

to Elizabeth. Everyone that humbles himself shall be exalted: what can be more sublime than humility? Elizabeth was astonished to see her and said: 'How have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord?' Her astonishment must have increased, when she learnt that Mary, like her Son, had not come to have service done, but to serve others. It was of her that it had been written long before, 'Who is this, whose coming shows like the dawn of day? Fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army in battle array.' She rose far above the children of Adam, reached the choirs of angels, left them too beneath her, and found a place in heaven higher than any other creature: clearly she had to rise far above the angels if she was to draw from the source of living water and give to men to drink.

(to be concluded)



ROSA RORANS BONITATEM:

St Bridget of Sweden

ERIC COLLEDGE

THERE can be few saints of the late Middle Ages whose lives are so richly documented or so curiously varied as that of St Bridget of Sweden. A contemporary of St Catherine of Siena, she lived in Italy for a quarter of a century and played politics almost identical with those of Catherine, yet the two women never met; but their lives resemble each other at many points. Both of them were in their lifetime openly venerated as saints, a circumstance which must have been a further affliction to women each of a profound humility. Both of them were surrounded by 'families'; and in either case it appears that only the family's devotion to its mother held it together. Just as Catherine Benincasa seems to have given most of her trust to the English friar-hermit, William Flete, so the favoured son of St Bridget's largely Swedish 'family' was a Spaniard, the hermit ex-bishop Alphonse of Pecha; and Alphonse seems after Bridget's death to have suffered some of William Flete's neglect at the hands of the other devotees.

Bridget came to Rome for the jubilee of 1350, drawn from the rim of the known world, from a northern land beyond which was only a pagan night: but she descended upon Italy with a clearly-mapped campaign. God and his saints and angels, she claimed, constantly spoke familiarly with her, and she brought a secretariat to assist in her the work of recording these conversations in Swedish and turning them into Latin; and when she found that her staff's Latin was not up to modern Roman standards, she set to work to learn Latin herself, and put Alphonse in charge of the literary side of her work. Before his death, Alphonse and one of her Swedish chaplains successfully completed the editing of these day-to-day memoranda of Bridget's visions, which were issued as the 'Books of Celestial Revelations', in itself an achievement of medieval textual criticism of a magnitude comparable only with that of the vernacular Bible-translators of the age. But these 'Revelations', as Alphonse and his collaborators showed in their notes, had already achieved their first purpose in Bridget's lifetime: they are in effect a running commentary upon the personalities and events of the three disastrous decades which led up to the outbreak of the Great Schism in 1378, five years after her death. Gregory XI, vacillating in Avignon, is like a paralytic, unable to move hand or foot: this, Bridget told Gregory, was what Christ had said to her of him; and we have abundant evidence to show that when Gregory's predecessor was in flight from Rome, she pursued him to Montefiascone to tell him that only ruin and death awaited him in Avignon. The first object of her campaign was to recall the Holy See to Rome: and the second, to achieve which she sent her admonitions to the kings of England and France, was to bring about peace in Christendom, a true peace which could only come from the rule of Christ over the hearts of men.

Viewed merely as a mortal span, considered only as a temporal achievement, St Bridget's life in many ways was tragic. She was the seeress of a coming wrath, and not even St Catherine of Siena saw so clearly as she that the Church too had been given over into the hands of wicked men to be betrayed. With prophetic vision she saw that the day would come when the earthly dominions of the Popes would shrink to a little plot of land about St Peter's: but she also foresaw the endless miseries which the Church would suffer, and how many of these would be brought

about not by the Church's enemies, but by those who called themselves her sons and her lovers. And though Bridget was spared St Francis's anguish upon earth of seeing his followers in his lifetime quarrel and divide because they did not love poverty, her Rule for the monastery which she founded at Vadstena shows that she knew well how frail is mortal flesh: and indeed in the next century the houses of her Order were to be involved in a most bitter struggle over the financial benefits of their indulgences.

But to write of her life as a tragedy would be to forget altogether her spiritual qualities: her fortitude and resignation and utter abandonment in affliction to the will of God, the superb vigour and manliness with which she pursued her goals, hunting down popes and kings as the huntsman pursues the hare, and, above all, her heroic cheerfulness. When that famous enthusiast of the next century, Margery Kempe of Lynn, was in Rome, she spoke with one of St Bridget's maidservants, who told her that her mistress 'was ever laughing'. (Had she lived to know Margery Kempe, Bridget would surely have made short work of her floods of tears.) She was altogether a saint of her time, pierced and racked and broken by the contemplation of the Passion, swooning upon Mount Calvary, enacting in her 'contemplations' a part in the Nativity and the Crucifixion: and yet she is saved from mawkishness by qualities of dignity and sobriety which never leave her.

Like St Francis of Assisi (for whom she had deep devotion), St Bridget has had in this century a strong attraction for non-Catholics; and her native land seems now to take pride in her greatness. She has been especially well served by a truly eminent medievalist, Isak Collijn, most of whose long career was devoted to the study of the archives of the great European libraries which might yield evidence about her life and works; and his labour was crowned by his sumptuous edition of the minutes kept during the sittings of the commission appointed by Urban VI to hear witnesses in the cause of her canonization. This edition deserves to be better known, for it is one of the most enthralling texts which medieval hagiography has produced. The *mise-en-scène* and the personages are such as a Claudel might have dreamed; the time is March 1379, the place Rome, a Rome to which the Holy See had been restored only to have a worse evil than the Babylonian Captivity come upon it in the Schism. The pope who has

commissioned the opening of the cause is Bartholomew Prignano, the archbishop of Bari whose election to the chair of Peter had divided Christendom. The real organizers of the cause were Bridget's daughter Katherine and Alphonse of Pecha: she had saluted Prignano in St Peter's as the future pontiff before his election; Alphonse had been at the time the chosen intimate of Cardinal Peter de Luna, the future Benedict XIII, most unhappy of men, and had been an eye-witness of the tumults and despairs of the conclave. Even the formal legal documents produced before the assembled commissioners are meaningful: the king of Sweden who petitions for his country-woman's enrolment among the saints is the Albert of Mecklenburg who had come to fulfil Bridget's prophecies of doom, uttered when she as mistress of the household was serving Magnus Eriksson and his queen Blanche of Namur, and had driven Magnus out of his kingdom; and in the corresponding petition from one of Bridget's greatest devotees, Queen Joanna of Naples, even the date, October 1377, is significant, for a year later it was she who protected the conclave at Fondi which elected Robert of Geneva as the 'anti-pope'. Yet precisely because Urban still hoped that Joanna might be won over to his side, the witnesses to Bridget's sanctity were not allowed to do more than hint at one of her greatest earthly griefs, the liaison between her dissolute son Charles, whom she so dearly loved, and the notorious Joanna.

Those who have the perseverance to pursue their goals through the labyrinths of the dossier so splendidly edited by Collijn will find themselves rewarded both by the light shed upon many dark places and by the still unsolved mysteries which these present themselves. Those who wish to know Bridget and her times must go to his text of the *Acta et Processus*, and to one of the two available editions of her Latin *Revelations*, the first published at Lübeck in 1492 (the Bodleian library at Oxford possesses a copy of the issue printed on vellum and limited to sixteen copies; the British Museum owns the copy in which Anne Boleyn's father wrote his name), the second edited by Gonzalez Durante, bishop of Montefeltro, in the early seventeenth century. Most of the serious work done on Bridget in recent decades has, naturally, been published in Sweden; but some years ago one of the nuns of the English Brigittine house of Syon (who would be less than human if they were not proud to trace their unbroken lineage

back to the first sisters enclosed at Isleworth on the banks of the Thames by the favour of Henry V and his sister, Queen Philippa of Sweden), under her secular name of Helen Redpath published in America a first-class popular life of the mother of the Order, entitled *God's Ambassadors*. Unfortunately that work has not yet appeared in this country; instead we now have a much longer English biography, *St Bridget of Sweden* (Johannes Jorgensen, translated by Ingeborg Lund, 2 vols., Longmans, 1954, 15s. per volume). The author, described by his English publishers as 'the well-known Danish writer and mystic', is a Catholic convert who lived in Italy for many years, and whose lives of St Catherine of Siena and St Francis of Assisi have already appeared in English. He writes biography of a type which, though we know it well, has never, happily, been so fashionable or so tolerated in this country as in Germany and Scandinavia. Here is his account of the funeral of Charles: 'And Giovanna—after all, she had done some good—here in Naples she built a church to the glory of *Madonna Incoronata*, the great patroness of Apulia, and next to it she erected a hostel for the poor. "God is merciful", Bridget hears her whisper, "God is merciful!"—and how she weeps, nay sobs, So that her beautiful shoulders are shaken. Poor Giovanna. . . . The sloppy syntax, the irrelevant erudition, the bland refusal to be tied down by facts, and the remorselessly edifying sentiment, are all characteristic of one aspect of this book. Dr Jorgensen is determined that the simplest medieval Swedish peasant woman, a-telling of her beads, shall not vie with him in uncritical credulity and enthusiasm: he is in love with a Merrie Scandinavia, and Delehaye and the Bollandists have written for him in vain. But we shall be wrong if we dismiss his work as merely another piece of Glorious Technicolor: for his learning is immense, his knowledge of the documents minute, and his understanding of Bridget and everything to do with her profound, when he does allow these qualities to push through the turgid sea of his writing. When he chooses, he can bring a fine critical intelligence to his study of the primary sources. He points out, for example, the undertones of pique which are to be heard in Bridget's Swedish confessor's evidence in the canonization process, when he describes how he was superseded as her spiritual director and literary collaborator by Alphonse, 'though he did not understand the Swedish language'; and Jorgensen also shows how the true

source of all the stories repeated by witnesses at the process about Bridget's effulgence and levitation derive from one man, the witness Brother John of Pornaccio, the 'spiritual' from Todi. And every here and there we come upon a phrase in this book which does show Bridget to us as she really is, 'a voice, quiet and strong, stern and gentle, saying: "Oh, thou sinful being, turn back, for thou art walking in peril, and because thy heart is dark thou seest not the dangers of the road".'



AN EDUCATIONAL CENTENARY

SISTER M. ALBERT, O.P.

ON August 1st, 1855, when the riots which had greeted the restoration of the Hierarchy in England were still a lively memory, a middle-class boarding school for boys was opened at Netherton House, Clapham. The needs of its four pupils were catered for by a Community of nine Religious, three of whom were already teaching in the primary school attached to the Redemptorist church. All nine of them were French, Brothers of the Christian Schools, an Institute founded by St John Baptist de La Salle in the seventeenth century and now making its first English foundation. The renting of the house on Lady Day seemed to augur well for the future of this initiative in the land that had once been Mary's Dowry. And so it proved. In May this year, 1955, some 250 Brothers and nearly 7,000 pupils in thirty-one educational establishments in England and Scotland, not to mention innumerable past pupils, relations and friends will be celebrating the centenary of that event. In Malta, Burma, Ceylon, Malaya and China, Brothers from England are at work, while an even larger Irish Province which has sent its members to these parts and to South Africa and Australia as well, is also the fruit of this same humble beginning. Such has been the mustard growth of one seed sown in the hey-day of England's Second Spring.

St John Baptist de La Salle (canonized in 1900 and proclaimed