

5 things to know about St. Bridget of Sweden, mystic and mother

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On July 23, the Catholic Church celebrates the feast day of St. Bridget of Sweden, a mystic of the Middle Ages who was a wife, mother to a large family, lady-in-waiting to a queen, and founder of a religious order that still exists today.

1. St. Bridget experienced her first vision at age 10.

Bridget, or “Birgitta,” was born to wealthy, devout parents in Sweden in the year 1303. Her mother died early in her life, and she and her siblings were raised by their aunt. At 10 years old, Bridget had a vision of Christ on the cross in his agonizing suffering. In her vision, Bridget saw Christ with his wounds from Good Friday, with the wounds of “The Man of Sorrows” in Isaiah 53. She asked Jesus who hurt him, and he responded: “Those who despise me and refuse my love for them.” She would go on to write about these revelations; her works were published posthumously.

2. Bridget served in the royal court of Sweden.

Bridget was married in 1316 at the young age of 13 to 18-year-old Ulf Gudmarsson, the Swedish prince of Nericia. The two joined the Third Order of St. Francis and dedicated their resources to building a hospital and caring for the needs of the poor. Ulf served on the council of the king of Sweden, Magnus Eriksson, and the king asked Bridget to be a lady-in-waiting for his wife, Queen Blanche of Namur.

3. Bridget was a mother to eight children, and one of them became a saint.

Bridget and Ulf raised a large family together while also serving the poor and managing their duties in court. Of Bridget’s eight children, two died in infancy, and another two died in the Crusades. Two of their surviving children were married, and another two joined religious life. One of those two became a saint and was canonized St. Catherine of Sweden.

4. Bridget founded a religious order, the Bridgettines, after her husband died.

Bridget and Ulf made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela between 1341 and 1343, but on their return trip, Ulf became ill. The couple stopped in France until Ulf regained his health, but soon after they returned to Sweden, in 1344, he passed away. More in Europe

After his death, Bridget donated her belongings to the poor and devoted her life to Christ, following a call from God to start a new religious order.

She founded the Order of the Most Holy Savior, now known as the Brigittines, in 1346, and her congregation was approved by Pope Urban V in 1370. The Brigittines

were to be led by an abbess and constitute both nuns and priests. The priests, who lived in a separate section, served as chaplains and confessors for the nuns.

King Magnus helped Bridget make the Abbey of Vadstena the home of the Brigittines. He donated a small palace and land for the new monastery.

But Bridget would never see her work come to fruition. She had a vision from Christ calling her to return to Rome and await the pope's return from France during the Avignon Papacy. She never became a nun herself, and she never saw the monastery in Vadstena. She died several years before the pope's permanent return to Rome.

But her order spread through Europe and still exists today in both contemplative monasteries and apostolic convents, with branches in 19 countries including Sweden, Norway, Poland, Italy, Israel, India, the Philippines, Mexico, and the United States.

5. St. Bridget is the co-patroness of Europe.

After Bridget died in Rome on July 23, 1373, her children brought her remains back to the headquarters of her religious order. Less than 20 years later, in 1391, Pope Boniface IX proclaimed her a saint. Her revelations and writings on the sufferings of Christ were published after her death. In 1999, St. John Paul II chose her as one of the three female co-patronesses of Europe, along with St. Catherine of Siena and St. Edith Stein.

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