comes whether pleasant or painful in exactly the same manner, with exactly the same tranquillity ”.

About a month after her loss of speech she was one morning so ill that it was feared she was dying; the whole community assembled round her bed, the priest was sent for to anoint her in all haste, as it seemed that no time should be lost, when lo in their midst appeared our Lord in form as a bridegroom,

with arms open to embrace her. He looked tenderly upon her, always placing Himself before her whichever way she turned. St. Mechtildis was given to understand from this how great was His love for this chosen one, and His longing desire to take her to Himself when the time decreed for her deliverance from the body should come: it would even seem as if He would anticipate the time in this vision, for she lingered on for more than four months after this. Her sister enquired of our Lord how this venerable Abbess might attain to the merits of the canonized virgins who had shed their blood for the faith. Our Lord replied: " In the first year of her abbatial dignity, she united her will to Mine, and by My cooperation performed all her actions with such perfection, that she has obtained like merit with those virgins who wear the fairest crowns, and now as she has not ceased to grow in perfection in these years that followed, I have laid up for her an increase of glory proportioned to her merits. " How lovely is the rejoicing of the saints over the merits and the glory of each other. St. Mechtildis in a burst of exquisite joy cries out, " From this we can see with what brilliance of

glory this elect one of God, our most sweet mother is crowned. ”

On the feast of St. Libuin, November 12th, we read that the whole community united in fervent prayer to obtain through the merits of the Saint, her restoration to health. St. Gertrude not content with earnest entreaty, insisted and wrestled with the Martyr, but the reply seemed to come in strange form: “ When the King ” so it was said, “ is caressing His bride in the nuptial chamber, would it be fitting for one of the courtiers to interrupt him in order to ask him to send her away that the household might be consoled by her presence? So neither must we ask for the cure of one who is united to God by patience and goodwill, the marks of her love for the King of heaven. ”

At last came the day so long and joyously desired by this chosen one of God, and for which she had prepared and made ready by so many prayers; indeed for which her whole life may be said to have been a preparation. When her agony began our Lord appeared to come in person, as it were in haste and full of gladness to meet her. His Blessed Mother and St. John the Evangelist were on either

side of Him, and a great multitude of the court of heaven followed Him, chiefly the army of virgins dazzling in their whiteness. These seemed to fill the house all the day that her agony lasted, mingling with the nuns, who never left the room of the dying Abbess; plunged in deepest grief they deplored their loss with sighs and tears, and with fervent loving prayers commended to God the death of their cherished mother. Perhaps all cannot realise what the desolation of such a time is for a community, only those who know what spiritual ties can be could gauge the depth of such sorrow. The Lord Jesus approached the bed of His beloved one, and seemed to lavish such tokens of love upon her, that all the bitterness of death must have been made sweet to her. And when the Passion was being read beside the dying Abbess, as they came to the words: " He bowed His head and gave up the ghost ", our Lord, as though He could no longer restrain His love, bent over her, and opening His Heart with both hands, seemed as though He would enclose her in it. She continued in her agony all that day, but all through it was given her to bask in the divine tenderness of the

Sacred Heart which seemed to lie open before her like a " garden of fragrant flowers or a treasure of balmy and sweet aromatics. " The spirits kept coming from heaven to gaze on her, and they invited her to follow them singing this sweet melody; " Come, come, come Lady Mistress, the delights of heaven await thee. *Alleluia alleluia.* "

When at last the agony was over and " this brilliant sun who had cast around and far bright rays over earth's darkness, had set here below, and at the look of the Divinity this little droplet had returned to the deep from whence she came, her children left in darkness raised eyes of faith through the pathway of hope to the glory of their mother's beatitude, and thus were enabled, though with sorely wrung hearts and weeping many tears, to take glad part in her glorious celestial joys ". And while bewailing their own desolation they raised loud praises to heaven, at the same time commending their loneliness to their mother's love in the *Surge Virgo* intoned by St. Gertrude, who, St. Mechtildis being ill, as second Chantress took her place. St. Gertrude obtained the grace of entering more fully into her

joy, for when they had sung the words *Quae pausas sub umbra dilecti* they heard her say; “ It is not enough to say I rest under His shadow, it is in the very Heart of my Beloved that I sweetly and peacefully rest. ”



CHAPTER X.

St. Mechtildis beholds her sister Abbess Gertrude several times in vision. — Requiem Masses for her soul. — Counsels of the Abbess Gertrude to St. Mechtildis.

Soon after the Abbess Gertrude's death, her sister St. Mechtildis whilst engaged in prayer, beheld her soul brilliant in glory. St. Benedict, the Father and Patriarch of the Order, preceded holding a crosier in one hand, whilst with the other he embraced the blessed soul of his daughter the Abbess with loving veneration, and he led her thus before the throne of the adorable Trinity, and there with a loud voice and the loveliest melody he began to sing in praise and honour of this soul the responsory: " Who is she who comes like the sun. etc. Welcome My beautiful daughter ". He then besought our Lord on behalf of the community confided to her. Mechtildis beholding these things said: " What wilt thou send to thy children, my beloved sister? The blessed soul replied: " Tell them always to love the Beloved of my

heart and soul, with all their hearts, and may they never prefer any thing to His love, or even to the memory of Him ". Mechtildis spoke again : " Recommend us all to God, since I see you are happy ". She replied : " I commend my children to the place of my repose full of sweetness, where I abide most securely in the most sweet Heart of Jesus, the loveable ".

St. Mechtildis fearing she had done wrong in daring thus to salute a soul not canonized, turned in her perplexity to consult her Lord. He replied : " Thou hast done well and fittingly, for she is the honour of My omnipotence the splendour of My wisdom and the charm of My divine goodness ". Another seeing her in glory asked her what reward she had for having made a constant practice of repeating the Psalm *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes* especially on the Feast of the Resurrection: and in answer she was shown robed in splendid garments, adorned with stars, pearls and rubies. Then again Mechtildis spoke : " Now that you have such abundance of all wealth, what are you going to give the lay sister who waited on you so faithfully in your illness? " Touching one of the rubies she said : " Take her this

from me. The red colour of the ruby signifies the Passion of the immaculate Lamb. I will pray that she may patiently bear all contradictions ”.

While a Mass was being sung for her, St. Gertrude told our Lord all the bitterness and grief of her desolation, and He to console her said tenderly : “ Cannot I replace all I have taken from you ? Believe confidently that I who am goodness itself will be your consolation, and trust and believe that if with your whole heart you turn to Me, I will be to you all that which each of you regrets having lost in her ”.

At the first Mass on the day of the burial, during the Offertory Mechtildis offered for her sister’s soul in supplement of her own merits the most sweet Heart of Jesus Christ as it was in His Humanity full of all perfections. Our Lord accepted her offering as if it were a heart-shaped vase containing a gift of great price, and placing it in His bosom called the soul, saying : “ Come, dear virgin, come to Me and dispose of the gifts your children have sent you ”. At the Elevation the Blessed Virgin Mary lifting the soul in her arms brought her to the Saviour, who bent down and gave

her a most sweet kiss, and so let her taste what is His love for His Mother. As this took place at each of the Masses – and there were more than twenty sung for her – St. Gertrude wished to offer something of still greater price, that the merits of so loved a mother might be increased. She therefore made an offering of the filial love of Jesus for God His Father, as God, and Mary His Mother, as man. At this the Son of God rose and turning to God the Father, called the soul of the Abbess, saying: “Come hither My queen; here is something yet more precious they have sent thee”. The Abbess then called St. Gertrude by name and said to her: “I have received because of thee My daughter a special reward from God. For that I urged thee with fidelity and love for the glory of God in the affair thou knowest, the Heart of my well Beloved, like a melodious instrument, sings to me an endless song of love, and all the court give me glory for it. This song has power to give a sweet light to my eyes, a fragrant perfume to my senses, all except my touch, and that because of some slight negligence on this point, though my intention was good and for the sake of peace”. At the ele-

vation of the Sacred Host St. Gertrude offered It to atone for this negligence of her spiritual mother. The sacred Host then placed itself before the soul, but she could not touch it, for nothing that has been neglected can be completely made up in the next life.

When the body of this blessed mother was laid in the ground, each time the earth was cast upon the coffin, our Lord as if to confirm this benediction appeared to make the sign of the cross upon it, and when at the last the grave was filled in, the Virgin Mary with her delicate hand also made the sign of the cross upon the grave.

The burial over, as they began the Responsory *Regnum Mundi*, there appeared so great glory and joyful happiness in heaven that the sound was like the " shaking of every stone in a house ". Then appeared a circle of fairest virgins before whom walked the departed Abbess as though she were their queen: in one hand she held a flowering lily, with the other she led the nuns of her community who had been her children, and had already entered into glory. Amongst the souls who were admitted to heaven through the prayers and Masses offered for her,

or even through the virtue of her merits, was that of a lay brother of the monastery, who had been considered somewhat negligent in spiritual matters; and who had received great comfort from the merits of this saintly Abbess.

Also on the anniversary of the Lord Burchard, the Founder of the monastery, her sister, St. Mechtildis, saw her soul surrounded with a marvellous light and clothed in great splendour, his robes being of various colours and studded with many precious stones. Understanding the significance of these ornaments, she asked him whence he came by so many and various virtues. "I have not received so great grace", he answered, "by my own merits, but through God's mercy I am enjoying the virtues and merits of my beloved community. This robe of purple I received on the entrance of the Lady Abbess Gertrude, that magnificent queen.

On the thirtieth day after her death her sister was allowed to see her in a new and superexcellent glory; the glorious ranks of the heavenly princes formed a rampart round her, all having cymbals in their hands with which they sweetly accompanied the singing of the verse: *Laudate Deum in tympanis bene sonan-*

tibus etc. The soul was led during this concert to the throne of the King of Glory, and there Jesus, her Beloved, said to her: "Welcome, My dearest one". No longer able to restrain the overflowing sweetness which filled her heart, she broke forth in praise of her Beloved and her spouse, and sang: "My soul melteth etc.". Then the Cantor of Cantors made a like return to His chosen one, and to sing her praise, He the source and the end of all perfection, from the depths of the abyss of beatitude which He is, intoned this hymn in a voice of heavenly melody: *O Gertrudis, O pia*, the whole celestial choir then took it up softly singing; *Quam pium est gaudere de te O Gertrudis, prophetis compar.* St. Mechtildis understood by these words that her sister was receiving special praise because she had such ready faith, and had taken such delight in all the gifts of God. After this she was extolled for the spiritual teaching she had given her subjects, in the following words: *Apostolis conserta, Praelatorum gemma: fide et meritis egregia: pietate, misericordia, charitate ineffabilis; exulta hic et ante Deum.*

Her sister then begged to know what was the "melting" of which she spoke; the answer

was: "When the love of the Divinity pours itself into my soul, it is done gently yet with such force that the creature cannot contain it, but is as it were dissolved and melted, and thus flows back to Him from whom it came".

There is a lovely touch of nature in St. Mechtildis' next request. "Pray for your children who loved you so much on earth". "I do pray unceasingly for them" was the reply. "What message will you send them"? "Tell them I would have the sweetness of love which abides in my heart also dwell in theirs and in their minds". "What gift did you receive on your first entering heaven"? "The Lord God, my Creator, Redeemer and my Friend, taking me into Himself filled me with ineffable joy. He put robes upon me, He fed me with Himself, He has given Himself to me as a spouse and thus glorified me with honour unspeakable". "Indeed the glory in which our blessed mother", says St. Gertrude "appeared on this thirtieth day made all we had already beheld seem little. She shone with a special glory of God's bounty in recompense of the weariness and discomfort caused her by her excessive corpulence during her life. We also

saw a golden book in which were written all the instructions she had given to her subjects, and all the fruits which may be produced in the future by her words and example will be written there for her glory and reward ". The Saint beholding all these things asked what reward she would have for the pain she suffered in her right hand. The blessed soul replied : " With this hand I embrace my Beloved, and it is a priceless joy to me that Jesus deigns to use this arm as a necklace, and is pleased that it should embrace Him ". Her right side was covered with precious stones whose brilliance was reflected on the left side. The ornaments on the right signified her infirmity, and the reflection on the left, the reward she had obtained for having always united her will to God's. She was also rewarded in an especial manner as soon as she had breathed her last for her loss of speech.

While they sang at Matins on the anniversary of their beloved Lady Abbess of sweet memory, the Responsory, *Redemptor meus vivit*, her sister beheld her soul embracing the Lord Jesus with great joy and delight, while she sweetly sang 'to Him the same words.

A number of souls came to swell the glory of her festival, then all the souls of her community, both brethren and sisters, formed a circle round her; amongst these St. Mechtildis saw the soul of a brother who had died the same year: he was clothed in pure white with beautiful ornaments, by which she understood that the kindness and goodwill always shown by this brother to every one was thus signified. They sang joyfully, leading their different choirs: *O mater nostra* etc. From the Heart of Jesus seemed to come a large silver trumpet through which all their singing passed, drawing thence a most melodious harmony. The next day while Mass was being celebrated, it came to her sister's mind to wish, were she a powerful queen, to offer to God upon the Altar a golden statue richly robed for the soul of her sister.

Another time St. Mechtildis said to the Abbess: " My dearest sister what wilt thou that we specially observe "? " Humble submission, loving charity to each other and a true and faithful intention towards God in all things "; then she added: " Give thy whole heart to love, love every one; then the love of God and of all who have ever loved God

will be thine. Likewise if thou art humble, the humility of Christ and of all who have humbled themselves for His Name's sake will be truly thine. And if thou hast mercy on thy neighbour, the mercy of God and His saints will be thine and so with all the other virtues ”.

Such was the life, the death and the teaching of Helfta's second Abbess.



CHAPTER XI.

Gertrude of Hackeborn and St. Gertrude. — Abbesses of Helfta. — Abbess Gertrude. — Our Lord instructs St. Mechtildis on election of Abbess. — Abbess Sophia. — St. Mechtildis's vision of Burchard of Querfurt, and his wife, Countess Oda of Reinstein. — Deaths of two of the community.

Although to those who have studied the Revelations of SS. Gertrude and Mechtildis it may seem superfluous, yet to others it will be necessary to explain how impossible it is that the abbess Gertrude and the Saint whose Revelations are so familiar to us are the same person, and that only too often the incidents of the life of Gertrude of Hackeborn and those of St. Gertrude have been hopelessly confused. In trying to disentangle and make the real facts clear, it will be necessary to reproduce almost word for word part of the preface of Dom Joseph

Pasquelin, the learned editor of the Revelations of both St. Gertrude and St. Mechtildis (1).

The first editors of the writings of St. Gertrude, Lanspergius, Blossius and Tilman of Breidenbach were free from any misconception on the matter, but the excessive care of the first to make clear a certain passage which he thought ambiguous was perhaps one reason for the confusion between the two Gertrudes. The passage in the genuine text of the manuscript of the year 1490 in the library of Vienna reads: *Unde et orantibus pro ea saepius per istam in spiritu dedit responsa consolatorium verborum, ut ex consequentibus patebit.* Lanspergius in his edition of 1536 published at Cologne thinking to make the meaning clearer wrote thus: *Unde et orantibus illis pro ea saepius per istam Gertrudem in spiritu dedit responsa consolatoria, ut ex sequentibus patebit.* And this rendering was followed

(1) In a letter received from the Pere de Smedt S. J. Bollandist he says: "As regards St. Gertrude, the arguments of Dom Pasquelin in the preface of his edition of the Revelations of St. Gertrude and St. Mechtildis are very convincing. The great St. Gertrude and the Abbess Gertrude, sister of St. Mechtildis are two different persons".

by subsequent editors: yet it is abundantly clear from his *Epistola Apologetica* that Lanspergius recognised two Gertrudes, one the Abbess who was ill at the time of the revelation just referred to, the other indicated by the pronoun *istam* as is common all through the book; and to remove all doubt he distinguished this second by her name Gertrude. Tilman who also recognized the fact of the existence of the two Gertrudes, yet printed with his usual incorrectness and negligent editorship *orationibus illius* instead of *orantibus illis*, which has no meaning. Others who came after him, in order to make sense of the passage, changed the printer's mistake into a substantial error, introducing for the first time a new Gertrude, who was to be regarded as the author of the fifth book of the Revelations, while all the rest were to be attributed to the Abbess Gertrude. This mistake was copied and spread by those who translated the Revelations from Latin into various modern languages. The first who boldly made the assertion that St. Gertrude was an abbess was Arnold Wion O. S. B. author of the *Lignum Vitae* who is well known for his untrustworthiness.

That St. Gertrude whose revelations are

contained in the book called *Legatus Divinae Pietatis* or *Insinuationes Divinae Pietatis* is a different person from Gertrude of Hackeborn, the Abbess of Helfta, is proved by the following arguments :

I. St. Gertrude manifested her revelation concerning Adolphus of Nassau, the successor of Rodolph I., on the very day and at the very hour when he was elected, i. e. 7th May, 1292. Now the Abbess Gertrude died according to uncontested documents in 1291. She therefore could not have had this revelation, and the Gertrude who had it a year after the death of the Abbess Gertrude is the same who is the subject not only of the fifth book but of the entire work; for the revelation concerning the succession is inserted in the second chapter of the first book, which is the introduction to the whole. St. Gertrude, moreover, is said to have communicated this revelation to the Mother of the Monastery, i. e. the Abbess, who could not be the Abbess Gertrude lately deceased, nor evidently can the reference be to the Saint herself.

II. Saint Gertrude was never Abbess. The series of Abbesses of Helfta during this and a much longer period is ascertained, and is as follows :

- I. Kunegundis Halberstatensis 1229-1251.
- II. Gertrudis de Hackeborn 1251-1291.
- III. Sophia I. de Mansfeld 1291-1303.
- IV. Jutta I. Halberstatensis 1303-1310?
- V. Sophia II. de Friedburg 1310?-1337.
- VI. Lutgardis I. de Mansfeld 1337-1347.
- VII. Lutgardis? II. de Querfurt 1347.
- VIII. Oda de Hamersleben 1348?-1351.
- IX. Jutta II. de Stolberg 1351-1383.
- X. Mechtildis I. de Querfurt 1383-1409.
- XI. Sophia III. de Stolberg 1409-1459?
- XII. Mechtildis II. de Mansfeld 1459-146...
- XIII. Margarita 146.... 1474?
- XIV. Catherina de Wartzdorff 1496?-1527.

III. In the *Legatus* itself St. Gertrude is nowhere referred to as Abbess. The first part was written by the Saint herself, the second she dictated twelve years later, and the last part, comprising the first book and the last chapters of the fifth book, were added by some one after her death to complete the work. In all that she wrote about herself or dictated no allusion can be found to her at any time holding the government of the monastery. Even supposing that St. Gertrude in her humility pur-

posely avoided any reference of the kind, and that when she speaks of persons committed to her she means not those recommended to her prayers, but her subjects, how is it that in the chapters that were written in her praise after her death absolute silence is preserved as to her abbatial dignity? She is never called, like Gertrude, *Domina Abbatissa*, the *Lady Abbess*, or St. Mechtildis the *Domna Cantrix*, the *Lady Chantress* but is simply described by the pronoun *ista* or the like. The St. Gertrude whom the *Legatus Divinae Pietatis* names is, therefore, not the Abbess who ruled the monastery of Helfta for forty years, and was never invested with the dignity of abbess anywhere.

IV. We read in the manuscript of the Revelations of St. Mechtildis (wrongly attributed to St. Gertrude) that the Abbess Gertrude appeared to her sister Mechtildis after her death: on the other hand the Gertrude about whom the Legatus speaks assisted Mechtildis when she was dying, and after her death saw her soul in glory. This of itself proves the existence of the two Gertrudes.

V. All ancient historians are silent concerning a gift of revelation having been bestowed on

Abbess Gertrude. The *Legatus* certainly speaks in the highest terms of the venerable abbess, relates her holiness, her words and works, and describes her final glory in heaven, but does not say one word of her having the gift of revelation. Nor, again, does the *Liber Specialis Gratiae* which speaks even more fully about her.

These then are the principal reasons which prove to us that the Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn and St. Gertrude are two distinct persons living in the same community, just as there were St. Mechtildis of Hackeborn and Sister Mechtildis of Magdeburg, namesakes at the same time. Any one who wishes to see these arguments more fully developed may consult the preface of the Latin edition of the Revelations edited at Solesmes.

And now to return to our history. Abbess Gertrude was succeeded by Sophia of Mansfeld whose brother it will be remembered had done so much injury to the monastery a few years before; she only governed the community a few years, as we find that on account of her age she was obliged to resign and died, after St Mechtildis, in 1303.

It was at her resignation, on account of age as well as the suffering caused by violent headaches, that St. Mechtildis received instructions from our Lord as to the way in which the abess should be elected; and no doubt these were followed at the election of Abbess Sophia herself; they are as follows: "On that day on which you would elect the abess have the Mass of the Holy Spirit sung and let the whole community remain in prayer, no one excepted; and let them pray God that He Himself who knows all things before they are accomplished may inspire them to elect her who has been from all eternity destined to this office. Let there be chosen one of the community, wise and fearing God, to whom, after prayer, each one shall declare whom she elects, and this chosen person shall carefully write down what they say. When this has been done let seven persons be named, wise and fearing God, and let one of these be elected, all the community remaining in devout prayer until one has been chosen as abess according to God's good pleasure. If these seven cannot agree on one person let the matter be referred to the provost who will preside there in the place and power of God. The greater offices,

such as Provost and Prioress, may also be elected in this manner ” (1).

We know very little of the Abbess Sophia, but one sentence in the Saint's Revelations is pregnant with meaning; she was, she says “ truly according to the Heart of God ”. On one of the anniversaries of Burchard of Querfurt, grandson of the founder of the monastery, she, being Abbess, asked the Servant of God, almost as if giving her a command, to beg of God some knowledge concerning the state of his soul. And when the Saint hesitated for a long time, for it was never her custom to ask anything from Him but rather to wait until He vouchsafed to bestow whatever He chose upon her, she heard our Lord during the secret prayers at Mass saying to her: “ Fulfil thy obedience ”. She replied: “ I had not received this as a precept of obedience ”. But He taught her that her obedience was to be like His own and then she said: “ My Lord hear then the desires of Thy servant ”. Then she beheld the soul of the Count, and it was revealed to her that he was most especially

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* IV. 14.

rewarded for his humility of heart which had made him submit even to his wife; for his kind-heartedness, for he showed himself affable and benevolent to all men; for his mercifulness towards the poor and needy, and because he had given his daughter to the service of God with great devotion. Then the Saint said to the soul "What message do you send to your daughter?" And he answered: "Tell her to keep herself in entire fidelity to Him and to submit herself to His will who with entire fidelity has bowed Himself down to her to become her Spouse" (1). Then St. Mechtildis was given to see the soul of the Countess Oda of Reinstein, his wife and the mother of Abbess Sophia. She was in heaven in great joy because she had by her own free and benevolent purpose provided an annual alms to be given to the poor for the repose of the soul of her husband the Count.

The bodies of both still lie awaiting the resurrection not far from that of their daughter under the ruins of the monastery they loved so well.

(1) *Lib. G. Sp.* v. 15.

The loss of their Abbess was not the only sorrow the nuns had to suffer from death; only twelve days elapsed before one of the community was called to follow her, and the account of this new trial is so beautiful that it must be quoted in full.

“ On the twelfth day after the death of Dame Gertrude, our most loving Abbess of blessed memory, there died another from amongst the daughters she had left. This passing added sorrow upon sorrow to the community, for she who left us was most pleasing to God and man, both on account of her most innocent purity and great devotion, and of the wonderful sweetness of her manners and the sweet community spirit which she showed to all without exception. After her death the writer calling to mind the sweetness of her conversation, filled with sorrow said to our Lord: “ Alas O most loving Lord why hast Thou taken her from us so suddenly? ” And He said: “ Whilst they were celebrating the obsequies of My beloved Abbess Gertrude, I took pleasure in the intense devotion of the community, and I descended as it were to feed amongst the lilies, and when I saw there this lily, very pleasing to My eyes, I took it into my hand, and when I

had held it for eleven days between My fingers to break it off, its sufferings made it open and blossom in admirable perfume and beauty, therefore I took it to Myself and take My delight in it:” “ And ” added the Lord: “ When any one of you remembering the sweetness of her conversation, desires to have her back again and will offer her to My will, her offering shall be as a most sweet perfume which I shall reward a hundredfold according to My loving kindness ”.

And when, at the elevation of the sacred Host, St. Gertrude offered for her, with sisterly fidelity, all the faithfulness of the Heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, she saw her lifted up to a greater dignity as though she had been put into a higher place and clothed in more shining vestments and honoured with more glorious ministry. And this she beheld as often as she made the same offering for her. When she asked our Lord how it was that this virgin when she was in her last agony showed fear by her expression and by her voice, she received this answer: “ My great faithfulness brought this about. During her illness she greatly desired the assistance of your prayers that she might be received by Me after her death without any delay, and receiving

from Me My promise she trusted to it, and I, considering her confidence, was pleased to do her yet greater good; but as those who are young are rarely fully cleansed from slight negligences, as for instance taking pleasure in things not really necessary and the like, and as she had to be cleansed from these by the pains of illness before I could recall her to Myself, I could not suffer her, after having endured such pain with so much patience, to be delayed in receiving the full reward of eternal glory; therefore I allowed her to be frightened by the sight of the devil that this might suffice for her purgatory, and that she might be cleansed fully from all her imperfections and might receive to herself eternal glory ". Then St. Gertrude said; " And where wast Thou in the meantime, O Hope of the despairing? " And the Lord answered: " I hid Myself on her left side, but as soon as she was purified I showed Myself to her and took her to Myself in eternal rest and glory " (1).

Soon after this another was called out of the community who we are told " had been

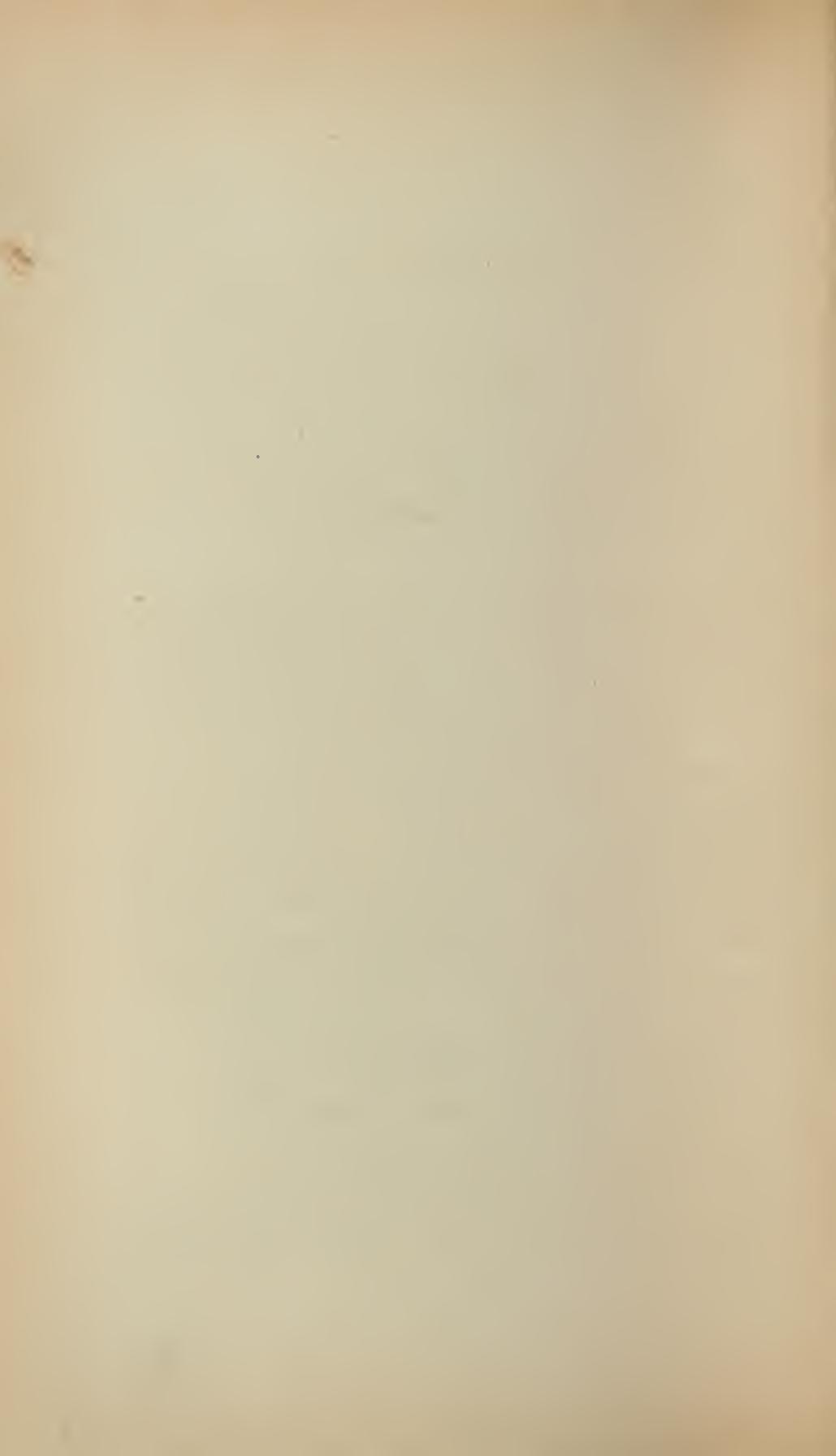
(1) *Leg. v. 2.*

especially devoted to the Mother of our Saviour from her infancy". At the time of her death she was still but a young girl. "When she had run her laborious course and was about to be called to her eternal reward, being in her agony she prepared most devoutly to receive the last Sacraments. She took into her hands the image of the Crucified and saluted its most sacred wounds with words of sweetness, and gave thanks and adored and pressed such sweet kisses on them that she incited those around to deep contrition". Then we are told that she had served others with loving humility, especially those whom she thought to be most pleasing to God, in order that she might thereby participate in their graces, but we find too that she required a special purification after death, because during her life she had been a little too attached to her own judgment, and that she had a great shrinking from going to confession and avoided doing so whenever she could, but this was atoned for by the pain her last confession caused her. P. Surely these are faults hardly less edifying than the virtues which obtained for this soul a high degree of glory and which are thus summed up: "I have clothed her" said our Lord, "as with

My Passion, in order to reward her for having once, when she was greatly depressed, not omitted any of the ordinary duties of her Order. And when she had to work beyond her strength she did not impatiently complain ". " And " added the Lord " as she suffered from great weakness and exhaustion in her illness, I have given her in reward the most noble princes of My court to serve her, and as her greatest suffering was in her arm, she embraces Me in such a manner as to make her wish that she had suffered a hundred times as much " (1). Happy the community where there were such lives and such deaths.

(1) *Leg. v. 3.*





CHAPTER XII.

1292-1298. — Death of Rodolph of Hapsburg. — Prayers at Helfta for a worthy successor. — Prophecy of St. Gertrude concerning Adolphus. — Internal wars, miraculous preservation of Helfta. — Interdict, 1298.

In the spring of 1292 the community at Helfta were earnestly praying to God that He would send a worthy successor to Rodolph of Hapsburg who had lately died. He had been Emperor of Germany for nearly twenty years, but as he had not been crowned by the Holy See he was called by the title of King of the Romans; he had been a good and wise ruler and it is said owed his election to an act of faith and reverence towards the Sacramental presence of our Lord.

One day he was out hunting when heavy rain came on and rendered the road almost impassable and the continuance of his amusement impossible; as he and his companions were turning back they met a priest on foot who

was on his way to administer the holy Viaticum to a person dying in his parish. Rodolph was so touched by the sight that he reined in his horse and dismounting insisted on the priest, with his precious burden, mounting in his stead. This was not enough, and he followed him bare-headed to the house of the sick man and returned also to the church when all was over; arrived there the priest, inspired by the Holy Ghost, predicted to him that he should sit upon the throne of his country.

At his death, this prophecy having been fulfilled, he left one son Albert who inherited his father's lands, but his severe and uncompromising character did not commend itself to the electors, and Adolphus, Count of Nassau, succeeded to the throne on May the 7th, 1292. "On that very day" says St. Gertrude's biographer "and, as it is believed, at the very hour that the election was made, it was revealed to her, who was praying with the rest of the community, that the election had taken place, and she told the result to the Mother of the monastery (Sophia of Mansfeld). More than this, she added that the king elected on that day would perish by the hand of his successor,

a prophecy confirmed by the event ” (1). Indeed Adolphus enjoyed his dignity only six years. During that time he had managed to alienate the affection of his subjects by offending the Archbishop of Mentz, to whom he in a large manner owed his election, and the electors themselves, by his endeavours to aggrandise his own family at other people’s expense. In 1298, as he refused to give any answer to the grievances alleged against him, Albert, who had been long looking for such an opportunity, took his place. Then began a civil war and on July 2nd a battle was fought at Gelheim in which Adolphus was slain by his rival, after gallant fighting on both sides; and thus were fulfilled the words of the Saint.

In 1294 the monastery was again troubled by the internal wars which so frequently upset Germany at this period, and too often, unhappily, from most inadequate causes. The war between Adolphus and Albert had lasted several years before the end came and had brought much anxiety to the nuns. In St. Mechtildis’

(1) *Ley.* 1. 2.

Revelations we have a reference to it: "Once" her biographer says "we were in great fear of the King who was not far from our monastery (this was in September, 1294, when Adolphus' army was in Eisleben) and she prayed to the Lord that He the Lord, the King of Kings, would deign to defend us in His fatherly kindness and that we might suffer no harm from the King's army, and the Lord said to her: 'Nothing shall you see of this army'. But she thought within herself, that even if they did not see the army it could harm their cloister, and the Lord answered her thought and said: 'No one of them shall approach your monastery; but I will lovingly defend you from all of them'. And so it fell out for God so mercifully preserved us that we received not the least damage from them whilst many other monasteries suffered many evils" (1).

But the war between Albert and Adolphus led to a war between the Barons who inflicted no small damage on the monastery, and St. Mechtildis prayed to our Lord once more and begged

(1) *Lib.* IV. 11.

Him to intervene and send peace and to change things for the better, and He said to her " I will turn all these things into good ". And this also was done, for peace was restored within a short time and all the tribulation gave place to tranquillity.

Even some time before this, during the lifetime of Sister Mechtildis of saintly memory, war had broken in on the peace of cloistered life, for she tells us: " When I prayed to the Lord that we might be delivered from the evils of war and many sins, He answered and said to me: ' The stench of sin comes up before Me, rising from the earth even up to heaven. Were it possible it would chase Me from it. Once indeed sin drove Me from heaven when I humbled Myself and was made obedient for man even unto death, but this cannot be done again; for now I must raise up the edifice of My justice on sin, ' Beloved Lord what must we miserable creatures now do ? ' And He answered: ' Under the threatening hand of the Almighty God humble yourselves and fear Him in all your works. I desire to deliver the people from all danger for they are My friends. Prayer in common will satisfy My Heart. For what

I intimately feel I Myself best know; willingly do I hear the prayers of spiritual persons who love with all their hearts." And then she refers to certain prayers taken principally from the Office of Virgins, which they loved to sing at Helfta when they were in great need of God's special help. She continues: "O Lord, Heavenly Father, accept from Thy troubled children their service and praise and deliver Thy people from their present necessity, deliver us from all our bonds, saving only those of Thy love from which we would never be unloosed" (1). And another time she writes: "I had been earnestly entreated to offer my prayers for the war now raging in Saxon and Thuringia, and although I hastened to our Lord and while praising Him besought Him to listen to my prayer, yet for fourteen days He preserved most strict silence, and I was obliged to wait in loving patience. At last I said to Him: 'Tell me my Beloved Lord when will the time come when it will please Thee that I beseech Thee in this necessity?' Then showing Himself He said: 'Those

(1) Lux Div. vii. 10.

who are now labouring under various afflictions resemble the many-coloured dawn which with its feeble light yet sheds a certain beauty over the landscape; but with the dawn of the eternal day, when this trouble has passed away, and the sun that knows no setting has arisen, they shall shine forth with splendour in the height of their joy. Then sanctified and glorified they shall be as the sun which rising joyfully in the east rests not till it reaches the highest point of the heavens. Some there are in this war who have been forced to fight from necessity and fear, and whom I have allowed to lose their lives or their liberty, but such as these have not lost My grace and can come to Me. But those who have brought about this war, are utterly abominable in My sight, always engaged in deeds of cruelty they do not even spare the sacredness of My temple, but rushing in deface its images and destroy its beauty. Such I well know will be lost eternally. They infest the highways, practising all manner of robbery, and were it not a time of war they would be looked upon as thieves and scoundrels. But the righteous are rendered blessed by these afflictions, and so Almighty God

by trial and sorrow draws to Himself souls which He could not otherwise win'. Thus did God speak to me of the faithful and devout, and what is to be the end of this I know not? Only this I know for certain that I can bring consolation to the friends of God, for no matter what misfortune may befall them they will never be forsaken by Him, but in all their straits will ever find help and comfort in Him. Therefore, let us struggle and suffer with good heart if we desire to shine with splendour before God in eternity'' (1).

The divine reason of all these perturbations through war as far as the monastery was concerned is given us by St. Gertrude, who after having described the fear of the nuns at the news of the approach of the army, and the prayers they said adds, " that by that fear of their enemies the Lord wished to draw to Himself the hearts of that community which He had chosen so that those who composed it, frightened by tribulations and purified from their negligences, might take refuge under His fatherly protection, and thus more surely find divine consolation '' (2).

(1) *Lux Div.* vii. 28.

(2) *Leg.* iii. 48.

A far greater trial than this came upon the nuns sometime before 1298 and this was an Interdict. We can imagine what it must have been to those whose lives were wholly liturgical—whose chief work in life, the Work for which they had sacrificed all else, the Work of God, the Divine Service—to have their church closed, the bells silenced, the solemn round of services ceased, and chant and organ hushed, the sacraments administered, when necessary, privately; and yet this was what befell these fervent brides of Christ. The see of Halberstadt was vacant between the death of Vulradus and the coming to the see of Hermann of Blankenberg in 1296, and the Canons, as we read in the Revelations of St. Mechtildis, “laid an Interdict on the community greatly afflicting it on account of certain pecuniary matters. On the day of the glorious Assumption of the most Blessed Virgin, this servant of God (St. Mechtildis) was greatly afflicted with sorrow on account of not being able to receive the Body of her Lord, the desire of her heart, when He appeared to her and wiping away the tears from her eyes and taking her hand said: “This day thou

shalt see wonderful things". When therefore the priest according to custom began the Responsory: *Vidi Speciosam*, it seemed to her that the community put itself in order for the procession and that the Lord and His Mother walked before, and that He carried a banner of red and white. On the white were embroidered golden roses, on the red, silver. This procession went round the cloister until it reached the church where the Lord prepared to celebrate Mass, vested in a red chasuble and with pontifical ornaments. St. John the Baptist was to read the Epistle and this because he was the first who exulted even in the womb for the joy of the Blessed Virgin, but St. John the Evangelist was to read the Gospel because he had been the guardian of the Glorious Virgin. St. John the Baptist and St. Luke served at the altar and St. John the Evangelist waited on the Blessed Virgin who stood at the right of the altar clothed in garments brilliant as the sun, having on her head a crown studded with all manner of precious stones. Then we are told how the Mass of the feast commenced, as it does to day, with the Introit *Gaudeamus omnes in Domino*, how our Lord

intoned after the *Kyrie eleison* the *Gloria in excelsis* in a high voice, and of the spiritual offerings made by the nuns at the Offertory, and how when this "most High Priest and Pontiff" sang the Preface up to the words *cum quibus et nostras voces* He made the saints join in and they too sang the triple *Sanctus*, the Blessed Virgin's voice sounding sweet and high above all. Then when the moment drew near for the Elevation of the Host it seemed that the "Lord Jesus who was at the same time both Priest and Victim raised the Host in a golden casket veiled, by which was figured that this mystery is hidden from every human and angelic intellect" (1). The *Pax Domini* was said and then all received the Body of our Lord from His own hand. Mass being finished He gave the blessing and so the vision passed away.

So much for the day on which the Interdict came into force, but St. Gertrude tells us that the community the day before sang the Mass in honour of the Blessed Virgin *Salve Sancta Parens*, and that during it she asked our Lord how He intended to console the commun-

(1) *Lib.* 1, 27.

ity in their tribulation, and He answered that He would increase His delights in them and that their very sighs and desolation would help to this. She asked Him how long the Interdict would continue, but He only told her that as long as it continued so long would His special favours last. The next day when Mass was being celebrated privately for the people, she said to Him at the Communion: "Art Thou not filled with compassion, O most clement Father, that on account of those earthly goods which ought to help us to Thy service, we are this day deprived of that most precious gift of Thy Body and Blood?" And the Lord answered her thus: "And why should I have such compassion? If I were taking My bride into a banquet in a hall adorned with flowers, and perceived that her robe was in some disorder would I not take her aside and remedy the fault with My own hands in order to take her in afterwards in more fitting guise?" And the Saint said: "And what wilt Thou do O Lord with those who have made us suffer so much?" And He answered: "Leave them alone for about this I will treat with them Myself". The following day she asked Him during Mass if He would allow the nuns, His

own members, to be cut off by that anathema by which those, who desired their goods, menaced them, and he replied: " If any one could take from Me the very marrow of My being by which I adhere to you, he, and he alone, could cut you off from Me ". " And " He added " the anathema with which you are struck for such a cause can injure you no more than a blunt knife striking a piece of wood, which can, at the most, leave a mark but not penetrate the wood. " And she said to Him ; " O Lord, God who art the unfailing Truth, Thou hast deigned to declare to me, unworthy though I am, that Thou wilt increase Thy delights in us and our love for Thee, how then is it that some of us complain to-day of feeling more cold in our love towards Thee? " He answered: " I am He who contains in Myself all good things and I distribute them in their due time to each one as is best for him (1) ".

With such trials as these did God purify the souls of that special garden of delights which He had chosen and so carefully cultivated for Himself at Helfta. It surely is a lesson

(1) *Leg.* iii, 16.

that He ever works His designs out in His own way and that we can never have a right to call that way or its wisdom in question.

How to use such a trial to advantage was revealed to Sister Mechtildis, and the instructions given to her by our Lord may indeed be useful under many other circumstances.

“ I grieve in my heart ” she says “ for the troubles of this community in which I am, so one night in my solitude I spoke thus to our Lord : ‘ O Lord, what pleasure dost Thou take in this captivity ? ’ Our Lord answered : ‘ In it I too find Myself a captive ’. This made me understand the meaning of what follows : ‘ With them I fasted in the desert. With them I was tempted by the enemy. With them I did good all through my life. With them I suffered hatred and betrayal. With them I was sold as a hostage, when they promised to serve God in their offering. With them I was watched in My conversation, and savagely attacked, seized out of avarice and envy, bound in obedience. With them I was mocked with great insolence, and in My innocence was scourged. Though they hear of danger let them fear nothing, for with them I was carried to the pretorium like a guilty robber ;

let them remember this in chapter and at confession. With them I was scourged; let them remember this when they scourge themselves. With them I bore My cross; let them have this in mind when it falls to their lot to suffer. With them I was fastened to the cross, let them therefore be patient and not complain in adversity. With them I commended My soul to My Father at My death, so let them commend themselves to Me in all their needs. With them I made a happy death, so let them be delivered from all their bonds. With them I was buried in a grave in the rock, so let them be ever pure and free from every earthly stain. As I rose from the dead, so let them rise from their faults, and so shall they receive heavenly light in their souls. By My divine power I ascended into heaven, whither they shall follow Me in the self same power" (1).

(1) Lux Div. VII, 53.

CHAPTER XIII.

Correspondence of St. Mechtildis.

There is every reason for believing that St. Mechtildis had a large correspondence, but all that remains to us is what follows and is addressed to one person whom we are told was a "woman of the world". She begins :

" My beloved daughter in Christ, the Lover of your soul holds your hand in His, His fingers entwining yours, that He may show you how He works in your soul and how you ought to follow Him by imitating His example.

" The little finger signifies the lowliness of His life, for He came on earth to minister not to be ministered unto, and to be subject to every creature. Lean your finger therefore on His, that is when your heart is puffed up with pride you may think of the lowliness and subjection of your God, and pray that through His humility you may be enabled to overcome pride and clinging to your own will, which finds its root in self-love.

“ The ring-finger signifies the fidelity of His Heart, caring for us like a devoted mother, bearing our burdens and sorrows and protecting us from every misfortune. Join this finger also with His and acknowledge your great want of fidelity to this sweet and faithful Lover, separating from Him that soul which He has created for His praise and love, and for the sole enjoyment of Himself amid the joys of eternity, regretting that you have so rarely and so coldly given your thoughts to Him.

“ The middle finger signifies the love, deep, divine and everlasting with which He is drawn so powerfully and so wonderfully to unite Himself with the human soul, giving His Heart no rest until He pours Himself into it with all the might of that love, like a torrent that rushes onward seeking an outlet. Place this finger then of your hand on His, that is your goodwill to love Him, so that if you do not feel this love at every moment, your goodwill will be accepted in its stead; and desire, if you possessed the love of all the saint and every creature, to consecrate all that love to Him alone.

“ His forefinger signifies the wonderful and inscrutable working of Divine Providence that

so mercifully presides over the future of man, and when he goes astray, so wisely and gently brings him back, sometimes by prosperity sometimes by adversity. Lay this finger also willingly upon the finger of your God, that is believe that whatever happens to you, whether in joy or in sorrow, comes from His great love and is for your greater sanctification, and saying that you would wish nothing otherwise than as He sends it, praise Him and give Him thanks for each of His gifts.

“ The thumb signifies His Divine omnipotence and powerful protection of His paternal goodness, by which He resists and crushes whatever is opposed to the faithful soul, unless when He permits some things to happen for its sanctification and the exercise of virtue. Join your finger also to His that you may gain strength to practise virtue and fight manfully against your faults, never losing confidence in the mercy of God if He permits you to suffer tribulation or if He withdraws for a time His sensible grace ” (1).

At another time she wrote : “ Good advice to the same ”.

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 59.

“ O Faithful soul that lovest God, consider diligently and with burning love the law which the Imperial child Jesus, the Son of His Father’s Godhead and graciousness, gave unto thee when He chose thee for His bride, and bestowed Himself upon thee in those happy nuptials. On that day, then, of such solemnity, and of the joy of His Heart, He clothed Himself for the love of thee with a rose-coloured vestment, which love dyed for Him into the Blood of His own Heart. A garland of roses also He placed upon His head, set all round with goodly pearls, the drops of His own precious Blood. The gloves upon His hands were so perforated that He could keep nothing in them, but poured out upon thee all that He had so long hidden from the world. His lordly couch was the hard cross which He mounted with such joy and burning delight as never bridegroom enjoyed on couch of ivory or silk. On this couch of love He is still waiting for thee with desire unutterable. But if now thou desirest to be His bride, thou must utterly renounce all delight and approach Him on His little bed of sorrow and contempt, on which Love hath placed Him, and unite thyself to His Side which Love hath wounded.

“ Consider diligently of what nature and how precious was the pledge He gave thee, when He opened for thee His Heart, even the treasury of His Godhead, and gave thee to drink therefrom in that goodly chalice, which healeth all the diseases of thy soul. This is the noble pledge of His priceless love, because it containeth all grace, all virtue and all good. This pledge, I say, He will not take from thee, for thereby He hath confirmed His troth. Even as a king, who hath not as yet brought his bride into his house, leaveth a city or town full of wealth, and even his friends, as pledges that he will come and take her; so hath the Bridegroom, thy Lover, given in pledge His most precious house, namely, His own Divine Heart, God the Father, that He will never forsake thee, His own bride, offering It at the same time daily for thee on the altar, as a proof of the love with which He hath prevented thee from everlasting. Wherefore, O daughter of the Eternal Father, and elect bride of His Co-Eternal Son, and the Beloved and longed for resting-place of the Holy Ghost, love thy Beloved whose Heart is exceeding full of love for thee, and who is Himself all love. Be faithful to Him

who is faithfulness itself, and if aught troubleth thee, receive it as if it were a chain of gold which God hath put round thee, whereby to draw thee to the love of His Son. Then straight-way, as if consenting to be drawn in this way, lift thyself up and dispose also thy heart by gratitude and patience, that it may be still more drawn towards Him; observing diligently how by this God wisheth to work salvation in thy soul.

“ Consider, also, what may be wanting to thee in virtue. And if thou standest in need of humility, or any other virtue, open for thyself with the key of love the precious casket of all virtues, even the Divine Heart of Christ, and pray to the Lord of virtues, to give thee His noble virtues, by which thou mayest overcome every temptation to sin. And if those pilferers, evil thoughts, rush upon thee, have recourse to thine armoury, and take therefrom the brightest of all arms, that is, the Passion and Death of thy Lord, and fix these as strongly as thou canst in thy heart by continual remembrance of them, that the whole crowd of evil thoughts may thereby be put to flight and reduced to nought. If despairing thoughts tempt thee, have recourse to the coffer of the inexhausted good-

ness , which willeth none to perish but all to come to the knowledge and love of the truth, except only those who choose out of their own free will to be damned, mindful that God is more ready to receive man than man is to come. And this above all doth God desire, that a man show himself ever in such a state, that He may be able to pour His grace upon him without ceasing, and ever increase in him every good gift ” (1).

Another time she wrote what is entitled: “ Good advice to the same ”.

“ Our Lord Jesus Christ, faithful Lover of men , eagerly longs to unite Himself to the soul, especially to her who longs for His consolations and is eager to participate in Divine joys, who renounces all human love and consolation which does not attract or lead to God. When we have something that we love or in which we take pleasure, let us consider that it was given by God to lead us to Him. And if we feel that, instead of advancing the love of God in our souls , what we love comes to us oftener

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* IV. 59.

than God Himself, we must relinquish that love whether it be the love of a creature or some other attachment, if we wish to preserve this familiar union with God. For Jesus, Son of the Father of love, wishes to have the first and dearest place in our hearts, for He is a jealous Lover, who will not suffer another to be loved more than Himself nor even to share with Him a place in our hearts ” (1).

Again we find that she wrote the following: “ Useful advice to the same lady ”.

“ God has given His Divine Heart as a gift to the soul that she in her turn may bestow her heart upon Him. The soul that does this lovingly and with confidence will become so strong in His strength that she will never fall into grievous sin. Moreover, such a soul should be anxious to guard the interests of the Heart of God, considering attentively what will give that Divine Heart most pleasure. In sadness let her hasten with confidence to this treasure that has been committed to her, and there seek for consolation. And if God does not will that she

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 59.

should receive comfort, let her praise and thank Him from her inmost heart, for God takes a special pleasure in the faithful soul who seeks not her own interests but those of Jesus Christ, preferring His honour to her own consolation" (1).

This is all we have of the Saint's letters, but they contain sentences full of spiritual wisdom and sweetness, and make us regret that nothing else remains to us. .

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* iv. 59.



CHAPTER XIV.

Intense suffering of St. Mechtildis. — Last illness and death. — Her Divine Spouse deigns to sing to her during her agony. — He asks a return of His Sacred Heart, given as a pledge to her eight years before.

For two years before her death St. Mechtildis' sufferings greatly increased. The account of her last illness and death is given both in the *Liber Specialis Gratiae* and in the *Legatus Divinae Pietatis*, and we must combine both these accounts, though indeed there is very little in the latter which is not in the former.

“ This humble and devout handmaid of our Lord Jesus Christ, this loving mother and most sweet consoler of us all, about whom we have published this little book, after having lived in the purpose of Religion up to her fifty-seventh year, practising in their perfection all the virtues, after having suffered constant pains for nearly three years, approached her end ” (1).

In these words does St. Gertrude begin her

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* vii. 1.

account of the last illness and death of her sister, friend and mistress in the spiritual life.

About a month before her precious death, the Saint on the nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, prepared herself for the end by saying the prayers composed by St. Gertrude, which we find in the Exercises under the title of Reparation or Preparation for Death. On that same Sunday she received Holy Communion, and then confided her last hour into the hands of her Lord. St. Gertrude praying for her that same day asked our Lord why He still wished the Saint to remain upon earth, and He told her that it was in order that He might perfect the work that He was doing in her, and added: "To this end she will minister to Me in three ways: I shall find repose in her humility, food in her patience, and recreation in her virtues. In all that she sees and hears she humbles herself, looking on herself as unworthy and viler than any one else; and this gives Me a delightful rest in her heart and soul. Then she rejoices in all her infirmities and tribulations, she is most patient and willingly, for My love, suffers all hard things, thus preparing for Me a most sumptuous banquet. And, lastly, by the practice of

the various virtues, she offers Me a recreation most delightful to My Divine pleasure ” (1).

As she came nearer to the end, her sufferings increased very much, and every day as evening came on she had pains about her heart which to those around seemed intolerable. Once when her sisters were expressing their sympathy and grief for her sufferings, she consoled them saying: “Do not weep nor be sad for me dearest sisters; I greatly condole with you in your desolation, and if it were the will of our sweetest Lord I should desire always to live in these pains, that I might be your consoler in all things ” (2). On another occasion she was pressed by some to take medicine to relieve her pain, as they hoped, and she, though unwilling to do so, consented; and immediately after taking it the pain increased greatly. Next day St. Gertrude asked our Lord why He thus recompensed her condescension, and He made answer: “Out of the pain which My beloved one suffered when at the prayer of others she took that medicine, I made a wholesome remedy for all the sinners

(1) *Leg.* v. 4.

(2) *Ib.*

in the world and for the souls in Purgatory " (1).

The Servant of God grew rapidly worse, and on the twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, *Si iniquitates*, we might have seen a long procession of priests and nuns accompany the Blessed Sacrament to the bedside of the dying nun. This was the last time that the Saint was to receive her Sacramental Lord.

There knelt round the bed many souls in that community admitted to the secrets of their Beloved, and one of these praying with great devotion for the Saint heard our Lord say tenderly to her: " Honour and glory of My Divinity, crown and reward of My Humanity, delight and repose of My Spirit wilt thou come now and dwell henceforth with Me that thy desire and Mine may be fulfilled? " She answered: " My Lord God I desire Thy praise beyond my salvation. Therefore I pray Thee to allow me to still expiate in sufferings all that creatures have neglected in Thy praise ". Our Lord received this reply with pleasure and said: " Because

(1) *Lib.* v. 4.

thou hast chosen this, behold even in this thou shalt resemble Me, for I voluntarily suffered the pains of the cross and death itself for the glory of God the Father and the salvation of the world: and as all My sufferings pierced the Divine Heart of My Father, so will thy sufferings and death deeply penetrate My Heart, and contribute to the salvation of the whole world ” (1).

Another heard our Lord call to her in words which need no comment: “ Come My chosen one, My dove, My flowering field, in which I have found all that I desired; My pleasant garden, where I had all the delights of My Divine Heart; in which were flowers of every virtue; trees of good works and waters of devout and fervent tears; which was ever open for whatever I wanted. Into this garden whenever sinners angered Me I withdrew, and drinking of its water I was so inebriated, as to remember no more the injuries done to Me ”.

Our Lord warned another nun that Extreme Unction was to be administered that same day, promising that after the reception of this sa-

(1) *Lib. Sp.* vii, 1.

ving Sacrament, He, who is the most diligent keeper of His friends would preserve her carefully from all stains, even as a painter preserves the picture which he has newly painted from all dust: whilst He revealed to St. Gertrude also that He wished her to receive Extreme Unction that same day. When she had made known this command from God, the Saint, who had always been humbly submissive to her Superiors, left everything to their decision, confiding in Divine Providence which never abandons those who hope in It. Her Superiors who held her in great veneration, persuaded her that our Lord would make known to her when He desired her to receive this Sacrament, and seeing that she did not press the point, deferred its administration. But our Lord verifying those words of the Gospel "Heaven and earth shall pass away but My words shall not pass away", confirmed the testimony in the mouth of these two witnesses, for on the next day, Monday, before Matins, the Servant of God was seized with such violent pains that they thought her last moment had come. The priests were called in haste and she received Extreme Unction, if not on the day itself, at least before the dawn of the next day.

Three of those present seemed to behold our Lord under the form of a Bridegroom who administered to His Bride this lifegiving Sacrament, and one of them understood that He would give great graces to those who invoked her with confidence, she having merited this favour because she had always shewn such charity, benevolence and compassion for every one.

When, while reciting the Litany of the Saints, they came to this invocation: *Omnes Sancti Cherubim et Seraphim, orate pro ea*, Gertrude saw that the *Cherubim* and *Seraphim* made way in their midst with the deepest reverence, for this blessed soul, for it was fitting that she who had led upon earth not only an angelic life in holy virginity, but who had also been raised above the angels with the *Cherubim*, taking deep draughts of the waters of spiritual intelligence from the source itself of all wisdom, and who had, besides, with the flaming *Seraphim* embraced with her love Him who is a devouring fire, should have a right to take her place amongst those who are nearest to the Divine Majesty. As each Saint was named in the Litany, he arose with immense joy and the greatest reverence, and kneeling before the Lord offered his

merits as rich presents; these He immediately gave to His beloved for the increase of her joy and glory.

For two days after this she waited the last call, reposing on the Sacred Heart. On Tuesday, which was the vigil of St Elisabeth, the joyful hour drew nearer of her blessed passage, when our Lord had resolved to give to His chosen one, in reward for all her labours and sufferings, the imperturbable rest of perpetual peace. She seemed to enter into her agony before the hour of None; the community assembled round her with great devotion, awaiting with much sadness the departure of their beloved sister and assisting her with the usual prayers.

St. Gertrude beheld her standing in the presence of God drawing each breath from the Divine Heart, and understood that the whole Church received a great influx of grace which overflowed specially on those who were present, and she understood that this was granted by God's grace on account of the dying nun's fervent intention and devout desires for all, both living and dead.

When in reciting the antiphon *Salve Regina*, they came to the words *Eia ergo Advocata no-*

stra, St. Mechtildis turned to our Lady commending her sisters, whom she was so soon to leave, to her care, and begging her to receive them for her sake with even greater love than formerly. And as she during her life had always been a ready and loving advocate, so now she prayed the Mother of Mercy to be a perpetual intercessor with her Divine Son, and the advocate of the community. Our Lady most readily and with great tenderness gave this promise, and putting her delicate hands in the hands of the Saint received as it were from her those of the community.

The prayer, *Ave Jesu Christe*, was said and then the community went away to recite None, returning afterwards to recommence their prayers for their dying sister, but as she seemed a little better, they asked her whether they could go to dinner, and she answered: " They may very well go ".

All that day she remained in her agony saying only these words " *O good Jesus, O good Jesus* ", thus showing most clearly that He dwelt ever in the depths of her heart, whose name was constantly on her lips, even amidst the bitter sufferings which manifested themselves by

the involuntary movements of her body. Her sisters came to her with their various commissions for the next world, recommending to her the necessities of their friends and their own interests, and as long as she was able to speak she said in a low voice: "Willingly" or "Yes"; by which she sufficiently indicated with what attention she would recommend them to her beloved Lord. Later on she was not able to speak any longer, but showed the tenderness she had for her sisters and her spiritual friends, by lovingly lifting her eyes to heaven when they spoke to her to make them see how willing she was to recommend them and their intentions to God.

St. Gertrude having seen the special operations of the Holy Ghost on this holy soul resolved to keep silence on the subject, not wishing to put herself forward, but it was quickly made known to her that this was displeasing to God. During Vespers the Saint grew rapidly worse and seemed so near her last moment that the community was sent for from the choir, and was obliged to omit the Suffrages. Reciting near her the ordinary prayers, St. Gertrude found she was deprived of that vision of the workings of

the Holy Ghost in her sister, which she had previously had. Entering into herself she recognised her fault, and effaced it by sorrow and penance, promising to manifest willingly for God's glory and the consolation of her neighbour, all that He should deign to reveal to her in the future.

After Compline they thought for the third time that her last moment had come. They recited for her the Responsory *Ave Sponsa*, and during this time our Lord bestowed upon her the special privilege of being called, after the example of His Virginal Mother, Virgin and Mother, because she had by her charity, given birth to His memory in so many hearts.

Some time after midnight the nuns arose to office, and noiselessly going down to the church took their places in the choir. Matins had hardly begun when so great a change came over the Saint that those around again thought she was dying. The community was once more called in haste round her bed. St. Gertrude saw that she was inundated by the most wonderful graces from God, some of which she received on account of the great sufferings she had borne from her childhood, both in body and mind,

and which had helped so greatly to sanctify her soul. Then it seemed to St. Gertrude that our Lord blessed the community present saying : “ Moved by My loving kindness I was pleased that all My chosen ones should be present at this transfiguration : for which cause they will have as much more honour among My saints in heaven as have those three elect ones, Peter, James, and John before all the other Apostles, who were witnesses of My transfiguration on the Mount ” (1).

Then the community having received the blessing of our Lord returned to the choir to finish Matins. Whilst they sang the twelfth Responsory *O Lampas*, the soul of the Saint appeared as if in the presence of the most Holy Trinity, devoutly praying for the Church, and God the Father saluted her sweetly singing these words : “ Hail My chosen one, who by the example of thy holy life canst truly be called *Lampas Ecclesiae*, the lamp of the Church, which pours out streams of oil, that is prayers over the whole world ” (2).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* VII, 8.

(2) *Ib.* VII, 9.

Then the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord melodiously intoned: “ *Gaude, sponsa mea, Rejoice, O My spouse*, who may truly be called the medicament of grace, since by thy prayers thou hast obtained the restoration of so many to My favour: ” Then the Holy Ghost sang, saying: “ Hail my immaculate one who worthily art named the nourishment of faith, for in all hearts piously believing in the Divine operations which I work in thee spiritually, not corporally, the virtue of faith shall be nourished and established ” (1).

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* VII. 9.

This Response has evidently been adapted from the thirty-fourth stanza of the hymn *Laetare Germania*, published in an Antiphonary of the fifteenth century. It runs thus.

“ *O lampas Ecclesiae
Rivos profundens olei,
Medicina gratiae,
Nutrimentum fidei* ”.

The prose *Gaude Sion*, and the hymn *Laetare Germania*, are both in honour of St. Elizabeth.

(Life and Revelations of St. Gertrude).

Then the throng of the holy angels rising together before God sang in a loud voice : “ Thou art the satiety of God, a fruitful olive whose purity shines and whose works are resplendent ”. In the words : “ Whose purity shines ”, they specially praised in her the most sweet peace in which God deigned to rest in her soul. In the words : “ And whose works are resplendent ”, they praised the virtuous and pure intention of all her works (2).

The next morning Mass was sung in honour of St. Elisabeth, and during it St. Gertrude was given to understand that God’s time had not yet arrived, although the community had said the prayers round the Servant of God five times. After Tierce, stretching out her limbs, she placed her feet in the same position as our Lord’s on the cross, the right resting on the left: and as some of those who were waiting upon her gently moved her foot, she energetically replaced it in its former posture, thus showing that she acted from a deliberate purpose, and as our Lord for her love had at that hour of

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* VII, 9.

Sext His hands and feet fixed to the cross, so she desired at the same hour to immolate herself as a sacrifice of eternal praise.

At last the hour so long desired arrived, when the soul despoiled of all that was earthly, and “ in all things conformed to the will of her Beloved, was to quit the prison of the body to enter the nuptial chamber of her Imperial Spouse ”.

The community had risen from table, and the “ Mother of the Monastery ” was the first with some others after leaving the Refectory, to come to the bedside of her dying daughter. Suddenly they saw her face change and light up with an air of exquisite tenderness, as though she would invite her beloved sisters in Christ by her expression, as she was unable to speak, to congratulate her on the ineffable gifts which her Lord had given her. Then the Lord of majesty, the Cantor of Cantors, intoned with the most sweet voice: *Venite Benedicti Patris mei percipite regnum etc.* with a chant which surpassed all human thought, singing to “ His Nightingale ” (1) who so many times upon earth

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* VII, 11.

had charmed His Divine Heart, more even by the fervour of her devotion than by the beauty of her voice. Greeting her tenderly and reminding her of the great favour He had bestowed upon her eight years before, when He had given her His Divine Heart as a gage of His love and His fidelity in keeping His promises, He said: "And where is My pledge?" (1) On which she, opening her heart with both hands, offered it to her Beloved who absorbed her entirely by the virtue of His Divinity, and associated her to His glory: "where", adds St. Gertrude "may she be mindful of us who remember her, and obtain for us by her prayers at least some drops of her superabundant delights from Him with whom being made one in spirit she exults eternally" (2).

And so entered into eternal joy the Saint of the Praise of God.

(1) *Lib. Sp. Gr.* VII, 11.

(2) *Ib.* 11.

CHAPTER XV.

St. Gertrude sees in vision the great glory bestowed on St. Mechtildis. — Burial of St. Mechtildis. — Anniversary of the death of Count Burchard of Mansfeld. — The Saint's likeness to our Lady.

Soon after the death of their beloved sister, while the community were making the usual commemoration for her soul, one of them saw the Lord of Majesty tenderly caress His bride, and all the angels were seen to rejoice, but they did not approach until they heard their names invoked in the Litany. Then as they knelt reverently before our Lord, He, in His loving generosity, bestowed upon them all the merits, wonderfully increased in value, which they had offered on the previous day to the Sacred Heart to increase the glory of the Saint. Then St. Gertrude, for it was to her these visions were vouchsafed, besought the blessed soul that with all the affection she had shown her special friends while in life, she would entreat of God the

correction of their defects. But she replied: "I see clearly now in the light of truth, that all the love I may have borne any one on earth is as a drop of water to the ocean, when compared to the tender love which fills the Divine Heart for those I loved. In this same light I see also how incomprehensibly advantageous is the dispensation of God in allowing men to keep certain faults which give them occasion to humble themselves, and thus advance every day towards salvation, and this I so recognise that I cannot entertain the slightest thought of desiring aught but what the Almighty Wisdom and the most wise love of my sweet and gentle Lord has ordained in His good pleasure. For such a beautiful disposing of things by the divine goodness I can only pour myself out in praise and thanksgiving (1)''.

The next day during the Mass *Requiem Aeternam* she was seen to draw as it were, from the Sacred Heart, for all those who bore her special devotion, golden mouthed reeds by which they should obtain whatever they asked: they were to breathe through them the following

(1) *Leg.* v. 4.

words, believing they would thus dispose the Sacred Heart to grant their desires :

« By the love which made Thee lavish so many graces upon Thy well beloved Mechtildis, or upon any of Thy elect, and which Thou wouldst have poured out upon any whom Thou hadst found capable of receiving them, for all the graces Thou wilt yet bestow upon earth and in heaven, hear me, most benign Lord Jesus Christ for her merits and those of all Thine elect (1) ”.

At the elevation of the Host this blessed soul seemed to desire to be offered together with It to God the Father, in praise eternal for the salvation of the world. The only Son of God, Who always yields to the wishes of His beloved ones, then drew her to Himself, and offering her with Himself to God by this union of sacrifice, the faithful in heaven, on earth and in purgatory received a twofold benefit.

During the Mass which followed, a beautiful vision was vouchsafed to the same nun, who saw the Saint enthroned in the Sacred Heart, and drawing thence as from a lyre, most

(1) *Leg.* v. 4.

sweet music, and as she touched in particular four strings, the melody resolved itself in turn into expressions of praise and thanksgiving to God, of tender plaint and supplication, in this way to atone for the negligence of those, who at that moment were celebrating her obsequies, and for those who would gladly have taken part in them had they known how many and how great were the prayers and gifts she had received from God.

The next vision which took place at the Offertory shows the Saint's care for the Holy Souls. Having all her life at this moment of the Holy Sacrifice offered for them the merits of Christ and His saints, she now obtained from our Divine Lord the power of releasing many of them from their sufferings.

The merits of her virtues, the various ways in which she had exercised them, her humility, gentleness and compassion etc. were accepted for these souls, and numbers were released and brought into the light of heaven. So eager was her Lord to increase the glory and joy of His beloved, that He opened the heavenly gates to many. Two other persons had the revelation of the deliverance of many souls, and one of them

“ learned for certain that on the day that this blessed Saint passed from earth, not one Christian soul by the mercy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was condemned to hell, for each one received, through the merits of this soul so dear to God, the grace of repentance, or if any obdurately resisted grace our Lord did not allow them to leave the body that day, for He would not suffer such terrible punishment to fall on any soul on that day of gladness for His Heart ”.

How eager the Saint was for the Divine Praise, and how pleasing this eagerness was to God may be seen from the following vision. Having again appeared to St. Gertrude during one of the Masses offered for her soul, the former asked her what she most desired for her community. She replied: “ Above all I desire that they shall praise my Lord who has glorified and exalted me so far beyond my deserts, that all He has bestowed upon me seems to be the outcome of His goodness, and so you can do nothing which will please me more than through me to praise Him ceaselessly. He has brought me to the midst of those saints with whom He is best pleased, and in whom He takes greatest delight, and from whom He has the chiefest

praise" (1). The other asking how they should praise God in her, she answered: "All that you do I did myself when on earth. Therefore, do all you have to do in union with that single intention and perfection of love with which I performed my actions for the glory of God and the salvation of the world. For instance, when you enter the choir to worship or to sing, think of the fervour and purity of intention with which I was in God, and, as much as is in you, try to imitate me; so again when you retire to rest or take your repast think of the pure intention and the fervour of love with which I accepted bodily refreshment, and made use of creatures. And so with all else. Let all your actions be done for me to the praise of my Beloved, and thus you will find salvation." Her friend then asked what she had gained by the praises addressed to God for her by the nuns. She replied, that she "received an embrace which renewed all her joy and happiness" (2). Then St. Gertrude saw three rays of light proceed

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* VII. 16.

(2) *Ibid.*

from the Heart of Jesus and passing through the soul of the Saint fall upon all the blessed, who, illuminated and rejoiced, began to praise the Lord for her, saying: " We praise Thee for the ravishing beauty of Thy spouse, for the loving delight Thou hast in her, and for the perfect union which has made her one with Thee. " St. Gertrude seeing how our Lord took great pleasure in these hymns of praise said to Him: " Why my Lord does it so please Thee to be praised in this soul? " " Because, " He replied, " in her life she thirsted beyond all for My praise, and she retains the same longing now, and I will to satiate her ceaselessly with My praises " (1).

As the Responsory *Libera me Domine* was being sung at her burial, she appeared to make earnest supplication for all those present, that they might never incur eternal death, and she merited to obtain a certain promise of this from the divine bounty. At the *Regnum mundi*, when they came to the words, " whom I have seen, " she began herself to sing: " Yea, I have seen

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* VII. 16.

Him in the Divinity Whom I have so often gazed upon with the eyes of my intelligence on the earth;" Whom I have loved, "whom I have loved with all my strength"; In whom I have believed, with all my heart; "Whom I have loved, whom I have cherished with my whole affection." Then turning towards the convent, she said: "I require, and I exhort you always to sing or recite this responsory heartily, for God the Father is rejoiced by it, God the Son is hailed in it, and the Holy Ghost finds delight in it. Why do you suppose that our Lord has given you command through Sister Mechtildis, to sing it thus, but because He so delights to hear you sing it?" (1). And again, as they sang the Responsory, *Surge Virgo*, she appeared standing before our Lord, adorned like a queen; and casting herself into His arms she rested her head on His Heart. Her Lord then said to her: "Thou joy and delight of My Heart, all that

(1) Is it of herself that St. Mechtildis thus speaks, as she introduced the chant of this responsory for such occasions, or does she refer to another of the same name, Mechtildis of Wipra, who at that time directed the school of the monastery?

is Mine, is thine; and be it as thou desirest, I will hear the prayers of all who assist at thy burial, and will succour them in the hour of their need" (1).

After the Saint's burial the visions ceased for a while, but on the Feast of St. Catherine, she was seen to come into the choir in company with our Lord and direct the singing as she had been wont to do. St. Gertrude showing surprise, the soul said to her: "When I sang with you, it was my custom when the singing rose, to present with all fervour the requests of all my sisters to God and in God, and, as it fell, I brought to you with all love fresh grace divine, and this I do yet without ceasing". Then her friend and sister asked her what gifts she would send to the nuns "Rejoice with all your hearts", replied the Saint, "in your beloved whose love surrounds you with all the tenderness of a mother for her only child, whom she keeps ever in her bosom; He thus surrounds you to keep all hurtful things from you. God your Lover wills that you abide ever close to

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* VII. 18.

Him, never departing from Him, and if you do, He will allow you to suffer, like the mother who chastises her child if having left her he falls, thus teaching him not to quit her side again. As a mother finds a charm in the loving words of her child, so far more does your Spouse long to hear such words from you" (1). These words the Saint who heard them interpreted thus: "As our Father we must go to Him for all good things; as our Lord we must place in Him all our hope; as our Spouse we ought to cherish Him with all our heart and soul, and as our Friend, we should make known to Him in all confidence our needs and our sorrows, desiring consolation from Him alone" (2).

During the thirty days after the Saint's death, among other visions vouchsafed to the community was one of special interest, as it shows the oneness of interest there is between the faithful on earth and the blessed in heaven, and how the glory of the latter is increased by the merits of the former.

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* VII. 19.

(2) *Lib.* VII, 19.

On the anniversary of Count Burchard of Mansfeld his soul appeared in marvellous beauty and splendour, his apparel being adorned with his virtues as with most beautiful ornaments. She to whom this vision was vouchsafed desired to learn whence he had those many virtues. "I have them not by my own merit, but of God's goodness, and from the virtues practised in the community so dear to me. This tunic made up of all virtues was given me when Abbess Gertrude entered the celestial mansions, this second robe which I also owe to her is composed of the virtues of her subjects on earth, its red colour representing the glory of martyrdom which religious gain by true obedience, because she who offers gladly to God her own will, sacrifices a holocaust more worthy and more precious than if she offered her life." Then he went on to interpret the significance of the ornaments with which he was adorned, the lions signifying the strong deeds of obedience, the golden circles its bonds; by the roses is shown the patience the religious should always preserve in all their works. The green colour denotes the vigour with which virtues grow, and the merit of each virtue is shown

by the wonderful ornament which covers all, “ and that ”, added the Count, “ is a distinction which I owe to the merits of each of those who serve God in my monastery. The bright jewel signifies the ever abiding desire of the venerable Abbess, it is like a star, because a star is always in motion even like her desire, and, moreover, it is an image also of the purity which ever directed her desire, for always and above all she sought the glory of God and the salvation of souls. The gold which encases this jewel, means her heart’s diligence and labour, both of which were like her longing. This golden mantle and the crown were bestowed upon me by the Lord when the admirable eagle, Mechtildis, attained the highest heights of heaven; they signify love and knowledge. ‘ What was the joy of the saints, then ’ asked St. Gertrude, ‘ when in her illness she made her last Communion?’ ‘ She was so entirely united to God, that we in heaven saw her in God. A newborn ray of light from the Divinity illuminated all the saints, and in its light we saw and recognised all the merit and dignity which this blessed soul was about to receive, and from that moment we made ready with great joy. As she expired the Lord drew

her with His breath so sweetly and tenderly that no words can express it. All the saints from the least to the greatest were present, and when our Lord led her Himself, all sang in triumph : ' Prudent and watchful Virgin how art thou now with this Spouse who has chosen thee.' When we sang : ' How fair art thou and admirable, how brilliant art thou in light ', she, overflowing with delight, sprang from the Sacred Heart and placed herself before the Throne under the mantle of the Divinity, all filled with God. As the saints then sang : ' Thou art a royal bride, united as thou art to the Son of God, ' our Lord taking her lovingly again into His embrace, gently sang in her praise : ' She is fair among the daughters of Jerusalem as you have seen her filled with love and charity for God and her neighbour, *in cubilibus*, in retreat, that is in contemplation, in the garden of spices, that is the fruitful teaching she shed around in hearts '.

" All the saints offered their merits in honour of His bride, and as I approached amongst them, our Lord embracing me bestowed on me this mantle, the symbol of love and knowledge, for the merits of His dear one, and placed on my

head the crown of love. I then gained a deeper knowledge of, and greater love for, the ever adorable Trinity, which I shall have now for eternity'. In answer to the question what profit he had gained by the anniversaries solemnly sung for him on earth by the community, he replied; 'My Lord gives to the souls in purgatory all that is offered for me, and several have been delivered from that place of suffering; He gives me these souls as an emperor gives soldiers to a prince, and it will redound to my glory in heaven eternally' (1)''.

On the thirtieth day the soul of the blessed Mechtildis appeared once more, and said: "Ear has not heard, nor has the eye seen, nor has the heart of man conceived my merit and my glory; I am so taken into the Divinity, and so happily united to It, that I am, in a manner, wise with His wisdom, almighty with His almightiness, and good with His goodness; I have been enriched with all the goods that are in God. And thus it is that all you have done for me these thirty days, in the way of prayers, thanksgivings

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* VII. 20.

or other good works, our Lord has accepted absolutely as though you had done them directly for Him; and He has fulfilled your petitions according to the good pleasure of His merciful will. Be it known to you also, that all the prayers you may offer with faith and devotion at the grave of my beloved sister will be heard, in such sort that should you ask what might not be good for you, God's bounty will change it into what will be better." St. Gertrude asking: "If all the elect souls have the same union with God?" She answered: "Yes, but with some difference, according to their merit, some receiving more liberality, others more knowledge and so on" (1).

✠ Once during Mass the Glorious Virgin Mary appeared to St. Gertrude who asked her whether the blessed soul of Mechtildis in anything resembled her. The Blessed Virgin said: "Yes, she is like me in all virtues but especially in these seven, for firstly, she was distinguished for her humility, counting herself as nothing, and preferring herself to none: in

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* VII. 21.

reward of this our Lord has raised her to the highest rank among the saints; secondly, in her purity of heart and innocence of life, for which she is placed with those who stand nearest to God and have the most intimate knowledge of Him; thirdly, by her faithful love, for which she is rewarded by being filled with the greatest good a soul can have, joy, delights, honour and beatitude; fourthly, she is like me in the desire she always had for the glory of God, seeking on the earth with all her might to further the Divine Praise. For this she has her place amongst those who praise God with most delight, and our Lord will accept as offered to Himself all the praise and thanksgivings offered for her on earth, and He will Himself accomplish any desires that she had been unable to carry out. Fifthly, for her mercy and compassion she receives this honour, that all invoking her in their necessities will obtain help. Sixthly, she resembles me in gratitude and kindness; and in reward for this our Lord pours His grace into her as into a fountain which in its overflow fills all the saints with a special joy, and in gratitude they bless our Lord in her behalf;

seventhly, in her union with God, being now in consequence more closely united to Him, and having the privilege of granting the prayers of all those who invoke God through this mutual love existing between them, for she loved God tenderly, and He reciprocated this love" (1).

Then our Lady told her that on the day when our Lord took their beloved mother from them, He confided the community to her care, recommending them to her with all the faith and love with which He had chosen her for His Mother; and she added: "My one care now is to adorn you all as best befits the brides of My Son. Moreover, He Himself will be your consoler, taking the place of this your beloved mother whom He has called to Himself" (2).

(1) *Lib. Gr. Sp.* vii. 22.

(2) *Ibid.*



CHAPTER XVI.

Laudable conversation of St. Mechtildis. — She consoles many religious and seculars — Her infirmities and penances. — Devotion to the Passion. — Her gift of prophecy. — St. Mechtildis is likened to the nine Choirs of Angels.

To sum up the life of St. Mechtildis, we cannot do better than transcribe what her affectionatedisciple and friend St. Gertrude has left us.

“ Thinking the above revelations sufficient, although, indeed, we might add many things, it is not our desire to proceed farther with them, lest, being over-long and over-many they should become tedious to those who read them, which God forbid. Of such worth are those things which we have passed over, that what we have written seems small compared with what we have omitted. Moreover, we have set these things forward for the glory of God alone, and for the profit of our neighbour, thinking it would be an unworthy thing to hide in silence those marvellous graces which she received from God,

not so much in our opinion for her own individual profit, as for our good and the benefit of those who are to come after us. As, however, we have said very little with regard to the praiseworthy and truly wonderful life and conversation of this truly marvellous woman, we would wish, at least before we finish, to say a few words in commendation thereof, so as to leave an example to those who wish to imitate her.

“ This venerable woman then preserved her virginity, which from her seventh year she had vowed to God, and her purity of heart, with such great diligence, that from her infancy she was without any sin. This is testified by her two confessors who tell us that never had they seen any man or woman of such purity of heart and innocence, as she and her sister, the Lady Abbess. Wherefore, when she had made a general confession the only penance that her confessor gave her for all her sins was to recite the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, and on a similar occasion she received from another the recital of the hymn *Te Deum laudamus*. The only grave sin which she could remember ever having committed, and this she confessed with great sorrow, was

having once said, when she was a little girl, that she had seen a thief in the court, when she had not seen one. Yet no other falsehood did she remember to have told knowingly and of her own free will. Not unworthily then may she be compared with the virgins who follow the Lamb, for she herself had most perfectly followed the Lamb, whithersoever He goeth. For neither was humility wanting to her to lift her up to the lofty heights of His glory, nor virginal chastity, to unite her to Him in familiarity and sweetness.

“ She may also without inconsistency be likened to the fathers of the religious life, since for Christ’s love she despised the world with its attractions, and embraced poverty to such a degree that she refused to have even what was necessary. Even when compelled by obedience she had only one goodly robe, the rest were but of poor and cheap cloth; while the tunics which she wore were much torn and mended in every place, and all this when she might have had in sufficiency whatever she wished. On the other hand, all virtues belonging to religion she had in perfection, that is to say, denial of her own will, self humiliation, promptitude of

obedience, earnestness in prayer and devotion, abundance of tears, enjoyment of continued contemplation. So far had she denied herself and, forgetful of herself, had become absorbed in Christ that she made but little use of her outward senses, as we likewise read of St. Bernard; hence it often came to pass that without knowing it she eat putrid eggs, until it was discovered by those who sat near her and perceived the bad odour. Likewise when dining with the guests, and having said she would never eat meat, she took it when they, knowing her habit of recollection, would place it before her, until returning to herself at the laughter of the others, she found out what she had done. Holy doctrine flowed from her lips edifying all who heard her; never hath there arisen one like unto her in our convent, nor, alas! we fear will there ever arise. Everywhere the sisters gathered around her, as if about to hear a preacher of the Word of God. She was the refuge and the consoler of all; and by a singular gift she had this grace, that men opened to her with confidence the secrets of their own hearts. And many who have been delivered by her from their difficulties and temptations, both religious and seculars, many of whom had come from afar,

were wont to say that never had they received so much consolation as from this woman. She dictated and taught so many prayers, that if they were all written together they would exceed the Psalter in size.

“ She was so continually troubled with pains and infirmities that not undeservedly she may be accounted to have had fellowship with the Martyrs. Moreover, she afflicted herself with many chastisements for sinners, and once before Lent, when she heard the people singing lascivious songs, she was inflamed with exceeding great zeal for God and loving compassion; and in order to make at least some amends to Him, she placed in her bed broken bits of glass and other sharp fragments, and throwing herself upon them, rolled about for so long a time that her skin contracted and became one large bleeding wound, from which the blood poured forth in such abundance, that for pain she could neither sit nor lie. She had so marvellous a devotion to the Passion of Christ that she could hardly hear it spoken of without tears, and very often when men were speaking of the Passion without love, she was inflamed with such fervour, that her face and hands appeared in colour like a boiled crab. For this reason we

believe that she frequently shed her blood spiritually for the love of Christ. Like to those elect ones of old, the Apostles who clung to our Lord day and night never leaving Him, enjoying His most sweet presence and daily familiar intercourse, this devout disciple of Christ saw God face to face with the eyes of the spirit and had daily most sweet converse with Him; like a pupil and well loved daughter, she was instructed by Him in those things that she desired and of which her soul had need. So intimately was she united to God and had so offered all her will to Him, that, as she herself related, after she had made her profession, she never desired in anything otherwise than as God willed. She fed with marvellous sweetness on the words of the Gospel, and was moved to such tenderness that very often, as she was reading it in choir, she passed into such a state of joy that she could not finish: at times she became as it were half dead, and so fervently was she ever wont to read it, as to excite to devotion those who heard her. In like manner, when she sang in choir, she fixed her thoughts upon God with her whole strength, as if she were all on fire, and sometimes, not knowing what she did,

made extraordinary gestures, now stretching out her hands, now lifting them up on high; at other times, carried away, as it were, in ecstasy, she remained unconscious even when moved, and at last, with difficulty, returned to herself.

“ Endowed also with the gift of prophecy she often foretold the future. Once a lady, who feared for her husband, knowing that his enemies were preparing to entrap him on a journey, saying that they would keep him in captivity until their prisoners were restored, sought the prayers of the handmaid of Christ. The Saint prayed for some time and then said to the lady; ‘ I saw the Lord with a horny hand,’ and He said: ‘ as this hand cannot receive any hurt, so he will receive no injury from his enemies ’. The lady hearing this returned to her home reassured, especially as she had had occasion to prove the truth of the Saint’s words on many similar occasions. While she was entering the town, her enemies surrounded and laid seige to her castle but their efforts to take it were in vain. Likewise the same lady on another occasion, anxious for the safety and welfare of her husband who had very many enemies, recommended him

earnestly to the Saint's prayers and the latter speaking prophetically said: ' He will go through much more adversity and danger but our Lord will preserve him from captivity and serious injury '. And all happened as she foretold, and he escaped being taken very often miraculously.

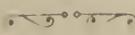
“ And now, what more shall we say? May she not be likened to the angelic spirits? Yes, even with these she was joined so lovingly and in such friendly harmony, as seldom to be without their presence, and indeed she seemed to have exercised the office of the different Choirs of angels at one time or another. Moreover, the comparison with the Angels, whose proper office it is to minister, becomes her, who by her dutiful charity and sweet companionship, ministered compassionate love to the wretched, the help of prayer to sinners, admonition and correction to the negligent, and the word of instruction to the ignorant. Like the Archangels she interceded for many before God, and tenderly besought help for them from Him. She may be compared also with the Virtues, for she was an exceeding bright example of all virtues. Nor, undeservedly, may she be counted amongst the Powers, since the Almighty Majesty gave Itself so often into her power,

and she had been made powerful over the demons, as they themselves once complained in a vision to a certain person, saying, that by her merits and intercession the souls of the faithful were daily taken out of their power. With the Principalities also she may rightly claim a place, for like a princely commander, together with her sister the Venerable Lady Abbess, she wisely and orderly governed both the inner and outer life of the monastery. Moreover, not inconsistently is she joined with the Dominations, since she hath been proved to have been the sovereign mistress of her affections and acts. She was mistress over her heart by keeping it in all custody. She was mistress over her works by performing them for God's sake. She may also be called the most delightful Throne of God, on account of the exceeding fervour and purity of her mind; for, full of the grace of God, she pointed out what they ought to do to all who asked her, how they should live and govern themselves, as if from the mouth of God who dwelt within her. She may be likened also to the Cherubim, for, plunged so many times into the very source of wisdom and penetrating into the abyss of light, she illuminated with

knowledge and doctrine all who came to her, like the sun shining in the temple of God. For as she herself told us, our Lord gave her often spiritual understanding as to the psalms, whatever she either sang or read, and she understood what before had not entered into her thoughts. But above all, most suitably and worthily this angelic virgin may be compared with the Seraphim, for so many times was she immediately united to Love itself, which is God, and so lovingly pressed to His burning Heart, that she was made one fiery spirit with Him. So gracious was she in speaking of God; so fervently, above all, did she discourse of charity, as often to inflame the hearts of those who listened to her. Wherefore it may be fitly said of her, that her words were as the words of Élias, which *quasi facula ardebant*. (Eccl. XLVIII).

“ These few words in praise of her conversation we have written down, and in our opinion she is the equal in merit of all these saints whose company and familiar friendship she enjoyed, even upon earth, frequently feeling their sensible presence especially on their feasts. And let it not seem strange to any one that we should compare as equal to all the saints in merit, a

creature of our own times, this age of decay, when men have become familiar with the dregs of every vice, and virtue has become tedious, for St. Gregory borrowing from Exechiel, says: " God deigns to increase men's knowledge from day to day, to reveal more liberally His secrets, and that with time the knowledge of things spiritual grows ", and he introduces that passage of the Prophet Daniel speaking of the latter times *Pertransibunt plurimi, et multiplex erit scientia* (Daniel, xii. 4). He also says: " Moses knew more than Abraham, the Prophets more than Moses, the Apostles more than the Prophets. Thus David says of himself: *Super omnes docentes me et super senes intellexi.* (Psalm. cxviii. 100). We read also in the Lives of the Fathers, that some of them prophecied as follows concerning the last generation: ' The men of that time will be lax, but the perfect among them shall excel us and our fathers ' "



CHAPTER XVII.

History of Helfta. — Death of St. Gertrude. — Sophia of Mansfeld. — Jutta I. of Halberstadt. — Sophia II. of Friedburg. — Sacking of the Monastery. Removal of the nuns to Eisleben, 1343. — Account by Abbess Sophia of Stolberg. 1346. — Burchard becomes a Penitent under the Rule of St. Benedict. — Lady Luchardis. — Consecration of the Monastery, — Old and New Helfta.

The history of Helfta has become too dear to us to leave it with the death of St. Mechtildis. In a few words we must resume its chronicle and relate the principal events connected with it until the community was dispersed and the monastery almost destroyed.

Only three years passed by when St. Gertrude followed her friend, sister and guide to heaven. Into the details of her death we must not go; they belong to a period when she has passed out of the life of St. Mechtildis, and we need only note that Sophia of Mansfeld was still living, but died two years later; she was succeeded by Jutta I. of Halberstadt who died

probably in 1310. So far as we know the life of the nuns was for many years free from those troubles to which they had been too long accustomed.

Sophia II. of Friedburg succeeded Jutta, and dying was succeeded in 1337 by Lutgarde I. of Mansfeld, thus showing us that the same old families continued to give their daughters to the cloister of Helfta. During her abbacy the nuns, as in the time of her namesake Sophia I., suffered terribly from Albert of Brunswick, the self-appointed bishop of Halberstadt. Reference to this has been made elsewhere but the accounts given in history are much more full.

We are told that during the abbacy of Sophia the nuns underwent a terrible trial, for the monastery was plundered and all but rased to the ground. A contest had arisen as to the succession to the Bishopric of Halberstadt. In the lifetime of the last bishop, Pope John XXII had reserved the bishopric to himself; notwithstanding the reservation however, the canons, on the death of Albert of Anhalt, elected Louis of Nyundorp to the vacant see. On this, Albert of Brunswick, with the help of his brother Otto Duke of Brunswick, took violent possession of

Holzace, and sent orders commanding all to obey him as bishop. Albert of Brunswick by the use of force compelled the canons, monasteries and clergy to submit to him. Shortly afterwards Louis of Nyundorp was appointed by the Pope to the bishopric of Brandenburg and at the same time made vicar general of Halberstadt. He issued various sentences of suspension, excommunication and interdict against all who refused obedience to the lawful bishop. The prelates and clergy of the eastern and Eisleben districts at once gave their allegiance to the Papal nominee. Albert was greatly irritated at this, and in his turn excommunicated the prelates and obtained a reversal of his sentence. Albert now procured the assistance of his brothers, Otho Duke of Brunswick, Henry of Hyldensein, an intruder like himself, the Count of Wernigerode, and Duke Ernest of Brunswick. With them he invaded the disputed territories, devastating them with fire and sword, particularly the lands of the Counts of Mansfeld and Regensteyn, who had protected the clergy loyal to Rome. They set fire to many parish churches and monasteries, expelling the religious, and not sparing even the Blessed Sacrament, which they carried off to their camp.

The monastery of Helfta was too much bound up with the family of Mansfeld to escape in the general disaster. Armed bands broke into it after midday, made havoc of every thing moveable, carried off books and sacred ornaments, and were preparing to set fire to the building. Duke Otho interfered to prevent this outrage, and obtained from his less scrupulous brother a promise to spare the house, but as soon as he had left, Albert ordered the place to be set on fire. His followers shrank before this sacrilegious command, upon which he himself seized a torch, and calling to his men to follow, set fire to the bakehouse and granary. He even put his torch four times to the dormitory of the nuns, but his men resolutely extinguished the fire each time. Thus the dormitory and the monastery were saved, but all the other buildings were destroyed.

It was after order was restored, and the nuns had learned from the experience of the past how insecure was the situation of the monastery, that it was determined to transfer it nearer to Eisleben, so as to be within reach of protection. Their pious patron Burchard, Count of Mansfeld, assigned to them some land in Eisleben, and

provided for the transfer which was effected in in the year 1343. We give the conclusion from the deed of gift to the new foundation :

“ We, therefore, Burchard, by the grace of God, Count of Mansfeld, well aware that the state of things in the world is not improving but rather growing worse every day, and wishing, from the affection we have always had for the monastery of Helfta, to provide against the recurrence of similar trouble, have determined with the help of God, to change the site of the monastery and remove the nuns to Eisleben. Therefore, with the consent of our heirs and others having interest in the matter, we give by this deed to the community aforesaid, eighteen acres of arable land for the construction of the monastery, further intending to contribute towards its building. We also bestow upon them three mills, one near the field where the monastery is to be built, at the rent of three marks a year; and the other two immediately above, on the stream under the walls of Eisleben, at the rent of six marks and two measures of wheat, to be held in possession by them peacefully and without disturbance for ever. In consideration of the anniversary of our beloved

consort, and on our own anniversary after we shall have finished our course on earth, the monastery shall celebrate Solemn Mass and Office; the steward, for the time being, shall give alms to the poor, of the income of the mills, namely, a cheese, loaf and beer, for the health of our souls and of all the faithful departed, and shall also regularly give to the nuns a good pittance every year on our anniversaries. Lest any one may question part of this deed, or seek to prevent this our donation and the good to ourselves and our consort, we, not being able to use our authentic seal, do affix in confirmation our privy seal.

“ Given in the year of our Lord 1343. on the vigil of St. George the Martyr ”.

So far the deed drawn up by Count Burchard of Mansfeld; but now we must turn to the account of the removal to Eisleben written by the Abbess Sophia of Stolberg in 1346.

“ The Lord Burchard, Count of Mansfeld and Dom John the Provost, those two faithful benefactors of the Cloister, arranged for the transfer of our monastery from Old Helfta to New Helfta near Eisleben, (which site was acquired in the year of our Lord's Incarnation 1346), on the feast of St. Severus, Bishop, which was the

Sunday when *Da pacem* is sung. When the new monastery was quite completed, the Lord Burchard was made one of our *Confratres* and lived with us under the Rule of the Penitents till his death.

“ The Lady Luchardis , daughter of our most devoted Father Burchard, Count of Mansfeld, together with the above mentioned Lords transferred the monastery, on account of the danger from enemies, to a safer place where it now is. The Lady Abbess, when we came to the new monastery, filled, as it were, with new fervour , frequently exhorted the community, one and all , to begin afresh in newness of spirit, and to strive in the new cloister with redoubled ardour, to give themselves entirely to God in love and devotion, in the perfection of religious observance; and she herself, wholly inflamed by the Holy Spirit, so burned with the love of God that she felt neither cold nor any inconvenience in His service

“ Three months after our coming to New Helfta, during the night of our Lord’s Circumcision, she fell into a mortal illness, although she had been singing with the greatest fervour during the whole octave of our Lord’s Nativity. She lingered for ten days, and fortified by all

the Sacraments of the Church, on the III. of the Ides of January, (Jan. 3) with her sight and hearing unimpaired, without any fear of the demon, she most happily passed away to Him whom she loved and sought and always desired.

“ On the following day when Dom John the Provost was celebrating her funeral with all solemnity, during the singing of the *Regnum mundi* and *Surge virgo*, her father, the Lord Burchard, nearly fainted from grief at finding that the place in which she was buried was not consecrated. Lord Albert, his son, who had been elected and confirmed Bishop of Halberstadt by the Holy See, sent for the Lord of Byche-ling, a Bishop consecrated in the Roman Court, who on the third day, that is the Sunday when *Omnis Terra* is sung, consecrated the whole monastery, the altar of the Apostles, the chapel, the cemetery in the cloister, the chapter house, the cloister and the court in it.

“ And now we, Sophia Abbess, by the petition and election of the seniors of this our monastery of St. James and St. Burchard, have caused search to be made in the Breviary of the said monastery, compared with our Breviary and that of the community, and after careful examin-

ation of all that pertains to the Divine Office, find that they agree in all the hours and customs etc. and that the manner of life which we have retained from the commencement, and in which we mean by the grace of God to persevere, is derived to us from the aforesaid monastery primarily and principally, excepting only two feasts, the night of our Lord's Resurrection and the night of Pentecost, when we have twelve lessons with proper antiphons and responsories, while, in the old Breviary seen and examined by us, there are three lessons and three responsories on these feasts.

“ Deed subscribed in the year of our Lord's Incarnation 1251 on the Sunday within the octave of the Epiphany of our God, which we have confirmed with our seal and the seal of the monastery ”.

After the removal of the monastery from Old Helfta to New Helfta near Eisleben, the name of Hackeborn occurs less frequently in the deeds. Still we find that an Elisabeth of this family was Abbess in the Imperial foundation of Quedlinburg in the years 1363-1374, and a Mechtildis Prioress of the same monastery.

Noble daughters of the house of Mansfeld

continued frequently to govern the monastery of New Helfta, although Abbesses were sometimes chosen from other families. Among these, Mechtildis of Querfurt, who was Abbess from 1383 to 1409, deserves special notice. During the prevalence of a pestilence she so carefully tended her daughters that, although many of them were struck down by the plague, they all recovered. It was she who replied to the *Praepositus* Nicolas Gutterbock, when he proposed some novelty in the Divine Office *Sic Deo inserviendum est, ut et proximi et corporis habeatur ratio*.

About the year 1500 the Abbess Catherine of Watzdorf introduced a reform which was adopted by the monastery of St. John the Baptist, in Gerberstett. She was the last of the Abbesses and was subjected to much annoyance from Luther, on account of a cousin of his named Florentina, receiving from the apostate, with the appellation of Jezabel, a full share of his accustomed invectives. In the rebellion of the peasants, in 1525, came her last sorrow. These heretical fanatics plundered and destroyed New Helfta, and put together the books and deeds of the monastery to be boiled in the caldrons used

for making their beer. Catherine took refuge in Old Helfta and died shortly after. There is no record of an Abbess elected to succeed her, and with the intrusion of a heretical preacher in 1546 the religious family of Gertrude and Mechtildis came to an end.

The foundation made by the Abbess Gertrude and her brothers, Albert and Louis of Hackeborn, in 1252 at Hedersleben, was more fortunate. It survived till 1810, when Jerome Bonaparte, King of Westphalia, expelled the Abbess Engelhardt with thirteen nuns.

The desolation both of Old and New Helfta was complete. The sacred remains of St. Gertrude and St. Mechtildis were not taken from the ground, and the spot where they are buried is not known.

The monastery of Old Helfta is now the property of the state, and transformed into an agricultural school. Happily, however, we can still trace from the ruins that have survived the ravages of time and plunder, the plan and extent of the ancient cloister, though with the exception of the church it is impossible to determine exactly how the different buildings were situated and arranged. In the southern block two gables arise

cutting through the roof of the modern buildings. There can be no doubt that these two walls were the east and west ends of the ancient church. A quadrangle is formed by two larger walls uniting them, the upper parts of which have been cut away, and a very modern roof lower than the original one now supports them; these walls form the north and south sides of the church. We thus can see how spacious the church was in the days of its glory, the quadrangle formed by the walls measuring thirty feet in breadth and one hundred and thirty in length. The double form of the structure can also be seen at a glance: at the eastern end must have been the church itself, while the lower addition must be the ruins of the chapel built at a later period in honour of SS. John the Baptist and Evangelist, by Burchard II. Count of Mansfeld as burial place for the family.

The church itself is of the simplest form of structure; its architecture consisting in bare, smooth walls. The twelve bow-shaped windows on either side are twelve feet from the ground, rising to the height of nine feet, while their breadth is three feet. The eastern wall has three windows likewise arched at the top, which

starting at four feet from the ground reach to the height of twenty feet. Three eastern windows, unlike the others, have the outer part of the aperture wider than the inner, so that the light, instead of penetrating into the church as is usual, emanates from it. Adjoining this part of the church, are the ruins of a building of the same period, which would seem to have received its light from those three windows, both places being so constructed as to afford a mutual inlook. It is thought probable that the sanctuary with the altar was here; whilst the choir of the nuns was within the church itself, or it may have been that the nuns had their choir at the end, the sanctuary being in the church. On the north, near the Chapel of St. John, there was a door—now built up—but whose arched top can be seen and shows it to be of the same period as the church. Towards the middle of the same aisle, we find traces of another door likewise closed up, close to which a holy water stoup may be seen built into the wall.

What thoughts crowd in upon the mind on looking at this precious relic, and how easily can we not see in imagination St. Mechtildis, St. Gertrude and their companions reverently taking

holy water as they entered to sing the Divine Office.

A third entrance on the northern side, also built up, can be traced, but its pointed gable proves it to be of later date. Of the adjoining part, which conjecture would have to be the Chapel of St. John, there is little to describe, a few stones still clinging to the side walls is all that remains to show that there existed a wall connecting this building with the church. Light was received from the western side by two windows, each divided by a small central column, which at one time were pointed but now end with a round arch. The area of this is larger than the church itself by seven feet. Below there still exists a vaulted crypt with pointed roof, lighted by pointed windows. Close to the sides of this part and within the church are projections which supported some sort of platform, for what purpose we cannot now say, unless the nun's choir was here, as is still found to be the case in many places in Germany.

These then are the remains of the ancient Cloister of Helfta. Within these walls St. Gertrude prayed and held sweet converse with her Lord: there the blessed and saintly Mechtildis

rejoiced the heavenly choirs with the melody of her divinely inspired singing of God's praise, and near to it they both repose, awaiting the resurrection. There are no traces of a cemetery and so that hallowed spot is not known; it may be that they rest in the crypt beneath or even in the church itself. Surely their spirits hover over the spot where they lived their lives in the service of their Lord under the Rule of St. Benedict and where they tasted, even here below, the joy of closest union with Him.

With no more appropriate or more beautiful words can we end this life of St. Mechtildis than in those of the Holy Ghost which epitomise the dealings of God with that chosen soul; " Her have I loved, and have sought out from my youth, and have desired to take for my spouse, and I became a lover of her beauty. She glorifieth her nobility by being conversant with God: yea, and the Lord of all things hath loved her. For it is she that teacheth the knowledge of God, and is the chooser of His works " (1).

(1) Wisdom VIII. 1-4.

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