

MEDIEVAL WOMEN

Nuns, Scholars, Mystics, Saints



1

REVIEW

MEDIEVAL WOMEN

- Women were active in a variety of ministries in the early church – primarily, but not exclusively directed to other women
- As Christianity emerged as a public religion in the 4th century, women’s leadership and ministry was restricted; their social role conformed to Greco-Roman ideals
- Christianity opened a path for women’s independence in the form of vowed virginity (or widowhood), which evolved into monasticism
- The vast majority of Christian women served quietly as mother, sisters, and wives

2

MOTHERS AND SISTERS

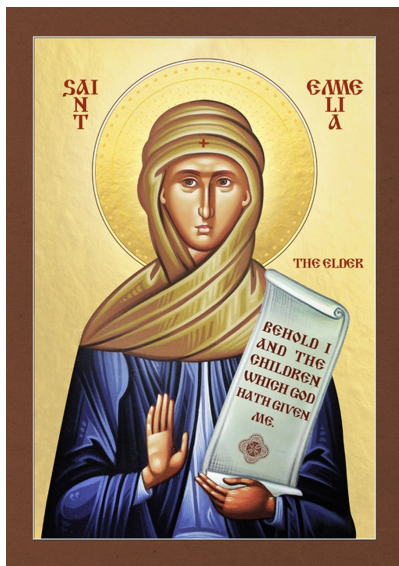


NONNA (305-374)

- Lived in Cappadocia (modern Turkey)
- Converted husband; all three children became saints:
 - Gregory of Nazianzus
 - Caesarius
 - Gorgonia
- “She recognized only one true nobility, that of piety, and the knowledge of our origin and final destiny. The only wealth she considered secure and inviolate was to strip oneself of wealth for God and the poor, and especially for kinsfolk whose fortunes had declined...Who subdued her flesh more by fastings and watchings, or stood like a pillar during nightlong or daily singing of the psalms? Who had greater ambition for virginity, although she herself was under the bond of matrimony? Who was a better champion of widows and orphans?... Though in her body she was but a woman, in her spirit she was above all men...” (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Funeral Oration for His Father*, 124-27)

3

MOTHERS AND SISTERS



EMMELIA (d. 375)

- Also Cappadocian
- Five of her ten children were designated saints:
 - Basil of Caesarea, bishop
 - Gregory of Nyssa, bishop
 - Peter of Sabaste, bishop
 - Naucratis, monk
 - Macrina, nun

4

MOTHERS AND SISTERS



MACRINA (327-379)

- Eldest sister of Basil, Gregory, and Peter
- Her mother had a vision of her as “Thecla,” which became her secret name
- Took a vow of virginity
- After father’s death, she led the household as “father, teacher, attendant, mother, the counselor of every good”
- Though lacking formal education, she had “one of the most extensive informal educations of the fourth century”
- Her brother Gregory praised her as a “wise philosopher” like Socrates, filled with wisdom “as if she were inspired by the Holy Spirit”

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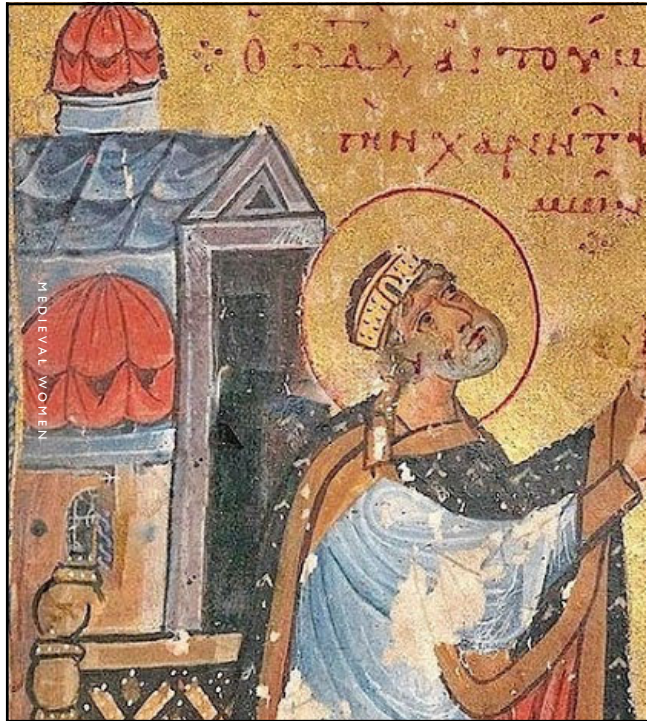
MOTHERS AND SISTERS



MOTHERS AND SISTERS

- Served God through their example of holiness
- Trained children to become theologians, monks, and church leaders
- “Christian womenfolk in the family played a great part in forming the outlook of Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, and Ambrose of Milan. Each owed his later, strongly held views to the influence of a mother or sister in the decade 350-360” (W.H.C Frend)

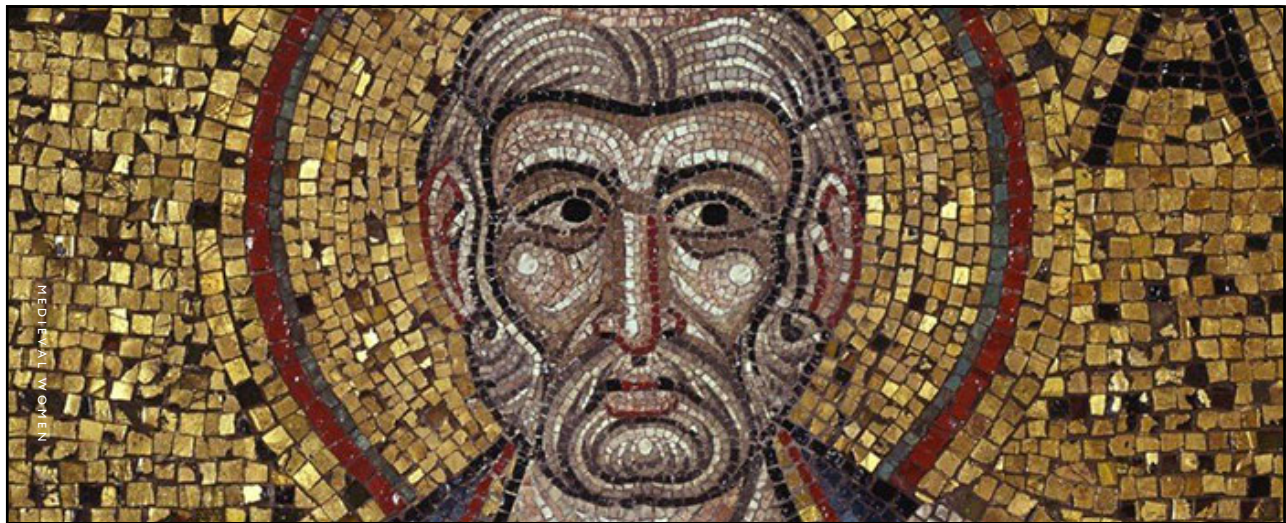
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GREGORY OF NYSSA

- “Image of God” not gendered
- Sexual difference is the result of the fall
- Resurrected bodies will have no sexual difference
- Celibacy is a participation in the life to come

7



AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

8



9

MEDIEVAL WOMEN

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

“separately in her quality as a helpmeet, which regards the woman alone, then she is not the image of God, but, as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one”

(*City of God* 14.11)

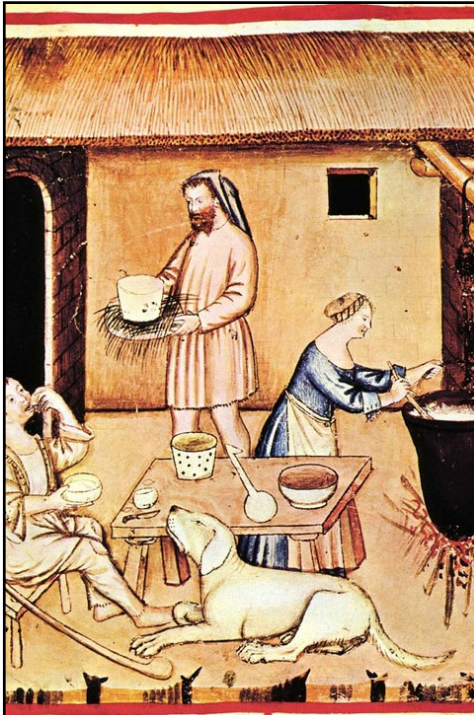
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FEMALE MONASTICISM



- Monasteries were a place where women could devote their lives to God
 - Alternative to arranged marriages, life of servitude and childbearing
 - Communities ranging in size from an extended household to several hundred
 - Nuns devoted themselves to intercessory prayer, liturgical responsibilities, and social services like teaching and nursing
- There were various "orders": Benedictines, Cistercians, Augustinian
- One of the few places they could operate (relatively) free of male oversight

11



WHY JOIN?

"And how I ask...how does the wife stand who when she comes in hears her child scream, sees the cat stalking food, and the hound at the hide? Her cake is burning on the stone hearth, her calf is sucking the milk, the earthen pot is overflowing onto the fire...it ought maiden, to deter thee more strongly from marriage, for it does not seem easy to her who has tried it. Thou happy maiden, who hast fully removed thyself out of that servitude as a free daughter of God and as His Son's spouse, needest not suffer anything of this kind."

(Eckenstein, *Woman Under Monasticism*, 96)

12

FEMALE MYSTICISM

- Mysticism is “the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of [...] a direct and transformative presence of God.” (McGinn)
- “For the first time in Christian history we can document that a particular kind of religious experience is more common among women than men. For the first time in Christian history certain major devotional and theological emphases emanate from women and influence the basic development of spirituality” (Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 172)



13



THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

- During the 14th century, the task of interpreting the Bible and God was restricted to ordained male priests.
- Mystics were not a direct threat to male priestly power.
- Women mystics had to express their experience of God through the senses and the body.
- Mystics directly experienced God in three classical ways:
 1. bodily visions, meaning to be aware with one's senses - sight, sound, or others;
 2. ghostly visions, such as spiritual visions and sayings directly imparted to the soul;
 3. intellectual enlightenment, where one's mind came into a new understanding of God.

14



HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098-1179)

15

“A WOMANISH TIME”

“And I heard a voice saying thus: Who created Heaven? God. Who opens heaven to the faithful? God. Who is like Him? No one. And so, O men of faith, let none of you resist Him or oppose Him, lest He fall on you in His might and you have no helper to protect you from His judgement. This time is a womanish time, because the dispensation of God’s justice is weak. But the strength of God’s justice is exerting itself, a female warrior battling against injustice, so that it might fall defeated.”

(Letter 1)

MEDIEVAL WOMEN

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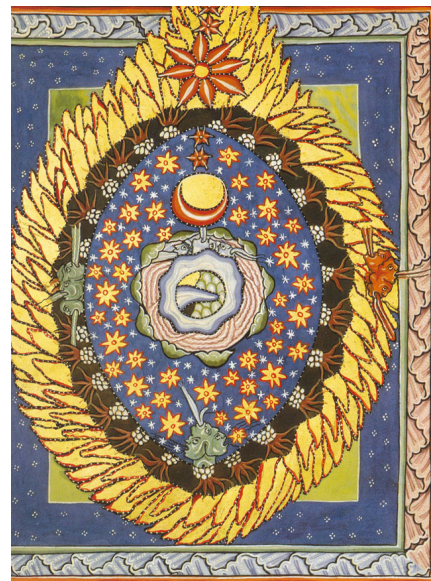
SCIVIAS



17

HILDEGARD'S
FEMININE ART

“I saw a huge form, rounded and shadowy, and shaped like an egg... Its outer layer consisted of an atmosphere of bright fire with a kind of dark membrane beneath it... From the outer atmosphere of fire, a wind blew storms. And from the dark membrane beneath, another membrane raged with further storms which moved out in all directions of the globe.”



18

VIRIDITAS THE GREENING

“In the beginning all creatures were green and vital. They flourished amidst flowers.”

The “greening power” is the creative force that is inherent in all life and which calls us forth to be fruitful , vibrant co-creators with the Divine.



19



WOUND IS WOMB

20

Divine Love

I am the supreme and fiery force, who sets all living sparks alight and breathes forth no mortal things but judges them as they are. Flying around the circling circle with my upper wings, that is, with wisdom, I have ordered all things rightly. But I am also the fiery life of the essence of divinity; I flame above the beauty of the fields, and I shine in the waters and I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. And with the airy wind I rouse to life all things with some invisible life, which sustains all things.

Therefore I, the fiery force, lie hidden in these things, and they burn because of me, just as breath continually moves a human being and a flickering flame exists within the fire. All of these things live in their essences and are not found in death, because I am life. I am also reason, possessing the wind of the resounding Word, through which every created thing was made; and in all these things I blow, so that none of them might be mortal in its nature, because I am life.

(Book of Divine Works)



21



HARRAD'S GARDEN OF DELIGHT

- Harrad, abbess of Hoenburg in Alsace
- Nuns wore colorful clothes and were well educated
- *Garden of Delight* (1185)
 - Encyclopedia of all knowledge written for women novices
 - Nearly 700 pages and illustrated
 - First encyclopedia written by a woman
- “Despise the world, despise nothing, despise thyself, despise despising thyself - these are four things” (Harrad)

22

Mystics of Helfta Covent

- Gertrude of Hackenborn
- Mechtild of Hackenborn (1240-1298)
- Mechtild of Magdeburg (1207-1282)
- Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1301)



23



SACRED HEART OF JESUS

- Mechtild's Vision of the Sacred Heart
 - Christ "gave her his heart as a token of love"
 - "Straightway the Lord with love unutterable, bending to her as a mother would to a son, embraced her saying: 'In the love of my divine heart I bathe thee', and he opened the door of his heart, the treasure house of flowing holiness, and she entered into it as through into a vineyard."
- Mechtild and Gertrude perceived Jesus' Heart as the breast of a mother. Just as a mother gives milk to nourish her child, so Jesus in the Eucharist gives us His Life Blood.

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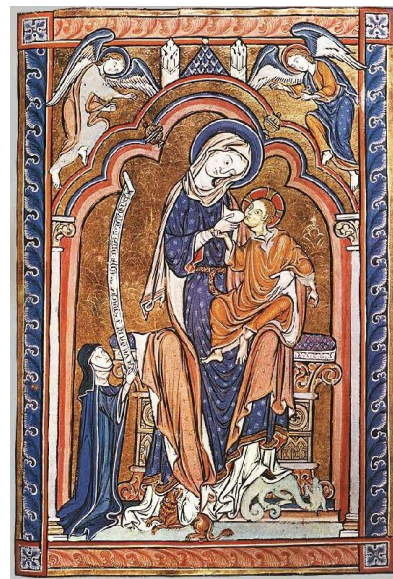
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BRIDAL MYSTICISM

- Women mystics saw communion as a meeting of bride and bridegroom
- Use of *Song of Songs*

BABY JESUS

- Christ often appears as a cheerful baby or a handsome young man, not as the bleeding, agonized figure popular in medieval devotion
- “Sometimes it seemed to her that for three or more days she held Him close to her so that He nestled between her breasts like a baby, and she hid Him there lest He be seen by others. Sometimes she kissed Him as though He were a little child and sometimes she held Him on her lap as if He were a gentle lamb” (*Life of Mary of Oignies*)



26

MARGUERITE PORETE (d. 1310)

The Mirror of Simple Souls

All humans can unite with Divine through Love, and the perfected soul lives above demands of ordinary morality.

“I am God, says Love, for Love is God and God is Love, and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. I am God by divine nature and this Soul is God by righteousness of Love. Thus this precious beloved of mine is taught and guided by me, without herself, for she is transformed into me, and such a perfect one, says Love, takes my nourishment.”

Burned at the stake for heresy.



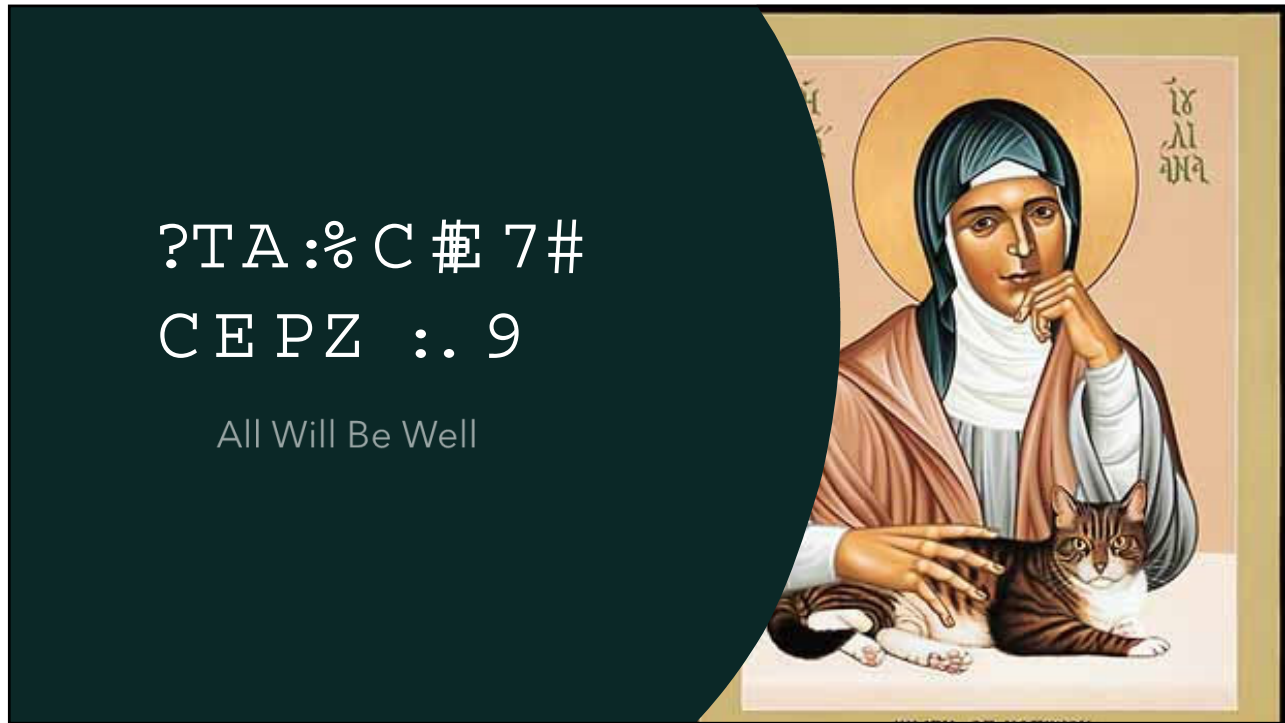
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CATHERINE OF SIENNA (1347-1380)

- Vowed virginity at a young age; had mystical visions; known for holiness
 - Fasted so much she stopped menstruating
 - Probably died from extreme asceticism
- Became a nurse during Black Plague in Italy
- Criticized for her public service: “My very sex...puts many obstacles in the way. The world has no way for a woman to mix so freely in the company of men.... [And she heard the Lord respond,] ‘With me there is no male or female.’”
- So many people’s lives were transformed by her that a team of priests traveled with her to hear confessions
- Involved in church reform, resolved conflict with papacy, organized a crusade
- Along with Hildegard, she is one four women called “Doctors of the Church” (1970)



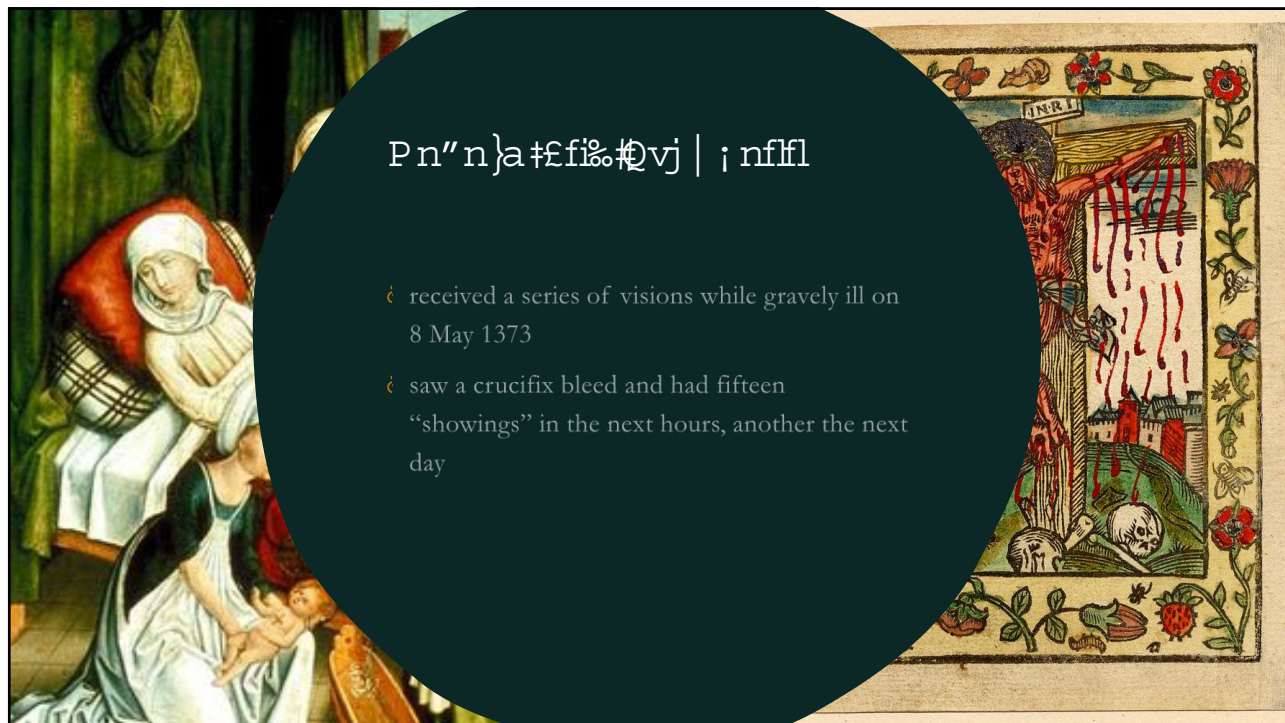
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All Will Be Well

29

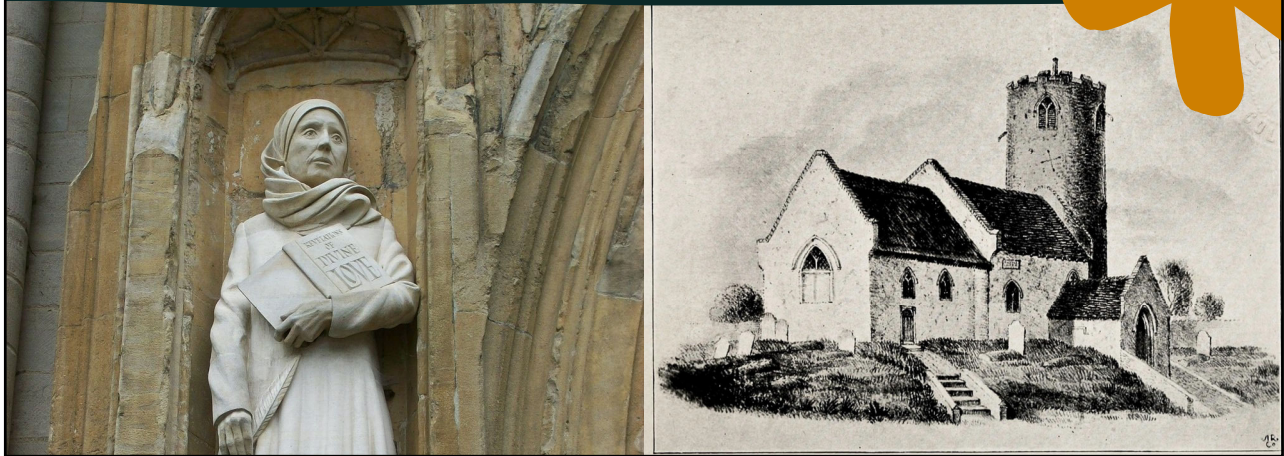


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- ⌘ received a series of visions while gravely ill on 8 May 1373
- ⌘ saw a crucifix bleed and had fifteen "showings" in the next hours, another the next day

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31

And after thysoure Lorde brought to my mynde the longyng that I had to hym before. And I saw nothyng lettyd me but synne, and so I behelde generally in us alle. And me thought yf synne had nott be, we shulde alle have be clene and lyke to our Lorde as he made us. And thus in my foly before thys tyme often I wondryd why, by the grete forseynge wysdom of God, the begynnynge of synne was nott lettyd. For then thought me that alle shulde have be wele.

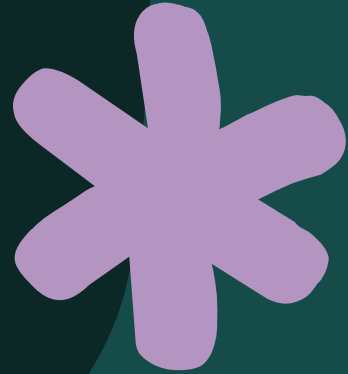
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"Sin is necessary, but all will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well." (225)

"But I did not see sin, for I believe that it has no kind of substance, no share in being, nor can it be recognized except by the pain cause by it." (225)

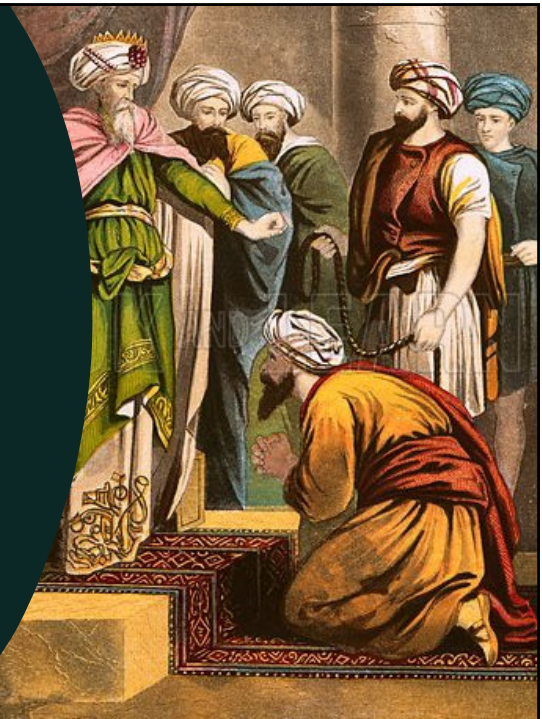
"For he regards sin as sorrow and pains for is lovers, to whom for love he assigns no blame....For our courteous Lord does not want his servant to despair because they fall often and grievously; for our falling does not hinder him in loving us" (245)



33

Mafiai }n#s#un#Afil # ; l # #un#Qnfi" a ; †

"And then our courteous Lord answered very mysteriously, by revealing a wonderful example of a lord who has a servant..." (267)



34



Mafiai }n#s#un#A£fil # ; l #
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"This man was injured in his powers and made most feeble.... I saw the Lord commend and approve him for his will, but he himself was blinded and hindered from knowing this will. And this is a great sorrow and a cruel suffering to him, for he neither sees clearly his loving lord...nor does he truly see what he himself is in the sight of his loving lord"

"And the loving regard which he kept constantly on his servant, and especially when he fell, it seemed to me that it could melt our hearts for love and break them in two for joy."

35

C £ #uv; t# a ; #Qn«afia n#fl

"It is a great understanding to see and know inwardly that god, who is our Creator, dwells in our soul, and it is a far greater understanding to see and know inwardly that our soul, which is created, dwells in God in substance, of which substance, through God, we are what we are. And I saw no difference between God and our substance, but, as it were, all God"

36



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“And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.”

37

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“The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament, which is the precious food of true life ... The mother can lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus can lead us easily into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show us there a part of the godhead and of the joys of heaven, with inner certainty of endless bliss ... This fair lovely word 'mother' is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things. To the property of motherhood belong nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge, and this is God.”



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"And always as the child grows in age and in stature, she acts differently, but she does not change her love."



39



Sun#B na ; v i t o #E " n

"I desired many times to know in what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered: 'What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing? Know it well, love was his meaning. Who reveals it to you? Love. What did he reveal to you? Love. Why does he reveal it to you? For love. Remain in this, and you will know more of the same. But you will never know different, without end.'" (342)

40

RESOURCES

- Religious Nuns in Medieval Europe: <https://silo.tips/download/religious-nuns-in-medieval-europe>