14th of NOVEMBER SAMUEL SEABURY 1729-92

16th of NOVEMBER THE BEGUINES

17th of NOVEMBER MECHTHILD

18TH of NOVEMBER GERTRUDE the GREAT

19TH of NOVEMBER ELIZABETH of HUNGARY

20TH of NOVEMBER PRISCILLA LYDIA SELLON

21st of NOVEMBER CECILIA with tongue decidedly in cheek.

**SAMUEL SEABURY** was the first ‘Anglican’ bishop in the U S.

If you read ch20 of Diarmaid MacCulloch’s doorstep simply entitled ‘Christianity, the first 3,000 years’ you may be able to understand why it took nearly 200 years for north America to get its first bishop: most of the early settlers were refugees from the superhigh Stewart Church, although when Cromwell got the upper hand some of these came back to give him a helping hand.

Followers of transactional analysis teach us that ‘The victim becomes the perpetrator.’ Refugees from persecution the early settlers may have been, but uniformity of belief was introduced in most early colonies; fines, expulsions whippings and hangings persisted, although burnings were confined to witchcraft as we know.

Samuel Seabury was born in Connecticut, studied theology at Yale and medicine at Edinburgh, and was ordained priest by the Bishop of Lincoln in 1753. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel sent him as a missionary to New Brunswick, in New Jersey, followed by livings in the New York area. He served as a chaplain in the British Army during the War of Independence and engaged in pro-British controversies for which he was imprisoned in 1775.

In 1784 Seabury was elected bishop by his fellow ministers, but although he had fought on the British side in the war and been ordained in England, he couldn’t be legally consecrated by English bishops because he was unable to swear allegiance to the King! Negotiations carried on with the Waxworks who ran the English establishment at the time, but eventually Seabury was forced to go to the nonjuring bishops in the Church of Scotland, who must have been delighted, in their restrained Scottish mode of expression, to get the opportunity to make a pact that would influence important elements of future American Episcopalian worship and liturgy: Read this ‘Concordat’ in your best subvocal Scottish accent and intonation:

‘The wise and gracious providence of merciful God, having put into the hearts of the Christians of the episcopal persuasion in Connecticut in North America, to desire that the blessings of a free, valid, and purely ecclesiastical episcopacy might be communicated to them, and a church regularly formed in that part of the western world upon the most ancient and primitive model:

And application having been made for this purpose by the Reverend Dr Samuel Seabury, Presbyter in Connecticut, to the Right Reverend the Bishops of the church in Scotland:

The said bishops having taken this proposal into their serious consideration, most heartily concurred to promote and encourage the same, so far as lay in their power; and accordingly, began the pious and good work recommended to them by complying with the request of the clergy in Connecticut and advancing the said Dr Samuel Seabury to the high order of the episcopate: at the same time earnestly praying that this work of the Lord, thus happily begun, might prosper in his hands, till it should please the great and glorious head of the church to increase the number of bishops in America and send forth more labourers into that part of his harvest.

Animated with this pious hope and earnestly desirous to establish a bond of peace and holy communion between the two churches, the bishops of the church in Scotland, whose names are underwritten, having had full and free conference with Bishop Seabury after his consecration an advancement as aforesaid, agreed with him on the following articles, which are to serve as a concordat or a bond of union, between the Catholic remainder of the ancient church in Scotland and the now rising church in the state of Connecticut.

They agree …

Christ as the supreme head and governor, and that under Him the chief ministers or managers of the affairs of this spiritual society are those called bishops, whose exercise of their sacred office being independent of all lay powers, it follows of consequence that their spiritual authority and jurisdiction cannot be affected by any lay deprivation.

They agree that there may be as near a conformity as possible in worship and discipline established between the two churches as is consistent with the different circumstances and customs of nations.

As the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, or administration of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is the principal bond of union among Christians, as well as the most solemn act of worship in the Christian Church, the bishops aforesaid agree in desiring that there be as little variance as possible, and though the Scottish Bishops are very far from prescribing to their brethren in this matter, they cannot help ardently wishing that Bishop Seabury will endeavour all he can, consistently with peace and prudence, to make the celebration of this venerable mystery conformable to the most primitive doctrine and practice in that respect, which is the pattern the Episcopal Church of Scotland has copied after in her communion office; and which it has been the wish of some of the most eminent divines of the Church of England, that she also had more closely followed than she seems to have done, she gave up her first reformed liturgy used in the reign of King Edward VI – between which in the form of the Church of Scotland there is no difference in any point which the primitive church reckoned essential to the right ministration of the Holy Eucharist.

Here's a neat piece of footwork: Scotland 6 and most English players red-carded and sent off!!!

Seabury proved an excellent bishop; an able organiser and administrator whose major influence on American church history is celebrated on this day every year.

BACKGROUND

**THE BEGUINES**

Expanding commerce in the High Middle Ages led to some parts of Europe developing commercially more than others, and that development occurred mainly in cities and towns in Italy and Northern Europe, particularly around the Netherlands and that part in the centre that we now know as Germany. With commerce came social mobility and an increased population in these urban areas, which brought on a certain amount of economic and social change, with consequent instability in many areas of life which led to a good deal of spiritual angst and the sense that the church was no longer always fit for purpose; and, of course, in many areas it was not. [Does that sound familiar?]

As we saw with Francis and Clare, this whole socio-economic change came with a reaction among people of real faith who found themselves in search of something other than the pursuit of wealth and luxury, so that various communities formed in pursuit of a simpler spiritual lifestyle that they regarded as more nearly replicating that of Jesus and the Early Jesus Movement, which they called ‘apostolic.’ These included the Albigensians in Southern France, who had a two-tier way of life consisting of ‘perfects’, who were believed to have achieved the necessary state of knowledge and purity for salvation, and those who were still on their way, who supported them. The Albigensians and another Southern French sect called ‘Beguins’ [not Beguines] were well outside the Catholic fold and regarded and, indeed, treated and punished as heretics.

The early Franciscans were a rather anarchic bunch, and could easily have been misunderstood, which is one reason why Francis himself set such store on obedience to the Pope and Holy Church. Already feeling threatened, the Bishops’ Council of 1215 had forbidden the creation of new ‘orders’ by the time Dominic got to Rome to get his order of preachers approved, and you remember that Pope Honorius had to ask him to find an existing order into which he could fit his requirements before coming back for the approval of which he was assured. Dominic chose the Augustinian Rule as his own best fit.

Nobody, however, has come up with a satisfactory theory as to why, around the beginning of C13 in the low countries and parts of present-day Germany, groups of perfectly ordinary women started coming together and living, firstly as neighbours where possible, and later in communities of maybe a dozen or more, with no formal affiliation nor life vows; just a determination to live lives they conceived to reflect apostolic principles, taking care of the sick and the poor, and supporting one another in pursuit of holiness.

The 12th century was the era of crusades, and while husbands were away for years on end, or perhaps never returned, women found they could come together to encourage and support one another through the lay foundations of some of the principal monastic and mendicant orders, particularly the Cistercians, Premonstratensians, Carthusians, and early next century the Dominicans and Franciscans. Perhaps it is not a very great step from a close association of friends and neighbours meeting together regularly in such an environment, to the notion that some may have found extra security and convenience initially by purchasing houses in one another’s vicinities, then choosing to live together in settled communities.

In their early phase the Cistercians warmly encouraged foundations of nuns and many other orders followed suit or even set up double monasteries, but, for whatever reason, perhaps sheer numbers of recruits, most started rowing back on support for women, and it is also the case that many of the new foundations were already dealing with informal lay communities in search of a more regulated and structured life. What seems to be the case is that the existing monastic and mendicant orders were either unable or unwilling to take on the numbers of women postulants.

Throughout the 12th century opportunities for women to improve their education grew, as did their economic circumstances. We have already met instances where women of high social rank could either become patrons of monastic foundations or abbesses, but the role was usually well circumscribed.

What probably did happen was that many women found that neither the Church nor the lay orders were satisfying their deepest spiritual needs at a time of stress, and it is spiritually, even more than socially, that the movement known as the Beguines started to run over pre-existing boundaries. Remember how careful even Abbess Hildegard had to be when trying to have herself validated as mystic and spiritual director, while somebody as important and ground-breaking as Clare of Assisi remained economically dependent on the male first order Franciscans, at least until the men got tired of it.

Men had the advantage of theological training and were likely to be in holy orders if they had something original to say, but for women it wasn’t only a matter of prejudice, but of real disadvantages of social and ecclesiastical standing.

The presence and profile of women living in community was raised with the meeting of Jacques de Vitry with a remarkable woman named Marie d’oignies, whom he credited with having taught him how to preach in the vernacular. Jacques went to Rome with a view to getting papal recognition for such women, and the biography of Marie that Jacques wrote was very influential during the Middle Ages, and was one of the texts that inspired Margery Kempe in her pursuit of holiness.

In time these community members were called Beguines. Later a sort of rather inferior male template evolved known as Beghards, but these usually consisted of poor, retired or homeless men, whereas the women’s communities, at first, at least, consisted very largely of well-off, well- educated and even aristocratic people who had made a positive choice to join. Members were not bound by life vows and were usually free to leave at any time and only agreed to remain chaste while in residence: they could own property but had to leave it behind when they quit.

Whereas monastic orders like the Cistercians set up in isolated wilderness areas, the Mendicant Orders and the Beguines tended to live in the centre of cities, often next to churches or near water where they could work, as many did, in the cloth industry. They supported themselves by the work of their hands, often weaving or taking on service of different sorts. Each community set up its own rules, so it is difficult to speak about the movement in more than general terms.

One example is that of Elizabeth of Hungary’s harpist, Alheid, who, while travelling through the German lands in her queen’s entourage, arrived in Nuremberg and decided to stay to live a life of penance and austerity, and in time a group of women formed around her and asked her to be their ‘Magistra’ [leader.]

The public admired the Beguines because, like the Clares, they were determined to support themselves without begging, and within an atmosphere of culture and mutual support, many Beguines wrote religious and mystical, rather than theological texts, several of which have become classics of Christian spirituality, The principal difference, apart from genre, is that the Beguines wrote in the vernacular, which upset the established clergy who regarded Latin as the language of learning, and were concerned about lay folk reading things in their native tongues for reasons of control.

With the creation of orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans, bishops started to feel threatened because the prestige of the friars, and the money and goods they attracted came at their moral and material expense. As matters developed, moreover, resistance from clergy grew to the Beguines for other reasons, mainly, perhaps, because, as we have seen, various ‘heretical’ groups such as Albigensians, Cathars and Beguines in Southern France, set up in similar communities, and neither clergy nor the public at large were always able to distinguish who was who, even if they wished to, which was quite another story.

Unfortunately, one writer of real interest, Marguerite de Porete, did write something that resulted in her trial for heresy and burning at the stake. The women were accused of public preaching, which was anathema, and in time the Beguinages attracted poorer and less able women, and baseless accusations of illicit sexual conduct were hard to dispel, particularly when occasional confessions were elicited under torture.

In 1312 at the Council of Vienne the Beguines were condemned, and although some houses remained, many were finally abolished at the reformation and later at the French Revolution. Many individual Beguines and their houses became absorbed into formal religious foundations.

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**MECHTHILD of MADGEBURG** [1207-82] illustrates the trend neatly, having been born into a high-class family, located near Magdeburg. She appears to have started having visions and at age 23 in 1230 she fled into Magdeburg itself in search of a community of women in to take up the life of a Beguine.

Like many interesting characters from the Middle Ages, it is difficult to find accurate details of Mechthild’s life: often we only have what has been written about such people by others, usually hagiographers, or else we have to sail through what Bernard McGinn describes as the Scilla of swallowing whole autobiographies, or autobiographical hints, in some cases – and the Charybdis of trying to take them apart and being left with nothing.

From a comment in her book, it seems likely that, although she knew nobody in town, there would have been a vestigial community of lay sisters established somewhere locally, since Norbert, the founder of the Premonstratensian monks, had established a third order of devout lay women there, and ended his career as Archbishop of Magdeburg, where he was buried. It seems likely that Mechthild held a position of authority in whichever community she joined.

After 40 years in Magdeburg, during which time she would have survived the various changing public attitudes and clerical perceptions of her calling; aged 63 and in poor health, Mechthild found it necessary to move into a convent, which she did in 1270, and into one of very great distinction at Helfta, where she was warmly welcomed by Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, dying in or around 1282.

Mechthild’s choice of refuge was an inspired one, and no doubt one she had thoroughly thought through. The convent at Helfta was a remarkable centre of learning and spirituality. She must have been welcomed very warmly, because her reputation as a mystic writer was already established, and it was here that she completed her only writing, ‘The flowing light of the Godhead,’ although its seventh and final book is somewhat different from the rest, and probably illustrates the cross-pollination of ideas between herself and the other bright stars of 13th-century female mysticism.

‘The Flowing light of the Godhead’ was written in Mechthild’s Low German, and the original is lost, but her spiritual director, Henry of Halle, caused it to be translated into Latin, and later into middle German. It seems likely, then, that various alterations were made in the process, since Mechthild wrote her original on loose sheets, so we cannot be entirely sure how much of the production is her own, although it is generally accepted that the seventh book is probably her work entirely. Saskia Murk-Hansen, author of a short book about the Beguines, suggests that there are ideas in the book that might have inspired Dante.

Her writing presents both poetry and prose, and, like contemporaries in this tradition, treats often with very great intensity of the mystical union between the soul and God, often with borrowing and adapting the imagery of courtly love from the troubadours.

One aspect of early 13th-century mysticism that the Beguines seem to have had largely in common was the concept of ‘Minne,’ which, in Collins’ German dictionary, is defined in ancient usage as ‘courtly love,’ and, again, ‘The duty of a knight to his lady.’ The 12th-century Troubadour culture arrived in Germany as the art of the ‘Minnesingers,’ and, in this context it is important to realise that besides the predominantly ‘whingeing’ nature of many of the male lyrics in the tradition of courtly love , there are a good deal of contrasting emotions and imagery in the mix.

What is interesting in women’s mysticism at this time is that whereas the traditionally monastic model based in the ‘song of songs’ sees the individual himself in the female role with Christ as the bridegroom, songs of courtly love exchange places, so that the mystic takes the male role, leaving all kinds of new and original perspectives to be explored by a woman taking on the male initiative, leaving God, Christ or ‘Minne’ as female, although the object of writing in this way is often to pass through gender roles altogether in order to lose sight of all conventional boundaries.

What this opens up is the possibility to express madness, violence and a deep longing which is, paradoxically, fulfilled by the absence of God; not in the sense of ‘Dark night,’ when God’s temporary absence will, hopefully, be restored, but in the absence itself; the more deeply felt, the more fulfilling.

What would confuse the modern reader is that Mechthild employs dialogues of various kinds, and between a variety of figures; God, the soul, some personified virtues and characters such as ‘Minne’ herself. Mechthild is seeking the desert by markedly different routes from the original Desert Fathers and Mothers, and what she seems to be aiming at is a state in which she can only experience the fullest love of God through utter self-abnegation and by exhausting herself in the love and service of other people.

This is a different apophatic way from that of the ‘Via Negativa,’ by which union with God is sought through everything he is NOT, but the attempt on the part of the female mystic to break through everything that is finite in order to meet God as nearly on equal terms as may be possible in this life.

This genre of mediaeval women’s mysticism is found more among the Beguines than among the cloistered nuns. Together with two other Beguines from northern Europe, Hadewijch and Margaret of Porete, Mechthild is ranked as among the most important mystics to arise from the Beguine Movement.

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**GERTRUDE the GREAT** [1256-1302] was presented to the convent of Helfta in 1261 at the age of 5, as a Child Oblate, to be raised and educated with a view to taking up the monastic life. Her parents, who were probably well-off, but quite unknown, were good judges, because the convent at Helfta was an outstanding centre of culture and spirituality. The child proved very bright indeed. At age 25 Gertrude experienced a vision of Christ, and thereafter she grew into one of the most distinguished mystics of the Middle Ages.

In 1229 Count Burkhard of Mansfeld and his wife Elizabeth founded a convent for Cistercian nuns near their castle in Thuringia, in Saxony. Unfortunately, in the previous year the Cistercian General Chapter had forbidden further foundations or incorporation of houses for women into the Order, so that the convent had to remain technically Benedictine, though the habit and usage were Cistercian. It was not until 1258 that the convent was moved to Helfta, near the town of Eisleben, where Gertrude was probably born.

The convent flourished, particularly under the 40-year abbacy of Gertrude, [1252-91], daughter of the Baron of Hackeborn which might explain how she became abbess at age 19, which was, of course, by no means unknown. She gets a good write-up, however:

‘She would read sacred scripture very eagerly and with great delight wherever she could, requiring her subjects to love sacred readings and often recite them from memory. Hence, she brought all the good books she could for her church or made her sisters transcribe them. She eagerly promoted the girls to learn the liberal arts, saying that if the pursuit of knowledge were lost, they would no longer understand sacred scripture and the religious life would also perish.’

Bernard McGinn writes that the ancient monastic ideal of combining the love of learning with the desire for God was alive and well at Helfta and reaped a rich reward.

In 1247 Abbess Gertrude’s younger sister Mechthild of Hackeborn [1241-99] entered the convent, growing up to become the Chantress of the House, and a teacher and spiritual guide for the younger nuns and was eventually canonised.

In 1270 the 63-year-old Beguine, Mechthild of Magdeburg also entered the convent, and composing the seventh book of her treatise: ‘The floating light of the Godhead.’

Many other women in the community were literate; in fact the nun who describes herself as ‘Compilatrix’ collaborated with Gertrude and Mechthild in writing up the two productions that summarise the mysticism of the Helfta women: the books called ‘the Herald of divine love’ and ‘The Book of special Grace.’

Although the Beguine Mechthild was already a considerable mystical writer, and must have had some influence during the last decades of C13 at Helfta, the work of Gertrude the Great and St Mechthild, her mentor, is different, and very much their own.

While Mechthild the Beguine wrote in Low German, the Helfta nuns wrote in Latin, and their theology was derived from and based in monastic tradition and liturgy. The other important thing that McGinn stresses is that these were not individualist mystics: both St Mechthild and Gertrude stress that the wonderfully rich gifts they receive in visions from Christ are to be shared by everybody in the community, and thence by all his followers; moreover, the nuns do not approach God or others as ‘weak women’ but with confidence, apart from the general and heart-felt acknowledgement predicated by anybody experiencing the presence of God that they were ‘dust’ and ‘less than nothing.’ As Caroline Walker-Bynun asserts:

‘The socialising of these women within the stable and protective intellectual environment of the Cistercian cloister gave them a sense of security and authority unusual among mediaeval women mystics … In contrast to C12 women and to many of their C13 predecessors, including Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn are serene about the implications of both their learning and their contact with Christ.’

Both mystics centre their encounters with Christ in the Eucharist, which they may have taken more than once a week: as Caroline Bynun puts it:

‘The Eucharist was the equivalent and the occasion for ecstasy … Gertrude and Mechthild of Hackeborn are regal figures; queens welcomed into the stately embrace of the king of Heaven.’ The union of bride and bridegroom centres on the uniting of their hearts and it is this devotion to the Sacred Heart that distinguishes the mysticism of the women of Helfta.

Nuns are usually consecrated as ‘Brides of Christ,’ so that nuptial imagery becomes entirely appropriate. Like many spiritual states, however, this one is open to abuse and misunderstanding, particularly, perhaps by men when misconceptions about sexual frustration and Freudian notions of sublimation inhibit us from opening our minds to the deeper spiritual reality that a good commentary on the ‘Song of Songs’ might begin to help us understand. The problem is encapsulated in Mary Magdalene: early church fathers were only too happy to see her as a nymphomaniac whereas the question that faces us nowadays is how, if at all, to make sense of her relationship with Jesus.

This is all such a complex and sensitive area of spirituality that it probably needs to be best appreciated with the guidance of reliable and established authorities. A good commentary or Companion to the ‘Song of Songs’ would probably make a good beginning.

For people who wish to interest themselves in mysticism the most reliable and modern resource is still probably Bernard McGinn’s survey of Christian spirituality entitled ‘The Presence of God’ in 6 volumes up to 1650.

Briefly what McGinn states is that although there are distinct differences between male and female mysticism generally, the further he looks into women’s mysticism the more difficult it becomes to generalise, and to ascertain whether there are, indeed, any aspects of women’s spirituality that do not at least occasionally occur in that of men’s, and vice versa.

Gertrude’s only authenticated writing is the second book of the ’Herald’, which she is said to have written off during the liturgy in an ecstasy of praise and gratitude; and is partly autobiographical. It is difficult to know from the books which is the work of Mechthild, that of Gertrude and the compilations of the ‘Compilatrix’ nun, but the two books are considered to be some of the most remarkable of the Middle Ages; not that well known, but sufficiently celebrated to have earned Gertrude the honorific ‘great,’ and to have had Mechthild of Hackeborn canonised.

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**ST ELIZABETH of HUNGARY** [1207-31] was a queen, daughter of King Andrew of Hungary, born at Pressburg, and given in marriage to Ludwig IV Landgraf [Count] of Thuringia in the southwest of the German lands where she had been brought up. The Oxford Dictionary of the Saints describes her as ardent passionate and handsome, and that she enjoyed a married life of extraordinary happiness, in which she bore three children. She was also very generous, giving alms, founding a hospital and providing for helpless children and orphans.

After four years, in 1227, Ludwig went on crusade and within three months died of the plague. Elizabeth was devastated, and distraught almost to the point of insanity, and to make things worse her brother-in-law Henry drove her out of court, but she refused either to re-marry or to return to Hungary, and settled in Marburg in 1228, with a confessor she had known for several years, Konrad of Marburg, whose ‘spiritual’ direction proved to be insensitive, abusive and even sadistic. Konrad had been a successful inquisitor of heretics, [which mindset hardly qualified him as a spiritual director.] He slapped her face, beat her with a rod, and insisted on Elizabeth dismissing her favourite ladies in waiting while replacing them with two bullying and harsh nurses. Elizabeth bore this all with good humour and spent her resources of time and money on the care of the poor, the sick, the old and other needy people, cooking, cleaning, spinning and carding, and even fishing in order to help feed them.

Elizabeth became a member of the Franciscan ‘Spirituals,’ an order which was condemned early in the following century for its extreme take on Franciscan principles, so that with this background and her sois-disant spiritual director, it shouldn’t surprise us that with all her charitable exertions, she was dead at the age of 24, not, unfortunately, unusual for women of lower social standing in those days, but in Elizabeth’s case quite unnecessary and un-called-for.

In the Deposition of Isentrude, companion of Elizabeth, to the papal commission concerning her canonisation, she writes:

‘While her husband Ludwig was away on imperial business, there was a general famine, and Blessed Elizabeth caused the reserves of corn in the king’s granaries to be expended to satisfy the needs of the poor, each day as much as was necessary. Beneath the high castle of the Warburg there was a large building which she filled with a number of sick people for whom the general alms-giving could not suffice; and despite a long steep hill she visited them several times a day, consoling them and encouraging them to patience and she sold her own jewels in order to satisfy their needs. She paid no heed to the fetid air and to the stench of corruption made worse by the summer heat and which her attendants only bore with much murmuring.

Once there were in this hospital a number of poor children for whom she provided everything, and with much gentleness and kindness kept them near her; and as many as came in, all ran to her calling her ‘Mother.’ She gave the most loving care to the worst cases among these children, the deformed, the dirtiest, the weakest, those suffering from the most repulsive illnesses, and would take them tenderly into her arms.

These sick people shared in her general alms-giving, and besides this blessed Elizabeth cherished the poorest and weakest and lodged them in a dwelling outside the castle where she could feed them from her own table with her own hands denying herself and her attendants many things in order to give them to the poor.‘

One or two more vignettes from Elizabeth’s life: in the article on the Beguines, it is recounted that while she was on a progress through her lands, and arriving at Nuremberg, her harpist, Alheid, chose to leave her entourage and take up a life as a penitent. In these days this would have required Elizabeth’s willing consent, so we have a clue as to her personality and grace.

The other one, just to add confusion to a week already crowded with Gertrudes of various stripe, one of Elizabeth’s daughters of that name became an abbess in a Premonstratensian convent in the same area and at the same period as the Gertrudes we’ve already celebrated.

Elizabeth is sometimes described as a mystic, though it is difficult to imagine how much time and energy she would have had left over from her various charitable activities. If you have been able to grasp something of the meaning of ‘Minne’ from the article on Mechthild, however, it is possible to understand that Elizabeth’s life did, in a sense, act out the concept in utter self-negation, whether or not she understood its mystical meaning in the way Mechthild tried to.

After her death Elizabeth was rapidly canonised in 1235 and in the following year she was buried in the church of her own name in Marburg, which just as speedily became a site of special pilgrimage until 1539 when the Lutheran Philip of Hesse moved her remains to an unknown site.

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**PRISCILLA LYDIA SELLON** [1821-76] is of particular interest, coming up this week when we have been examining women’s communities in the Middle Ages and the opposition they encountered from the public and the established church: very little changes: in 1850 she wrote to Augusta Wade, who wanted to join the community Priscilla helped set up:

‘I am not surprised at the opposition you meet with; the surprise to me is when such a vocation is not opposed. It is contrary to every argument of worldly wisdom, and prudence, and excellence. It is, on the very face of it, reckless, and mad and enthusiastic. It is counted very mad to ‘rise up and forsake all and follow Christ.’

Priscilla was the daughter of a senior naval of commander; and suffered from poor health all her life. On new year’s day in 1848 she was about to leave England for her health’s sake, but at the last moment she responded to a public appeal by the Bishop of Exeter for people to work among the poor and destitute of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse. Here a group of women gradually gathered around her, and with the help and support of E B Pusey they adopted a conventual lifestyle, and in the face of much opposition created the Devonport Sisters of Mercy.

Priscilla led her community, starting up schools and orphanages, and the sisters heroically nursed the victims of the Cholera epidemic of 1848 in the slums, as well as soldiers in the Crimea. The community met with a great deal of opposition, and it was only with the support of the bishop that they were able to continue, but even he withdrew as Visitor in 1852.

Her crucial role in the revival of religious life in the Church of England was enhanced when in 1856 her sisters joined with the first community founded – the Holy Cross Sisters – thereby establishing the Society of the Holy Trinity. In her last years she was an invalid.

E B Pusey referred to her as ‘the restorer after three centuries of the religious life in the English Church.’

The parallels with the Beguines are striking; growing resistance pressurising Priscilla to join up with a more formal community, which, by the way, still exists at Ascot Priory.

N B: the better-known Sisters of Mercy are actually a Catholic order set up in Dublin in 1831 and serve worldwide.

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