

## BIRGITTA OF SWEDEN AND THE DIVINE MYSTERIES OF MOTHERHOOD

St. Birgitta of Sweden is most widely known as the founder of her order *Regula Sanctissimi Saluatoris* and as the “author” of the *Revelaciones S. Birgittae*, the collection of her 700 revelations. Born in 1303 to one of the most politically influential families in Sweden, Birgitta rose to prominence in Swedish aristocratic circles and earned substantial education in theology, history, law and languages. After thirty years of marriage and privileged life and a religious transformation after her husband’s death, she began to follow “full-time” her special call as Christ’s bride and “mouthpiece,” a path that would lead her to leave her considerable possessions and travel to Rome as a poor pilgrim.

Birgitta became known as a prophet who counseled the rich and famous of the time, advising them to reform their lives, bringing unsolicited advice even to emperors (Charles IV) and popes (Clemens VI, Urban V). Using her influential connections and manifest spiritual authority, she strove to end the Hundred Years’ War and to persuade the pope to return to Rome from Avignon (which the pope did soon after her death)—and to win a papal approval for her new monastic rule for women. After her death in 1373, she was swiftly canonized in 1391, not least because of her humanitarian work with the poor and the sick (and prostitutes especially), but predominantly because of her spiritual visions.<sup>1</sup>

Last but not least, this ambitious woman was also a mother. Birgitta’s experiences and role as a mother have distinctively imbued her theology and mysticism, her words and acts. She was a mother in a double sense: physically, she gave birth to eight children and nurtured them to adulthood, some even to their death.<sup>2</sup> Spiritually, she produced children for God through her prophetic messages, calling strayed souls to renounce their wicked ways and return to the righteous life and, most of all, the love of God. She apparently understood her vocation as God’s mouthpiece and the bride of Christ as a form of motherhood. And here she had an exquisite role model: Mary.

A mother herself, Birgitta was extremely devoted to the mother of all mothers. Mary had been Birgitta’s spiritual ideal since her childhood, especially since losing her mother at the age of eleven.<sup>3</sup> In Birgitta’s new calling Mary became even more important as her “mother-in-law” and a fellow spiritual mother. As a token of this devotion, Birgitta’s *Regula* is founded in honor of Mary and for the women (and “adjunct”-men) who follow Mary’s path. Birgitta’s visions demonstrate how Birgitta brings the spiraling medieval devotion to mother Mary to its pinnacle, anticipating the main mariological doctrines of immaculate conception and bodily assumption. Influenced by Mary’s example, Birgitta lets her appreciation of motherhood guide her theological reflections.<sup>4</sup>

Birgitta's exceptionally maternal brand of Marian theology may reflect her own fundamental identity as a mother. Birgitta's positive memories of her own mother may have shaped her understanding not only of motherhood but also of divinity, as she often talks of God as mother.<sup>5</sup>

Birgitta's distinctive theology of motherhood (rare among medieval theologians) can be examined in some of the visions she received on her 1372 pilgrimage to Bethlehem. There the nearly seventy-year-old Birgitta saw the Virgin Mary giving birth to the Son of God. Birgitta's love of Mary had always included a certain curiosity about Mary's labor experience, and this was the climax of her life; the mysteries of incarnation and divine motherhood were being revealed to her. Birgitta's visions recorded in the *Revelations* Book VII, revelations 21-26, can be seen as a tribute to Mary's "godliness" as a mother, to the womb as a channel of divine incarnation and salvation of humankind, and, perhaps even, to the holiness of childbirth and motherhood.<sup>6</sup>

In *Rev. VII:21* Birgitta begins to detail her famous vision that has had a lasting influence on the iconography of Christ's nativity:<sup>7</sup>

When I was at the manger of the lord in Bethlehem, I saw a Virgin, pregnant and most beautiful, clothed in a white mantle and a finely woven tunic through which [from without] I could clearly discern her virginal flesh. Her womb was full and much swollen, for she was now ready to give birth.

It is notable here that, first, Birgitta says she "saw," instead of heard, as she usually describes her revelations; even for her this is a truly remarkable vision. Second, her attention focuses immediately on the feminine instrument of the holy birth, Mary's womb, and she continues to make observations of its physiological changes.<sup>8</sup> Third, she notices Mary's practical preparations. She observes how a dignified old man, obviously Joseph, accompanied Mary to a cave together with an ass and an ox. After tying up the animals, he lit a candle and left—since he was "not to be personally present at the birth." Women clearly dominate the scene where no male intervention is necessary.<sup>9</sup> Then, when alone, the Virgin took off her shoes, veil, and white mantel, and remained dressed only in her tunic and her beautiful golden [!] hair. Then she drew out fine pieces of linen and wool, to clothe the newborn. Thus prepared, the Virgin knelt, facing the east, and with great reverence put herself at prayer.

This was the moment Birgitta had waited for. What did she see?

And so, with raised hands and with her eyes intent on heaven, she [Mary] was as if suspended in an ecstasy of contemplation, inebriated with divine sweetness. And while she was thus in prayer, I saw the One lying in her womb and then move, and then and there, in a moment and the twinkling of an eye, she gave birth to a son, from whom there went out such great and

ineffable light and splendor that the sun could not be compared to it . . .  
(*Rev. VII:21*)

To Birgitta's disappointment, this all happened too fast: "And so sudden and momentary was that manner of giving birth that I was unable to notice or discern how or by what member she was giving birth." She had wanted to see with her own eyes how the future savior would emerge from Mary's womb. Why was that so important? Was that the ultimate evidence of Christ's humanity, or proof of the sanctity of childbirth and, perhaps even, the female body? Nevertheless, the moment is gone.

But yet, at once, I saw the glorious infant lying on earth, naked and glowing in the greatest neatness. His flesh was most clean of all filth and uncleanness. I saw also the afterbirth, lying wrapped very neatly beside him. And then I heard the wonderfully sweet and most dulcet songs of the angels. (*Rev. VII:21*)

Significantly, Birgitta dwells upon the physical details. The afterbirth, the umbilical cord, and the splendid swollen womb, all testify to the physicality of Jesus' birth, and perhaps allow Birgitta to identify with Mary's experience. But simultaneously they become signs of the miracle of Mary's labor. The afterbirth is neatly wrapped. By whom? It is not known. Mary cuts the umbilical cord deftly, and no liquid or blood comes from it. And "[T]he Virgin's womb, which before the birth had been very swollen, at once retracted; and her body then looked wonderfully beautiful and delicate" (*Rev. VII:21*). No wonder Birgitta is in awe; she shares the universal sentiment of all the women who miss their pre-pregnancy figure.

In its tidiness and speediness, Jesus' birth is phenomenal. But what about pain? Birgitta wonders. Did Mary feel the pain she had felt? Here Mary's labor is highly unusual—it is totally painless: "For I gave birth to him with such great exultation and joy of soul," says Mary, "that I felt no discomfort when he went out of my body, and no pain." With her own eyes Birgitta saw how

Not even at the birth was that Virgin changed in color or by infirmity. Nor was there in her any such failure of bodily strength as usually happens in other women giving birth, except that her swollen womb retracted to the prior state in which it had been before she conceived the boy. (*Rev. VII:21*)

This all goes beyond Birgitta's comprehension; she wants to know more, but is told:

And therefore know for a truth that however much human beings, following their human perception, try to assert that my son was born in the common

manner, it is nevertheless more true and beyond any doubt that he was born just as I elsewhere told you and just as you now have seen. (*Rev.* VII:22)

In other words, Birgitta is reminded to focus beyond the human aspects of Christ's birth to what is essential, namely, God's promises. Despite this reminder, however, Birgitta's vision underscores the real physicality of Mary's labor and becoming a mother. Her interest in the natural aspects of Mary's labor experience makes her a "different" theologian: Birgitta knows too much to ignore the physical side, to concentrate only on the spiritual miracle of incarnation. Even if she does not explicitly draw such (to a modern mind) logical conclusions as sanctity of motherhood and the female body, the implications are there. Moreover, her speculation on the incarnation goes beyond theoretical abstraction; she is obviously deeply touched by what she "saw" and could relate to it on an existential level.

Birgitta's description of Mary's childbirth discloses not only her special interests, but also an ambiguity in her doctrine of Mary: on the one hand, Mary is an exemplary, blessed, virtuous human being, but the extraordinary aspects of her labor, for instance, point to her uniqueness. To Birgitta, it is Mary's experiences and role as a mother that make Mary look divine—or at least more than human. In Mary, it seems, the physical and the spiritual come together.<sup>10</sup> It is in the purity of Mary's motherhood that Birgitta sees the beginning of salvation. In her role as a mother, Birgitta suggests, Mary stands next to the Trinity. The Queen of Heaven, the Mother of God is to be respected and loved along with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The link between physical and divine motherhood was evidenced clearly to Birgitta when her own son died and she feared for his soul. One revelation (*Rev.* VII:13) depicts how together with Mary—Mother of Mercy, *mater misericordiae*—Birgitta's tears and prayers scared away devils, made them lose their memory of her son's sins and delivered his soul to heaven: "This was done by his mother's tears and long labors and many prayers," an angel said. So "greatly did her tears please God. . . . Know that now, in heaven, he is called 'Son of Tears.'" This inspired the devil to curse Birgitta. "O what a cursed sow his mother, that she-pig is, who had a belly so expansive that so much water poured into her that her belly's every space was filled with liquid for tears."<sup>11</sup> This underscored the kinship between Mary and Birgitta as well as the power of a mother's tears (cf. Monica and her "son of tears," Augustine).<sup>12</sup>

The Nativity visions, where one might assume the baby Jesus to be the center of attention, also underscore Mary's potency as a mother. For Birgitta, Mary is a powerful, marvelous mother, whose maternal love and care is vital for the defenseless newborn. This maternal power is, of course, expressed with appropriate humbleness and reverence: in *Rev.* VII:21 Birgitta describes how the

Virgin gracefully adored her son: "Welcome my God, my Lord and my Son." After the necessary expression of reverence, though, the roles are reversed, and the mother becomes essential to the newborn who needs her care to survive:

And then the boy, crying and, as it were, trembling from the cold and hardness of the ground where he lay, rolled a little and extended its limbs, seeking to find refreshment and his mother's favor. His mother took him in her hands and pressed him to her breast, and with her cheek and breast warmed him with great joy and tender maternal compassion. Then she wrapped the baby carefully in the linen and wool clothes she had prepared.<sup>13</sup>

Diverging from the prevailing father-centric notions of parenthood, Birgitta envisions mothers as more than just vessels for sperm, or in Mary's case, for the Spirit; she emphasizes the mother's authority over the child, even in their salvation.<sup>14</sup> She also cherishes the intimate bond between a child and a mother, taking delight in envisioning Mary nursing her newborn, just like any other mother (Book V: rev. 4). Her speculation about Mary's motherhood raises, implicitly, a question about the line between sacred and flesh, divine and human, and portrays Mary the mother as the bridge between the two.

It is easy to see why Mary is prominent in Birgitta's theology. Birgitta's God is the breastfed Christ, whom she got to know intimately along with his mother Mary and whose appreciation of his mother is apparent in Birgitta's visions. The example of mother Mary, who dominates Birgitta's visions and spirituality, shaped Birgitta's call as Christ's bride and inspired her to work for the salvation of humankind, God's children. Birgitta's legacy is manifold, but in terms of motherhood and its theological or spiritual appreciation and applications, Birgitta's visions of Mary's celestial motherhood, together with her own experiences of motherhood, implicitly behold the blessedness of all mothers.<sup>15</sup>

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1 On Birgitta's life, see *Vita S. Birgittae*; a good English introduction by Harris-Nyberg-Kezel 1990; a classic biography by Fogelklou 1973; pioneering works by Klockars 1966, 1971, 1976. This essay is based on a chapter in my dissertation on Birgitta's theology; see bibliography Stjerna 1994.

2 On Birgitta's children, see Klockars 1976, 93-100.

3 Mary, who appeared to Birgitta soon after her mother's death, helped Birgitta, e.g., with her embroidery work; according to another legend, the 7-year-old Birgitta experienced once the virgin offering her a crown; see Klockars 1976, 36-39; *Acta et Processus*, 76.

4 On Mary's immaculate conception, see *Rev.* VI:55, 49; I:9, 10, 26; V:12, 10; on her immaculate conception and eternal virginity, *Rev.* VII:25-26.

5 Klockars 1976, 35, 38-39; on Christ/God as mother, see *Rev.* II:15; VI:19.

6 Mary said to Birgitta. "Be attentive, oh daughter: I am the queen of heaven. Because you love me with a love so immense, I therefore announce to you that you will go on a pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem at the time when it pleases my son. From there you will go to Bethlehem; and there I shall show you, at the very spot, the whole manner in which I gave birth to that same son of mine, Jesus Christ; for so it has pleased him." *Rev. VII:1* [English translation here and in the following notes by A. Kezel 1990]. See also *Rev. VII:6* and *Vita* 69.

7 See Kezel 1990, note 770; Warner 1983, 183.

8 See *Rev. V:12* and *Rev. 4; VII:21-23*.

9 Whereas the idea of a cave as the place of Jesus' birth was centuries old, the lighted candle is a "distinctive and enduring 'Birgittine' detail in later nativity scenes" says Kezel 1990, notes 774-75.

10 For instance, Birgitta conveys how Mary had sworn her virginity to God, being immaculate in thought, word, and deed, and Joseph treated Mary as his lady, not as his wife, as the virginity of Mary should remain unharmed forever. But then, when Mary's womb got swollen from the Holy Spirit, Joseph got scared, seeing himself not worthy to serve such a *pure mother*; an angel had to instruct him to stay and serve Mary with charity (*Rev. VII:25*)

11 The devils asked Mary why she "drove away all demons from the presence of his [Birgitta's son's] body at his soul's exit so that none of us could cause any horror there or strike any fear into him." Mary answered: "I did this in return for the ardent charity that he had toward my body and in return for the joy that he had from the fact that I am the Mother of God." Furthermore, "When his mother first understood that his will was wavering toward sin, she immediately rushed to his aid with works of mercy and daily prayers. . . . Because of those works of his mother, he finally obtained a godly fear so that, as often as he fell into sin, he immediately hurried to make his confession." An angel said, "This was done by his mother's tears and long labors and many prayers. God sympathized with her sighs. . . . His mother's tears have plundered you [devil] and have burst the sack and have destroyed the writing. So greatly did her tears please God." *Rev. VII:13*.

12 See *Rev. VII:13*. On Mary's and all mothers' power over devils, *Rev. VII:28*; on the tradition of mothers' tears, see Atkinson 1991, 173-79, 183. See *Rev. I:8-10* on virginity and motherhood.

13 Birgitta glorifies Mary in her motherhood and even more so in her humility, expressed in her prostration before her child, says Warner 1983, 183.

14 *Rev. VII:13, 28*; see Atkinson 1991, 173-79, 183. On Greek and medieval views on birth, parenthood and father-centrism, see Atkinson 1991, 46-52; Nicholas 1985, 8-10, 144, 121.

15 See Borresen 1991 on feminist interpretations of Birgitta's images of God and Mary; also chapter 3 in Stjerna 1994.

