

Women in the Church

Our Catholic Heritage

Church Women — Vigorous and Valiant Leaders

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"Despise not yourselves, ye women, the Son of God was born of a woman." (St. Augustine)

Medieval church history is replete with outstanding women, liberated even by our standards, who labored in the vineyard of the Lord. Articulate, vigorous, valiant, they fought side by side with the men to preach the Gospel, and pursue the dream of Christendom.

In those centuries, the only way for the socially disadvantaged to rise to their rightful dignity was to enter the service of the Church. So it was for women:

"From the very beginning of the Christian era women, no matter what their position in society, knew another outlet for their talents besides the purely domestic. They had only to step from the hearth to the cloister and find there a bracing freedom." (Phyllis McGinley)

Medieval abbesses were by no means timid creatures wrapped in the silence of contemplation. They were powerful agents of public policy in both Church and State. The British Isles and the Holy Roman Empire developed the widespread custom of double monasteries, male and female, governed by the abbess. They ran their houses, advised local rulers (lay and ecclesiastical), and maintained the educational standards of the day.

Medicine seems to have been a specialty of female Religious. St. Walburga of Heidesheim (d. 779), a member of St. Boniface's mission band, studied and practiced medicine. St. Hildegard of Rupertsburg (d. 1179), the "Sibyl of the Rhine," wrote books on natural history and medicine. She wrote works of theology, and published what amounted to pastoral letters! Her poetry has been compared with that of Dante and Blake.

The life of contemplation drew a

large number of women to choose "the better part." Some of the great medieval teachers of prayer were St. Mechtildis (d. 1298), "The Nightingale of Christ," and St. Gertrude the Great (d. 1302), "The Herald of God's Loving Kindness."

The female royalty and nobility of the middle ages exercised such an influence for good in public affairs that Christian civilization would have been impossible without them. Queens like St. Cunegunda (d. 1033) and St. Matilda (d. 968) were the support of the poor in their realms, and the counselors of their husbands in the arts of gentility. St. Margaret of Scotland (d. 1093) made a Christian land of her country and a Christian gentleman of her husband, King Malcolm.

"She invited the king to works of justice, mercy, charity and other virtues."

St. Adelaide of Burgundy (d. 999)

and St. Hedwig of Poland (d. 1399) were politicians of no mean talent. St. Elizabeth of Portugal (d. 1336) twice rode out between the battle lines of armies to impose peace.

As the breakup of Christendom came upon the West in war, famine, and pestilence the women of God rose to their great moment, and tided the Church over a new dark age. St. Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) and St. Birgitta of Sweden (d. 1373) raised their voices against the scandals of the papacy, and led men of good will in the paths of right. St. Collette (d. 1447) was even commissioned to reform the Friars Minor. St. Joan of Arc (d. 1431) saved the honor of her land in its darkest hour, and taught the knights of France to fight like men. The voices that spoke to Joan were heard and obeyed by a host of women in the Age of Faith: "Leave your village, daughter of God... Choose your standard and raise it boldly!"

St. Hilda — A Life of Industry and Goodness

By FATHER THOMAS McMANUS

"Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the fruits of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates." (Proverbs, 31, 29-31)

Of all the valiant women who took their part in leading the Church through the Dark Ages, few were more famous than the English Abbess, Hilda of Whitby (614-680). She was the niece of King Edwin of Northumbria. He brought such peace and order to his lands that it was said: "A woman could carry her new born baby across the island from sea to sea and suffer no harm."

At the age of 13 Hilda was baptized by St. Paulinus, the Bishop of York. In 647, she decided to become a nun. Two years later, St. Aidan, the great Irish missionary, made her the abbess of a convent at Hartlepool. Some years later Hilda established her own foundation at Whitby. Hers was a double monastery, a community of both men and women, living in separate quarters. Hilda ruled both houses, one of many women in her day who held such authority.

"She established the same regular life as in her former convent, and taught the observance of righteousness, mercy, purity and other virtues, but especially in peace and charity." (St. Bede, The History of the English Church and People)

Her fame grew as an educator and stateswoman. Kings and nobles, bishops and clergy would come to her for advice. She was especially concerned with the proper education of priests.



(Art by Robert F. McGovern)

St. Hilda of Whitby

"Those under her direction were required to make a thorough study of the Scriptures and occupy themselves in good works, in order that they might be found fit for Holy Orders and the service of God's altar." (St. Bede)

She succeeded so well that five of her subjects became bishops, among them St. John of Beverly. The early English poet Caedmon was also one of her proteges.

In 664, representatives of the Celtic Church met with the legates of the Pope to iron out their differences over various disciplinary matters. Hilda's monastery of Whitby was chosen as the site of the negotiations because of its reputation for learning and her own reputation for practical wisdom.

St. Bede wrote "Abbess Hilda and her community, together with Bishop Cedd, strenuously supported the Scots." Unfortunately for Hilda and Cedd the Scots lost.

In the year 680, Hilda died, honored throughout Britain as a woman worthy of her words and holy in her works. She is remembered by the historian Bede (d. 735):

"Christ's servant, Abbess Hilda, whom all her acquaintances called mother, because of her wonderful devotion and grace, was not only an example of holy life to the members of her own community, but she also brought about the amendment and salvation of many living far distant, who heard the inspiring story of her industry and goodness."



Calendar ..... 16
Child ..... 7
Classified ..... 19
Cuddy ..... 19
Deaths ..... 9
Editorial ..... 17
Liturgy ..... 13
Opinion ..... 17,18
Parish News ..... 18
People and Events ... 13
RapAround ..... 14,15
Reedy ..... 6
Shamon ..... 9
Southern Tier ..... 8



NFP Is On the Move .... 11