

Written in 2013, publication pending

essay for the volume *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, edited by the CTEWC ([www.catholicethics.com](http://www.catholicethics.com))

## **SAINT GERTRUDE OF HELFTA AND THE FORGIVING OF SINS**

### **Abstract:**

In 1179, the III Lateran Council prohibited the abbesses to forgive the sins of the nuns in their communities. Thirty-five years later, in 1215, the IV Lateran Council forced all nuns (abbesses included) to confess their sins once a year to a priest. Seventy years after this issue was clarified in Church Law, Gertrude of Helfta (1256 – 1301/02), saint of the Church and patroness of present day feminine Benedictine noviciates around the world, received from God the mission of forgiving the sins not only of the nuns in her community, but of all those, women and men (priests included), who sought her as their spiritual guide. This paper will analyze the experience of God of Gertrude with a special emphasis in her understanding of personal freedom and subjectivity and her astonishing discovery of the receiving pole in God. I will start placing Gertrude in her historical context and in the peculiar circumstances in which her community developed, and will pause to consider the fact that she is not an isolated figure, but belongs to what it has been known in the specialized scholarship as ‘the circle of women theologians from Helfta’. The analysis of Gertrude’s experience and thought will bring to the fore certain key-questions for theological anthropology and for ecclesiology today about the understanding of personal freedom in the believing subject and about the role of Church Law and the leadership of women.

Teresa Forcades i Vila

## SAINT GERTRUDE OF HELFTA AND THE FORGIVING OF SINS

*By your grace, I acquired the certitude that all those who, wishing to have access to your sacrament, restrain themselves because of the fear of a burdened consciousness, if they seek humbly to be strengthened by me, the smallest of your servants, on account of their humility your unlimited tenderness will judge them worthy of your sacrament, and they will truly receive the fruits of eternal life; and you added, that if your justice did not allow somebody to be justified, you will not allow that one to humble her/himself seeking my counsel. <sup>1</sup>*

‘They will truly receive the fruits of eternal life’. So binds saint Gertrude of Helfta the most sacred and heavenly gifts with her own actions on earth. And she does so explicitly in no ambiguous terms,

*You also certified to me, most unworthy, that all those who with penitent heart and humbled spirit, come to me seeking counsel about their faults, according to the degree my word declares their faults to be more or less serious, thus will You, God of mercy, judge them more or less guilty or innocent; and that, by your grace, they will henceforth obtain your help so that their defect will not impinge on them as dangerously as before. <sup>2</sup>*

Dom Pierre Doyère, Benedictine monk of the Abbey of Saint-Paul de Wisques, translator and editor of the works of Gertrude in 1968, deemed it necessary to introduce a footnote right after these bold affirmations of Gertrude in order to clarify that the nun had not been granted by God ‘any kind of sacramental role, but the gifts of enlightenment and persuasion to help a

fearful consciousness come to terms with the problems of guilt and forgiveness' <sup>3</sup>. Was Dom Pierre right? Did the nun Gertrude, honored as one of the greatest saints of the Church, receive the sacramental power of granting the absolution of sins, or did she not? Gertrude herself seems to have believed with no shade of doubt that such divine favor had been granted to her,

*Thirdly, the abundant liberality of your grace enriched the poverty of my merits with the certainty that whenever I, trusting in the divine piety, promised somebody the forgiveness of a crime, your benign love would consider this promise according to my word, as solid as if you yourself had in truth sworn it with your blessed mouth.* <sup>4</sup>

And so seemed to believe as well Gertrude's sisters and the many pilgrims who sought her advice,

*Many people used quite often to ask her advice on certain doubtful points, and in particular whether they should, for one reason or another, refrain from receiving communion. She would advise those who seemed reasonably fit and ready to approach the Lord's sacrament with confidence, as God is gracious and merciful. Sometimes she almost forced them!* <sup>5</sup>

(...)

*And, touching the tongue of the saint, [the Lord] said: , Hereby I put my words in your mouth and I confirm with my truth all the words that you, inspired by my Spirit, will utter to anyone from me; and all that you promise on earth on account of my goodness, will be granted in heaven'* <sup>6</sup>

The forgiving of the sins was not a practice reserved to ordained priests in the medieval ages,

*With the appearance of monasticism, the custom was established to confess the bad thoughts and actions to the spiritual father, even though most of the time he was a lay person. The same custom was established in women monasteries, where very often it was the abbess who heard the confession of the nuns.*<sup>7</sup>

*The task of determining and administering penance was, according to the sources, to be counted among the tasks of an abbess. As already mentioned, the degree of 'sacramentality' implied thereby has not yet been determined. However, it seems appropriate at the very least to relativize a strict refusal of the sacramental character of this penance.*<sup>8</sup>

In 1179, the III Lateran Council prohibited the abbesses to forgive the sins of the nuns in their communities. Thirty-five years later, in 1215, the IV Lateran Council forced all nuns (abbesses included) to confess their sins once a year to a priest. Seventy years after this issue was clarified in Church Law, the nun Gertrude of Helfta (1256 – 1301/02), a saint of the Church and patroness of present day female Benedictine noviciates around the world, received from God the mission of forgiving the sins not only to other nuns in her community, but to all those, women and men (priests included), who sought her as their spiritual guide. There is nothing in the writings of Gertrude or her sisters that makes us think that they were engaging in a conscious challenge against the rules of the Church when they described and practiced the powers that God granted to them. It is true that their community had been founded in 1229, more than a century after Church Law ruled out the possibility for anyone other than an ordained priest to take on the sacramental role of forgiving the sins, but it is also true that in the medieval age even more than today, the fact that a decision was taken in a

council did not imply its immediate reception. It could take years, or even centuries, until such a disposition was made known to all affected by it. It is also true that the community of Gertrude is a special case with regard to its dependency on male superiors, the reason being that it was founded in 1229 by seven Cistercian nuns, but was never officially accepted as a Cistercian monastery because the General Chapter of the order had resolved in the preceding year (1228) not to admit more female monasteries. This is why Gertrude is described indistinctly as being Cistercian or Benedictine. It was in these particular historical circumstances, that the so-called school of women-theologians of Helfta developed its distinctively joyful character and its originality. Together with Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1301/2), three other nuns of whom the name has been preserved belonged to this theological circle: the abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (1231-1291) – of whom no writings have survived – , her younger sister Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241-1298) – author of the *Book of the Special Grace* – and the beguine Mechtild of Magdeburg (1207/10-1282/94) – author, among others, of *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit* (The flowing light of the divinity). The nuns of Helfta wrote in Latin and the beguine Mechtild of Magdeburg, who spent the last years of her life at the monastery and composed there her main work, wrote in vernacular (German), but they all have something in common: their theology describes a loving and merciful God, so close to humans as to inhabit our very heart and so gentle to us as to bear with endless patience our ungrateful contempt. A God able to be vulnerable in the age of the Crusades, a Christ identified with the poor and needy in the age of the Pantocrator. About Mechtild of Magdeburg, the beguine, it is known that she had a male spiritual father in her early years; the nuns of Helfta, on the contrary, seem to have been accustomed to be the source of spiritual counsel for one another. They quote the spiritual teaching of each other with respect and gratitude. Their writings are completely devoid of self-demeaning remarks on the topic of being a woman. This is particularly remarkable in Gertrude, who entered the monastery at the age of five; despite all her explicit erotic language, the issue of ‘being a woman’ is never

mentioned as such. Gertrude, like her sisters, seem to be naturally assuming as a matter of fact that her inner experiences of the radical character of human freedom are open equally to all, male or female, who care to pay attention to the depth, the width and the joy of God's love within us.

In what follows, I will analyze what I consider to be the main insights of the theological anthropology of Gertrude of Helfta: the creaturely dependency on God, the receiving God and the reciprocity between God and God's creature.<sup>9</sup>

### **The creaturely dependency on God**

*On Sunday 'Be my protector'<sup>10</sup>, during mass, you woke my soul kindling my desire for the noble gifts that you wanted to give me and this you did mostly by means of two words of the response: 'I will bless you' and the verse of the ninth response 'to you and your descendants I will give this land' (Gn 26). Touching during the recitation of these verses your blessed chest with your venerable hand, you showed me which one was the land that your endless liberality was promising me.<sup>11</sup>*

Jesus' breast is revealed to Gertrude as the true Promised Land, the goal of human life in its pilgrimage on earth, the pole of attraction in difficult moments.

Gertrude also experiences Jesus as the good Shepherd, the one to whom we can turn in full confidence when all seems lost, the one who nourishes with his tenderness the burdened soul and gives it courage:

*You grew in me the spirit of reverence in the image of a green rod so that, staying always with you and never leaving the shelter of your embraces even for a single moment, I might without danger extend my care to all the windings and labyrinths in which human affection so often loses itself.*<sup>12</sup>

In another passage, Gertrude identifies her condition of creatural dependency towards God with the joy of a young child who sees herself honored above her more able siblings. With full filial trust, Gertrude acknowledges the gifts she has received and rejoices in them,

*I should consider your affection towards me under the similitude of a father of a family, who, being delighted at seeing so many beautiful children receiving admiration from his neighbors and servants, had, amongst the others, a little one who was not so beautiful as his companions, whom he, nevertheless, often took in his bosom moved by paternal tenderness, and consoled him by gentle words and kind gifts.*<sup>13</sup>

Gertrude's theological insights bring no surprise up to this point. Which one could be our relationship to God, if not *dependency*, and which one could be our task with regard to God, if not that of *receiving*? God is the *giver*, we as creatures receive life from God and live it thanks to God's loving support. But there is more. As she deepens her friendship with the God who fascinates her, Gertrude unexpectedly discovers in God a vulnerability, a need, a receptive pole that in no way contradicts God's giving pole, but instead, revealing itself as simultaneous, introduces the one experiencing it in the very heart of Trinitarian life. God is not only Father. In her/his relationship with us, God has wanted to be also Son, because God cannot reveal him/herself other than He/She is.

### **The receiving God: incarnation and subjectivation**

*On one occasion, during the Mass, when I was about to take communion, I perceived that you were present, and with admirable condescension, you did use this similitude to instruct me: you appeared as a thirsty man who requested that I should give you something to drink (...)*

Gertrude describes her astonishment at this most unexpected exchange of roles:

*(...) I was troubled thereat. <sup>14</sup>*

One can perceive the echo of the gospel of John, but without the irony that probably accompanied the first words that the Samaritan woman addressed to Jesus: *How is it that you, being a Jew, request a drink of me, who am a woman of Samaria?* (Jo 4,9). How is it that you, being God and being I about to receive the eucharistic nourishment from you, request a drink of me, who am your creature? From Gertrude's heart comes forth the fountain of living water that Jesus promised to the Samaritan woman,

*On seeing that, no matter how hard I tried, I could not force even a tear from my eyes [Gertrude is here trying to find something in her that could be offered as a drink], I beheld you presenting me with a golden cup with your own Hand [Jesus insists in being offered a drink and hands an empty cup to her]. When I took it, I experienced a deep tenderness and my heart immediately melted into a torrent of fervent tears. <sup>15</sup>*

Despite her not having anything to offer, Gertrude doesn't refuse the challenge and takes the empty cup from Jesus. Her trust in the face of the limit and her willingness to be present despite her perplexity, turn her inside into a fountain. The mystery of Incarnation starts



bearing its fruits in Gertrude, inviting her to leave behind the kingdom of childish projections in order to explore the unknown territory of God's neediness: *How is it that you, being a Jew, request a drink of me, who am a woman of Samaria?* Jesus' request invites to initiate, together with him, the path of our subjectivation or, what is the same, the path of our personal growth, of our human plenitude, of our christification, of our divinization: Lord, what do you want me to do? *Be perfect like your Father is perfect* (Mt 5,48). These are Jesus' words according to the gospel of Matthew. Had they not been attributed to him, such words would most certainly have been deemed heretical: how can God's creature dare aspiring to be as 'perfect' as God?

In order to grasp adequately Gertrude's discovery of God's receiving pole, is particularly revealing to compare the inner experience she describes in chapter VIII with the one in chapter XIV. In both occasions, Gertrude is participating in the mass of Sunday XV in the ordinary liturgical time. In both occasions, the experience takes place after chanting the antiphon of the day: 'Be my protector'. But while in chapter VIII (quoted above), Gertrude comes to the inner understanding that Jesus' breast is the promised land and reposes in it, in chapter XIV the words of the antiphon 'Be my protector' take a most unexpected turn, because what Gertrude comes to understand this time is the following,

*You made me understand by the words of this introit, only Object of my love, that, being wearied by the persecutions and outrages that so many people inflict on you, you looked for my heart, that you might repose therein. Therefore, each time that I entered therein during these three days, you appeared to me as if lying down there like a person exhausted by extreme languor.*<sup>16</sup>

The experience of God's receiving pole is possible for Gertrude because of the Incarnation, that most distinctive and peculiar of all Christian claims: God took flesh, did exist in time and

space not as a minor God, but in all his/her plenitude. This is the reason why the limits that our spatiality and our temporality impose on us can never be obstacles to realize in all its fullness our potential for love, but on being made concrete in the body, these limits are the condition of possibility of our freedom in the same way the air is the condition of possibility for Kant's dove: 'The dove is convinced that without the resistance of the air, it would fly quicker.'<sup>17</sup>

### **The astonishing reciprocity between God and God's creature**

*I have many times experienced the sweetness of your kiss; so much so that while I sat meditating, or reading the canonical hours, or saying the office of the dead, you have often, during a single psalm, placed on my lips ten or more times your sweet kiss, which far surpasses the most fragrant perfumes or the sweetest nectar; and I have often noticed your tender look on me and felt your embraces in my soul.*

*But though all these things were filled with an extreme sweetness, I declare, nevertheless, that nothing touched me so much as this majestic look of which I have spoken. For this, and for all the other favors, whose value you alone know, might you rejoice for ever in that ineffable sweetness surpassing all comprehension, which the divine persons communicate mutually to each other in the bosom of the Divinity!<sup>18</sup>*

The look Gertrude valued so much was an exchange of light that she experienced while looking at Jesus directly into the eyes,

*I felt that from your divine eyes came into mine an extremely soft light that I am unable to qualify (...) so that, according to my understanding, all my substance was no*

*other than divine brightness (...) and this communicated to my soul the joy of serene repose.*<sup>19</sup>

God and God's creature are here face to face, looking each other into the eye, experiencing the mystery of love of the Trinity itself, the reciprocity with which the divine persons honor each other and rejoice at each other. *That they may be all one, like you Father in me and I in you, thus shall they be in us*, prays Jesus right before offering his life in exchange for ours (Jo 17, 21).

In this we find the perfection that Gertrude proposes to us: that we realize that God inhabits in us, that we repose without reservations in God's breast and that we don't scandalize ourselves when God requests to be allowed to repose also in ours.

Trust, freedom, joy, depth, intimacy, body, serenity, light, repose, kiss and sweetness are some of the words that keep reappearing in Gertrude's writings. They express how she experienced God and how she talked about God to the many pilgrims who queued at the door of the monastery to talk to her and to her sisters. The theological circle of Helfta is responsible for having started the tradition of the 'sacred heart' of Jesus, duly understood not as a kitsch depiction of superficial sweetness, but as a taking seriously God's invitation to personal intimacy and the challenges associated with it. One of these challenges was to discover, after having been told and having felt herself that the most appropriate chamber for God to dwell in her was 'the heart', that it actually was 'the brain'; and after having desired to enjoy the solitude of the intimacy with God and forget about everything else, to discover that God was expecting her to love and serve all others and most particularly the poor<sup>20</sup>. These challenges brought Gertrude to leave behind her childish quest for an almighty controlling God in order to discover that God was indeed vulnerable, and was expecting and actually

needing from her a unique and original act of love that only she could perform – that only each of us can perform – and that needs to be constantly renewed. This striking combination of God’s majesty and God’s vulnerability is the theological *novum* introduced by the nuns of Helfta, a *novum* that reflects the gospel at its purest. Gertrude described this double dimension of the unique love of God with the image of the heart and the two rays of light: golden for the divinity, rose for the flesh of the Incarnation. In the Incarnation, God has undergone what all classical notions of God most abhor, that is, *change*. God has changed: it has acquired a body that, by the resurrection, has been incorporated into God’s self for all eternity.

The nuns of Helfta did talk to each other about these inner experiences and did help each other to take seriously the challenges they involved, but each of them was utterly alone when facing them. In the process, they were discovering the depths of what modern language calls ‘subjectivity’; they were true XIII century pioneers of the discovery of subjectivity and individual freedom; they anticipated the ‘*devotio moderna*’ and were transformed by their experience in a way that gave them authority to inspire others in the path to personal fulfillment and joy. They are an example of female leadership that escaped patriarchal control and developed in a seemingly natural and daring way. After the extraordinary influence they enjoyed while alive, Gertrude and the circle of theologians of Helfta fell into a surprising oblivion right after their death. Their monastery was destroyed in 1346, less than fifty years after Gertrude’s burial, and they were forgotten during two centuries. Paulus of Weida published for the first time Gertrude’s writings in 1505. In the Hispanic context, they were discovered during the Reformation and were politically misused: Gertrude, characterized as a celibate nun with a life of obedience centered in the liturgy, was opposed as a counter-figure to Martin Luther, the heretical advocate of personal freedom. The opposition was favored by the fact that Helfta was located a short distance from Eisleben, the city where Luther was born and where the nuns of Helfta established their new monastery after the old

one was devastated. The reasons for the destruction of such a thriving school of female theology and monastic life as Helfta are unknown, but some historical precedents (the fate of the thriving monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses in Catalonia, for instance <sup>21</sup>), let us suspect that these free, loving and highly educated nuns might have been too much of a challenge for their patriarchal social and ecclesiastical surroundings. Gertrude's canonization came also very late. She was included in the roman martyrology in 1677 and in 1738 her cult was extended to all the church. By then, her free spirit had been conveniently forgotten and it was never mentioned that she preached or that she and her sisters claimed that God granted Gertrude the power to forgive sins in God's name (that part was even erased in some of the renderings of her writings). The depth of Gertrude's experience of the love of God and her astonishing discovery of God's vulnerability and God's quest for reciprocity, were also conveniently substituted by a rather hollow spirituality of the sacred heart based on emotion and lacking vitality.

And yet, Gertrude's writings have survived and in them, if she has the patience to cross some rhetorical boundaries that threaten to hide the pearl, the contemporary reader can still admire and be touched by Gertrude's familiarity and joy in her dealings with God. A striking example of it is the boldness with which Gertrude requests a contract from Jesus, so that she can be sure that the favors Jesus granted to her are not a product of her imagination,

*Reflecting on my mind one day about your gifts to me, and comparing my hardness to your tenderness that I so superabundantly enjoy, I dared to reproach you that your gifts to me had not been confirmed with a shake of hands as it is customary with contracts, and your loving softness promised to satisfy this objection saying: 'Let your reproaches cease, come and receive the confirmation of my commitment'. Then, in my littleness, I saw you opening with both hands that arch of divine fidelity and ineffable*

*truth that is your divinized heart, and you asked me, mean as I was having asked for a sign like the Jews did, that I place my right hand in the opening of your heart and, closing it then with my hand included, you said: 'Hereby I promise to keep the gifts I gave to you, so that if temporarily, I retire their effects, I oblige myself to repay all later with a benefit three times greater in the omnipotence, wisdom and benignity of the glorious Trinity, within which I live and reign, true God for ever and ever'.*

*After these words came from your most sweet tenderness, I took my hand out and there appeared seven circles of gold as if they were seven rings, one for each finger and three in the ring-finger, a faithful witness to the fact that the gifts had been confirmed according to my desire. <sup>22</sup>*

Gertrude's writings contain a lively theology of the Trinity, a Christology, a Mariology and a theological anthropology, but, until recently, she had not been studied under the rubric of 'theology' but under 'spirituality'. Such has been the fate of most (all?) the women theologians in the history of the Christian churches prior to the XX century: given that women were not allowed at the university and were not supposed to enjoy a rational capacity comparable to that of men, when they produced a theological writing of worth, it was considered directly 'inspired' by God, and the woman was described as a 'mystic' and not as a 'theologian'. This distinction corresponds to the medieval tradition of the two sides of Jesus' breast: the right side or 'official side' and the left side or 'mystical side'. The right side is the one that becomes pierced in the gospel of John, the one that brings forth the church, understood as the eucharistic community of the redeemed (blood and water flow from the right side of Christ, like the blood and water of the sacrifices offered at the old testament altar would flow from an opening on the right side of the temple that communicated the sacred space with the people who were not allowed into it and gathered outside to partake in its holiness through the flowing water). The left side is the 'mystical one', the one that allows

God's creatures to have an access to the holiness and the love of God not directly mediated by the institutional church and not limited by the church's distinctions between holy and unholy, sacred and profane, sacramental and non-sacramental.

Gertrude speaks of the right side in chapter five, while describing the light that comes from Jesus and pierces her heart<sup>23</sup>, but her most intimate description of the love of God has it coming from the left (*ex parte sinistri lateris*)<sup>24</sup>. Gertrude's mystical experiences reveal to her a new understanding of God's omnipotence, one that has to do not with forcing others to behave as God sees fit, but rather with freely adapting to others for their sake:

*In what should my omnipotence be extolled, if I could not contain myself within myself whatever I am, so that I am only felt or seen as is most suitable for the time, place and persons? For since the creation of heaven and earth I have worked for the redemption of all, more by the wisdom of my benignity than by the power of my majesty. And this benignity of wisdom shines most in my tolerance towards the imperfect, leading them, even by their own free will, into the way of perfection.*<sup>25</sup>

*In tolerando imperfectos, quousque illos per liberum arbitrium ducam ad viam perfectionis.* God's unfailing benignity sustains the freedom (*libero arbitrio*) of God's creatures. Thus understood Gertrude her own existential situation, and thus preached she, in the name of God, to all those coming to her to obtain reconciliation.

The case of Gertrude of Helfta challenges the claim that the Catholic tradition has been consistent throughout history in excluding women from the sacramental ministries. It has not. Those arguing for exclusion do so at two different levels: the theological and the historical. At the theological level, the fact that women have always been and are also today considered

able to administer the sacrament of baptism in case of imminent danger of death, disprove the claim that there are essential impediments for women to act sacramentally *in persona Christi*. At the level of tradition, the case of Gertrude is not isolated. As the recent work of Gary Macy shows, the notion of ordination changed substantially in meaning and scope in the XI-XII centuries<sup>26</sup>. It moved from a community-centered approach (the ordained person as the embodiment of the communion granted by Jesus to those gathering in his name; cf. Mt 18,20) to a legalistic approach (the ordained person as individually possessing ‘sacred powers’, independently of the community). According to the new definition, one of the conditions needed to consider an ordination ‘valid’ was that the recipient of it ‘be male’. It is anachronistic to evaluate the ancient sources according to a later definition, and it is wrong to assume that the definitions of *ordination* and *sacrament* have not changed substantially in the Catholic tradition. There is an urgent need in Catholic studies to reinterpret the history of sacramentality taking into account sources hitherto suppressed, misinterpreted or ignored. In doing so, as the case of saint Gertrude compellingly shows, we will discover a new traditional image of God and of the human being able to speak to the heart of the postmodern subject, an image that describes God as vulnerable and places freedom and desire at the center of our relationship to Her.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quod gratia tua certitudinem accepi, quod omnis qui ad tuum sacramentum accedere desiderans, sed habens timorem conscientiae, trepidans retrahitur, si humilitate ductus a me famularum tuarum minima quaerit confortari, pro hac ipsius humilitate, tua incontinens pietas dignum ipsum iudicat tantis sacramentis, quae vere percipient in fructum salutis aeternae; adjungens quod si quem iustitia tua non permitteret dignum iudicari, nunquam permitteres ad meum consilium humiliari (Gertrude d’Helfta. *Ouvres Spirituelles II. Le Héraut, livres I-II*. Sources Chrétiennes, 143. Du Cerf: Paris, 1968. Liber II, caput XX, §1; p. 308).



<sup>2</sup> Unde et addidisti me indignissimam certificare, quod, quicumque, corde contrite et spiritu humiliato, aliquem defectum mihi querulando exposuerit, secundum quod per verba mea defectum illum majorem sive minorem audierit, secundum hoc, tu misericors Deus, velles judicare eum culpabiliorem vel innocentiorum; et quod gratia tua mediante post horam illam hoc semper habere deberet relevamen, quod nunquam tam periculose premi posset ab illo defectu, sicut antea fuerat pressus (Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*. Liber II, caput XX, §2; p.310).

<sup>3</sup> Il ne s'agit pas d'un rôle sacramentel, mais de grâces de lumière et de persuasion pour mettre au point dans des consciences timorées les problèmes de la culpabilité et du pardon (Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*; pp. 310-11, note 1).

<sup>4</sup> Tertio etiam copiosa liberalitas gratiae tuae inopiam meritorum merorum ea certitudine, ditavit, quod cuicumque aliquid beneficium vel alicujus delicti indulgentiam ex confidential divinae pietatis promiserim, hoc benignus amor tuus secundum verbum meum tam firmum tenere proponeret, quasi hoc tu ore tuo benedicto juraveris in veritate (Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*. Liber II, caput XX, §3; pp. 310-12).

<sup>5</sup> Gertrud the Great of Helfta, *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*, Books One and Two (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1991); p. 82. Cf. Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*. Liber I, caput XIV, §2; p. 196.

<sup>6</sup> Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*. Liber I, caput XIV, §4; p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> *Mit dem Auftreten des Mönchstums entsteht die Sitte, dem geistlichen Vater, wenn er auch gewöhnlich ein Laie was, ein Bekenntnis aller unrechten Gedanken und Taten abzulegen. Dieselbe Gewohnheit tritt in Frauenklöstern zutage, wo vielfach die Äbtissinen eine Beichte der Nonnen vor ihnen verlangten.* Gromer, Georg. *Die Laienbeicht im Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zu ihrer Geschichte.* Verlag der J.J. Lentnerschen Buchhandlung;: Múnic, 1909; p. vii

<sup>8</sup> *Diese Aufgabe von Bußfeststellung und Bußübergabe kann nach den Quellen auch die Äbtissin leisten. Welcher Grad von 'Sakramentalität' dann vorliegt, ist, wie erwähnt, noch nicht zu beantworten. Doch scheint es erlaubt, eine strikte Ablehnung der Sakramentalität dieser Buße zumindest zu relativieren.* Muschel, Gisela. *Famula Dei: Zur Liturgie in merowingischen Frauenklöstern.* Aschendorff: Munster, 1994; p. 263.

<sup>9</sup> An earlier version of this analysis was published in Spanish in: Forcades i Vila, Teresa. *Gertrudis de Helfta y Teresa de Jesús: cuerpo y subjetividad en la experiencia mística.* Revista Cistercium, 258 (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Sunday XV from the ordinary time.

<sup>11</sup> Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*. Liber II, caput VIII, §1; p. 263.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., caput XIII, §1; p. 285.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., caput XVIII, §1; p. 301.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., caput XI, §2; p. 277-79.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., caput XI, §2; p. 279.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., caput XIV, §1; p. 287.

<sup>17</sup> Kant, I. *The Critique of Pure Reason* (introduction, §3).

<sup>18</sup> Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*. Liber II, caput XXI, §4; p. 327.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., caput XXI, §3; p. 325.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., caput XV; pp. 287-89.

<sup>21</sup> Pladevall, Antoni. *Els monestirs catalans*. Ediciones Destino: Barcelona, 1970.

<sup>22</sup> Nam cum die quodam ea mente revolverem et ex comparatione pietatis tuae ad impietatem meam quam tam longe superabundare gaudeo, usque ad illam praesumptionem ducta fuissem, quod causerer te mihi ea, more pollicitantium, manu ad manum non firmasse, tua tractabilissima suavitas his objectionibus se benigne satisfacturum promisit, dicens: 'Ne haec causeris accede et suscipe pactu mei firmamentum'. Et statim parvitas mea conspexit te quasi utrisque minibus expandere arcam illam divinae fidelitatis atque infallibilis veritatis, scilicet deificatum Cor tuum, et jubentem me perversam, more judaïco signa quaerentem, dextram meam imponere, et sic aperturam contrahens manu mea inclusa dixit: 'Ecce dona tibi collata me tibi illibata servaturum promitto, in tantum quod si ad tempus dispensative ipsorum effectum subtraxero, obligo me postmodum triplici lucro persoluturum, ex parte Omnipotentiam Sapientiae et Benignitatis virtuosae Trinitatis, in cujus medio ego vivo et regno, verus Deus, per aeterna saecula saeculorum'.

Post quae suavissimae pietatis tuae verba, cum manum mean retraherem, apparuerunt in ea septem circuli aurei in modum septem annulorum, in quolibet digito unus et in annulari tres, in testimonium fidele quod praedicta septem privilegia mihi ad votum meum essent confirmata (Gertrude d'Helfta, *Le Héraut*. Liber II, caput XX, §14-15; pp. 318-20).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., caput V, §2; p. 249-51.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., caput IX, §1; p. 269.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., caput XVII, §1; p. 299-301.

<sup>26</sup> Macy, Gary. *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*. Oxford University Press, 2007.