18TH JULY ELIZABETH FERARD

For many years, on the other side of the Shepherds Bush roundabout in North Kensington stood St Andrew’s Convent, where some of us, who are refugees from St Saviour’s, would remember the late Sr Denzel; one or two other visiting preachers, besides the somewhat more assertive Sr Gerd, who rattled John Wheeler’s cage for some months in the late 80’s before migrating to St Michael & All Angels, and thence back to the land of her birth, where news came that she’d left the Order. Apart from this, the community was served for many years by a Caribbean cook whose productions warmed the hearts and spirits of its inmates and its many visitors. Those of us who remember the community and its Denizens with love and admiration have ELIZABETH FERARD to thank for its foundation.

With the still recent appointment of Bishop Sarah to the diocese of London, at long last women priests can be ordained by their own bishop. It’s also good to know that back in 1861 it was one of Sarah’s predecessors, Bishop Tait of London who licenced the first deaconesses to our church.

Bishop Tait first encouraged Elizabeth to visit a deaconess institution in Germany, and three years later, in November 1861, she and a group of women were admitted by Bishop Tait to the office of Deaconess.

Elizabeth went on to found the community of St Andrew with a dual vocation, as one of deaconesses and of religious sisters. At first the community was set up in a poor parish at Kings Cross before moving to Notting Hill. When her health failed, Elizabeth passed the leadership of the community onto others, and died on Easter day 1883.

We should not forget that within the living memory of many of our congregation, the office of deaconess was as far as women were permitted to progress in the church, and, reading the account both of the first dedications, and an informal record of that service of admittance, you would need to be practically nose-blind not to register a whiff of condescension; and what seems almost tragic is that Elizabeth’s definition of the office of deaconess seems to have written into it the very limited understanding of the role, as servant and teacher of children, that so constrained and deformed our church for over a century and a half.

Taking Phoebe as a role model for the deaconess ministry to serve the church, she, or perhaps Bishop Tait, her Eminence grise,’ ignores what the text of many parts of the New Testament make clear; that it was women of substance in whose houses the Apostolic church was nurtured and sustained.

The community of St Andrew ceased accepting new recruits in 1989, once women finally won their right to be ordained; and in 2002 the remaining sisters moved from their Notting Hill home to St Mary’s Convent in Chiswick.

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19TH JULY GREGORY of NYSSA [331-395

 MACRINA the YOUNGER [D379]

The three ’Cappadocian fathers’ lived in what is now south-eastern Turkey during the middle and later 4th century considered at the time to be an outpost of the Greco-Roman empire.

Basil, Gregory and Macrina were three of ten children from an aristocratic Christian family. Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea [c333-379] is the best known of the three; and seems to have been the only one of the children who had a formal academic education: He it was who argued that Christians should study the pagan philosophers to learn the practice of the virtues. But his younger brother GREGORY, was a remarkable philosopher, theologian and mystic, many of whose ideas were well ahead of his time. The third of the Cappadocians was Gregory of Nazianzus, [c329-391] a friend of the family whose principal gift was rhetoric, with his five Theological Orations succinctly summarising the Cappadocian consensus. Basil and the other Gregory have separate feast days.

Gregory of Nyssa, and Macrina, the eldest of the children, seem to have been particularly close both spiritually and emotionally, as well as intellectually, having probably seen him through his primary education; at all events he writes of her with great affection, referring to her as The Teacher.

When Basil the Elder, father of the family died, his widow, Emelia, and Macrina took over the upbringing of the children as elder sisters often did at the time, settling on one of the family estates at Annesi, which she converted into a sort of monastery. Emelia would have had all the necessary resources to support her community which would probably not have attracted undue interest at the time.

It is more than likely that Macrina, perhaps with Basil’s assistance, took care of Gregory’s early education. In 348 Gregory attended school at Caesarea, and Cathleen Jones suggests that, like Basil, he finished his education in Athens, though this is not certain but likely for somebody who was determined to pursue the career of a rhetor.

For this reason, Gregory at first declined ordination and married Theosebia in 360 and had a son. When, in 372, Basil asked him to write a treatise on virginity, however, he appointed his younger brother as Bishop of the small, rather out-of-the-way town of Nyssa; and although Gregory complained at being stuck in such a backwater, Basil predicted that Nyssa would receive more prestige from Gregory than it would bestow on him.

Having already lost Basil and his beloved sister in rapid succession in 379, a truly remarkable transformation seems to have come about as Gregory worked through his profound grief. Theosebia died in 385, although we are not certain as to whether she had already been released to become a nun, since Gregory himself became increasingly interested in and attracted to monastic life and became a monk himself.

Among the more accessible works of Gregory’s that we have from his last ten years is a touching but instructive account of his coming home to his sister following the death of their brother Basil in 379. Having not met for 8 years Gregory found Macrina herself on her death bed, but his account of how she allowed him to share his grief, and then took him through her thoughts on the soul and the resurrection demonstrates their close family bond.

The short book ‘On the soul and the Resurrection’, sometimes called ‘Macriniae’, is a dialogue between the two which touches on some extremely interesting and original insights regarding judgement and the afterlife.

The book is short and well worth reading today.

Macrina maintains that the soul reflects God much as a piece of glass, however small, reflects the full brightness of sunlight. Of ‘judgement’ she suggests that there is no punishment, but that god, having given himself in part to each human, must receive back what he has given, and the accretions of anger, desire etc that cling to the soul must be dealt with in order for God to retrieve that part of himself that is pure, and the process of separation is bound to be a painful one, to the extent that that part of God’s purity that has been besmirched needs to be discarded. The implication is that in the process no soul will actually be lost, but we do have an early suggestion of a purgatory here. As an attempt to speak of resurrection Macrina suggests it will be: ‘The reconstitution of our nature in its original form.’ This gives us a lot to think about.

Gregory himself seems to have passed through some kind of purgative experience in his grief, and emerges with a mysticism that initially brings him to find God within his own heart:

‘If man’s heart has been purified from every creature and unruly affections, he will see the image of the divine nature in his own beauty. I think that in this short saying the Word expresses some such counsel as this: ‘There is in you, human beings, a desire to contemplate the true God; but when you hear that the divine majesty is exalted above the heavens, that its glory is inexpressible, its beauty ineffable, and its nature inaccessible, do not despair of ever beholding what you desire. It is indeed within your reach; you have within yourselves the standard by which you apprehend the divine. For he who made you did, at the same time, endow your nature with this wonderful quality. For God imprinted on it a likeness of the glories of his own nature, as if moulding the form of a carving into wax. But the evil that has been poured all around the nature bearing the divine image has rendered useless to you this wonderful thing that lies hidden under vile coverings. If, therefore, you wash off, by a good life, the filth that has been stuck on your heart like plaster, the divine beauty will again shine forth in you … And so you see the blest vision radiant in the pure heaven of your heart.’ [Homily 6 ‘on the Beatitudes.’]

Humanity is the only part of creation in which God places his image, so that, because there is a part of human creation that is, literally, not of this world, human beings have an intrinsic worth, lacking in the rest of creation This idea obviously imposes certain obligations on us both in relation to ourselves and others.

To ourselves we owe the effort to overcome the deficiencies in our likeness to God: We are unable to contemplate God directly and morally our free will has been compromised by the passions. Thus, we must strive for intellectual and moral perfection:

And, because he was committed to the idea that all humans have a unique value that demands respect, Gregory was an early and vocal opponent of slavery and also of poverty.

Only God has the right to enslave humans, and he chooses not to do so, and it was God who gave humans free will and how dare anyone compromise another’s free will by enslaving them.

 As humans who were created in the divine image, we are all radically equal. Therefore, it is hubristic for anybody to arrogate authority over others!

But Gregory goes on to state that poverty is inconsistent with the rulership bestowed on humankind and its creation. Both slavery and poverty sully the dignity of human beings by degrading them to a station below that to which they were rightfully born.

With this kind of ‘anthropology’ it is easy to see why Gregory was also very keen on the church’s healing ministry, supporting his brother Basil in the foundation of hospitals all over Caesarea.

There are resonances of Gregory’s mysticism at many levels in the following passage:

‘When we look down from the sublime words of the Lord into the ineffable depths of his thoughts, we have an experience similar to that of gazing down from a high cliff into the immense sea below. On the coastline one can often see rocky cliffs where the seaward face has been sliced off sheer from top to bottom, with the tops of the cliffs projecting outwards, forming a promontory overhanging the depths. If anyone were to look down from such a lofty height into the sea below, they would feel giddy. This is exactly how any soul feels now, as it is raised from the ground by this mighty Word of the Lord: ‘Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’

… To see the Lord is eternal life, and yet these pillars of faith, John, Paul and Moses, all declare it to be impossible! The vertigo in the soul this causes! Confronted by the profundity of these words, I am confounded. Is not all human hope thus destroyed? … But the Lord supports our faltering hope, just as he grasped Peter when he was in danger of sinking and stood him on the waves as though it were solid ground. If, then, the hand of the Word is extended to us also, supporting those who are at sea in the midst of conflicting speculations, we can be without fear. We are gripped by the guiding hand of the Word, who says to us: ‘Blest are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’

‘The Life of Moses’ is Gregory’s mystical exploration of the divine through the three accounts in the Old Testament of Moses’ own encounters with God. Gregory takes Moses as the model of somebody passionately seeking to know God.

1 THE BURNING BUSH: light, which is Gregory’s image for knowledge: so stage 1 represents the limit to which reason and rational knowledge can take us towards God.

2 THE MOUNTAIN, where darkness, rather than the light of reason, must be endured/accepted

3 THE CLEFT IN THE ROCK; God shields Moses from the full sight of his glory, and all Moses is able to see when the hand is removed, is God’s ‘back,’ Moses finally understands that his longing for God will never be satisfied: nevertheless, he is satisfied by the very things that leave his desire unsatisfied.

Gregory puts it like this:

‘Moses learns from what is said [Exodus ch33 v20] that the divine is, by its very nature, infinite; enclosed by no boundary … since what is encompassed is certainly less than what encompasses, it would follow that the stronger prevails. Therefore, he who encloses the divine by any boundary makes out that the good is ruled over by its opposite … It is not in the nature of what is unenclosed to be grasped. But every desire for the good which is attracted to that assent constantly expands as one progresses in pressing onto the good. Never to reach such satiety is truly to see God.

Because God is an infinite being, the desire to know God is an infinite process, but Gregory sees this as more satisfying than some beatific vision: it is better to travel than to arrive!

Very few of Gregory’s writings were translated into Latin, so that his influence in the west was limited, but the 9th-century philosopher and theologian John Scotus Eriugena, who knew Greek, based his interesting speculations on those of Gregory, and writers such as the 5th-century Syrian monk known as Pseudo-Dionysus carried forward Gregory’s apophatic - negative –mystical path to God, which, in turn, influenced many writers on spiritual matters in both east and west through the middle ages.

In terms of doctrine, Bernard McGinn writes:

‘In the wake of the Arian controversy the major doctrinal dispute of the Greek fourth century, the Greek fathers were forced to examine the doctrine of God with more care, and in greater depth than had hitherto been the case. The creation of Orthodox Trinitarian theology marks a watershed in the history of Christian thought; one that was bound to have an effect on all aspects of subsequent Christianity including mysticism. Gregory, the last and most subtle of the Cappadocian fathers not only played a crucial role in the development of Trinitarian theology, but also in the Christian view of the divine nature, as unlimited, and therefore incomprehensible.

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20TH JULY BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS [1484-1566]

Was born in Madrid of an impoverished family, and in 1502 he and his father immigrated to Hispaniola, now the largest Caribbean island shared between Haiti in the west and the Dominican Republic on the eastern side. At the time the whole island was a Spanish colony; in fact Hispaniola was where Columbus first landed.

One of the ways the Spanish administered their conquered territories was by the ‘encomienda’ grant system, whereby a piece of land and its people was assigned to a colonist, whose responsibility it was, in theory, to look after the people’s needs and teach them the Catholic faith, in exchange for tributes of gold, or other commodities such as fruit, or work. In reality the Indians had no choice in the matter, and in practice what happened was that many of them were worked to death, underfed and died of European diseases for which they had no exposure immunity. An encomienda was, in fact, a slave labour camp.

Bartolome was part of this system for some time before his conversion: He joined his father in slave raids among the indigenous communities, and was granted an encomienda himself; in fact he was one of the signatories to a successful petition to expel the Dominicans who had preached against the system and its cruelties, and had denied communion to encomenderos unless they repented their sins.

Bartolome became a priest in 1510. In 1513, after participating in the Spanish invasion of Cuba, he became sickened by its violence and cruelty and in 1515, whilst reading Ecclesiasticus, he experienced a total change of heart, and subsequently gave up his estate and released his Indians; commencing at this point, his life-long campaign to Spanish royalty to end the encomienda system and to give native Caribbean Indians their rights as free human beings.

It’s important to stress that, at this point, Bartolome was not against slavery as such, but that, in fact, at one point which he bitterly regretted in later life, he had actually advocated the use of Africans as opposed to Indians as slaves, claiming that they were hardier, which, because of their greater exposure to European diseases, they probably were. By the end of his life, however, he had gone the whole hog and become a fully-fledged anti-slavery campaigner.

All of Bartolome’s campaigns met with virulent opposition from those whose livelihoods and profit margins were threatened by the possible loss of the system, including churchmen and absentee bishops, often living at home in Spain.

Much of his opposition came from the Franciscans, who had taken to baptising Indians in droves willy-nilly. Bartolome insisted that such forced conversions were invalid, and that, converts needed to be able to understand the faith to which they were offering their lives. There was no question in his mind but that they SHOULD be converted: the crux of his campaign was that the Indians were being killed off before they had the chance to convert properly and save their souls[!] He was, after all, a man of his time.

Bartolome made many journeys to and from Spain, to pursue his project, and at first three Hieronymite monks, whom he had chosen, were sent over to govern the territory, but when Bartolome caught up with them, at last, it became clear that they had had to back-pedal in the face of united resistance from the encomenderos.

Eventually he got permission to set up a small colony in Venezuela along the more liberal lines he had advocated; but it became impossible to raise the necessary sum because of a paucity of investors, so that the project began at a disadvantage, and, when other slave raiders continually attacked the settlement, the few Indians left turned on Bartolome’s men and massacred them, leaving Bartolome desolated and broke.

Now, in 1522, he returned to Spain and took up theology studies at the influential Salamanca University, and the following year, he joined the Dominicans, whose preaching had assisted in converting him from his ways.

In time he was named ‘Protector of the Indians, which empowered him to settle native disputes to the best of his judgement, according to their own customs rather than Spanish law; and ‘Protector of the Indians’ is the title he received at his canonisation.

As his powerbase grew so did the ferocity of opposition to his campaigns, which centred, over the years, in Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Guatemala, as well as back in Spain.

In 1544 he was made Bishop of Chiapas, where he remained for only a few years before having to return to Spain to take part in debates organised by Franciscans, who had opposed him root and branch, and claimed that, because of their inhuman religious rituals, Indians were subhuman, and therefore in need of Spanish rule and supervision. Some of the established local cultures practised human sacrifice.

The result of the debate was inconclusive, which should astonish us now, but Charles V had his hands full, being Holy Roman Emperor as well as King of Spain, and he simply didn’t follow through, although there were, at least, some legislative changes which were, however, very largely ignored back in the Americas.

Bartolome wrote several books, the best-known being an account of the destruction of the Caribbean Indians, and in later life he retired to a monastery where he died in 1566.

COMMENT

In these days of post-imperialism and multi-culturalism there is still a debate as to the extent of a colonial or post-colonial power to sanction customs and practices that offend our moral sensibilities, but nowadays it is usually a matter of which are the highest values that trump others, conquistadors and those who perpetrated oppression and violence in the East India Company were motivated principally by greed.

Aviva Chomsky has written about the evils perpetrated on the peoples of central America, and the extent of U S involvement in those nations in modern times, focussing particularly on Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, where the British were involved. Her book is mainly addressed to U S citizens and is a lot less detailed about these nations history under Spanish colonial rule, which is a pity because very little is known or understood about this part of the world, and when we learn from the TV about horrific and seemingly never-ending civil wars it is important to realise that these countries have never had the ghost of a chance to set up fair or stable governments, which has its effect on the very ‘immigrant problem’ that has been troubling white America for so long.

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22ND JULY MARY MAGDALENE

The calumny that MARY MAGDALENE was a prostitute was thrown out by the Vatican in 1969. It had been assumed that she was the ‘sinful’ woman who anointed Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee [Luke ch7.] At the beginning of the following chapter Luke names Mary among the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee as having been healed of seven demons. This, in itself, may be significant because Luke seems to be emphasising the extraordinary nature of this particular miracle.

The ‘Three Maries’ comprise the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whose ‘case’ comes up next week. This is particularly confusing if people cling to the notion that it was Mary Magdalene who anointed Jesus in Luke ch7, because John relates that Mary of Bethany anointed him at a dinner given after the raising of Lazarus [ch12], so we really need to hold onto the thought that Luke doesn’t name the ‘sinful woman’ in ch7, and whoever she may have been , she was certainly not Mary Magdalene.

The one thing universally celebrated of Mary is that she is ‘Apostle to the apostles; bringing the first news of Jesus’ resurrection to the 11, holed up in abject fear and despair; and receiving Jesus’ commission to meet him in Galilee. ’The most dramatic account of this occurs in John ch20, when Mary mistakes the partly ascended Jesus for the gardener, but all four Gospels carry the account of Mary, accompanied in Mat ch28 vv1-10, and named at Luke ch24 v10 among the women who had witnessed the burial and had waited through the Sabbath to anoint the body.

Mary Magdalene Is also named in the Gospels as having been present both at the crucifixion and as witness to the burial of Jesus by joseph of Arimathea. She is portrayed in various states of grief in most paintings of the descent from the cross.

It seems abundantly clear, then, that, from whatever physical, mental or spiritual condition Jesus may have healed her, by the time of his passion, she must have been sufficiently grounded in recovery to have been able to withstand these horrors, whilst being able to give and receive support from the other women in attendance, which is more than most of the disciples were able to achieve.

As has already been mentioned, there seems to be something significant about Mary’s ‘seven demons,’ and if you recall Jesus’ saying about seven demons worse than the original, who might fill a vacuum left by the expulsion of the first, we can imagine that Mary’s condition may have been of the gravest, for all that the canonic Gospels tell us nothing of its nature.

Whatever nonsense has been written about the relationship between Mary and Jesus what the Gospels, alone, tell us is that Mary must have been extraordinarily attached to Jesus. The same is true, also, of Mary of Bethany, whose jar of spikenard, with which she anointed Jesus, is a perfume derived from a plant grown only in India, and the probability that it represented her potential dowry has been put forward convincingly. Bible scholars suggest nowadays that these incidents referred to in Luke and John may have been the same one.

All that this tells us is what we already know; that Jesus possessed the power to attract other people, be they women or men, and that there is no scriptural warrant for suggesting any erotic relations between Jesus and Mary, although what we can deduce is that most of the women who supported Jesus’ ministry had pre-existing family commitments.

Enter the Rev Dr Cynthia Bourgeault, a contemplative, retreat leader and Episcopalian priest! Her book, ‘The Meaning of Mary Magdalene’ is worth reading, even if you don’t go all the way with her thesis, which is that, quite regardless of any erotic relations that may or may not have existed between Mary and Jesus, Mary becomes Jesus ‘soul-mate.’

Good feminist as she is, Cynthia downplays Luke’s seven demons, as being the only insinuation in the whole of the New Testament that Mary was somehow ’flaky,’ and therefore unreliable and less than… This writer’s take on the seven demons, however, is that, on the contrary, Mary’s brokenness, in whatever form it may have taken, provided Jesus with an opportunity to impart a concomitant strength and grace to her situation. Notwithstanding, the end result was the same.

Cynthia quotes G K Chesterton, who once said: Christianity hasn’t failed; it just hasn’t been tried yet.’ She states, undeniably, that

* Christian doctrine as we have it in most churches, is more the result of power politics than it is of anything Jesus might have intended,
* That the Evangelists largely chose to overlook the part played in Jesus’ ministry by women
* And that Christian doctrine has been shaped very largely by monks.

Among liberal Christians today these three points should not attract much controversy, but another perceptive insight that may not have crossed our minds that Cynthia points up is that far too much emphasis has been traditionally placed on the 12 disciples, again, partly at the expense of the important role played by women in the development of the Jesus movement.

At the beginning of Acts, it is stated that there were 120 believers, and this, presumably, after the news of Jesus’ resurrection had spread. When, in the hiatus between the ‘ascension’ and the descent of the spirit, Peter found it necessary to fill the gap left by Judas in the 12, it becomes clear that there were others who had been with Jesus from the beginning, to say nothing of the 72 whom he had sent out in pairs: nor the detachment of faithful selfless women who supported Jesus with their own means. There was evidently a far wider caucus of disciples than the 12, most of whom, in any case, disappear from history entirely.

So what does this have to do with Mary Magdalene? Cynthia sees her as Jesus’ principal soulmate; somebody ready, willing and able to offer and receive whatever might be the utmost in self-emptying, ‘kenotic’ love possible between two human beings. What Jesus means by ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ is not: ‘love… as much as…’ but ‘love your neighbour as though your neighbour WERE yourself.’

The idea of ‘kenosis,’ self-emptying, was around in protestant circles for a while in C19 and did not attract much interest in the form it took then, but it has actually been around for far longer and makes perfect sense. It denotes the idea that, in order to live on truly equal terms with humans, Jesus necessarily needed to forswear aspects of his divine nature; attributes such as omniscience, for example. Cynthia uses the term in the same sense that Paul does in the famous hymn in Phil ch2 v8ff; that Jesus ‘emptied himself … and took the form of a slave…’ There would be major inconsistencies in Jesus’ life and ministry had he come to ‘empty himself’ in love for humanity in general, without at least a willingness to bestow this unlimited love on every individual willing and able to accept it.

Cynthia’s thesis is that Mary Magdalene became the willing vessel, and one who was able to reciprocate this kind of agapeic love to the best of her endeavours.

Christians have objected to the idea that Jesus may have had an erotic relationship with Mary on the grounds that

* This would have made him a sinner
* If he loved one person more than the rest, he couldn’t have loved all of us equally
* That marriage would have distracted him from his ministry as a whole.

The only one of these objections worth dealing with is the second. We know, don’t we, that there were 12 disciples, and an inner circle of James, John and Peter: we also know that there was a disciple ‘whom Jesus loved,’ whom most of us have assumed to have been John. The reality is that Jesus seems to have loved and nurtured those around him according to their potential for growth, or for their various individual needs. We find the same generosity and attention to the needs of the individual in the resurrection appearances.

As for the first of these objections, Cynthia is frankly not concerned whether there may or may not have been an erotic dimension to the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but that While erotic passion could have been very real between two persons who loved each other in this uninhibitedly self-giving and intimate way, and while such natural and God-given feelings may be appropriate in theological terms, they may have been inappropriate in such a culture and society.

The Jewish background to all this is that erotic love is a God-given and joyous experience, and even a duty between husband and wife, and an open-minded reading of The Song of Songs expresses the yearnings of lovers for each other’s intimate presence, whilst it is still true that trained exegetes can easily discern in this beautiful poetry an analogy of the soul’s longing for God, through a network of very erudite symbolism.

That the mainstream of traditional Christian spirituality was dualistic in nature [over-concerned with rejecting ‘the things of the flesh’ in favour of ‘pie in the sky’] is understood nowadays, and there are aspects of erotic love that are the nearest to the love of God, something that occurs in female mystical experience that both includes and transcends sexual intimacy, of which the latter is merely one part. Agapeic love can exist with, through or free of erotic love, and we shall simply never know or understand the full nature of Jesus’ relationship with Mary Magdalene, and how much does it matter?

In Jesus’ society it was expected that every man would marry, except, as he teaches, for those exempted from this [social] duty: John the Baptist was a Nazarite whose calling it was NEVER to marry.

Something a close reading of the Gospels hints at is that neither Jesus nor those around him seem to have suffered any inhibitions regarding touch, other than in the case of skin disease referred to everywhere as leprosy. In classical times as in many modern non-European cultures people were and continue to be far less self-conscious about aspects of touch that recent social influencers have deemed to be dangerous or simply inappropriate, and we should not impose our taboos on a society about which we still know practically nothing in this regard. Other societies functioned within well understood boundaries between affectionate and erotic touch.

There is enough support in the Gospels and mainstream of tradition to validate the outline of Cynthia Bourgealt’s thesis that Mary was able to bring to Jesus a focus for the optimum possible exchange of agapeic, mutually self-emptying love. If this is the case, the church needs to be upgrading Mary’s honorific of ‘Apostle to the apostles’ to include some acknowledgment of the probability that through gratitude, faith and attachment she may rank among the very closest of Jesus’ earthly companions.

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23RD JULY BRIDGET OF SWEDEN – BIRGITE - [1303-73]

 Bridget was recently declared one of the six patron saints of Europe; she was a contemporary of CATHERINE of SIENA whom she once met in Italy, and they had their prophetic charisma in common, but other than that, they came from very different backgrounds.

Bridget’s father was a Kings’ Councillor, a judge and the benefactor of several churches; his brother was Pryor of the Dominican Order who later became a Bishop.

Bridget is said to have experienced mystical visions since the age of ten, but at fourteen she married a Christian knight, Ulf Gudmarsson, who was appointed a judge in 1330 and later became a privy councillor.

The couple had four sons and four daughters, one of whom, Catherine was canonised in her own right. Bridget and Ulf lived exemplary lives of charity and good works, administering their extensive estates and encouraging learning and, in fact, bringing the first printing press over to Sweden.

After the birth of Cecilia, their eighth child, the couple went on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, perhaps the first known example of the love affair the Swedes cherish for Spain, but in time Ulf entered the Cistercian monastery at Alvastra in northern Sweden where he died in 1344.

Bridget settled property and estates on her children and set up house near Alvastra where she lived a simple life based around the Eucharist. Old King Magnus was impressed with her piety, and she persuaded him to endow a double monastery at Vadstena, for 60 nuns and 25 monks based on the model of the Benedictine Foundation of Fontevrault.

There exists a hagiography of Bridget written in 1909 by one Francesca Maria Cappelli from Patristic Publications – hardly an appropriate source, to the effect that Bridget was called to the court of the old king’s son, another Magnus and his child queen, as House Manager, and that she tried to regulate their behaviour and expense accounts and was sacked in rather short order for her pains.

It was also at this time that Bridget wrote her first letter of denunciation to Pope Clement V in Avignon, lamenting the state of the church as well as seeking approval for her foundation.

From 1309 to 1378 the Papacy had moved to Avignon where it remained under the influence of the French kings, who appointed a majority of French cardinals, while Rome, which had become ungovernable and unsafe, was in ruins and would, in fact, have been quite unable to support the papal administrative machine. Catherine of Siena, naturally, wished it to return and campaigned as fervently as she could, to that end. Bridget felt she had been commanded to await the return of the Pope to Rome, and never went back to Sweden alive.

Given her privileged background, Bridget’s choice to live simply in Rome at this time, wearing poor clothes, represents a considerable sacrifice, and while many people appreciated her holiness and sincerity others called her witch and heretic.

Kathleen Jones discovered a passage in the ‘Book of MARGERY KEMPE’ recounting that remarkable eccentric’s encounter in Rome with Bridget’s maid, [which is just possible], to the effect that she was:

‘The maiden said that her lady Saint Bridget was kind and meek to every creature, and had a laughing face … [and because of constant prayer] her knees became hard as a camel’s.’

She was small, modest and as she grew older she rode a white mule and became known by some as ‘Principessa.’

Such testimony, if it is reliable – and it may well be – gives us a more human aspect of Bridget than that portrayed by her writings. The account of Bridget’s life by Francesca Maria Cappelli, mentioned above, paints her as a thoroughly sanctimonious control freak, and reading her prayers, that explore Christ’s wounds in searching and frankly neurotic detail, would place her securely among the least attractive of the Old Testament prophets.

What this more positive testimony encourages us to imagine is a deeply grounded aristocratic woman who turned her grief outward into the broader church in order to serve it as best she knew how. Her writings, are, in any case, in Swedish and subject to redactions of later hands: at the reformation Sweden became a Lutheran nation and it was all too easy for somebody like Cappelli to emphasize the degeneration of the Roman church, and claim that other Swedish candidates for canonisation failed because of Lutheran heresy and bad faith: all this does is to lose Bridget’s essential holiness in post-reformation parti-pris.

It may be helpful in understanding Bridget’s apparent pre-occupation with the gory details of each of Christ’s wounds to put her spirituality in context: there was a lot of it about, particularly among female mystics of the time, but far more importantly is the connection between his suffering and that of his church in her time, which surely match the nadir of the ninth century.

Bridget joined the third order of Franciscans and bear witness to the humane interpretation of the Franciscan rule postulated by BONAVENTURE which, in fact, goes right back to the desert fathers, holding that poverty is a matter between God and the individual; the mark of its authenticity being to live with necessities only, and that for somebody used to a life of privilege the notion of what is necessary may differ from that of a beggar or a slave already accustomed to deprivations that [s]he may not experience in quite the same way as the Aristo. In these times of entitlement this concept places the burden of responsibility fairly and squarely on ourselves, our relationship with God and a good spiritual counsellor.

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