

## **SAINT GERTRUDE OF HELFTA: DOCTOR OF THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH**

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Saint Gertrude, whom the Catholic tradition has named “the Great” was born January 6, 1256, the feast of the Epiphany. She reminded herself of that fact in order to accept, not without resistance, the insistence of the Lord and of her superiors that she put into writing her spiritual experience. They persuaded her that her word will be “light to illumine the nations” and “the announcement of salvation to the ends of the world.”

Gertrude’s family origins are not known. Still a child she was offered to the monastery of Helfta in Germany, in the diocese of Magdebourg. This was a milieu of cultivated women who were living according to the Rule of Saint Benedict and the customs of Citeaux. Gertrude’s education was entrusted to saint Mechtilde of Hackeborn from whom she received a solid intellectual and spiritual formation.

A decisive encounter marked her life: in the evening of January 27, 1281 when she was living for more than a month in “a thick cloud of darkness” a young man who was holding in his hands “the brilliant jewels of scars that have annulled all our debts, presented himself to her.” He promised to deliver her from this big trouble. From that very day a two-fold conversion took place in her: she renounced humanistic studies in order the better to devote herself to theological studies and she passed from a neglectful monastic life to a life of interior mystical prayer with an exceptional missionary ardor.

We know from her biography that saint Gertrude wrote a number of works in which the word of God held a prominent place. Two of these have survived the centuries: The Spiritual Exercises “a rare jewel of mystical literature” and Le Heraut de l’Amour divin where there is consigned the Memorial of the graces of union with the Lord. A long “approbation of the doctors”, Dominicans and Franciscans, placed at the head of Le Heraut recommends reading it. After Italy, Spain, France the diffusion of her works gains Latin America where Gertrude is declared patroness of the West Indies. The nuns of The Conception in Mexico obtained permission to celebrate her feast from 1609, even before she was inscribed in the Roman Martyrology in 1677.

### **DOCTOR OF THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH**

The authors who have studied the work of Saint Gertrude (Cyprien Vagaggini, Jean Leclercq, Pierre Doyere, Charles-Andre Bernard, etc.) are unanimous in recognizing the fundamental place of the liturgy in her life. There is nothing surprising in this fact for a nun who belongs to the great Benedictine tradition; however, in Gertrude this liturgical influence attains an unequalled expression. The liturgy is not only the privileged place of her spiritual experience, but her who life, as it were, is bathed in the liturgy and becomes “the work of God” all along the days and nights. For her the cult practiced in the oratory is deployed everywhere as well.

This place of “foundation” occupied by the liturgy in the work of Saint Gertrude makes her a sure and very healthy spiritual mistress for anyone who is engaged to follow Christ on the paths

of the Gospel. By her life and by her work the “great” nun of Helfta witnesses that no form of prayer is more to be recommended than the liturgy of the Church; none is more capable of transforming the heart so that it becomes the receptacle of the “overflowing waves of divine tenderness”. It is also remarkable to see how the celebrated adage of Saint Benedict “mens nostra concordat voci nostrae” (let our mind be in harmony with our voice”) (Rule 19:7) cited in the General Presentation of the Liturgy of the Hours, finds in Gertrude an enlargement that manifests an sense of the Church quite uncommon: “le devotion be in harmony with the offices of the Church”. That amounts to saying that without ceasing to assure the harmony of the spirit with the voice, fervor should search to be in accord with the offices of the Church. Thus all exercise of piety or private devotion to avoid slipping off course, should be at pains to be inspired by the great liturgy of the Church and support itself on it.

This explains why Saint Gertrude of Helfta can be presented as an example of liturgical spirituality that can lead to the highest forms of Christian and contemplative life. In our ecclesial context where the liturgy has become a sensitive point –at times even a very regrettable source of tension among the faithful of Christ- Gertrude is a figure of great witness to the impact on the whole baptismal life of a liturgy whose form, whether “ordinary” or “extraordinary”, attains its purpose only if the heart of the celebrants is enlarged by it, and if their sense of the Church is singularly developed.

Beginning with the luminous source of liturgical prayer of which the Eucharist is the element desired above all by Saint Gertrude, all the major axes of her spiritual life fall into place: six centuries before Saint Therese of Lisieux, she discovered the way of childhood. She developed a theology of divine love that, without ever yielding to laxity calls to an experience and confidence in God without limit. It is also her liturgical experience that permits her to give its full measure to a “to sense with the Church” that announces the ecclesiology of communion. Vatican II and the most recent documents of the Magisterium have rendered us more aware of this teaching. The mystique of Gertrude is the opposite of an intimacy with God in which God would isolate the praying person from the Body to which he belongs. On the contrary, it draws one into the immense current of grace where the members are bound together. This solidarity is not limited to the present moment of history but extends through the centuries. Influenced by the mystical theology of Saint Bernard, Gertrude does not fear to have recourse to images borrowed from married life. The style is affective, spousal, in the line of the Canticle of Canticles.

But there is nothing sentimental due to a sustained reference to the Word of God and to the liturgy. The body to body of the images sustains the heart to heart of the spiritual experience and leads the saint to take on the role of precursor in the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Aware, nevertheless, that her writings could become a stumbling block for certain readers she develops a number of times a theology of images that show her severe with herself and in this way preserves herself from the dangers of illuminism. She can, then, write in conclusion to her Memorial: As it is by means of the alphabet that those who wish to study arrive at the science of philosophy, by means of what, so to speak, are only painted images, those who will read this writing will learn to taste within themselves this hidden manna that it is not possible to ally to any mixture of material images. Only those who have eaten of it will always experience hunger for it.

## A LIGHT TO ENLIGHTEN THE NATIONS

In a very different domain than the liturgy the life and the work of Saint Gertrude merit to hold our attention: what we might call the integration of the negative in the journey of conversion. In contrast with the majority of biographical accounts of the Middle Ages and until modern times The Herald presents us with a woman who is not holy from her younger age, who has some faults and who struggles against her defects. She is perfectly aware of this when she writes, for example: For what merits on my part such a gift comes to me, O my God, from what resolutions of yours? It requires that you possess a love forgetful of its own honor but prompt to bestow honor, yes, an impetuous love that precedes all judgment and escapes all reasoning, O my God, infinitely kind, as it were intoxicated to the point of losing sense so that you attempt to unite terms so dissimilar. But it would be more appropriate to say that the sweet goodness- innate and essential to your nature-under the intimate influence of sweet charity by which You not only love but are Love itself. You have used the most tangible efficacy of love for the salvation of the human race. You have reached out to the least of human creatures, the most lacking of all that is not necessary to her and due,, contemptible by her very life and behavior, to call her from the greatest distance of her extreme lowliness and make her participate in the grandeur of Your Majesty- what can I say? – of Your Divinity so that without doubt to fortify by this example the confidence (confidentiam) of every living soul here-below. My hope and my desire are that every Christian should receive this same grace by respect for God, and that He encounters no one abasing self as much as I by dishonoring your gifts and scandalizing her neighbor.

Gertrude understands that, in choosing her as witness of His love- she, “the last of human creatures, the least gifted with only what is necessary and owed her, contemptible by her life and conduct”,- God wishes “to fortify by (this choice) the confidence of every soul living here below.” Even a rapid reading of The Herald reveals that defects have an eminent place in the acquisition of holiness. God “allows them to continue, at times even in his closest friends” to keep them humble and “to exercise their virtue by that.” Here is a page that can convince us of this: As she was praying that the Lord would correct a superior of a fault, she received this reply: “Do you not know that not only this person but all those who preside in this community which is dear to me, are not lacking in faults- no one here below, in fact, can be absolutely perfect-. If I permit this it is in virtue of my immense divine tenderness, kindness, and love for this preferred community and so that its merits through this be marvelously increased. It is a greater virtue in fact to obey a superior whose faults are evident than one whose worth shines in all her actions” She replied: “Of course, my Lord, I rejoice that there is merit for the subjects but yet I would also like that the superiors would be kept from committing these faults that expose their defect.” The Lord answered: “For me, I do not remain ignorant of their faults that surely reveal themselves on different occasions relative to their duty when perhaps they do not arrive at the necessary humility. Thus, for the merit of the subjects there is occasion for their growth as well in the faults of the superior as well as from their virtues.

Likewise, for the merit of the superiors there is occasion for growth in the virtues of their subjects as well as from their own defects. In the unity of a single body all the members concur in the common progress.” These words enabled her to understand how much the tenderness of

divine wisdom super-abounds and with what skill it contributes to the salvation of its saints on permitting that the defects contribute to lead to the best progress.

It would be worthwhile to study *The Herald* from the point of view of “integrating the negative.” One would see how “the marvelous” in Gertrude’s case is not the holiness acquired at the beginning but by a holiness conquered by a realistic taking into account its dark face. Gertrude was not born “a light to enlighten the nations”; she destined herself for it by a tireless conversion. This feature fits well with one of the major concerns of contemporary hagiography that is no longer focused on sublimity but rather with the presence of the grace of the density of the human. To conceal the shadows is to obliterate the power of grace. For all that let us not conclude that *The Herald* is satisfied to keep the reader in the defective part, dark and sinful, of the human person. Rather let us say that the serene joy that emerges is of the same kind that emanates from the Gospel. There we find Jesus seated at the table of sinners and declaring: “It is not the healthy who need the physician but the sick; I have not come to call the just but sinners.” (Luke 5:31-32) Gertrude is alongside the sick and sinners for it is to them that are destined the overflowing waves of divine tenderness (*pietas*). It is necessary that by seeing her “play” with Christ that the sick and sinners be “convinced” of “confidence”.

To take into account the dark face of Gertrude, it also to take into account the way in which the Lord reproves and corrects her. Nearly always it is with an excess of kindness, and Gertrude recognizes that “this procedure was more effective for her than ever would have been the severe punishment she deserved.” The experience of her foulness and of her nothingness in light of the *pietas Dei* led her to identify with a name that came to be considered one of her most original concepts: *suppletio*. “This was one of the fruits of her spiritual formation at the school of the liturgy.”, wrote Cyprian Vaggini, who sees in this *suppletio* the conjunction of “the ascetic effort” with the “consciousness of grace”: This practice (for Gertrude) consisted in thinking of the sufferings of Christ, of the desires and prayers of his holy humanity, in order to unite one’s self with them and to offer them to the Father that they might supply for one’s unworthiness, for one’s negligences, faults, and sins.

In a similar way one had recourse to the merits of the Virgin and the saints. This practice allowed her, while preserving an exact consciousness of one’s unworthiness and of the small value of one’s ascetic effort and to approach God in all tranquility of soul to meet Him in the liturgical action. In all this, no trace of Pelagianism or of voluntarism. But, without falling either into laxism or quietism she had a very lively consciousness of the sovereignty of grace and of the contribution brought by Christ to the poor efforts of person who are united with him with a good, sincere will and a pure heart.

We would be wrong, however, to believe that Gertrude is aware only of the shadow face. She is also conscious of her luminous face and of her mission “to enlighten the nations”. At the frontier of these two faces she places herself with a preciseness that preserves her at once from discouragement and from presumption. A proof of this is her manner to return to the register of “littleness” to situate herself before God and before men. Let us understand well: there is no question here of the “vileness” associated with the experience of her defects and sins. Rather, she has in mind that “littleness” that is radically distinct from that “vileness”, while remaining tied to it, by virtue of not being linked with sin. This sentiment emerges clearly in such exclamations as

this: O the dignity of this minute dust (*minutissimum illius pulveris*) that the eminent Being, jewel of the heavenly reassurance, has withdrawn from the mud to attach it to Himself! O the excellence of this minute little flower (*illius flosculi*) which the ray of the sun causes to rise from the swamp, so as to associate it with its own light!

The Herald and The Exercises are interwoven with diminutives that are not to be construed as mere literary artifice. It is the experience itself that Gertrude has of the *pietas Dei* that is inscribed there. The logical consequence of this just sentiment is verified among other place in the matter of liturgical cooperation. Free from Pelagianism as well as laxism, Gertrude understands that she must measure her “role” in proportion to her “littleness”. This will be the “little” of the Gospel. Here the Infinitely Great recognizes His image and likeness in the smallness. This very small cooperates in a small way. In regard to the Infinitely Great this “small way” is the most exact measure of cooperation with the Immense. Without this intentional and signified “small way” the Infinitely Great is, as it were, paralyzed and the *divina pietas* cannot manifest itself. There is a good example of this one day when, desolate at seeing the obstacle her weakness opposes to the desire to “apply all her attention to pronounce all the notes and words of the Office” she understands that the Heart of Christ, “infinitely tender instrument of the adorable Trinity” is at her side “like a faithful servant . . . attentive to the least good pleasure of his master”. The Lord adds: My Divine Heart, knowing the fragility and human instability, wishes, with the expectation of an infinite desire, that, if not by a word, at least by a sign (*si non verbis, saltem aliquot nutu*) you entrust to him the concern to supply for you and to perform what you of yourself, are unable to accomplish (*committas sibi supplendum pro te ac perficiendum quidquid per te minus perficere potes.*)

Such confidence of the Lord leads us perhaps to question ourselves on the manner to understand “full, conscious, and active participation at liturgical celebrations.” We could multiply examples. The atmosphere of The Herald is everywhere imprinted with this graciousness of the *pietas* that does not search any participant than the one whose lived experience is that of “littleness” nor does it seek any exploit than that of a response measured by this “littleness”. Admirable commerce of grace where the “least” is the best placed to “cooperate” with the Immense, and thus make experience of the divine tenderness.

#### **APOSTLE OF THE CHURCH**

We know that the liturgy is the privileged place of the spiritual experience of Saint Gertrude. An attentive reading of the Herald of Divine Love allows us to be more precise: of all the liturgical celebrations without doubt the Eucharist exercised the greatest attraction. We can be still more precise: the most significant days for Gertrude are those when the Lord calls her “to the delights of (his) royal table.” She refers here to those celebrations where she can communicate. At this period, in fact, the faithful only rarely approached the holy table. Saint Clair communicated only seven times a year. Saint Louis (+1270), six times a year and Saint Elizabeth of Portugal (+1330) three times a year. At Helfta, on the contrary, the nuns communicated habitually on Sundays and Feast days. While this practice remains exceptional, yet it still is far from daily communion. It is easy, then, to see why preparation for communion occupies such a large place in Church circles and, for that reason, in the Eucharistic dossier of the Herald. To appreciate the reference points it would be interesting to attempt a comparison between Saint Gertrude’s details and those of the

scholastics in force at that period. The limits of this discussion do not allow us to enter into detail in this comparison, only to bring out the accents placed here and there in this regard.

The question that preoccupied minds at that time is that of “worthiness”: Am I worthy or not to approach the holy table? The great scholastics, contemporaries of Saint Gertrude – Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great – replied inspired by the famous letter of Saint Augustine to Januarius: oscillating between fear and love, between tepidity and devotion, the faithful person is invited to undertake self examination to arrive at the necessary discernment. He will know that the choice of Zachaeus who received the Lord in his home and that of the centurion who, on the contrary, judged himself unworthy to receive him are both praised. To the one and the other the Lord bestows the grace they merited. So we are placed before a proceeding that is individualist. Zachaeus and the centurion are left to themselves to decide the matter. The role of the one relative to another than himself, to collaborate in the decision taken, without being denied, is not made clear. The ritual of access to communion gives the impression of being reduced to an “examination of conscience” that each one makes before God, to be sure, but to a God present more in the corridors of one’s self than at the scene of the Church. If conscience is light-minded communion risks to be received ‘lightly’. On the other hand, if it is too delicate, or even anxious, or inclined to be scrupulous, access to communion may be restricted without solid reason.

The Herald of Divine Love distances itself from theological and pastoral views of the time where the need to examine one’s self risks to paralyze the impetus of good will by exaggerating the issue of unworthiness. Faithful to the old monastic tradition of the relation of self to self is mediated in a work of discernment with an “ancient”, Saint Gertrude eludes the traps of a self-justifying conscience and makes use of a technique for access to sacramental communion that, in its very principle, takes account of the Mystery of the Church. When the disciple manifests his thoughts to his abbot and seeks with him the will of God, is it not in effect a cell of the Church that is established in a revelation of the Trinitarian Mystery, giving occasion to the Spirit of discretion, that animated the spirit of Jesus to his Father, to pursue in the members of the Body the work that it had deployed in the Head: a work of obedience animated by the pure desire to glorify God? To engage one’s self in such a “process” is to recognize, at the same time, that what is permanently involved in the scene of the Mystery of the Church informs the actors all the way to the corridors. To this purpose a kind of ritual of access to communion is set up beginning with the three points that deserve we stop to consider them.

### **THE PRESSURE OF CONFIDENTIAL**

The first is the pressure of *confidentia*. The nun who sketched the portrait of Gertrude at the beginning of the Herald placed confidence as the first star in the Saint’s heaven: She owed to this confidence (*confidentia*) a special grace concerning communion that caused that no word of Scripture of men on the danger of unworthy communion could not prevent her from communicating without fear, placing all her hope in the tender mercy of the Lord (*pietate Domini*). She considered her efforts of so little and almost no value that forgetting the prayers and habitual exercises of preparation for communion did not determine her to abstain from communion. She thought that the effort of human attention before the supreme excellence and open handedness of the gift is like a tiny drop of water in the ocean.

This limitless confidence leads Gertrude to give thanks to the Lord for not rejecting her when she approached “so often poorly prepared for the surpassing banquet of (his) very holy Body and Blood” The continuation of her thanksgiving allows a glimpse of her keen sense of ecclesial solidarity which manifests itself here on the terrain of preparation for sacramental communion. Your unfathomable munificence toward her who is the most vile and the most contemptible of your instruments had deigned again to add this feature to your gift: under your grace I have acquired the certitude that whoever, desiring to approach your sacrament but held back by the timidities of a fearful conscience, would come with humility to seek comfort from me, the last of your servants, your overflowing love (*tua incontinenens pietas*) would consider this soul because of the very act of humility, worthy of this great sacrament. She would receive it then with eternal fruit. You have added that for those that it would be contrary to your justice to consider worthy, you would not give them the humility to have recourse to me advice. O supreme Master who dwell in the heavenly heights and cast your glance on the misery here below, what are we to think of this design of your divine mercy save that, though you see me so often approach unworthily your sacrament et meriting by that in all justice condemnation, yet you wish on the other hand that other souls become worthy by an act of humility. And so your goodness (*bonitas tua*) has decided- though this result could be attained better without me- to obtain it by me, nevertheless, in consideration of my indigence, to make me participate at least in the merits of those whom my advice would lead to the enjoyment of the fruit of salvation.

Here we have a typical example of the pastoral access to sacramental communion as Gertrude conceived it. Moved by the Holy Spirit, marveling, she discovers the design of the *divina pietas* that united among themselves the members of the Church so that the humility of the ones may come to the aid of the unworthiness of the others, preparing them in this way, so long as there is no mortal sin, to approach together the sacrament of life. By this we can measure the finesse of the theological appropriateness of the indications Gertrude gave to mark out the way of access to sacramental communion. We would be mistaken to say that they are different from those of the scholastics. It is better to recognize that they go further in conjugating the duty to examine oneself with the one of self examination in the Church. One could say that in the case of the scholastics, Zachaeus, and the centurion they go side by side without being conscious of forming a body, where in Gertrude’s case they do not exist side by side belong to the same body. This certitude of faith explains the *confidentia* that animates the whole spiritual life of the saint and that serves as a line of behavior to approach the sacramental communion. Her *discretio* opened her eyes to the mystery of the Church: she understands that belonging to the same Body obliges the members to consider themselves as partners contributing of the ones with the others Body. The topic of unworthiness will accordingly have less hold on the sentiment of guilt always ready to appear. One can say that in the Herald of Divine Love Jesus invites himself with the centurion and Zachaeus.

### **THE BENEFIT OF RITUALITY**

The *discretio* of Gertrude however does not stop there. She draws her confidence at a still more profound spring than only belonging to the Church, from the spring of the mystery of the Church at the very place where the Church assumes a body by taking the Body: what she sees, what she understands, what she touches, breathes and tastes in the act of the celebration of the sacred

mysteries all stir her to confidence. It is the second datum at the basis of her ritual of access to communion. One could call it the benefit of rituality. When Saint Gertrude declares to the Lord that she never had better preparation for communion than “taking part in the mass”, she situates herself in the interior of the “sentire cum ecclesia” (“experience with the Church”) where the spouse of Christ understands that this sacraments truly her good and that the celebration has no meaning save in view of communion. But there are other reasons that explain why and how the holy mysteries set confidence aflame in her. We must search for them in the area that the regretted Fr. Pierre-Marie called “a concrete Eucharistic theology”, that is to say, “a visit in humility of the Son of God” in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Inseparable from the notion of the (real presence” understood as “bodily presence” and “sacramental presence”, along with the Eucharistic interpretation of Matthew 28:20. This Christology profoundly marks the teaching of Saint Bonaventure. “There is a coming-and-going between scholastic technique and the Gospel piety of Saint Francis that authorizes speaking of the sacramental species as of a little cape, or more often according to an expression familiar to Hugh of Saint-Victor, as a veil (velamen). ” Gertrude also links with Matthew 28:20, without, however, speaking explicitly of “real presence”; Rather than recurring to the image of the veil or of the little cape she confines herself to the “body” itself in her sacramental portrayal. She considers it in its physical dimensions, and at the same time in its relations with the human body of the faithful who see, touch and eat it. There is nothing more concrete for her than this Eucharistic Christology that is involved in this body to body engagement in the liturgical celebration. Here are some examples of it: When a preacher made a long sermon on divine justice she paid such close attention that, she feared to approach the divine mysteries. God comforted her by his kind words: “If, with the eyes of faith (interioribus oculis) you forget to see the many marks of my kindness I have given you, at least look with your bodily eyes (corporalibus oculis) in how narrow a vessel I enclose myself to come to you and hold for sure that the rigor of my justice has allowed itself to be closed up in the gentleness of my mercy, for it is this that, in the visible sacrament, I like to present to all persons.”

Here the Lord invites Gertrude to a lesson of sacramental theology based on visual perception: lacking an appropriate interior sight she should relay on what she sees with her bodily eyes. Thus she will have certitude that “the rigor of (his) justice allows itself to be enclosed in the gentleness of (his) mercy”, for it is this latter that he “loves to present to all people”. This informs us at length of the exhibition of this sacrament (exhibitionem hujus sacramenti) where the Saint deciphers the intent of the Lord.

The incitement to confidence should be redoubled when, in consideration of the slightness of the sacramental body, one adds the comparison between this body and the human body. Taste here is joined with sight to bring out the lesson of these two objects: On another occasion in a similar circumstance and in the same manner, the divine tenderness (divina pietas) attracted her to taste the agreeableness of his sweetness saying: “See the tiny size of this material form under which I manifest to you all my divinity and my humanity, and compare this volume with that of the human body. In this way judge the benevolence of my goodness for if the size of the human body surpasses that of my body, that is to say, the species of bread under which my body is present, it is my mercy and my love that lead me in this sacrament to permit the loving soul, in a manner, to outdo me, as the human body in size surpasses my (Eucharistic) body.

On still another occasion when the bell sounded for communion, Gertrude feared to be “insufficiently prepared”. Why did the Savior not send her the ornaments of devotion (ornamenta devotionis) she wanted to receive from him? Here is the Savior’s response: At times the Spouse finds greater joy at beholding the bare neck of the spouse than covered with a necklace and also more joy at touching her hands in their beauty than in viewing them a long time adorned in gloves; similarly, it happens to me to find more joy in an act of humility than in the graced of devotion. Here the body is ritualized on the base of the distinction ornament/bare, and this gives occasion for a fresh lesson on confidence. The bareness of the humility of the spouse gives more joy to the groom than does the grace of devotion.

Whatever may be the appreciation for this kind of ritual exegesis, it merits all our attention if we wish to understand in what sense and what manner Gertrude ritualizes her preparation for sacramental communion. In opening herself to the mystery of the Church, she rejects an “indiscrete” individualism. In considering the “body ritualized”- that of the Lord in the size of the sacrament, that of the priest or of the spouse in the distinction ornament/bareness- she rejects “a zeal of justice” also for her “indiscreet”. A good number of preachers at the time seem to have succumbed to this: they put off the faithful from sacramental communion by endowing “ornaments” consisting of exercises of preparation with too high a price. They did not recognize the superior worth of the “bareness”, resulting from humility and unshakeable confidence in the mercy of God. This lesson of confidence, basically, openness to the Church and to a liturgical sense, explains also the way that Gertrude understands cooperation at the liturgical action. As we have evoked earlier. She did not allow herself to fascinate or attract by ascetic prowess. Her “part” is littleness that she discerns in the smallness of the sacramental body where divine mercy has enclosed justice so that the human person might prevail over God. This is how she develops a taste for the magnificence of the Infinitely small.

### **THE ORNAMENTS OF THE CHURCH**

There remains to present the last datum concerning the ritual of access to communion that emerges from the Herald. We can call it “the ornaments of the Church”. Gertrude was too experienced in the practice of discretion to trust herself inconsiderately to her star: would it not be neglect of devotion? To give such scope to mercy would not a person be living contentedly with his own misery? Did Zachaeus have nothing to learn from the centurion? A number of passages from the Herald show that the saint had seen the possible dangers of such a pedagogy. There is in particular in the long chapter 18 of book 3 a sequence, unique of its kind where the reader is informed of the pain that unworthy communions cause to Christ. Moreover, Gertrude, by herself or through an intermediary, questions herself before the Lord who, every time, confirms her in her gifts.

An attentive reading of the Herald shows that by giving such a fine role to confidentialia Gertrude did not give up devotion. To prepare herself for communion her sense of the Church stimulates her to search help from the pilgrims of here below with whom she is conscious of constituting a sole Body. And there is more: she had developed the habit of calling all heaven at her nuptial preparations for her communions. In her mind it is unthinkable to prepare oneself as a solitary individual for communion. The communion of a sole person concerns all, both in its effects as in

its preparation. A faithful person cannot go to communion save as belonging to the Church, for in her it is the whole Body that in her, takes bodily form; the whole mystical Body in her is going to take nourishment from the sacramental Body. The faithful individual must put on the whole Church to enter the act. The theme of the “ornaments” and of the “ritualized body” returns here naturally. Gertrude does not have too many fineries that she receives of Christ, Mary, and of the saints, fineries of their merits and of their virtues that spouse. Examples abound. One day of sacramental communion, seeing herself miserably adorned she is troubled by this and seeks to steal away: Drawing near to her the Son of God seemed to lead her more apart to adorn her. First by way of washing her hands for the remission of her sins he grants her the purifying effect of his Passion. Then, taking off his own adornments: collar, bracelets, rings with which he showed himself adorned, he put them on her. He invited her to advance with dignity (decenter) and like some senseless individual (sicut fatua) whom her awkwardness and inexperience should make her incapable of a bearing that would gain the honor of respect rather than smirks and contempt. She understood by these words that those walk like fools (fatui) under the adornments of the Lord who, having become aware of their imperfections, pray the Son of God to supply for them, but then, having been heard, yet remain just as fearful as before because they do have absolute confidence (plenam confidentiam) in the perfect strength of the Lord’s supplying.

Note that this entire account is centered on the theme of confidentia. By the play of strings of images (washing, and dressing aside, in a more retired place) and of scene (cum ornamentis Domini decenter procederet) all attention is directed to her. She is the stumbling block at which all the foolish (fatui) trip. Or, a person disguises herself while remaining just as timid and the only gain is removal of contempt. Confidence and decency are linked together.

On another occasion, on the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, during mass, Gertrude “began to pray (the Mother of the Lord) to deign to prepare her to receive the most holy body and blood of her Son.” And the account continues: The blessed Virgin placed on her breast a most beautiful necklace that had as it were seven bodkins, and on each a kind of very precious stone-work. That symbolized the principle virtues by which the Virgin had pleased the Lord . . . Now, when the soul presented itself to the Lord’s viewing, adorned with this necklace, the Lord was so greatly charmed (delectatus) and captivated (allectus) by the beauty of these virtues that, ravished by love (amore captus) he bent down to her with the omnipotence of his divinity, drew her- O marvel- entirely to Himself and pressing her tenderly to his Heart, embraced her with affectionate caresses.

In the second part of the sequence one notes the vocabulary of seduction. God is charmed (delectatus), captivated (allectus), ravished (captus) by the beauty of the soul that Mary adorned with her virtues. How explain that the ornaments exercise her, a power of fascination on the Lord whereas in other circumstances her preferred to them the bareness of the hands and neck? Is it not because the taste of the Lord is more sensible to the adornments that one receives from others than to those procured by one’s self?

## CONCLUSIONS

The route we have just traveled over shows that the Herald of Divine Love presents itself as a plea for an ecclesial preparation for sacramental communion. From this fact it poses the question

of the “dignity” in other words and with another perspective than that of the great scholastic. It is not a matter of weighing one’s self in the self-examination, but of learning to regard one’s self in Church. So long as one maintains “carefully lowered before one’s eyes the veil of her unworthiness” it is “impossible to see the tenderness (pietatem) of God. It is by her sense of the Church that Gertrude dares to remove the veil and preach confidentialia. In this manner she avoids the risk of obsessive drift inherent in preparatoria, and in liberty of heart she presents herself before the Spouse in persona Ecclesiae.

Certain persons perhaps will be surprised that such a discussion makes in practice no place for confession. The fact is that the rare allusions that are made to it in the Herald show that for Gertrude preparation for communion surpasses very largely the bare fact of having been able to confess or not. More than in the bath of confession, which was without doubt habitual the days of communion, it is her belonging to the Church and in the celebration of the sacred mysteries that Gertrude is conscious of putting on the beauty of the Spouse to go ahead to meet her Spouse Covered with finery or uncovered tin bareness she is always presentable because she knows, definitively, that the Lord demands nothing “except to come to (him) all empty and ready to receive.”

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