

AUGUST 29

BL. BEATRICE, Princess of Nazareth Lierre, Belgium.

One of the "five prudent virgins" whose lives were collected together in a book by Chrysostom Henriques, (1) was Beatrice of Nazareth, who ranks as one of the great Flemish mystics of the thirteenth century.

Beatrice was born at Tirolemont, Brabant, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1229, and indeed, long before her birth she had already been consecrated to the Mother of God. So pious were her parents, indeed, that her father was to found three Cistercian Convents, and to die in the habit of a Cistercian laybrother, while her two sisters joined her in the cloister; one of her brothers became a Premonstratensian canon and the others are thought to have become Cistercian laybrothers like their father, commemorated as Bl. Bartholomew in the Abenology. (2)

Beatrice, a shy and pious child, loved Christ in the poor: for she had a lively and loving faith, nourished by her habit of pondering

the phrases of Holy Scripture which she heard or read. She would introduce poor beggars into the house, and give them a place by the fire, and offer them her own food. At the death of her mother she was sent by her father to the school of the Beguines at Leeuwen, and there learned not only to read and write, but also acquired a thorough knowledge of Latin, without which it was impossible to be accepted as a postulant at many convents at that time: notwithstanding the false opinions concerning the lack of all feminine education in the middle ages.

But when her father founded his first Cistercian convent, endowing the ruined Benedictine monastery of Florival for the reception of a colony of Cistercian nuns, Beatrice became a boarder with the sisters, and under their direction lived a more or less strict life, keeping many points of the Cistercian Rule, although still only a child. Although the Rosary, as we know it, had not yet come into use, little Beatrice used to daily recite the hundred and fifty Aves that made up "Our Lady's Psalter", and did so prostrate on the cold stone floor of the abbey Church, until she was forbidden to do so, for the sake of her health.

She soon developed a great desire to do penance and punish her flesh, and so she fearlessly set about some very austere mortifications, beating herself fiercely with holy branches, until ~~her~~ her body was covered with blood, wearing a tight girdle of knotted cords, and filling her bed and clothing with holly leaves. She would also go out into the garden and kneel in some hidden corner for long hours in the snow, or with the rain pouring down from her head and shoulders and soaking her to the skin. This did not fail to have a bad effect on her health, but although she was consumed with a burning fever, she could not be persuaded to forego a single one of the regular exercises.

She had long desired to enter the Cistercian Order and become one of the community at Florival, but her natural timidity as well as a humility born of grace, made her hesitate and reflect upon this step, devoting a whole year to preparing her soul before she presented her request to be admitted. At first it was refused, on account of her poor health, but she argued with such simple faith and such intense earnestness of desire, that God would give her the necessary health, that her ~~plans~~ pleas could not be refused.

Soon after her religious profession, an important change occurred in her life. She was sent to the famous convent of Ramege to learn the art of illuminating manuscripts. It was in the scriptorium of Ramege that Bl. Ida of Leeuwen had added, to the distinction of her sanctity and beautiful spirituality, the humbler glory of a most proficient copyist and illuminator. Beatrice was probably sent with several other nuns from Florival to learn this art and form a scriptorium at their own convent: which they successfully did. Father Canivez tells us (3) that even the schedules of profession, written out by the nuns of Florival, to be sung on their profession day and placed on the altar, were works of art. Many of them are still preserved.

But the most important thing about Beatrice's stay at Ramege



was that it brought her into contact with the great mystic Ida of Nivelles. Bl. Ida soon recognised the depth of spirituality in this young sister, and loved her because of the great graces that she foreknew would be bestowed upon her by God. Indeed, she even told the young man just when these graces would first come to her, warning her to purify and prepare her soul, because the Lord would give her a new and incomparably profound and intimate knowledge of Himself during the Octave of His Nativity.

Beatrice did, indeed, earnestly prepare herself: but on Christmas day not only were there no exceptional graces or consolations to be had, but she could not even pray. Her soul was invaded by a paralyzing dryness and seemed surrounded by the dark waters of hell. Nor did the situation grow any better for the next two or three days, but rather worse. Then finally, one evening at Compline, she was turning over in her mind, according to the habit she had formed from childhood, a responsory of the liturgy (at present it is the fourth of the night office of Christmas Day: "Propter nimiam charitatem...") "Because of His exceeding great love with which He hath loved us, God the Father sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, to save all." And then, for no strictly liturgical reason, she associated this by chance with something from the liturgy of Paschal time, that came into her head at the moment: "Et David cum cantoribus cytharam percutiebat in domo Domini.(4)" David with the singers, played upon the harp in the house of the Lord." At that moment it seems that a burst of flame shot forth from the tabernacle and set her heart on fire with a joy so immense and powerful that she was rapt completely out of her senses in an instance, and, the office ending, fell on her knees in her stall and remained there, (even) while everyone else filed out and went to bed. Hours later, her absence from the dormitory was discovered, and the sisters found her still kneeling, apparently lifeless, in the same position. She came to herself in the infirmary, and told them what she had seen: for she had been present and assisted at the joy and exultation of the angels of heaven, surrounding their Queen and the Child Jesus, and praising the love of God in sending His only Son to redeem mankind. For days afterwards, and indeed all her life, she had only to remember this first foretaste of glory, and her heart would become light with pure joy.

Nevertheless, ecstasies are not perfection of virtue and sanctity, nor do they guarantee us against temptation, or great imperfection or even sin. St Gertrude had to struggle all her life against stubborn and seemingly incurable imperfections, temptations against patience and even against fraternal charity, temptations to fear and despair; and all the while she was being visited by frequent visions and raptures. Bl. Beatrice, on her return to Florival, was deluded by the devil into a false humility which told her that she would be attracting too much attention if she spent long intervals in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and consequently, she began to curtail her visits to Jesus in the Tabernacle and even omit them altogether.

And Bl Beatrice, desiring "not to attract attention" deprived herself so drastically of the food of the soul that soon she became indifferent and tepid in all her religious life. Her Communions were ill-



prepared, and her thanksgivings short and cold. Finally, one day she was kneeling in choir and saying to herself: "I shall not go to Communion to-morrow. I went twice this week, and both times I did not take time to prepare: it is too late to make a good preparation now: and besides, I am tepid after receiving Communion..." But one of the other nuns received a supernatural intuition of what was going on in the soul of her sister, and gave her an urgent warning that she must by all means go to Communion the next day. Beatrice was startled and frightened, and made a fervent Communion, after which she received grace to see what a mistake she had made, and resumed her long visits and began to receive Communion almost every day.

The way she distributed her time, at this period of her life, could serve as a model for any religious in our Order-- or any other. Although she spent much time in adoration before the Tabernacle, she did not, on that account, neglect her spiritual reading: for the two go hand in hand. They should be well balanced, however. Her reading was meditative rather than studious. She did not apply herself to her books with the intense concentration of the scholar, but read prayerfully, pausing to ask for light, and to reflect on what she read, but making notes at the same time, copying down whatever impressed her most.

Most of her reading was Holy Scripture. She made every Sunday a day of recollection and retreat, on which she examined herself on her faults and progress of the past week, and took a few effective resolutions. She habitually meditated on the Passion of Our Lord: for five years, she took no other topic. And besides that, she associated the various hours and times of the day, especially the canonical hours, with the phases of His Passion. At Compline she was with Him in Gethsemani, during night Office, before the high priests, at Prime she saw Him judged and scourged for our pride and self-indulgence, and so on throughout the day. Her prayer was mostly affective, and she talked with Our Lord, pouring out her heart to him in simple and direct and loving words.

Her meditations sometimes produced some rather elaborate devices to help her in the way of perfection, like her "interior monastery", of which reason was the abbess, Wisdom the prioress, Prudence the Sub-Prioress and so on. Chapter of faults was held every evening after Compline.

Her life was not all consolations and fervor. She was tried by several long periods of dryness and passive purification, during one of which, lasting three years, she became almost persuaded that heaven was closed to her utterly.

Then, one year, on Ascension Day, her heart was pierced, like that of St Theresa of Avila by a fiery dart, which, in her case, came not from the hands of a seraph but from the Tabernacle. After that immense joy, she entered into a period of intense physical and moral suffering.

She founded Nazareth, the third convent endowed by her father, in 1220, and was superior there until her death in 1268.



On Christmas Day, of 1267, she had collapsed after receiving Communion and was taken to the infirmary where she lay all but dead, with no sign of life except the beating of her heart, for days, and weeks, and months. Finally in July she returned to herself, and received the Last Sacraments before passing joyfully into the glory of her Spouse on the twenty ninth of that month.

She was venerated with an immemorial cult, and has left posterity an autobiographical account of her visions and revelations.

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SEPT. 8th

BL. WILLIAM OF ST THIERRY, Monk of Signy, near Rheims, France.

All our great Cistercians have been much neglected, even in their own Order: but perhaps the most neglected of all, when we consider how great a claim to our attention is made by his writings and doctrine, has been William of St. Thierry. Here is a mystic and theologian with all the power and genius of the great theologians of St Victor, whom he closely resembles, and one who, at times, is in no respect inferior even to St Bernard or St Anselm. It has remained for one of the soundest and most able Catholic philosophers of our own century, Mt. Etienne Gilson, to evaluate William of St Thierry at his true worth. Let us hear what he has to say of William, in his valuable Appendix which he devotes to him at the end of his book on "The Mystical Theology of St Bernard." (1)

"He is a very great theologian," says Gilson, (and Gilson is by no means careless with his superlatives) "a very great theologian in whom firmness of thought goes hand in hand with a remarkable power of just expression. Intimately connected with St. Bernard, in full accord with him on the principles of the mystical life and the solution of its problems, he knew how, in the midst of his unreserved admiration for the Abbot of Clairvaux, to preserve an absolute independence of thought."

The same writer also says:

"William of St Thierry has everything: power of thought, the orator's eloquence, the poet's lyricism and all the attractiveness of the most ardent and tender piety." (2)



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BOOK IV  
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Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani  
Trappist, Kentucky

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