

## “The Wisdom of the Beguines, Europe-wide”

I am so delighted to be with you and to spend time with our beguines across history as well as our beguines of today and into the future. While I had heard rumor years ago that beguines might be emerging again, I’ve been delighted to “meet” over zoom and now in person with modern beguines. It is no accident that the beguine movement has emerged again.

I am grateful to recent scholars who challenged the tired story they received in their graduate studies. Researchers now place the beguines and their communities and experiences squarely at the center of analysis. They have gone back through original source documentation with a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion,’ to liberate women’s contributions to and influence on the church and culture around them. I also want to mention some of the recent challenges in restoring the reality of the beguine movement across the centuries and of liberating beguine history from tired stereotypes.

Tired histories placed an overreliance on hostile clerical sources which denigrated beguines—their independent lifestyle (meaning, not under the control of a cleric) and their scholarship. An overemphasis on a few sources which demonstrated a conscious resistance to the institutional church, particularly the local hierarchy, and posits rebellious independence as characteristic of beguine life. Not necessarily so as the relationship between beguines and the local church was much more nuanced. Scattered archival evidence documents broad and wide-ranging support.

Secondly tired histories mistakenly thought binary categories such as wife/nun, lay/religious, or orthodox/heretical put beguines “in their place” within European society. This flattened the intricate multiplicity of beguine socio-spiritual networks. And tired histories perpetuated the myth of a “late-medieval crisis” model of European history, which included a story of persecution and disappearance from the historical scene for beguines. Not accurate.

Scholars speak of “axial ages,” which are periods in human history of major upheaval. I liken this to God’s “divine rear tine tiller,” a large earth moving piece of equipment that rips up hardened soil. I believe we have been in an age where God has again “expressed dismay” at our choices and has been taking the divine tine tiller and ripping up our attitudes, bigotries, assumptions, addictions (especially to war), and unhealthy social and church structures. Axial ages bring radical change to the whole of human culture – a paradigm shift.

Jesus Christ was born into an axial age (and brought so much more, at least in potential; potential because “we are to be what Christ was” but we too often fall short). Benedict of Nursia was born into an axial age and his followers (especially women) birthed a vein of transformation to the European continent.

European society on approach to the new millennium was much like ours. Women were being silenced from public ministry. Islam was “upsetting” the Europe they knew. Priests were increasingly uneducated and ignorant of Scripture or even of

ecclesial Latin (they didn't understand the words they mumbled at Mass) and attempts at a homily were dismal. Problems with simony abounded. Wars kept erupting, crops failed, the economy was moving from bartering to coinage, which left many on rural farms slipping into extreme poverty. And the Church was increasingly institutional, excluding the laity.

At the year 1000 C.E. another Axial age was born from which our beguines emerged. The church and society "knew" Jesus would return in the year 1000, but he did not! From farmers and fishermen, women around the hearth and in the village square – all across society, but especially those in the lower classes – asked themselves why Jesus did not return. And they concluded that it was because the church and society (they really did not separate these two in ages past) was too corrupt; Jesus was disgusted.

And from the ground up, a spirit of renewal swept across Europe. A call to repentance and reform emerged in small groups. When parish priests were too corrupt or simply deaf to the call to reform, people found like-minded souls and sought new ways to live. They were finding a life of prayer and literate people who would read the gospels to them.

And each reform movement looks to the examples of the early church in Jerusalem: how did they live? This image of how the early followers of Jesus may have lived is called the *Vita Apostolica* – the life of the apostles. Thus, they began sharing what little they owned in common, met for prayer (which took diverse expressions), preached both the call to repentance and reminders of God's

unquestioned love for all, and began an outreach to the destitute. An apocalyptic element emerged as well. Some voices claimed that the end times were near. People began leaving their farms and businesses, wandering the cities and countryside preaching repentance before Jesus returned. This disrupted the economy which angered the wealthy (we have always had the 1% and the 99%). Leaders of these informal apocalyptic movements were often arrested for heresy—sometimes for truly unusual teachings that contradicted scripture and sometimes they were inspiring people to abandon farms and village trades with disrupted the tax base and the profit margins of the 1%.

Remember: The history of the church is a history of reform movements. True reform is from the ground up and inside out. It was the poor and marginalized who were and are most effective at transforming Christianity

Among the wandering preachers, new religious orders emerged: the Carthusians in 1084, the Camaldolese in 1095, and the Cistercians in 1098 as reformed expressions of monasticism. Benedictine houses also heard and embraced the call to reform and revitalize their way of life. Francis/Clare and the Franciscans, and Dominic/Catherine of Siena and the Dominicans emerge. Each charism focused on preaching reform, deepening of one's spiritual life, and especially attempting to reform/improve the education level of the clergy. However, along with Cluny, each Order refused to admit women. Further, male religious leaders and bishops sought to control women—fearing their voice and wanting to control them,

but especially a misogynist belief that women were responsible for all men's sexual misconduct, and thus our sexuality needed to be contained and controlled.

Our beguines emerged from this growing reform movement with its many expressions. Beguines erupted across Europe around 1200 CE. This was not a slow spread across Europe, rather the Holy Spirit seems to have inspired women to create this new way of life all at once.

While beguines considered Marie d'Oignies (d. 1213) their "founder," she was not a beguine but considered herself a hermit living with the community of lepers she and her husband established. She spent her last years in seclusion and prayer in the midst of the leper community. Jacques de Vitry was a close friend of the beguines in and around Liège. He had left his post at the University of Paris in order to learn from Marie d'Oignies as well as some of the beguines. He became one of their early observers and vocal supporters.

When he was made bishop and then cardinal, his travels across Europe brought him in contact with other communities of women who bore names such as *bizzoche*, *beata*, *pinzochere*, *penitentia*, and *mantellate*. Yet de Vitry was adamant these were "beguine by many names" as the lifestyles and ministries were so similar. Some of the creative research moves beyond simply texts or legal documents to art history, material culture studies, and archeology studies.

Originally meant as an insult, the word ‘beguine,’ which meant a ‘two-faced liar’ or “mumbler,” soon became a compliment. An insult because it was “obvious” that women were simply not capable of preaching or teaching or debating fine points of theology. Thus, were simply acting like fools. A “mumbler” was a reference to their early expression of prayer that included dancing, singing, and ecstatic expressions of prayer. A compliment because it became clearly evident that beguines were intelligent, and their preaching and teaching made scripture come alive, and the spiritual journey understandable. And a compliment because their outreach to young and elderly women was gift to the local community. Tired histories claimed the beguine movement occurred due to a lack of eligible men to marry due to the crusades and other wars. No. These women were not lacking “marriage opportunities” but clearly sought to serve the gospel as they felt called. They were also free to leave in order to marry if her family needed a political or economic alliance.

Court beguinages (in Flemish, begijnhof/begijnhoven) were “cities within cities” and are the most famous of beguine communities. About 20% of beguine communities were these court beguinages. The beguines who built and expanded these court beguinages sought to live without interruption from the city around them—not about hiding from the world. Yet court beguinages provided safe space for the young women coming in from the countryside and in danger of sliding into prostitution (this was, in reality, human trafficking). The beguines of Venice specifically targeted freeing women from sex slavery and moved them out of

Venice and into a new life). Beguines sought to bring them into their community and train them in skills they could take with them if they chose not to join— such as carding, spinning, and weaving wool, silk making, bee keeping or beer making.

Court beguinages welcomed people coming in for market days with their wares who needed a place to sleep and to prevent theft (especially of livestock) or assault. The gates closed at dusk and visitors slept out in the open courtyard unhindered. Women entering a beguinage could bring their children with them, and court beguinages often accepted orphans to be raised among them. They educated the local children who, when not in classes, could be seen playing among the trees. Besides schooling these children, beguines established ‘scholas’ where they trained children to sing.

Each beguine community wrote their own ‘rule’ of observance, which clarified how they would live together; pray together; a process for receiving new members and for when someone needs or wants to leave; how they would take care of the poor; and how they would choose a new magistra (in Spain, ‘madre’). There was diversity as well as commonality among rules. On a playful note, when a woman completed her trial period (usually a year) and she is accepted as a full member, she was expected to put on a banquet for her beguine community! Many beguine communities, and especially the larger court beguinages, had something they called a *Table of the Holy Ghost* which was a fund that all members were expected to contribute and served as their fund for caring for the poor.

Most beguines (about 70%) in western Europe lived in houses they purchased, and when they could, purchased houses near each other with four to eight beguines in the house (in Italy, homes were referred to as *casa sancta* and in Spain, *beaterios*). Elderly, indigent women were an unfortunate sight across Europe, including women with no home anymore. Poverty too often forced adult children to choose between feeding children or mother. And too often homes became too crowded. The elderly women found themselves out on the street. Beguines valued having space in their homes to welcome these women. Those beguines with more money purchased homes near them solely in order to house elderly women with the beguines supporting and caring for them. Within court beguinages a dormitory-style building was built to house elderly women, indigent women, and poor beguines.

While court beguinages tended to build chapels within their beguinages and hired their own chaplain, most beguines living in these individual homes met at their preferred church for morning and evening prayer, and for mass when it was celebrated. In most cases the working relationship between parish priest and beguines was a true partnership.

It was a practice in medieval times for a symbol for one or all four of the gospel writers to be carved on the pulpit (an angel, a winged lion, a winged ox, or an eagle). In the chapel of St. Catherine's in the court beguinage in Diest, the beguines chose instead four women they considered the proclaimers of the gospel:



Mary of Magdala, the martyrs Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Agnes, and Abbess Begga of Andenne. While beguines met for morning and evening prayer—mass when available—beguines were noted for an expressive form of prayer that involved dancing and singing.

Recent research on beguines in eastern Europe, especially around Prague, reveals some similarities and differences. Beguines rarely owned their own homes. Most were owned by “benefactors” and only one to two generations of beguines lived in those homes before they were evicted. These benefactors were their financial support, and a priest was assigned to be their leader. Some of their contemporaries insisted that women who earned their own income and owned their own homes were specifically not beguines. They were. Dependence seemed to partially define beguines in eastern Europe. There are a few exceptions to this. The similarities were in ministries: outreach to the poor, orphans, hospital care, education, and home visits.

In the Scandinavian countries the beguines tended not to be found in urban locations but rather in the countryside and usually near a men’s monastery. They maintained their independence and the ministry was to the rural population. In Spain beatas were both urban and rural. When they lived together in small groups, their homes were known as beaterios. Many lived with their families. Yet, like their northern counterparts, they preached and taught, and provided spiritual guidance. They were renowned for their hospitals

and outreach to women prisoners. Beatas provided education and job skills to women in prison.

Beguines commissioned their own psalters, dictated what they wanted in their psalter (besides the psalms) that often included their own compositions of hymns, prayers and poetry. Some beguines earned their living by copying manuscripts and illuminating psalters and other manuscripts for a living.

Many beguines were brilliant businesswomen. They were successful in creating wool— from raw fleece through woven and finished woolens to handmade garments – that that were superior in quality to the local guilds while selling their product at a lower price. This angered the guilds who refused beguines entrance into the guild. Often beguines bought the fleece from England and sold back the finished wool—because of the hostility of the guilds. This has proven true with beguines who wove silks (Paris and Germany) or linens (Italy and southern France) as well.

Some beguines, particularly in the Low Countries, northern Italy, and southern France were astute in financial matters, including coinage exchange, providing letters of credit, selling annuities, and making loans. Some beguines translated Scripture into their local vernacular so that those they taught and preached to could understand the sacred texts. Art historians now point out that beguines, particularly in northern Europe, created a unique style of pieta, directing the carver to suit their own vision.

Countess Joan (d. 1244) and Countess Margaret (d. 1280) of Flanders and Hainault along with some noble women of northern

Italy recognized that an educated population vastly improved the economy. They invested large amounts of their estate, collaborating with beguines, in teaching reading, writing, and mathematics to girls and boys. Many beguines across Europe joined in this endeavor and the 13<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a vast increase in literacy levels among the populace.

Beguines established hospitals (sometimes called hospices), extending healthcare and journeying with the destitute poor and dying. In the example of Marie d'Oignies, beguines also created communities with lepers of which they were members. They built chapels and individual huts for themselves and the lepers. As their health permitted, lepers joined in the work that supported them. While healthy people would not draw near, these beguines who gave support and meaning to the lives of the lepers were held in high regard.

In Provence region of France, Douceline de Digne<sup>1</sup> (d. 1274) cared for the poor and sick from her father's home. In 1238 she made a commitment as a beguine. As increasing numbers of women associated themselves with her, she established a beguine community near the Roubaud River outside of the town walls of Hyères in 1241 and a second house within Hyères closer to the Franciscan church that the beguines attended. Around 1250 she established a beguine community in Marseilles where she lived, leading both communities, until her death. Like a number of beguines, she enjoyed a rich interior life with ecstatic vision. Like

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Life of Saint Douceline of Digne* in the bibliography in *Wisdom of the Beguines*.

other mystics of the Middle Ages, visions were never just for oneself. They were meant to be pondered and shared with those around them.

Little is known about the specifics of the life of Hadewijch of Brabant (c. 1200s). Scholars are confident that she was a beguine who came from an aristocratic background as she was familiar with chivalry and courtly love poetry. She knew Latin and French, but wrote in Middle Dutch. Her knowledge of scripture and the writings of many theologians was extensive. She is considered one of the finest medieval poets. Her letters, poems and visions have survived.

*God be with you. God will teach you the true ways of agape Love. Your part is to be vigilant and discerning in all you do.*

*Consider your journey. Remember who you are. Be firm in your faith.*

*If you earnestly desire eternal life and do not follow your emotions but God's will, you will possess everything His love desires for you. So live in joyful hope. Be utterly confident that God will allow you to love Him with that great love with which He loves Himself.<sup>2</sup>*

Claire of Assisi (d. 1253) claimed the life of a penitencia (beguine), wanting to follow with Francis and companions to preach conversion and serve the poor. Due to the prominence of her family, her dream was eventually thwarted and she with her companions

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<sup>2</sup> See *Hadewijch: The Complete Works and Incandescence* (now entitled *A Little Daily Wisdom*), in the bibliography in *Wisdom of the Beguines*.

were forced behind a grille. She made the best of her “desert.” To Agnes of Prague, she writes:

*What you hold, may you always hold. What you do, may you always do and never abandon. But with swift pace, light step, and unswerving feet, so that even your steps stir up no dust, go forward securely, joyfully and swiftly, on the path of prudent happiness, believing nothing, agreeing with nothing which would dissuade you from this resolution or which would place a stumbling block for you on the way, so that you may offer your vows to the Most High in the pursuit of that perfection to which the Spirit of the Lord has called you.*<sup>3</sup>

In the city of Magdeburg, the magistra of one of the beguinages lived Mechthild of Magdeburg (d. @1282). Mechthild lived a very public life encouraging people to experience God’s love for them and to take their spiritual lives seriously. She also publicly condemned corrupt clerics (whom she referred to as smelly goats) and the oppression of ordinary folk by heavy-handed leadership. The bishop in 1261 revoked the right of beguines to self-governance and placed under the authority of local clerics. In increasing poor health and enemies she’d created, Mechthild moved to the Benedictine monastery at Helfta where she completed her manuscript, entitled *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. She

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<sup>3</sup> From Claire’s Second Letter to Agnes. See *Claire of Assisi: Early Documents*, Regis Armstrong, New City Press, among other sources.

considered these seven books, but we know them today as one book.

*Be kind when meeting hatred.*

*Be loving in the face of cruelty.*

*Be pure and not guilty.*

*Be ready for all you might receive.*

*Love nothingness.*

*Flee somethingness.*

*Stand alone and go to no one.*

*Never be too busy.*

*Be free of all things.*

*You should let the captives go and imprison those who are free.*

*Restore the sick and yet have nothing for yourself.*

*You must drink the water of suffering*

*And ignite the fire of love with the kindling of virtue.*

*Then you're living in the true desert.<sup>4</sup>*

Near Assisi, Angela of Foligno (d. 1309) lived informally with a group of women, embracing poverty, serving the poor, and dedicating hours to prayer and cultivating the interior life. She left us her *Memorial* and *Instructions* as well as her *Visions*.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Mechthild of Magdeburg, Flowing Light of the Godhead* in the bibliography of *Wisdom of the Beguines*.

*If you want faith, pray. If you want hope, pray. If you want kindness, pray. If you want poverty, pray. If you want obedience, pray. If you want integrity, pray. If you want humility, pray. If you want gentleness, pray. If you want strength, pray. If you want virtue, pray.*

*Like this: Always read the Book of Life which is the life of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Don't skim this book. Let it penetrate you while you read it. It'll will teach you everything you need to know, no matter your present circumstances. It will fill you with a burning fire that will be your greatest consolation.*

*And the more you pray, the more you will be enlightened. As you pray, you'll see God's goodness more deeply. And the deeper and more excellent your spiritual insight, the more you'll love.*

*The more you love, the more joy you'll take in all you see, and the greater your joy, the greater your understanding. Then you'll reach the completeness of Light because you'll understand that you can't understand anything at all.<sup>5</sup>*

Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) lived as a mantellate (beguine) ministering alongside other mantellates. Remaining with women who joined her in her family home, she began a public ministry calling priests and even the pope to reform their lives. She left a large body of visions (written down as a dialogue) and letters.

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<sup>5</sup> See *Angela of Foligno, Complete Works* in the bibliography in *Wisdom of the Beguines*.

*In self-knowledge you will find the gentle mercy of the Holy Spirit, the aspect of God that gives and is nothing but love. Whatever the Spirit does is done for love. You'll find the Spirit's movement of love within your own soul because our will is nothing but love, and its every affection and movement comes from nothing but love.*

*And within the cell of your soul, you'll find the whole of God. God gives us such sweetness, renewing and consoling that—no matter what may happen—we cannot be shaken. So be glad. Be happy!<sup>6</sup>*

Bizzoche Francesca Ponziani (d. 1440) or Frances of Rome ran a hospital from her funds during one of the plagues to hit Rome. Women gathered around her. Both her living example during plagues and her visions and subsequent teachings attracted these women. In her last years her followers remained with her, but they became Benedictine Oblates with the Olivetan monks. She is now the patron saint of Benedictine Oblates.

Bizzoche Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510) wrote *Purgation and Purgatory*, and *The Spiritual Dialogue* which presents a very positive view of the process of purgation (growth into the image and likeness of God). Her teachings heavily influenced Teresa of Avila in the coming century.

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<sup>6</sup> From her Letters. See *Incandescence* (now A Little Daily Wisdom), pg. 242.



*As for heaven, I guess you've noticed, God puts no doors  
there.*

*No, God didn't. And don't you wonder why?*

*It's because whoever wants to enter heaven, does.*

*That's how God's love works.*

*All-merciful, standing there with His arms wide open,*

*God's waiting—this very moment—*

*to embrace us and take us into His splendid beauty  
and kindnesses.<sup>7</sup>*

Beguines were known as “funeral specialists.” Fear of death, but especially fear that the dying person would not be buried in sanctified ground, was real. People believed that if they didn't receive the Last Rites and be buried in sanctified ground, they—regardless of the quality of their life—they would burn in hell for all eternity. Beguines (in pairs) would be requested to come and sit with the dying person, praying with them until death. Then they would pray the Office of the Dead, clean the body, and journey with the coffin to witness the burial. This was considered an act of compassion. Today we have ‘death doulas’ who perform a similar ministry.

Beguine spirituality carried a purgatorial piety. With the *vita apostolica* interest in what happens after this life and questions around ‘how could a sinful person’ enter the presence of God grew intense. And a notion of purgatory as another state of existence

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<sup>7</sup> See *Catherine of Genoa, Purgation and Purgatory, The Spiritual Dialogue* in the bibliography in *Wisdom of the Beguines*.

(remember Dante Alighieri's brilliant *Divine Comedy*) flourished. Beguines were certainly influenced by this, and many of their visions (which were a form of preaching) centered around who they saw in hell (Popes ☺, Bishops☺, and kings ☺) and, when felt so moved, prayed souls through purgatory into heaven. Beguines were experienced by their neighbors as being powerful intercessors.

During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries (and beyond) beguines lived in a time of powerplays between kings and popes. While kings had armies, popes had the power of the sacraments. Interdict, in which the Pope denied the administration of the sacraments and could deny burial in sacred ground until the king buckled under the pressure. Interdict might be imposed for years. So, when mass was no longer celebrated, the beguines filled the void. They preached on street corners, taught through puppet shows, and in small gatherings. Many of their writings—especially those called “dialogues”—were meant to be performed before listeners. And their preaching was popular. Beguines met with people for what we now call ‘spiritual direction’ or ‘spiritual companionship.’ They presented an all-loving and compassionate God. They instilled the awareness that God is present everywhere and desires a relationship with each person. They expressed diverse and playful images of God, such as ‘music,’ ‘fire of love,’ and ‘the All in All.’ They visited the sick.

Like the Dominicans and Franciscans, beguines pressed for a higher standard of preaching by priests. They actively promoted their favorite preachers and condemned the sloppy. In Paris one of the first universities, now known as the Sorbonne and named after

John Sorbon who donated his library to the new university, was located near the court beguinage. The beguines became a “gate-keeper” for those men studying theology and hoping to be awarded the title ‘magister’ (a Master of Theology). Men were required to preach at the beguinage and the women’s evaluation determined whether they would receive their hat or return for more practice. Interesting note: the leader of beguine communities in northern Europe were referred to as “magistra,” which is the feminine for a Master of Theology.

Beguines were great promoters of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, more so than most priests of this time (a reminder that this time period is pre-Reformation). Part of their reasoning was that the Incarnation (God-Become-Human) affirmed the worthiness of our bodies. And the bodies of women and the poor were considered as lacking value or importance. And in recognizing the Real Presence they were recognizing the value of our bodies. This was radical thinking, especially regarding women’s bodies. And this was a form of nonviolent protest against society’s devaluing of human life.

Thus, beguines reporting powerful visions of Christ during the elevation of the consecrated host at mass (visions were never a private matter but were a form of preaching). Beguines had grown alarmed that European Christians had lost a sense of the sacred during mass. Too frequently the laity did not understand the words the priest was speaking or chanting at the altar; too frequently the

priest did not understand the Latin he was trying to pronounce; and poor or non-existent teaching left the laity not understanding what was happening at the consecration. Simple people had been experiencing serious disconnect between their private devotions and what was occurring up on the altar.

Beguines backed up their powerful preaching with their lived example. During mass and when the priest raised the host after the prayers of consecration for the congregation to respond with an “amen,” beguines would be particularly focused with a “contemplative gazing” toward the consecrated host. Their example served as a kind of “wake-up call” to their followers that what had happened at the altar, through their own prayers, was extraordinary and personally significant. Beguines were setting an example of reverencing Jesus’ presence as well as teaching a truth that was powerful and empowering to them.

Beguine Juliana of Mont-Cornillon (d. 1258) had a repeated vision of the full moon shining but with a rupture. Christ revealed to her that the rupture was the lax attitude toward the eucharist. He requested she create the Feast of Corpus Christi or the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ to honor His real presence. She preached her visions and call, seeking out bishops who would listen. Finally, Bishop Robert de Toroto of Liège ordered that the Feast be honored in his diocese, which eventually spread. Quickly he was solely credited for this feast and only slowly is Juliana now being restored as the founder. Agnes Blannbekin (d. 1315) of Vienna preached her received visions through the lens of

the liturgical year. She also frequented daily mass and bowed as she passed a church toward the altar.

Many find it difficult to relate to many of the expressions of medieval beguine spirituality. Scholars tell us that since the “Enlightenment” we have lost our capacity for a rich imagination. We are too influenced by hard sciences (while Carl Jung began to change this for us, it’s the language around contemporary science as well as our prophets trying to restore this capacity for us). Beguines emerged during the age of the troubadour and courtly love poetry. Beguines, both through preaching and teaching as well as in their writings, used language that expressed passion—often sexual—for God. Affectively experiencing Jesus’ life story was important to them. They meditated on the Good Friday Passion. Some, such as Elisabeth of Spalbeek (d. 1316), literally acted out all the parts of the Passion, both as devotion and as a means to teach their neighbors. They consistently affirmed that each person has an interior life worth attending to. Yet they did not consider individuality in the way we do; it was both individual and communal.

Beguines had a deep devotion to the Holy Spirit. And at times their teaching and preaching sounded as if they considered the church’s sacraments—when one had reached a level of spiritual maturity—as unnecessary. The Inquisition, particularly in France, Germany, and Spain pursued beguines/beatas for interrogation and trial. Many Spanish beatas were under suspicion of identifying

too deeply with the Holy Spirit—this went on for years. The beatas always lived under a cloud of suspicion.

Marguerite Porete, ‘a martyr for truth,’ was executed in 1310 for her continued preaching that we know as *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. She was a wandering beguine but had friends at many beguinages where she stayed when in the area. Marguerite taught, among other things, that a person could become so immersed in the presence of God that they would no longer need the church or her sacraments (a threat to the church’s power base).

*Love says, “God commands us to love Him with all our heart and soul and strength, and God commands us to love ourselves as we should, and then our neighbors as ourselves.*

*“First we are to love God with all our heart. That means our thoughts should always be in God.*

*“We must also love God with all our soul. That means until death we must speak nothing but the truth.*

*“We must also love God with all our strength. That means everything we do each day, we do only for the Lord.*

*“We must also love ourselves as we’re commanded. That means we must focus—not on our own self-interests—but on God’s will.*

*“We must also love our neighbors as ourselves. That means we shouldn’t act, think, or speak towards our*

*neighbors in any way that we wouldn't want them to act, think, or speak towards us.*

*“These instructions are necessary for salvation and healing. Nobody can gain grace any other way.*

An aside: a century or so later, her book was still in circulation but was attributed to an unknown male writer and considered worthy. Marguerite was only recently proven to be the author—by Italian scholar Romana Guarnieri (a woman) in 1946.

When Pope Boniface VIII issued the papal bull *Periculoso* in 1298 which ordered all women religious to be placed behind a grill (men seeking to control women) and when beguines were condemned at the Council of Vienne in 1311, the movement continued undeterred. Pope Clement's issues with the beguines was their preaching and debating aspects of theology with theologians—and it was not unusual for the woman to press her perspective, daring to disagree with the theologian. While some church leaders condemned them as heretics or whores (and lusted after their wealth), they enjoyed the support of many bishops and priests because of the great good they did for the populace. Town Aldermen were their great defenders because the women refused Church exemptions from taxes. A wise political move on their part.

Instead, clerics and neighbors simply avoided the word “beguine” and instead began using terms like during periods when the label ‘beguine’ was as easily associated with negative as positive

features, those many other names (sister, virgin, poor woman, soul sister, grey sister, and even nun) offered women and their supporters a path through the tangled net of papal definitions. Sources suggest that contemporaries, whether consciously or not, reinforced and protected a local 'beguinishness' defined not by language but by habitus: flexible membership, voluntary chastity, some degree of mobility, humble service in prayer, local social service, and recognizable garb.

For those historians who made assumptions and didn't pay attention to details thought beguines died out (within the last year a bright Dominican sister, a canon lawyer, expressed surprise to me as her canon law professors claimed they died out in 1311—this is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century!).

In some regions of northern and eastern Europe, 15<sup>th</sup> Century beguinages were more often houses of shelter than religious communities, no longer involved in theological disputes or able to support themselves. While it is true that the later medieval context witnessed a growth of institutions for social care, this depiction undervalues the charitable nature of earlier houses, the spiritual dimensions of later houses, and the fact that the association between beguines and work varied substantially by region.

With the 15<sup>th</sup> & 16 centuries documentation demonstrates that more beguine homes were purchased by families who served as patrons for the beguines who lived there. These beguine communities agreed to certain stipulations much like other beguine rules and the ministry seemed to be care for the sick and indigent,



elderly frail and in return were financed by their patron. Some of these supported communities also educated children in the beguine home.

Our beguines were simply embedded in their local communities and were deeply valued (always there are some exceptions in history). They also survived because their way of life was flexible—both of mobility and duration of membership—and they collaborated with those who would work with them. Surviving rules from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries speak to the communities' long-term institutional survival.

As did their townsfolk beguines had to negotiate some challenging times: the Reformation and Counter-Reformation with edicts of the Council of Trent that were harsh for women, and the terrible Wars of Religion. Economies were also compromised by the 'little ice age' besides the devastation of war. Beguinages were destroyed or stolen from them by hostile political players. Beguinages found it necessary for survival to accept somewhat more formal structures to their communities. By necessity she shared leadership with their chaplain. Many found title to their properties seized and they rented back their homes, which provided towns with much needed funds (repairs necessitated by the devastation of war). Beside the magistra was the 'infirmary magistra,' whose importance lay in her great responsibility to both oversee the infirmary/hospital/hospice and the beguines who nursed the patients as well as the largest financial portfolio—due to

‘pious donations’—that supported the infirmary. The portfolio required management of rents, properties, and farms, which meant she had outside staff to assist her. She was also responsible for the community administrative center and guest quarters.

The church magistra oversaw maintenance of the church, its decorations, sacristan supplies, and managed the calendar of religious observances. Interestingly the schola of the beguinages held its own funds to support themselves; these funds were payments for performing at outside religious celebrations and events. And the ‘poor table’ magistra (earlier known as the Table of the Holy Ghost) oversaw the almshouse and care of any indigent beguines. The infirmary and the ‘poor table’ served as the social network for the town.

As the seventeenth century progressed bishops claimed the right to appoint the chaplain to the beguinages rather than the past centuries of practice where the beguine community chose their own. While most magistra-chaplain relationships grew into a healthy partnership, there are some documented cases of extreme abuse by priests and protestations by the magistra to the bishop were ignored.

So, what happened to our beguines? Following the French Revolution, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Secularization damaged the beguine movement. Their homes, if they survived the revolution and Napoleon’s armies, were stolen from them so politicians could give away beguine homes and contents as political bribes. But some did

manage to regroup and make homes elsewhere. In the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century some devout wealthy families reendowed beguinages or built new ones and the movement seemed to make a turnaround. Then the First World War began a true 'death knell and beguinages began to disappear. A group of French Benedictines moved in with the last surviving beguines at *Ten Wijngaards* in Bruges and now keep it as a living museum. As you are probably aware, former beguinages are affordable housing. The Catholic University in Louvain purchased the two beguinages, restored them with the exterior as the later beguines knew their homes but the interior are offices and classrooms for the university.

It speaks volumes to me that so many beguinages survived the Franco-Prussian War, the First World War, and the Second World War. They have been trying to get our attention. And now we witness a new 'beguine moment' and movement, one the People of God desperately need right now. You bring a breath of fresh air and new opportunities that your foremothers would be so delighted to see.