

THE PROPHETIC CALL OF ST. BIRGITTA AND OF HER ORDER

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RESUMEN

Referencias a las fundaciones en España de cenobios de la orden fundada por santa Brígida, en el que se hace especial referencia a la espiritualidad que llega a la Península Ibérica desde Suecia, en comparación con otras órdenes monásticas hispanas.

ABSTRACT

References to the Spanish foundations of monasteries of Saint Brígida Order, making special reference to the spirituality that arrives to the Iberian Peninsula from Sweden, in comparison with other Spanish monastic orders.

In 1615, Marina de Escobar, living a pious life in Valladolid withdrawn from the public and devoted to prayer and good works in her community, had the special grace of a vision in which St. Birgitta of Sweden appeared to her, exhorting her to establish a convent in Spain of the Order she had founded. To any student and scholar of the history of spirituality in the Middle Ages and early modern times in general, and of St. Birgitta and her monastic Order in particular, it is a great challenge to ask questions like: how could this happen? what was the background for such an inspired call? and how could this call be so fruitful that five Spanish and two Mexican convents of this Order grew out of it?

Born in 1554, Marina de Escobar¹ had experienced a strong religious vocation in her youth. She had applied to St. Teresa of Avila to enter a Carmelite

¹ María Antonia FERNÁNDEZ DEL HOYO, *Marina de Escobar* (Vallisoletanos 39), Valladolid 1984. Cf. the anonymous contribution: «Santa Brígida y España», *Santa Brígida profeta dei tempi nuovi* -

convent, but because of her fragile physical nature, she was not accepted. Her spiritual director and confessor, the Jesuit Father Luis de la Puente, followed her visionary life and her intimate prayer life with God for years, until in 1598, as Marina was forty-four, he suggested to her that she should begin to write down her spiritual discourses and experiences with God. This she practised for the following years². However, at the age of forty-nine, she was severely hit by a sickness, maybe a stroke, which forced her to stay in bed continually.

Marina had received many extraordinary spiritual gifts already during her secluded life. Her confessor especially mentions «the gift of spiritual knowledge»³. Five admirable experiences, observes our venerable priest, embody this entire knowledge, and all five of them were communicated little by little by God to Doña Marina⁴:

«1. She experienced and touched on all the mysteries of the childhood, passion, and death of Our Lord, even to the point of feeling the nails in her feet, hands, and side, as well as the crown of thorns on her head, all according to a letter in Book Six.

2. From here she went on to a higher level, experiencing the Trinity as One with its attributes.

3. Thirdly, she experienced the communication between God and the soul, by speech, by inspiration, through metaphores and visions, by intellectual visions, raptures, suspension and union of the spirit in thousands of ways, in the depths of her heart already in an empiric heaven, already being there as if in a heavenly palace, already rejoicing in her place there.

4. To which were added the experience of the pains, the cross, the fatigues and torments, both exterior and interior...; experiencing that death is the step to happiness and the Cross the only real road to God's glory.

5. Finally she experimented and tried the heroic acts of all the virtues in which is found evangelical perfection, with highest prudence, modesty, and caution, through the extraordinary paths by which she was led, so as not to be deceived, and from which she came to be so full of this divine knowledge that she could have been an eminent master of it. Her soul and her way of life were like a living book, where the infinite wisdom of God wrote and impressed all the mysteries of our Holy Catholic Faith, with admirable elegance»⁵.

Saint Bridget Prophetess of New Ages, Roma 1993, pp. 640-665 (also in Italian translation, *ibidem*, pp. 666-692, and in English translation, *ibidem*, pp. 693-719).

² *Vida maravillosa de la Venerable Virgen Doña Marina de Escobar, natural de Valladolid, sacada de lo que ella misma escribió de orden de sus Padres Espirituales, escrita por el Venerable Padre Luis de la Puente, de la Compañía de Jesús, su confessor*, I, Madrid, 1665, Introducción, fol. 1r. Also Camilo María ABAD S.J., *Vida y escritos del V. P. Luis de la Puente de la Compañía de Jesús (1554-1624)*, Comillas, Santander 1957, lib. III, ch. 6, and lib. IV, ch. 5, here p. 425 with note 1.

³ ABAD, 1957, p. 425.

⁴ ABAD, 1957, p. 426. I quote here the English translation in the chapter on Marina composed by Dr. Gretchen Ericsson from *Birgittiana*, 1997, pp. 160-168.

⁵ *Vida*, I, lib. VI, ch. 21 §1. ABAD, 1957, p. 426 note 3.

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Marina tells us how, in 1615 –she was then sixty-one– St. Birgitta of Sweden appeared to her in a vision and gave her the message which I mentioned in the beginning: to establish a convent of her Order in Spain⁶.

On that occasion Marina declared that she had heard about St. Birgitta twenty years before but had forgotten everything about it until this moment. There is nothing strange in such an occasional knowledge which has not been especially deepened. Marina knew of St. Birgitta as she knew about any saint whose name was found in the calendar of the universal church –her feast day was that of her canonization, 8 October. She might have known also that St. Birgitta had received many divine revelations concerning faith and church discipline. On the other hand, we have her own word that until that day she had not been conscious of having any special relation to St. Birgitta, this prophetic woman and saint from the northern extreme of Europe. Sweden was far away, the great Spanish mystics and teachers of Catholic doctrine were near to her world and certainly the focus of her attention.

How and from where did Marina draw her knowledge of St. Birgitta and her Order, the «Order of the Holy Saviour», the *Ordo Sancti Salvatoris*, as its name had been given by Christ in a vision to St. Birgitta? From about 1595, but in a more serious way from 1615 and for the following fourteen years, the Birgittine convent which she had been called to establish must have filled her prayers and thoughts continually. A look at the actual situation of Birgittine religious life in Europe around 1600 will give us a picture of what Marina might have learned about St. Birgitta and her Order in preparation for her spiritual call.

Around 1595, which Marina in 1615 indicated as «twenty years ago», at least one crucial event in the history of the Birgittines may have been noticed widely in ecclesiastical circles in a Europe torn apart by the competition between Catholic faith and Lutheran and Calvinist interpretations of Christianity. In this year, the mother abbey of the Order, Vadstena in Sweden, was suppressed by the new Lutheran king Karl or Charles, who had taken power by defeating Sigismund, the Catholic king of Sweden and Poland. Vadstena was the last bastion of monastic life to exist in Sweden, after the Lutheran confession had been first introduced in 1527 and finally confirmed at a diet in 1593. The nuns' convent, which was the only surviving convent in Sweden after the priests of the Order had been dispersed, was taken care of in the 1570s and 1580s by the papal legate, the Jesuit father Antonio Possevino, who secretly had managed to spend long periods of time in Vadstena⁷. The convent was rejuvenated, novices were

⁶ Quoted in the anonymous publication mentioned in note 1, 650f, 676f, 704f.

⁷ Oskar GARSTEIN, *Rome and the Counter-Reformation in Scandinavia until the Establishment of the S. Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in 1622*, II: 1583-1622, Oslo, 1980, pp. 175-213.

taken in, and there was hope for survival under king John, the father of Sigismund, and his Polish Queen, Catherine. But after king John's death came the suppression, and the last nuns had to go into exile under Polish protection⁸. The Order had one abbey in the city of Danzig, which was under the Polish crown, another abbey in Poland proper. In any place in Europe where Jesuits were working, some of whom probably knew Possevino's heroic action, news must have spread about the extinction of the last Catholic life in Sweden and the suppression of the mother abbey of the Order of St. Birgitta. Such an event might have been conducive to Marina in Valladolid hearing about St. Birgitta around 1595, as she herself indicates.

In the Spanish-speaking world, the Birgittines also made their presence known in another way: they existed in the Spanish Netherlands. Around 1500, the Order had twenty-five fully established abbeys in Europe. As Scandinavia and many German principalities turned to Lutheranism, at least half of these abbeys were immediately exposed to persecution and were gradually confiscated by public authority and doomed to extinction. After the rebellion against Spanish hegemony in the Netherlands 1572 had paved the way for Calvinism in the Northern provinces, the turn had come to the handful of Birgittine abbeys in this area. Only one of them lay in what became the Spanish Netherlands: Mariethron, *Thronus Mariae*, in Dendermonde, Flanders.

During the last decades of the sixteenth century, still one more Birgittine convent may have been known in Spanish circles: the nuns from Syon Abbey in England had been exiled and were searching for a refuge where they could live their religious life in the spirit of St. Birgitta according to English tradition. After fourteen years of exile from England, spent in Rouen in Northern France, they decided, in 1594, to leave France and shipped for Lisbon. In Portugal, the community found refuge for the next two centuries, recruiting itself from English families who still adhered to the Catholic faith⁹. The news of the arrival of these nuns may have spread also in religious circles in Spain¹⁰, since very soon the nuns had to regulate their relationship to the bishop and had to apply to Rome to get their statutes approved according to the norms of the Council of Trent.

⁸ Hans CNATTINGIUS, «Vadstena klostets sista tid», *Annales Academiae regiae scientiarum Upsaliensis*, 13, 1969, pp. 46-102.

⁹ John RORY FLETCHER, *The Story of the English Bridgettines of Syon Abbey*, Syon Abbey 1933. Ann HUTCHISON, «Transplanting the vineyard: Syon Abbey 1539-1861», *Der Birgittenorden in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Wilhelm Liebhart, Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1998, pp. 79-107.

¹⁰ Ulla SANDER OLSEN, «The Revival of the Birgittine Order in the 17th Century: What Happened after the Reformation?», *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 91, 1996, pp. 398-435, 805-833, here 417, note 67.

Out of twenty-five abbeys existing around 1500, there were only seven north of the Alps and two in Italy left one hundred years later, besides Syon Abbey in Portuguese exile.

In these years, nuns and a handful of priests in the surviving Birgittine abbeys of the Spanish Netherlands, the Rhinelands, and Bavaria were seriously concerned about the future of their religious call in the footsteps of St. Birgitta. Two different ways of stabilizing the Order and its vocation were being pondered.

The one was represented by the young French abbess of Mariethron, Anne Dubois, who had entered there in 1599 and became abbess in 1601¹¹. Her spiritual director, a Jesuit, supported her idea of forming a Birgittine convent life of a new style, for nuns as well as for priests, but not necessarily with both of them united together in one abbey. She saw that such an adaptation of St. Birgitta's rule was inevitable in the new situation of Catholic life, fighting to overcome the consequences of Lutheran and Calvinist reform. Jesuits were no friends of the idea that priests should live permanently together with nuns, which was part of St. Birgitta's abbey concept for her Order. Recruitment to the communities of priests attached to the nuns had become very difficult, and it became impossible to bring together the dozen priests for a community life next to the nuns' convent, as outlined by St. Birgitta. Also, the proper understanding of the vocation of priests in such a community attached to the nuns had become obscured in the age of religious conflict.

Anne Dubois' programme fell on fruitful ground, not least thanks to the atmosphere prevailing at the papal curia under Pope Clement VIII (1592-1605), and she won influential sponsors for her case. A papal bull of 1603 enabled her to establish her first convent in Lille in 1605, a second one followed in Arras in 1608, three more between 1618 and 1628. The ambition was, not to let the number of nuns exceed thirty in each convent, which is only half of what St. Birgitta had envisaged for her nuns' convents 250 years earlier.

Under the inspiration of the visionary Anne Dubois, there were also priests who wanted to live together according to a reformed Birgittine rule on the basis of the papal bull of 1603, thus without taking part in pastoral care for the nuns. The first of these priestly convents, St. Sixtus, was founded in 1615¹², the same year as St. Birgitta appeared to Marina de Escobar in Valladolid. Several others followed, all of them in what was then still the Spanish Netherlands, some of them, however, in areas later annexed by France. In 1622, these priestly convents, the *Novissimi Birgittani*, received papal approbation.

¹¹ Ulla SANDER OLSEN, 407f.

¹² Ulla SANDER OLSEN, pp. 412-417.

Crucial for this development were decisions that had been taken in Rome back in 1593, to remove the priests from the Birgittine abbey of Paradiso outside Florence, thus abolishing the old structure there and making Paradiso a nuns' convent only. The same happened in the Order's abbey in Genova in the years 1601-06¹³. In this climate, the same tendencies could easily prosper in other parts of Europe. Parallel to Anne Dubois, but without referring to the papal bull of 1603, Abbess Agnes Jastkowska in the Polish abbey of the Order initiated a series of daughter foundations, so that six new convents came into being there between 1613 and 1636, all of them only for nuns.

The alternative solution was favoured by surviving Birgittine abbeys centered in the archdiocese of Cologne and in Bavaria, which believed in retaining the basic idea of priests of the Order living a community life with the nuns, active in preaching and pastoral work towards the lay people that used to visit Birgittine churches in big crowds. A spiritually gifted priest and widely known preacher, Christoph Langen, had entered one of these abbeys in 1602. He took the lead in trying to observe and develop the traditional structure of the Order's abbeys. New abbeys were founded in the Rhinelands, and until the death of Father Christoph in 1638, many priests and brothers were taken into these abbeys. Early efforts to call for a general chapter were in vain, however.

One very important change in the conditions surrounding the Birgittine Order was the fact that the Council of Trent had reintroduced the bishops' authority over the life of regulars and limited the extent of monastic exemption. This meant that Anne Dubois and Agnes Jastkowska could proceed more in concord with the wishes of their bishops and with less regard to what remaining priests of the Order meant. These, on the other hand, also had to resort to a bishop, who was then primarily the two successive prince-archbishops of Cologne, Ernest of Bavaria (1583-1612) and Ferdinand of Bavaria (1612-1650). Both favoured, in the spirit of the council of Trent, the pastoral work of the Birgittine fathers in places where preaching and pastoral care were required¹⁴.

As stated above, Marina had her first vision in 1615. In 1629, the new version of the Birgittine Rule for women only, called «Birgittines of the Recollection», was approved by Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644)¹⁵. 1637, four years after Marina's death, the convent in Valladolid was inaugurated. Letters are extant in Valladolid showing that Marina in these years of preparation was in touch with

¹³ Ulla SANDER OLSEN, p. 403.

¹⁴ Elke STRANG, *Das Kloster Marienforst bei Bad Godesberg von seiner Gründung im 13. Jahrhundert bis zur Auflösung 1802* (Veröffentlichungen des Stadtarchivs Bonn 56), Bonn 1995.

¹⁵ The anonymous contribution mentioned in note 1, 653-656, 679-682, 707-710. Ulla SANDER OLSEN, 417.

the subprior of the priestly Birgittine community of St. Sixtus, Father Joachim¹⁶. Thus, she must have had help and assistance in the revision of the Rule from the new movement born in the Spanish Netherlands. By this new and fruitful development, then, the Order of St. Birgitta of Sweden got a new home far south of the Scandinavian countries where it had originated. This is no wonder, since the concept and the prophetic call do not belong to one country or another, but to the universal Church.

Let us now look at the spiritual background and prophetic dimension of St. Birgitta and her Order, for a better understanding of how this transfer of her Order and its prophetic call from northern to southern Europe could take place.

St. Birgitta (1303-1373) grew up in an aristocratic society which had adopted Christianity some two centuries before her time. Impulses of Roman and European Christian culture had entered Sweden in many forms. On a par with developments in other European countries, the Swedish law system had become imbued with Christian values. In the 1340s, under King Magnus Eriksson, provincial laws had been replaced by a common Swedish law. Since 1164, Sweden constituted a church province with an archbishop in Uppsala. The parochial system was complete, Cistercians had brought monasticism to the country, the mendicants worked not only in towns, which were very small, but also periodically in the surrounding countryside. Seven dioceses and cathedral chapters, representing regional variations in the reception of the Christian faith, cared for priestly education.

Concern for the community was a high priority in the aristocratic class of this society. Christian ideals had been introduced through different channels, according to different patterns and from different European countries. This could not but create conflict and tension, further nourished by the recent pagan background. Conflicting values meant a challenge. We have every reason to interpret the position of St. Birgitta in her Swedish surroundings (until 1349) as a gifted and spiritually enlightened woman who had the privilege of growing up in close touch with written culture and in concern for law and righteousness. From this starting point, she responded to the challenge¹⁷.

In her Revelations, which came to her from the time of the death of her husband in 1344 onwards, she communicates to us a hierarchical spiritual universe centered around God/Christ, the Creator and Saviour. His judgement is severe, but His mercy is limitless. The Mother of God is Mother of Mercy, and in gloryfying her, God gives expression to His wish to reward His love overflow-

¹⁶ Ulla SANDER OLSEN, p. 417, note 68.

¹⁷ Cf. Bridget MORRIS, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer 1999.

ingly. A strong appeal to compassion with the suffering Lord is a vehicle for the appeal to be faithful to Christ, His Church, apostles, and sacraments. The temptation of worldly fortune is seen in contrast to the appeal for true poverty of a pure heart in the prologue to St. Birgitta's monastic rule, the *Regula Sancti Salvatoris*, revealed to her in a vision worked over by her Cistercian confessor. The message cannot be missed: share the sufferings of Christ, just as Christ has shared them intimately with this unworthy Bride, who has been chosen by Him. Direct your actions to God with burning love and attachment, and withstand temptations and what leads to them. This message is valid for each man and woman, to be expressed in different ways according to each one's status in society. The judgement will be much more severe for those carrying political or ecclesiastical responsibility, and Birgitta feels it her task to speak to those in responsible positions and to put their duties and their true vocation and the promises of Christ before their eyes. Much space in her revelations is given to didactical explanations of special aspects of the Catholic faith, but always, the responsibility of each person in his or her own position to activate true love of God is stressed. Scholars have pointed to the difference between the strict tone and strong feelings of Birgitta's message, and the highly affective devotions of German female mystics of her own time, found especially in Dominican convents¹⁸. Birgitta's spirituality is not formed by enclosed monasticism, she never entered a convent, but lived in Rome from 1350 to her death in 1373 in a kind of house community, strictly observing a regular time schedule, praying the daily office of the church together with her confessors, and visiting the churches of Rome. During the Rome years, she was widely known for her prophetic words which were written down by her confessors and spread to many people.

One may ask the question how the monastic Order which she founded was adapted to be a continuator of the prophetic call of the foundress? The name, «The Order of the Holy Saviour», clearly suggests that through the monastic life according to this Rule, Christ as Saviour is to speak to the Christian world. But the women entering convent life in an abbey of this Order will not enjoy much freedom to expand into a role of prophecy. They were to constitute a convent of sixty strictly enclosed nuns, and the priests for their assistance were to be just as enclosed, thereby strictly limited to the abbey church itself for any kind of pastoral work. The priests could fulfil a prophetic role in continuation of the basic principles for a life with God which the foundress had received and

¹⁸ Knut B. WESTMAN, *Birgitta-studier*, 1, Uppsala 1911, pp. 250-259; Peter DINZELBACHER, «Saint Bridget and mysticism of her time», *Santa Brigida profeta dei tempi nuovi - Saint Bridget Prophetess of New Ages*, Roma 1993, pp. 338-372 (also in German: «Die hl. Birgitta und die Mystik ihrer Zeit», *ibidem*, pp. 267-302, and in Italian: «Santa Brigida e la mistica del suo tempo», *ibidem*, pp. 303-337).

transmitted in her Revelations. But how could the nuns contribute to such a task? And if, as has been said above, the structure with small convents of nuns or priests without much pastoral care would dominate, how could such a branch of Birgittine convent life be a continuation of a prophetic call?

A possible answer to such a question might be sought for in the definition of prophecy. First, it is quite clear that prophecy does not mean predictions for the future in the popular sense of such an idea. There is no fortune-telling in Christian prophecy. If prophecy, on the other hand, is the term for God's mighty word into the present, using as a tool a person especially chosen for the task of communicating such a word and equipped with the corresponding knowledge and judgement of the hearts of men, then Birgitta's prophetic call would seem to be unique and not capable of being handed down to others, for example to members of her religious Order.

If, therefore, we ascribe a prophetic call to St. Birgitta's religious Order and its members, we can only do so according to other criteria. St. Birgitta lived in a world of contradictory impulses from all the Christian world hitting the recently christianized Scandinavian world. Her insight led her to realize and preach that only faith and attachment to God in His revealed Word and in supernatural love would reform society and community life, at the same time saving the individual from just punishment for his or her own personal transgressions. The narrow path of repentance and conversion is the basic constituent of all monastic life, built upon *conversio* as the birth of the New Man in Christ. If this is the prophetic work which can be carried out by men and women from different layers of society, it is truly their vocation which deserves to be regarded as the fulfilment of the prophetic call which the foundress, St. Birgitta, had carried out in her particular way.

We may understand the idea of the nuns' convent in collaboration with the priestly community as an effort of the foundress to express, in accordance with her vision of the Rule, that complementary forms of this prophetic call were united into one institution, the Abbey under the guidance of the abbess, who signifies the Mother of God. According to medieval patterns, men received literary education and could therefore fulfil the prophetic call by preaching, warning, guiding the faithful. Women did not receive such education and could therefore be assumed to fulfil their prophetic call by adopting the way of community perfection in prayer¹⁹. Both convents would be a sign to the surrounding world, including its existing monastic, mendicant and other religious communities, telling it that the prophetic call, above all else, consists in single-minded

¹⁹ Cf. Tore NYBERG, «Storia dell'ordine di Santa Brigida» - «The Development of the Order of St. Birgitta», *Birgitta una Santa svedese - a Swedish Saint*, Roma 1974, pp. 134-179.

realization of complete attachment to God. Ways of collaboration between the male and female communities of such an abbey would not belong directly to the prophetic call of the Order; though perhaps indirectly. As we can see from the transformation of Church discipline by the decisions of the Council of Trent, the appeal of the Birgittine Order was just as great in the seventeenth century as earlier, in spite of changes in structural matters in the set-up of convents. The all pervasive idea in all Birgittine religious life will be the realization of the prophetic call on the most elementary and basic level possible, whereas the organizational superstructure will display features which are more or less bound to the time of their origin.

In this sense, then, it is perfectly understandable that the Rule of the Holy Saviour and the inspiration from St. Birgitta of Sweden were received by Marina de Escobar as a personal invitation to participate in this prophetic call, and that the realization of the first convent in Valladolid was an expression of her being part of and linked to this call²⁰. There was, in fact, in Marina's time, no other mystic and religious woman in the Church, who like St. Birgitta had united her attachment to Christ as the suffering Saviour so strongly and intimately with the idea of a religious Order explicitly willed by Christ as His own Order. Other great female mystics like St. Teresa or St. Catherine of Siena were members of an Order that existed before their time. What St. Birgitta had received could not easily be repeated with the same kind of divine authorization by anyone else, since it had taken place in an epoch when there was an urgent need in the Church for a monastic sign that God is perfect and that God invites us to «be perfect like our heavenly Father is perfect». In the time of the Council of Trent, much of what St. Birgitta had understood to be essential to her Order, was introduced for the universal Church, for example, the strengthening of episcopal supervision over religious life. The widespread wish of the reformers of the fifteenth century to see religious of all types confined to the service of God in their own place instead of having them wander around from place to place, exposed to all types of unnecessary temptations, had received its expression in Birgitta's strict rules for perpetual enclosure, yet combined with an extreme openness to those crowds of visitors and pilgrims that the Birgittine monastic church was designed for. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we see this type of observance being met with full acceptance in all Catholic societies of Europe.

²⁰ Cf. the anonymous contribution mentioned in note 1, pp. 656-665, 682-692, 710-719.