



July 23

Commemoration: Birgitta of Sweden, 1373

Birgitta of Sweden spent her life in two distinct segments, one as a mother and the other as a mystic. She is best known for writing books about her mystical visions of Jesus and Mary and letters to many Church and political leaders. Later in her life, as a result of her visions, she took an active roll in urging the Pope, living in Avignon, to return to Rome. She wrote to church leaders about her visions urging them to end corruption and sin within the church hierarchy. From direction given to her in these visions, she started the Birgittine order of nuns which her daughter Catherine would later lead.

Birgitta married Ulf Gudmarsson, a lawman, at the age of thirteen. Although she wasn't very keen on the idea of marrying, due to her religious convictions, she found that Ulf shared her zeal for Christianity and the union was a happy one. Birgitta was very bothered by her desire for what she called "marital pleasure." She avoided sex, even sleeping on the floor away from Ulf at times to avoid temptation. With time, the desire to raise children outweighed her desire to avoid sex. Birgitta gave birth to eight children, one of whom was Catherine, who some view as a saint although she was never officially canonized. While raising children, she also served as the governess of King Magnus's wife, who was young enough to need a governess.

After returning from a pilgrimage to Cologne, Tarascon, Saint-Baume, and Saint James, Ulf became sick and died. His death in 1344 marked the beginning of Birgitta's religious life. Some time following the death Birgitta began experiencing visions of Christ, who gave her a vocation. In 1349 she and others left on a pilgrimage to Rome, arriving in 1350, a jubilee year. There, she hoped to form a new religious order, based on her mystical conversations with Jesus. The new order would include both men and women, living in equality, although, they would have to be separate because of past problems with monasteries housing both sexes. The plan was that the order would be very strictly cloistered from the outside world. When the monasteries were actually built, they were made as two separate monasteries, not one for both men and women. Other aspects of Birgitta's plan were permitted to be implemented into the monasteries. The order was never fully authorized by the Pope until after her death, when her daughter Catherine managed to get Papal authority. While founding her order, she also pushed to bring the Pope (who was in Avignon) brought back to Rome, threatening that returning to Avignon would cause him to have a stroke. She compared him to the devil because of the corruption that existed in the church at the time. She also wrote to the King of Sweden and church leaders urging them to refrain from sin and lead their followers to do the same.

One of Birgitta's most notable contributions was her writings, *The Revelations*. In these texts, Birgitta recorded her visions of Jesus and Mary. These visions not only included instruction on the creation of her monastic order, but also on questions of theology and morality. They also include vivid visions of the birth and death of Jesus. Upon her death in 1373, Birgitta left the Church influenced in several ways. Her daughter Catherine and a grand daughter went on to more fully establish the Birgittine order of nuns. *The Revelations* were spread throughout the church and had several key impacts. They became the basis for a lot of poetry, prayer, and hymns devoted to Mary. Her visions of the birth, suffering, and death of Jesus influenced art. Previously, art depicted the birth of Jesus as how birth actually looked. Some found this to graphic and so Birgitta's vision, which emphasized the divine aspect of the birth, became more prevalent in art. Her vision of the death of Jesus was more focused on reality. Her letters helped influence the Papacy to return to Rome and influenced church teaching in Sweden. Birgitta's body is now kept at the convent of Vadstena. She is considered the patron saint of Sweden.