

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

The First Women's Movement

The witness of the Beguines of Northeastern Europe is the witness of a movement of women. In fact some scholars have called the growth of Beguine spirituality, which began in the 12th century and retains some vestiges to this day, "the first women's movement." Individual Beguines such as Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechtilde of Magdeburg and Marie D'Oignies gained prominence for their scholarship, spiritual leadership and ecstatic experiences of God. More striking perhaps is the fact that the Beguine movement provided a way for many European Christian women, poor and wealthy alike, to respond to the signs of their times and to their own spiritual needs and calling. They did so in a way that both shaped and threatened the structures that governed women's religious lives. It was a movement that reflected the growing need among lay people for lives of spiritual meaning and religious action, as well as self-determination. In its far-reaching influence and its struggle can be seen the movement of God's own Spirit.

Responding to the Signs of the Times

Beguine spirituality developed at a time when

Europe was undergoing the turmoil of cultural change. The fall of feudalism gave rise to an ur-

ban trade-based economy, which allowed some individuals to achieve levels of personal wealth and opportunity that were

previously closed to them.

In opposition to the extreme materialism that developed in society, groups such as the Franciscans, the Benedictines and the Beghards embraced lives of poverty in service to God. Accompanying this cult of voluntary poverty was a renewed interest in the Apostolic faith of the early Christian church, where property was shared in common and members cared for one another. The *Vita Apostolica* called for poverty, humility, charity and lives lived in witness to that faith.

Europe at this time was also experiencing an evangelical

awakening that featured outbursts of religious enthusiasm among lay people.

THE BEGUINES

A Movement of Women and Spirit



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

It was in this milieu that the Beguine movement developed. As lay women awakened to the call of evangelism, voluntary poverty and mutual community, many sought for themselves a new kind of spiritual practice, one that fell in between their previous options of a vowed and cloistered religious life or private devotion as a married woman. Living alone in urban areas, or with families or in small groups, these women

began to shape a life that did not include enclosure or permanent vows of chastity. This in turn allowed them the freedom to practice evangelical poverty, to provide for themselves by the work of their hands, to minister actively to the poor and ill of urban areas, and to create a contemplative lifestyle that allowed for daily religious practice, education and the opportunity to discuss ideas.

Having no founder, no ecclesial status and no rule, the Beguine movement fostered a variety of communities of religious women scattered throughout Europe. The early part of the movement featured charismatic and ecstatic individuals who captured the imagination and support of many clergy and lay people.

Blessed Marie d'Oignies was one of these. She married at 14, but convinced her husband to live with her in a celibate relationship. They turned their home into a hospital for lepers. With the agreement of her husband, she settled in a community of Beguines. Her powerful personality and piety attracted many followers, including Jacques of Vitry, who wrote her life story. The prominent preacher was able to convince the Pope to ease restrictions on the Beguine communities at a time when no new orders of women were being approved.

But while the Beguines had their admirers among the clergy, they had their detractors as well, in a church highly suspicious of women's self-determination. The name Beguine, in fact, is thought to be a derogatory label for a female heretic, possibly a derivation of Albigensian, a heretical movement of the time. As the popularity of the Beguine spiritual practice spread, some church officials began to take more interest in shaping the way Beguines lived and served, which gave the women legitimacy in the church but also curbed their freedom in the community.

To live this third way, between the cloister and marriage, required courage and creativity in a time when women were considered dangerous when independent of men. That the Beguines did not fit the established mold of religious or secular life and were not under ecclesial control put them under attack by some church authorities who spoke out against their ministry. The women's own success in their economic independence brought them into conflict with trade guilds, especially those of the cloth industry. Their outspoken denunciation of social and institutional injustices also made them targets for hostility.

The communities of learning into which many Beguine groups eventually developed yielded educated women who publicly read Scripture in the vernacular. They wrote extensively of mystical experience, which had become a popular literature in the 13th century. By the 14th century the public nature of such mystical writing and the fear of heresy led European Catholic Inquisitors to burn several Beguines at the stake and to suppress the movement in such a way that it largely disappeared from the European scene.

In the centuries when they flourished, the Beguines made an impact on the communities in which they lived and served. These lay women ministered directly to the sick, to orphans and to lepers. The movement provided an attractive option for poor women, who did not have the property to secure themselves a place in the cloister or the means to secure a stable domestic life.

The example of members who practiced a public and mystical piety did not go unnoticed in their Medieval world. In the Netherlands, for example, the mystical writings of Beguines outshone those of the clergy in affecting the beliefs of the urban population. Beguine theol-

ogy stressed an intense devotion to the humanity and passion of Christ which influenced the devotion of those around them.

The Beguines were women dedicated to humility. But their public visibility and voice forced both church and society to reconsider where

spirit of the Beguines can be seen in the growth of intentional Christian communities and among women who are exploring feminine spirituality in supportive groups.

Their story contains hope for people who are on the margins of mainstream religious experi-

The prayer has great power which we pray with all our strength.
It makes an embittered heart mellow,
 a sad heart joyful,
A foolish heart wise,
 a timid heart bold,
A weak heart strong,
 a blind heart clear seeing,
 a cold heart ardent.
It draws God who is great into a heart which is small.
 It drives the hungry soul up to the fullness of God.
It unites the two lovers, God and soul, in a place of bliss.
 Where they converse long of love.

From "On the Tenfold Value of the Prayer of a Good Person"
 Mechthild of Magdeburg

women's place was located. And while this led to counterattack and suppression, they were a force to be reckoned with.

A witness to the people of God today

The Beguines' spiritual independence, deep love of Christ, desire for meaningful religious experience and dedication to an active faith make them a powerful witnesses today. For lay women and men who are creating their own faith vows and who are seeking new kinds of communal life and social action, they are a testament to the work of the Holy Spirit. The

ence, who struggle with barriers and judgments put up by both church and society. For gays and lesbians who find their religious roles restricted and their moral lives suspect, for men who must choose between marriage or ordination, and for women barred from ordination altogether, for lay people limited in their definition of ministry, the example of the Beguines' third way suggests that the Spirit can easily slip through the cracks of exclusionary practice. Such movements of the Spirit are not without their risk, for they invite change that unsettles the status quo. But the tenacity of these Medieval women shows that God's work prevails in the face of opposition.



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The Beguine Movement References:

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The Beguine Movement can be celebrated at any time including the feast of Blessed Marie d'Oignies on June 23. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

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Prayer Service Honoring the Beguines

Medieval lay women who served and moved with the Spirit of God.

This prayer service could be used as sunrise or vespers on June 23, the feast day of Bd. Marie D'Oignies, a well-known Beguine, who died in 1213. In publicizing this prayer service, invite those who will attend to bring with them a small symbol of themselves to be shared during the service and taken home.

Opening Song: Select an appropriate upbeat gathering song, such as *Gather Us In* or *We are Companions on the Journey*, *Simple Gifts* or Ray Repp's variation of *Simple Gifts*, called *When Two or More* would also bring out the theme of women's giftedness.

Presider: *(If the group is not already standing, invite them to do so)* In the name of Jesus Christ, who gifts us with his love, may peace be with you.

All: In the name of Jesus Christ, who fills us with his hope, may peace be also with you.

Presider: We gather today to celebrate one of the first women's movements in the church, that of the Beguines. These were women who were neither vowed to convent life or to marriage, but who lived in community, leading lives committed to holiness and service. As we quiet our minds and call ourselves to prayer, we'll use the words of, Mechthild of Magdeburg, a Beguine who lived in the 13th century. *(designate which side will be Group A and which Group B.):*

Presider: The prayer has great power which we pray with All our strength:

Group A: It makes an embittered heart mellow, A sad heart joyful.

Group B: A foolish heart wise, A timid heart bold.

Group A: A weak heart strong, A blind heart clear seeing, A cold heart ardent.

Group B: It draws God who is great into a heart which is small. It drives the hungry soul up to the fullness of God.

Group A: It unites the two lovers, God and soul, in a place of bliss, Where they converse long of love.

From *On the Tenfold Value of the Prayer of a Good Person* by Mechthild of Magdeburg, ca 1212-ca 1282. In *Visions and Longings, Medieval Women Mystics*, by Monica Furlong. (Shambhala Publications Inc: 1996). Mechthild joined the Beguines of Magdeburg when she was in her late teens and lived as a Beguine for 40 years.

Presider: God of love and longing, we gather today to celebrate and call out the gifts you have placed among your disciples, especially your greatest gift of All, your love. Help us to bring these gifts to meet the needs of your world, drawing inspiration from women like Blessed Marie D'Oignies, whose feast day is this month (June), the poet Mechthild of Magdeburg and All the lay women of the Beguine movement, whom we remember today. They humbly, courageously and freely took your love to those in need and brought their love back to you.

All: Amen

Presider: Please be seated as we listen to the Word of God.

First Reading: Song of Songs 8: 6-7

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 13: 1-7

Reflection: *Note to the presenter: Background and a bibliography on the Beguines can be found in the accompanying brochure. Themes to develop might include the challenge for women to see themselves as gifts, and to respond courageously to the needs around them, despite the limits of church and society. Also, such Spirit-led movements of lay men and women require communities of support and prayer. The ritual that follows will give participants a time to model such communities as they share symbols of themselves in small groups. Introducing this discussion/ritual can close the reflective words.*

Ritual: symbols of self... *The **Presider** or a ritual leader should invite those gathered to form groups of four or five and to share symbols of themselves taken from their everyday lives, for example, a set of keys, a brief case, a piece of artwork or a poem. They may have been invited ahead of time to bring such a symbol with them. Invite those who didn't bring a symbol to look in purses or pockets or wallets. You might even provide paper on which a symbol could be drawn. Have the groups discuss what these symbols say about them and their calling as Christian women. Invite them to discuss for about 5 to 8 minutes total, or longer depending on how time is going.*

Presider or ritual leader: *(After the discussion is completed)* These symbols of ourselves reveal gifts that God has placed within us, gifts meant for others, gifts to fill needs. They reveal the gift that we are. Let us bring our gifts forward to be presented and to be blessed. (As quiet instrumental music begins, leader should invite the participants to quietly set their symbols in a designated place, such as on a special table, in an area near the front of the room, or in the center of the circle if that is how the participants are seated.)

Presider: *(when the items have all been placed and participants have returned to their seats, invite the participants to extend their hands toward the symbols).* God of all good gifts we set ourselves before you in symbol and in flesh, in hope and in love. Bless these symbols as you bless our lives, making them a sign of your loving presence in the world.

All: Help us to yield to your Spirit, as she inspires movements of faith and justice, creativity and compassion in the communities that gather in your name. Lead us to one another, in our needs and our joys, to be signs and symbols of your supportive grace. Amen.

At this point the Presider can invite the participants to offer each other a sign of peace. A sung reflection or a liturgical dance would also be appropriate here to allow the participants to reflect on what they have just shared.

Presider: Please stand. Loving God you have set us like a seal upon your heart. We praise you for your faithfulness, your abundant gifts of love, your strength as we leave here to continue to do your work.

All: Grant us your peace, your love and your grace, as we pledge you ours. Amen.

End with an appropriate closing song or a sign of peace, if you haven't done one already.

Prayer service prepared by Barbara Ballenger who has her master's degree in pastoral ministry, writes for diocesan and religious media and works as a performing arts minister for Beacon Street.

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