



## 2023 History Essay Contest School 7/8th Grade Winner

### A Humble Bride of Christ: St. Birgitta of Sweden

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“To write well and speak well is mere vanity if one does not live well.” So said St. Birgitta of Sweden, one of the most influential women of the Middle Ages. A woman who loved Christ with all her heart, and therefore loved the world around her, she exemplified the wisdom of living according to her own advice. In doing so, she gained a reputation as both the author of numerous volumes (her *Revelations*, which offered wisdom to many) and a servant of the poor and ill. She was humble, often called “The Bride of Christ,” and dedicated her life to serving others, from the lowliest beggar to the Pope himself. As she exhibited exceptional spiritual sensitivity and wisdom, Birgitta’s life left a lasting legacy; she influenced both those close to her and important political figures of the time, all the while remaining humble and teachable.

Lady Birgitta's spiritual sensitivity shaped the course of her life's work. She was an important member of the Swedish aristocracy and the mother of a large and renowned family during the fourteenth century. From the time she was seven years old, Jesus, His Mother, and numerous saints gifted her with myriad visions and revelations. While fulfilling social responsibilities, she lived a private life of prayer and abstinence and was able to see unprecedented visions, especially concerning Christ's passion. When she was later widowed, these practices became even more central to her life. As Sigrid Undset writes, "She fought valiantly to bow her proud and passionate soul in perfect humility and love of Christ... Grace sanctified Birgitta, and made her a prophetess and seer" (134). God allowed her to see in her visions the fate awaiting the corrupt popes and royals of the time if they did not follow his commands. She devoted herself to dozens of pilgrimages and journeys to make these things known. Nonetheless, throughout her many contemplative pursuits, she never ceased to apply her spiritual knowledge to the care of the needy in body or soul.

Undoubtedly, Birgitta's loving devotion influenced those closest to her. She was zealous in her role as wife and mother and was slow to anger. Her husband, Ulf Gudmarson, was a good man, and their marriage was a joyful and fruitful one. Birgitta's confessor describes the spiritual encouragement she gave her husband in this way: "For even though he was a vigorous man and an important member of the king of Sweden's council, he occupied himself—at his wife's advice and admonishment—in

learning to read the Hours of the most Blessed Virgin Mary . . .” (Kezel 76). Together, they had eight children, in whom both mother and father worked hard to instill a great faith. Birgitta refused to use physical discipline on them, turning rather to kindness and compassion. She shared with them her love for the poor and suffering—people whose lives she was constantly changing for the better. Her daughters often aided her in these efforts. Due to the loving way she comforted the sick (e.g., establishing a hospital near her home), many came to her door seeking help and advice. She used her mystical gifts to give counsel to those stricken with conscience. She would pray for a vision and share with them words from God. In her humility, though, she often prefaced these instructions by saying, “I am a sinner unworthy to say such things, nevertheless . . .” (Kezel 81). Those whom she tended were inspired by her faith, and dozens of souls drew closer to Christ under her influence. These gifts of service allowed for changes in the hearts of those who needed it most. The greater things that Birgitta carried out later in her life had their origin in these humble, loving actions.

On a broader scale, Birgitta’s accomplishments influenced not just her community, but the very course of history. First, she influenced popes, kings, and queens of the day in major political decisions by writing to them and advising them personally. God instructed Birgitta concerning her engagement with these high officials, and she obeyed without hesitation. As her confessors wrote in her biography, “At God’s instruction, she sent letters to the major personages of the whole world of Christendom

... She also visited many lands personally, showing God's will to great and small alike for the good of their souls" (Kezel 83). After her children no longer required as much focused attention, her way of life began to shift. She became *magistra*, or mentor, to the new queen of Sweden and Norway, wife of King Magnus Erickson. Birgitta served as an excellent role model for the self-centered young queen, whom she patiently taught moral virtues. Later, Birgitta often counseled other royals in similar ways. She also intervened in a major political crisis of the Middle Ages: the moving of the papal court to Avignon, which caused chaos in a Church already suffering from corruption. Without their leader, the people felt lost. Birgitta followed God's instructions to her through her visions to speak directly to the Pope. Although she was not successful in convincing him to return to Rome, she paved the way for Catherine of Siena, who ultimately averted the crisis.

Second, Birgitta's writings had lasting influence on society. In order to preserve her holy knowledge, her spiritual directors urged her to write down her prophecies and visions, and she did. These volumes, called *The Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden*, still speak powerfully today, offering supernatural wisdom to seeking souls. Birgitta's many prayers included in these volumes, demonstrate a beautiful way of closeness to Christ and his Mother. Thirdly, and perhaps most fruitfully of all, she founded a monastic order. This was originally called the Order of St. Saviour, and was later referred to as the Birgittine Order. After her widowhood, Birgitta spent several years living at a

monastery called Alvastra, where she acquired knowledge about consecrated life. The most desirable aspects of this life she transferred to her own order. Though it took many years of petitions (which she repeated as divinely commanded), her Rule was finally approved by the pope in 1370. Despite the fact it suffered greatly during the Protestant Reformation, the Birgittine Order spread throughout Europe and flourished in later years. A prayerful, loving way of life for both men and women, it brought many individuals to Christ, as he had promised to her it would in a previous vision. Birgitta's undying efforts to carry out her calling impacted the world, linking the earthly to the divine.

Significantly, though Birgitta exhibited strength as a spiritual leader both privately and publicly, this strength stemmed from her humble obedience to her mentors and confessors. Though she was a very holy woman, she was still human and accordingly had her own struggles and vices. She was blessed with pious and caring parents who shaped her faith from infancy—helping her to avoid temptation to sin. In addition, she had several devout masters of theology for her confessors. In particular, her spiritual director, a learned man called Master Matthias, offered her guidance, especially in interpreting her visions. Master Peter and Prior Peter, as she called them, also counseled her in her spiritual life. All three inspired her and gave her strength to do as she was instructed by her Heavenly Father. She also spent hours poring over Scripture and the lives of the saints, searching for the truth she always hungered for.

These beloved works clarified her calling: their guidance was nearly as dependable as the voice of Christ she truly heard. Under the counsel of these trusted mentors, she was able, through her holy and noble compassion and through the love of God shining through her, to aid the spread of faith across Europe for years to come.

The love of God which flowed through St. Birgitta, apparent through her writings, selfless actions, and humble piety, was a wholesome gift to her country and to her world. She taught righteous ways of life to individuals personally, while also preserving this advice in her monastic order and writings to be practiced for years to come. Her example was such a loving one that it affected those close to her ultimately for the better, to the extent that her daughter, Catherine of Sweden, was canonized as a saint her- self. Birgitta was truly worthy of emulation. In living in humility in addition to writing and speaking with truth, St. Birgitta of Sweden left her imprint on Swedish society as well as on the world throughout the ages to come.

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