

Saints Gertrude the Great and Mechthild

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Saints Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Helfta lived together as Benedictine sisters in the same monastery in Germany during the 13th century. They influenced each other's personal and spiritual lives.

Mechthild was only seven when she visited her older sister who was a member of a Benedictine community. Mechthild begged to stay and was eventually allowed to do so, attending the abbey school first and later joining the community. One of her duties then was caring for the children sent to the abbey school.

One of the children Mechthild cared for was Gertrude, who came when she was only five, perhaps because she was an orphan. She thrived there and was an eager student of Mechthild who eventually also became her novice-mistress. Gertrude was well-grounded in grammar, rhetoric and Latin.

When she was 25, Gertrude had a significant conversion experience, not from sin to virtue, but from a prescribed spirituality to a deeply personal one. She realized that her passion for secular studies, "human wisdom", had caused her to neglect "true wisdom". As intense as it was, her profound experience did not produce an immediate or irrevocable change, which is a comfort to those of us who struggle to keep on our intended paths. She became more open to the Spirit and immersed herself in Christian writings, especially those of St. Augustine, St. Gregory and St. Bernard. Her writings include quotations from and allusions to these sources and clearly reflect the influence of liturgy and scripture. Most of her mystical experiences took place in Mass or during her praying the divine office. From being so captivated by intellectual pursuits, she grew spiritually so that there became no clear distinction for her between head and heart. She was wholly for God.

Gertrude wrote down Mechthild's teaching and experiences. At first Mechthild was troubled by this, but, after prayer, she decided that Gertrude had been inspired by God to do so. Together they prepared the manuscript for publication.

Gertrude also wrote a volume about her own revelations and helped with the publication of three other volumes about her experiences. A fifth volume was published posthumously from her notes. Gertrude also wrote a book of Spiritual Exercises.

A prominent theme of both Mechthild and Gertrude is love, particularly that of Christ. Gertrude's mysticism is intensely personal. Her writings include elaborate description and metaphors, some of which are offensive to our sense of style, but were typical of that era. Both women lived outwardly uneventful lives, yet they are remembered seven centuries later for living spirit-filled lives. They encouraged, taught and learned from each other. May we do the same.