

holy eucharist at the table of our Lord are responsible for their brothers and sisters, and that the body of the faithful must themselves undertake the care of their poor and sick to the utmost of their ability. What can be done on the spot must be done without expecting external assistance. It cannot be denied that in this sphere there is endless work to be done and that this side of the Church's activity is particularly pressing.

*(To be concluded)*



## ST BRIDGET OF SWEDEN

MICHAEL MUMMERY

**M**EDIEVAL saints are often difficult to understand. They flourished at a period when things were so very different from today that, however hard we try, we just cannot enter into their minds. We can't apply their lives to our own. Joan of Arc was inspiring but rather terrifying; some of the early monks did heroically saintly things which just amaze us. This is true, also, to a great extent of the mystics, but there is one big exception to the rule, and that is St Bridget of Sweden. She was, indeed, a mystic—she had more than her fair share of visions—and yet there was much in her life which can appeal to the modern Catholic. That she was an outstanding personality is attested by the great respect that the Swedes still bear for her even though the majority of them have abandoned the faith which was her guiding principle in life.

Bridget's life spans about three-quarters of the fourteenth century, which by any standards may be reckoned to have attained the nadir. The more pessimistic are inclined to view modern times as uniformly bad, but a cursory glance at the century in which Bridget lived reveals that the general level of spirituality and morals was depressingly low. From all this the saint was shielded in her early life, because, being born of a noble family closely allied to royalty, she spent her formative years on her father's vast estate in Uppland, north of Stockholm. Her birth

coincided with the opening of the century and she was running about and playing with her friends at the same time as Edward II was ruling so badly in England. It is a little surprising to learn that she married at the tender age of thirteen until one realizes that this was quite common practice. Her husband was Ulf Gadmarsson, a pleasant but rather weak man whom Bridget seems to have accepted without ever evincing a passionate love for him. However, Bridget became the mother of eight children and raised them herself. So, although she was beginning to have the visions which have made her so famous, her feet were very firmly planted on the ground. She did all she could to bring her children up in the practice of religion but was very disappointed in her son Karl, whose eventual death she considered the answer to her prayer, since it prevented him falling into the clutches of Joanna, the notorious queen of Naples.

Her husband died when she was forty. She had long felt that the married state was holding her back from the work which she really wished to do and Ulf was no great help to her. He actually died wearing the Cistercian habit which he had been allowed to adopt after a very friendly separation from Bridget. She now set about the laborious task of recording her visions which were concerned not only with the intimate relationship between the soul and God but also with political and international affairs. They were often prophetic in character. She received our Lord's command to found an order, and to do this obtained from the king and queen of Sweden a grant of land at Vadstena where the monastery was built. It is of interest that there is at Syon Abbey a community of Bridgettine nuns which has a continuous history from pre-reformation days, since during the troubled days of the Tudors it moved to Portugal and continued to receive English novices. It was to obtain permission for the founding of this order that Bridget determined to go to Rome to see the pope. It was a dramatic decision because she never returned to her native land.

She was shocked beyond measure with the evils and troubles that she witnessed as she journeyed across Europe and which reached their culmination when she reached Rome.

Europe was rent by the Hundred Years' War. This was bad enough. But of far greater consequence was the Babylonian captivity of the popes who had migrated to Avignon and were merely creatures of the French king. Rome was an empty shell.

Licentiousness and open immorality prevailed in society, a society which was cloven by the feuds between the noble families. Many churches had fallen into disuse, some of them were even used for profane purposes, and the administration of the Catholic Church had practically ceased to exist. All this had a profound effect upon Bridget. Anxious though she was to obtain papal approval of her new order, she was determined not to go off to Avignon to seek it. Instead she decided to remain in Rome until such time as the popes should decide to return. As it turned out, she remained there for twenty years and it is no exaggeration to say that, during that time, she virtually exercised paramount influence over the Church.

In accordance with custom, it was hoped that 1350 would be declared a holy year, and that the pope, Clement VI, would use this opportunity for his return to Rome. As if in judgment upon the lax moral state of the times, Europe was swept by the black death in 1349 and the death rate was appallingly high. In England almost a third of the population was wiped out in a single year. In this year, too, Bridget had some startling revelations from God which she was commanded to pass on to the pope. Through her God told the pope:

'My hour is nearly come when I shall visit upon thee all thy forgetfulness and sin. As I raised thee above all others, so shall thy soul be plunged into terrible torment, which shall sorely afflict thy body and thy spirit, if thou obeyest not my word. And thy unruly tongue shall be silent within thy mouth; that title which thou sanctifiest on earth shall be forgotten and dishonoured in the sight of me and my saints.'

Bridget never spared her tongue when talking to the pope. On one occasion she called him 'a murderer of souls, more unjust than Pilate and more cruel than Judas'. We might be inclined to regard this as exaggeration were it not for the fact that similar things were being said by others at the same time including St Catherine of Siena.

Unfortunately these threats and warnings fell on deaf ears and the popes stayed at Avignon. Bridget had plenty of time to study the state of things in Rome. She summed up the general situation by saying: 'Many altars are left desolate, the sacraments exposed in taverns, and those who offer them serve Mammon rather than God.' She pinpointed five grave abuses in the Church. (1) Very

few people attended even Sunday mass and even fewer observed the frequent use of the confessional so that the sacraments were almost completely neglected. (2) There was a lot of loose living among all ranks of society. (3) Lent was not observed as a time of fasting and penance. (4) Employers forced their servants to work on Sundays. (5) Christians practised usury more than the Jews themselves.

Bridget paid a number of visits to Naples which was ruled by Queen Joanna whose own moral tone was reflected in the state of her Court. Naples has always had something of a reputation for loose living, but under Joanna it surpassed itself. She herself had been married three times and her husbands had parted from her under suspicious circumstances. She seemed very much attracted to Bridget and for a while the saint thought that she was making some impression upon her. However, when she saw Bridget's son Karl, she fell passionately in love with him and he was swept off his feet. They proposed to live together and to celebrate their union they intended to have a magnificent banquet. Bridget, hearing of all this, prayed to God for divine intervention. It came swiftly and finally.

Karl died the night before the banquet. At the funeral, while Joanna was seen to be shedding copious tears, Bridget followed the coffin calmly. It was as if she had been prepared to make even this supreme sacrifice that her son might be free of sin.

Bridget had a short period of happiness when the pope, Urban V, actually returned to Rome in 1367, but he went back to Avignon three years later. Bridget accompanied him part of the way trying to persuade him to remain, but he was obdurate and gave her a sort of consolation prize in the recognition of her order.

Sorrowfully, she realized that her work was nearly done and that, humanly speaking, it had failed. She had, however, one last mission to fulfil—a visit to the Holy Land. It was on her journey there that Karl died at Naples. Another call on her way was at Cyprus, which she found to be a den of iniquity as notorious as Naples and Rome. However, her stay in Jerusalem consoled her for all the sorrows and disappointments she had had since she left Sweden. She returned to Rome in 1373 and died the following year. Her body was carried back all the way to her own land and buried at Vadstena in the home of the nuns which she herself had

founded. Some years after her death an official investigation was started of her claims to canonization. The evidence collected from those who had had first-hand acquaintanceship with the saint is said to be the finest collection of documents in the Swedish archives. Unfortunately, just at the time when the investigation was under way the terrible great schism split the Church. Consequently, the consideration of St Bridget's life of sanctity was deferred, but she was eventually canonised in 1391.

Did Bridget succeed or fail? Such a question is difficult to answer from a merely human standpoint for the ways of God are mysterious. Her object was the reform of the Church, which, if it had come in the fourteenth century, might have maintained the unity which was so completely shattered by the reformation in the sixteenth century. There were many like Bridget, crying in the wilderness, and there were some that wished to rend the Church by heresy. But however much Bridget might rail at the pope and call him all the vile things that could be imagined, she never for one moment called into question the authority of his sacred office. Hers was possibly the last century in which a saint could chase the pope across half Europe—castigating him and trying to bring him to his senses. It was a century filled with tremendous enthusiasms and terrible outrages. The technical efficiency of the Church was unimpaired; it worked because the system had been established over the centuries; it worked despite the fact that there was something rotten in the state of Rome. But there was a need for a new spirit that would move the cardinals and bishops in their palaces and stir up the monks and friars who had fallen off from their first fervour. In every age there comes forth one—like a voice crying in the wilderness—to point the way. Such a one must necessarily be terribly alone, for he or she is against the world. Such a one was Bridget—such a one, later, was Joan of Arc—such were Wesley and Newman and Vincent McNabb. No age is lacking in the men and women of the Spirit and no age is fit to pass judgment upon whether they succeeded or failed.

But in Sweden Bridget lies at peace and around her body her spiritual daughters pray that the work that she tried to do may succeed. If she returned today, would she rejoice or weep again?