



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE ABBESS GENERAL OF THE ORDER
OF THE MOST HOLY SAVIOUR OF ST BRIDGET**

To Reverend Mother Tekla Famiglietti

Abbess General of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour of St Bridget

1. With the approach of the seventh centenary of the birth of St Bridget of Sweden, I willingly join in the joy of your religious family. As I wish you great success with the Jubilee celebrations you have planned, especially the commemorative symposium on the theme: *"The path of beauty for a more just and dignified world"*, I hope they will help to draw attention to the value of St Bridget's message for our time.

I cordially greet you, Mother Abbess and your sisters, renewing my gratitude for the important apostolic work you carry out at the service of Christian unity, especially in Europe, following in the footsteps of the great Swedish Saint. Seven hundred years after her birth, you want to return in spirit to that event as the radiant starting point of your history, drawing renewed enthusiasm from the commemoration of that providential beginning.

Going back in mind and heart to her mystical experience that was completely focused on the Redeemer's Passion, you are dedicated to discerning on the face of the Church reflections of the holiness of Christ, Redeemer of man, now for ever "clad in a robe dipped in blood" (Apoc, 19,13), the everlasting, invincible guarantee of universal salvation.

2. In proclaiming St Bridget Co-Patroness of Europe, I wanted to offer the faithful of the continent an outstanding model of "feminine holiness". After living happily as a faithful wife, exemplary mother and wise educator, Bridget experienced a holy widowhood, and finally reached the state of consecrated life. At every stage in her life, she knew wisely how to combine contemplation with wide-ranging activity, sustained by love for Christ and for the Church. She brought truly feminine gifts to the Christian community of her time, and as a completely fulfilled woman, she put herself at

the service of others.

Her example can serve as an effective encouragement for women today to be protagonists of a society in which women's dignity is fully respected; a society that will regard men and women as being protagonists of equal importance for the universal divine plan for humanity. It suffices to skim through the biography of this woman, who combined the most exalted contemplation with the most courageous apostolic initiatives to realize that Bridget can still offer useful guidance for the women of today on appropriate ways to face problematic views of the family, the Christian community and society itself.

3. In my Apostolic Letter in the form of a "Motu Proprio" *Spes aedificandi* of 1 October 1999, I noted that the saint "was appreciated for her gifts as a teacher, which she was able to use when she was required to serve at court in Stockholm. This experience was the basis of the counsel which she would later give from time to time to princes and rulers concerning the proper fulfilment of their duties. But obviously the first to benefit from these counsels were her children, and it is not by chance that one of her daughters, Catherine, is venerated as a saint" (n. 4; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 6 October 1999, pp. 8-9). What a precious example for families of our time!

St Bridget is also a teacher of consecrated life. Indeed, she was deeply devoted to the formation of those who embraced the Rule of the Order she founded constantly drawing on the teaching of the Gospel; and in the school of the Gospel she guided with a firm and delicate hand those who joined her on the path of religious perfection. Her educational activity is rooted in a solid moral and spiritual maturity. For this very reason, the lesson of life she has passed on to us is still valid. We can sum it up by saying that education is credible when it puts into practice the "pedagogy of virtue". To educate people it is essential to be virtuous as well as wise and competent. Virtue alone qualifies people to be teachers.

4. St Bridget's spirituality has many dimensions. For this reason it can be a fascinating project for everyone. In her we admire a Christianity based on the unconditional imitation of Christ and inspired by choices in accord with the Gospel. She was a teacher in her acceptance of the Cross as the central experience of her faith. She was an exemplary disciple of the Church in professing full catholicity. She was a model both of contemplative and active life and an untiring apostle in seeking Christian unity. She was also endowed with prophetic insight in reading history in the light of the Gospel and the Gospel in history.

At the heart of Brigittine spirituality is the absolute primacy of God who cannot be "mocked" (Gal 6,7). The missionary dimension depends on the mystical dimension; and charitable, missionary and even political activity flowed from Bridget's passion for prayer and contemplation. Because she found time for God, she found time for men and women.

In her declarations for the process of St Bridget's canonization, her daughter Catherine recalled: "my mother, while my father was alive, and later when she was widowed, never sat down at table without having fed twelve poor people first". She deservedly held the title, "Mother of the poor".

During her stay in Rome, St Bridget also showed herself to be a caring mother for the lowliest, setting the seal of authenticity on the strong mystical experience that distinguished her.

Anyone who intends to take care of the old and new situations of privation, for this reason can find valid encouragement in the example of this mystic from northern Europe. Her apostolic strategy exemplifies an effective formula for the "new evangelization".

5. One special aspect of her spirituality deserves to be highlighted: the Marian dimension of her consecration to Christ. A Woman, Mary, is at the heart of the economy of salvation. St Bridget invites people to see the Virgin of Nazareth as a female icon of Christianity. In seeking to imitate Mary, she made herself a faithful wife, mother and religious; in the Virgin's footsteps, she sought in every circumstance to do God's will without reserve. My Predecessor, Boniface IX, rightly asserted at the ceremony for her canonization that Bridget, throughout her life, was supremely devoted to the Blessed Virgin (cf. Bull *Ab origine mundi*, 23 July 1391).

In the Book of her Revelations, a sort of diary of her interior pilgrimage, one reads that on many occasions she learned the meaning of Christ's mysteries from Mary. She learned to say, as she contemplated the incarnate Word of God in adoration, "Blessed be my God, my Lord, my Son" (VII, 21), recalling the words of Jesus who said: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 12,50).

6. Then how can we forget her passion for the unity of the Church? Her prayers and initiatives to keep intact Christ's seamless garment, the holy community of the Redeemer's disciples, are well known. Thus, as a woman of unity, she comes before us as a witness of ecumenism. Her harmonious personality inspires the life of the order that traces its origins to her in the direction of an ecumenism that was both spiritual and active. This is also due to the decisive impetus of reform which Bl. Elizabeth Hesselblad instilled into this religious family. The unity of the Church is a grace of the Spirit that we should constantly pray for.

May this Jubilee Year be an incentive for the Order of the Most Holy Saviour to set out joyfully on what my Venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, liked to call "the path of beauty", that is, the way of holiness which is a supreme form of beauty, in full fidelity to its vocation.

With these sentiments, as I invoke abundant graces of God through the intercession of the Mother of the Lord, of St Bridget and of Bl. Elizabeth Hesselblad upon the entire Briggittine community, I impart to you, Reverend Mother, and to each of your daughters, as a pledge of constant affection, my Apostolic Blessing.

From Castel Gandolfo, 21 September.

JOHN PAUL II

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