**Eglise francaise du Saint Esprit**

*Spirituality Course May 20, 2020*

**The Spirituality of Holy Women in the Middle Ages (500 – 1500 AD)**

Let’s stop for a moment and try to recall the names of some of the great spiritual leaders of the past who were women. You might recall Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene from the Bible, perhaps you might remember Hildegard of Bingen, the composer, Catherine of Siena or Joan of Arc or Theresa of Avila, four great Medieval women. If you were to think of the twentieth century you might recall St. Theresa of Calcutta or Dorothy Day. In fact, these remarkable women are only a very small sample taken from many women who have been blessed with deep spiritual insight and who have contributed to the development of Christian spirituality, but who have been sadly – and scandalously neglected in the succeeding years. Today we are going to look at several of these women who flourished in the Middle Ages and examine their influence on spiritual practices today.

At the outset, we need to remind ourselves of two little points for clarification. Firstly, the spirituality of the women of Medieval Christianity (500 – 1500 AD) is by no means uniform. It is just as varied and as rich as the spirituality of men. Secondly, a lot of the spiritual life of Medieval women looks a lot like the spirituality of Medieval men; and that might be particularly true of those who spent their lives in monastic institutions. The spiritual lives of the Medieval women that have been preserved for us resist categorization by gender or content. But there are certain family resemblances in the women we’re about to look at: probably because their spirituality sprang from the same sources (early Christian women), and also because even though these women didn’t occupy official teaching positions within the church of their day, they did experience a sort of private or hidden authority that they all succeeded in communicating publicly. They all had a high reputation during their lifetimes, and many people sought them out for spiritual guidance. They weren’t necessarily ‘rebels’ or opposed to church authority; even though there are many examples of such women in church history – just as there are men. They were by and large loyal to the church institutions of which they were apart, including convents, beguinages and hermitages. When they were zealous, they wanted to the church to be more true to itself and its Lord, rather than to abandon everything and start afresh.

**Early Christian women and their Medieval successors**

From the very start, the early Church produced many women martyrs, solitaries, nuns and scholars. They often became advisors and friends to their male colleagues. This forms a general contrast to the role of women in the pagan culture that preceded them. Pagan religion (with a few exceptions like Diotima and Hypatia) emphasized women’s roles as wives or mothers, and saw their spiritual roles as being mediated through the family rather than through an ‘organized’ religion. There is no indication in Judaism either that women might be called to renounce family and sexual practice and live as virgins. The renunciation of family ties in favor of attachment to Jesus was a strong part of Paul’s teaching, and it eventually became institutionalized in various forms of ascetic life in the third and fourth centuries. Perhaps it was even one of the reasons that attracted so many women to Christianity in the first decades of its existence. Pagan authors often ridicule this aspect of Christianity (Celsus “They are able to gain over only the silly, and the mean and the stupid, with women and children”). There are records of women as martyrs, visionaries, pilgrims, virgins, counselors, and financial backers of churches in various cities. One of the most popular hagiographies of the early church was The Acts of Thecla – a follower of Paul who renounced her wealthy family and her impending marriage and lived as a missionary until an early death as a martyr.

Many of these women gained a reputation for their spiritual discipline and their mystical devotion. They pursued the angelic life through the practice of celibacy. If these women were writers or teachers, none of their works survive; unless copied or reported by men (like the dialogue of Gregory of Nyssa with his sister Macrina on her deathbed). Tertullian talks about an anonymous woman in his congregation in Carthage: “We have now among us a sister whose lot it has been to be favored with gifts of revelation and ecstatic vision amidst the sacred rites of the Lord’s day in the church. She converses with angels and hears mysterious communications. After the services are ended, she reports to us whatever things she may have seen in vision.” This emphasis on monasticism, virginity, martyrdom, ecstatic visions and Christlike suffering survived in the experiences of the five Medieval women we are going to look at in more detail.

Eastern Christian communities for women survived the divisions of the church and the Islamic invasions and continued in the lands under Islamic control and in the Byzantine empire. They expanded into the Slavic countries when those nations converted to Christianity. Their emphasis on contemplation distinguishes them a little bit from numerous women’s religious orders in the West, who are often more orientated to teaching or social action. In the West, many of them sprang from the Benedictine model which was rooted in the social conditions of what was left of the Roman empire in the West. These were little barbarian kingdoms scattered over Italy, Gaul and England, and the church had to adapt itself to different local customs regarding the family and the role of women. Along with men’s monastic orders, monasteries for women were established very often along Benedictine lines. Double monasteries existed in which men and women lived in close proximity under a common rule. The abbess was the central figure in the monastery, to whom obedience was owed, and from whom a motherly and protective guidance was expected. Domestic tasks, like caring for the sick, cleaning and maintaining the divine services, the hostel for visitors and pilgrims were all managed and supervised by women. The tradition of holy women going on pilgrimage is recorded in the very early church – it was frowned upon by male monastics who were concerned for their safety and chastity. The monastic school was also important – a school that existed to educate the children and young women living in the convent. They had to be able to read, because it was necessary to perform the divine offices. Along with copying manuscripts and teaching, these women learned Latin to a high degree of erudition and became teachers and mentors of bishops. Hilda of Whitby (614 – 680) became a councilor to the royalty and nobility of England.

**Lioba** was an English nun who lived from 700 to 780. Her biography and one letter survive. She had a thorough education and was a mistress of scripture, patristic literature and the rules passed by the church councils. She was a friend and counselor to Boniface, the missionary to Germany. She left the abbey of Wimborne in England to help him in the conversion of the Saxons in northern Germany. As a bride of Christ, she was free to be friends with male monastics in a way that would have been unusual for wives because they were considered to be inferior members of the household. The story is told that Lioba’s mother had a dream when she was pregnant. She would become the mother of a sacred child; and her mother consecrated her to God at birth. She became abbess of Tauber Bishofs Heim in Germany, and acted as a councilor to the abbey of Fulda. When Boniface died, he had requested that her bones should be placed next to his in the tomb so that “they who had served God during their lifetime with equal sincerity and zeal should await together the day of resurrection.” Like the husband and wife effigies on medieval tombs…. Her biographer wrote of her “She was a woman of great virtue and so strongly attached to the way of life she had vowed that she never gave thought to her native country or her relatives. She was ever on her guard not to teach others what she didn’t carry out herself. In her conduct there was no arrogance or pride. In her appearance she was angelic, clear in mind, and great in prudence. She read with attention al the books of the old and new testaments and learned by heart all the commandments of God. To these she added the writings of the church fathers, the decrees of the councils and the whole of ecclesiastical law.”

**Hroswit of Gandersheim (932 – 1000)** was a German Benedictine nun, who wrote religious poetry, prose, epics and dramas. She worked from a very extensive library in her convent, and attempted to deploy her deep knowledge of scripture and patristic sources and her knowledge of the Latin classical tradition in order to further the Christian message. She concentrated particularly on the writings of Terence; precisely because he habitually denigrated the capabilities of women. She imitated his dramatic style and opposed his views by showing how Christian women (particularly virgins) retained their chasdtity despite impending martyrdom, or how they conquered the flesh by means of the Spirit. She wrote a play entitled Abraham, in which she taught that the redemptive power of divine love could reconcile human longing for God and the passions which cause women and men to stray from their longing for God. Only by coming to terms with lust can the depths of God’s love be appreciated. Perhaps these plays were intended to be read rather than acted – they were intended to be ‘closet dramas’. The guerrilla girls offered a prize to any drama company who would give up a classical drama by a man and put on one of Hroswita’s plays instead. Dulcitius was a historical Roman governor of Macedonia who was known for persecuting Christian women in the late three hundred. Diocletian wants to arrange marriage for three girls: Agape, Irena (peace) and Chionia (snow- or purity). Diocletian tells them that they have to renounce Christianity, but they don’t want to. Dulcitius is sent to question them. He sees them through a window and finds them very attractive. He asks that they should be locked up in a kitchen so that he can ‘visit’ them. The sisters pray. When Dulcitius comes into the kitchen, he mistakes the pots and pans for the women, and starts hugging and kissing them; which covers him in soot. When he leaves, the soldiers see his blackened face and think that he’s a demon, so they attack him violently. Docitius orders that the women should be stripped, but their clothes stick to them. Two of the sisters were ordered to be burned to death, but miraculously their clothes and bodies are left intact. The youngest (Irini) is ordered to convert, but she won’t. He orders her into a brothel. Instead, she’s miraculously spirited to a mountaintop. The soldiers shoot her from far off with arrows, and she dies; still secure in her chastity and faith. As she dies, she says, “I shall receive the martyr’s palm and the crown of virginity; thus I will enter the heavenly bridal chamber of the eternal King, whose is all honor and glory for eternity.” The sisters haven’t been forced to compromise their bodies or their beliefs. Eternal life and purity is far sweeter than being raped by a sooty Roman thug.

Maria is raised by her uncle Abraham as a chaste and virtuous girl. She is seduced by a monk, and ends up becoming a prostitute. Abraham disguises himself as a client and books an appointment. When Abraham turns up, he gives her a little talk. “Whoever despairs – and thinks that God won’t come to the help of sinners, is making a big and unforgivable mistake. Just as a spark from a flintstone can’t set the sea on fire, so the bitter taste of our sins can’t change the sweetness of divine love.”

During the high Middle Ages there is an increasing devotion among women to the Eucharist. Attachment to Christ present in the eucharistic bread and wine becomes more a central figure in Medieval piety. Flowing from this there is a whole wealth of writings (and chalices) designed to extoll the tenderness and nurturance of God made manifest in the eucharistic manna that comes down from heaven. A woman – Juliana of Liège (1192 – 1258) – was the first person to propose the feast of Corpus Christi to honor the eucharistic presence of Christ. Just as women were the dispensers and regulators of food in the home, so in the church the women became the devotees of the heavenly food of the Eucharist – and this shaped a lot of piety and practice in later centuries.

**Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schonau.** (contemporaries in the 1100’s)

Hildegard of Bingen was known as The Sybil of the Rhine. She was a composer, philosopher, mystic and a scientist, who at the same time ran two monasteries. Both these women received visions as a part of their spiritual lives, and communicated them in writing to their followers as authoritative teaching. They sprang from the Benedictine tradition, but their writings show a shift in the religious life of women that lasted well into the time of Teresa of Avila almost four hundred years later. The themes in the spiritual lives of these women are often something like this:

1. A period of perceived or real humiliation in which the woman identifies with the suffering of Christ. That experience of humiliation is eventually replace by one of exaltation at the end of progress in the spiritual life, or the visionary is rewarded for her humiliation by being granted private revelations.
2. An illness arises – perhaps out of strict self-discipline or as a result of a prayer for such an illness – or even just from natural causes.
3. A sense of authority is exuded, based on the experience of suffering in the religious life and on status as an abbess or a teacher in the convent. It is an authority that derives from learning, or a wide-ranging questioning of the faith, or from a direct religious experience that comes without formal instruction.
4. A conviction of intimacy with God based on a female appropriation of the sufferings of God’s son, Jesus Christ.
5. Some message for a wider audience – to give to a confessor, or a community, or even the entire church (like Catherine of Siena’s advice to the Popes) Sometimes these messages are messages of comfort or urge instant reform – they are thought to be the purpose of the sufferings and revelations that the women have experienced.

Hildegard was granted visions from an early childhood. She was raised by her aunt who was a hermit, and received into a Benedictine convent in Jutta. She became abbess, and it was there that she wrote the Scivias – her most famous composition. She was known to Bernard of Clairvaux, and the pope – who gave cautious approval to her visions. The twenty-six visions of the Scivias are often apocalyptic in content. They gave her the status of a prophet. She wrote treatise on the Athanasian creed, the Gospels and the Rule of St. Benedict. She also wrote songs expressing her devotion to Christ, the Trinity and the Virgin Mary. When she was 42 she experienced a sort of mental light that gave her instantaneous understanding of the Psalter, the Gospels and other books of the Bible. “I saw these visions not in dreams, nor sleeping, nor in frenzy, nor with the eyes of my body, neither did I hear them with my exterior ears, nor in hidden places did I perceive them, but watching them, and looking carefully in an innocent mind, with interior eyes and ears in open places, I perceived them according to God’s will.” She confided these visions to her amanuensis Volmar, who ‘did not exalt himself above her, but yielded to her authority with many sighs.”

A final illness compelled her to write the revelations she received over the next ten years. They combine a rather traditional doctrine with visionary and prophetic illustrations that are drawn from scripture. Many have naturalistic metaphors – even when it comes to describing the Trinity. Hildegard produced a vast corpus of works: three volumes of visionary theology, many musical compositions, a morality play and many letters. These were addressed to popes, emperors and heads of monasteries and sometimes included copies of the sermons that she had preached. She also wrote volumes on medicine and natural history. She invented a language she called the Lingua ignota (an unknown language) "O orzchis [Ecclesia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesia_(Church)), girded with divine arms, and adorned with hyacinth, you are the caldemia of the wounds of the loifol, and the city of sciences. O, o, and you are the crizanta in high sound, and you are the chorzta gem." It is a language akin to 'speaking in tongues', and has its own alphabet. (a few examples suffice: Aigonz = God Zuuenz = Holy Diueliz = Devil Vanix = Woman Linschiol = martyr)

The Liber Divinorum Operum was her last visionary work, undertaken in a dramatic loss of consciousness. It is an extended meditation on the opening verses of John's gospel. The Cosmic Christ is shown allegorically under female guises: Divine Love, Wisdom and the vision of the humanity as microcosm of the macrocosm of the universe. She also wrote hymns in honor of the Virgin: “Love overflows into all things, from out of the depths to above the highest stars.”

Hildegard's music is monophonic: it is one supple melodic line in a soaring melody that seems to float above the staid ranges of traditional Gregorian chant. There are hymns in praise of the virtues, and there is also a song sung by Satan himself, to which the virtues take their turn to reply. It is thought that the part of Satan would be sung by Volmar, and the parts of the virtues by the sisters of the abbey.

Hildegard didn't remain in the abbey as a recluse. She made many preaching tours throughout Germany and was loved and respected in her own day. She had an authority that made her one of the first to become a regional or international non-clerical female teacher in the church.

**Elizabeth of Shonau** was a member of a double-monastery, and it was there she received her visions over eight years from 1152-1160. Her brother wrote these visions down, that came after an extreme illness. She received visions representing the Eucharist. These were visions of the Virgin at an altar in priestly vestments. “Because in these times, the Lord deigns to show his mercy most graciously in the weak sex, such men who mutter against God are offended and led to sin. But why do they not remember that something similar happened in the days of the fathers? While the men were given over to sluggishness, holy women were filled with the sprit of God, that they might prophesy, govern God’s people forcefully and indeed triumph gloriously over the foes of Israel.”

She didn’t just receive visions; she was accompanied by an angelic guide to a pleasant spot where those visions happened. She was transported after reading about John the Baptist and led to a place where she was told to repeat words of rebuke to her monastery. The sisters trusted her revelations and did penance. Elizabeth regarded severe physical illnesses as necessary to the teaching function of those visions. She was granted a vision of the Virgin Mary ascending into heaven in a bodily as well as in a spiritual way. She was told to keep that vision secret, because if she revealed it she would be accused of inventing new doctrines.

**Catherine of Siena** represents a transition from the life of solitude in monastic withdrawal to life in an active religious order. The impulse for conversion of souls and the reform of the church pushed them into a more engaged mission with life outside. She was a Dominican tertiary which she entered at the age of 18. Her cell was a room in the family house, and for three years she led a life of solitude, only emerging to attend the Eucharist. Her life of solitude culminated in her mystic espousal to Christ – an identification with his passion that drove her interior life and her desire to amend the faults of the church. When she was about 25 years old she experienced a mystical death that lasted for four hours, in which she received visions of hell, purgatory and heaven. After this she dedicated herself to the healing of the Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy. She asked Christ to allow her to suffer for the sins of the world, and that her b ody should be sacrificed for the unity of the church. She consumed only the eucharistic host, and continued to pray and work from her sickbed. Christ is not only the incarnate word of God for her, but her primary experience of Christ that she had (and comes out in her work Dialogue) is that of Christ as food.

**Practicum**

All of us want to be remembered. Especially at special times of the year – birthdays, anniversaries, family holidays etc. When we’re not remembered, it feels almost as if we have never been. We remember people through family rituals, photos, videos, scrapbooks, cards etc. The people we remember continue to have an influence on us: they contribute to our identity. We bring our ancestors back to life by these practices. You can find this in the Bible too – people wanted to be remembered by their descendants, and wanted to leave a ‘good name’ behind them. IN the end, Israel existed solely on the basis that God remembered them – wherever they were, in Egypt or in Babylon.

This business of forgetting or remembering God has been a chief theme in spirituality ever since the church began. Being forgetful of God who is the author of all life and the center of our existence is often seen to be a cause of serious deprivation. We are stronger and more faithful to who we really are when we are living in conscious awareness of God. This awareness requires mutual remembrance: attention and love. Our lives are a mixture of sorrow, joy, victory and defeat, and so our remembrance of God has to come at every moment through confession, petition, thanksgiving and intercession.

Perhaps this is one of the main reasons that we are most aware of God in our prayers of thanksgiving. In Christian spirituality, this is more than a triggering of personal memories. Our remembrance of God is an extension of the Great Remembrance: the anamnesis – the remembrance enacted in our Sunday Eucharist. This remembrance extends into every day of the week, and into each moment of the day. In the Eucharist, the community meets Christ and particip0ates in his sacrifice of himself to his father and receives the gift of his body and blood in the visible forms of bread and wine. It’s a fulfilment of the commandment, “Do this in memory of me”. The church is the church when it remembers.

The church gathers past, present and future together when this act of remembrance happens. It says that every single time is holy. It’s God’s time and the time of salvation. But this impulse isn’t confined to the limits of a Eucharist. The remembrance flowed over into the prayer of the hours in the very early history of the church. We are to be the Body of Christ in and for the world – not just around a formal table. Every generation has added insights to what this means through their eucharistic theology. The late medieval focus on the presence of Christ in the blessed sacrament encouraged the practice of keeping a piece of bread in a public place in the church so that people could look at it and remember. A little lamp was kept next to it to remind people of Christ’s presence there. Eventually, seeing the Eucharist became as important as receiving it. This development in Eucharistic devotion gave rise to new hymn texts, prayers of devotion, and eventually to the establishment of the feast of Corpus Christi. The adoration of the host gave rise to a very personal piety, in which words of love, surrender, petition, or simply quiet listening were just as important as the physical eating of the bread itself. A prayer developed along these lines: “My Jesus, since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come spiritually into my heart and remain there forever.”

After the Reformation, this movement became exclusively identified with the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After reform in the 60s in that church, the eucharist and work among the poor were closely associated in places like Mother Theresa of Calcutta’s Missionaries of Charity. Women who minister to Christ in the bodies of the dying focus on Christ being really present in the Eucharist. The concrete divine presence draws them into prayer in the midst of the suffering and chaos around us – it reveals in suffering humanity another form of the Real Presence of Christ.

The church doesn’t ‘invent’ particular devotions to help people in their need. It discovers devotional practices among its members and recognizes some of them as being in harmony with the faith. Every generation of the church discovers new devotions, or reshapes old ones. But they are always a means of remembering what lies at the heart of our faith.

How does the fact that we can’t gather around the table physically at the moment make us feel? Have we taken this for granted in the past?

Is God trying to teach us to remember in a different way? What is the difference between eucharistic devotion practiced by the church for centuries, and eucharistic devotion via the internet?

Given the intimacy and physicality of the women who pioneered Corpus Christi, can the Eucharist be blessed or consumed ‘remotely’?

Have you ever attended a Benediction or Holy Hour? (apart from Maundy Thursday?)