



## History of Lay Preaching, Part Two\*

### The Beguines

Scripture assures us that lay preaching existed, beginning with Jesus. In the flesh, as Mark tells us, the power of his preaching was “astounding,” capable of transforming lives. That power radically reordered women and men, not only during his lifetime, but in every age, down to the present day, through his Spirit.

Whether in Jesus’ day or well beyond, some of these transformed women and men were sent forth to proclaim his Good News. Yet, when we search the Tradition, we find little official evidence that lay preaching continued. Why? Did lay preaching actually cease? Was it overlooked or ignored by the official Church after “order” increasingly trumped the gifts of the Holy Spirit, wherever they were to be found? What actually happened?

It is probable that over the years, even centuries, lay preaching did continue, most often unofficially, in a variety of forms. Take the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century Golden Age of Saints in Celtic Ireland, for example. In this historic moment when saints arose like meteoric stars in the sky, there were three who formed a uniquely holy triad: Saints Patrick, Columcille and Brigit. In order to proclaim their holiness, their biographers patterned their stories after that of Jesus: complete with annunciation, birth stories, miracles, hardships, and ultimate vindication.

While not necessarily factually “true,” these stories—known as hagiography—did contain the truth of their faithful discipleship, with the intent of inspiring others. One of the delightful stories about Brigit, for example, describes the manner in which she became a bishop. As the story goes, on the day she was to receive the veil of religious life, Bishop Mel called her forward and spoke the words of ordination over her. In response to his assistant’s shocked protest, the bishop could only say this: he had nothing to do with it, for the Spirit of God had spoken the final word! Was she really ordained a bishop? Or, did this story herald the truth that she ministered—as abbess of a double monastery, of men as well as

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\* This one of three essays on the history of lay preaching in the Roman Catholic tradition. Gloria Ulterino prepared these for [www.godswordmanyvoices.org](http://www.godswordmanyvoices.org), a web site which promotes the value of lay preaching. © Gloria Ulterino, 2016. For permission to use this material, contact Gloria Ulterino [by email](mailto:gloria@godswordmanyvoices.org).

women—with the authority of a bishop. Of course, such leadership would undoubtedly include preaching.

With the exception of 12<sup>th</sup> century Hildegard of Bingen, who was invited on preaching tours by the bishops of her native Rhineland while she was in her sixties, we seldom hear of lay preachers. What do we make of their seeming absence? Perhaps “the woman with the lost coin” can point the way for us (see Luke 15:1-3, 8-10). You will recall the story: Jesus was the center of yet one more meal. But some Pharisees and scribes were “grumbling”—because “all the tax collectors and sinners came near” to listen to him. In response, Jesus told three “lost and found” parables: the shepherd leaving all behind to seek out the one lost sheep, the woman with the lost coin turning her house upside down to find the one precious lost coin, and the father never giving up on his “Prodigal Son.”

All three are images of a God who will go to any lengths to seek out and save the lost among us all. And when the lost were found, there was always joy in heaven that cried out for celebration. So, what does the “woman with the lost coin” have to do with lay preachers lost to our Tradition? Just this. Beginning in the 1980s, newly educated women Scripture scholars and theologians committed themselves to seeking out the lost treasure of God’s daughters in Scripture and Tradition (not unlike the “woman with the lost coin”). Lo and behold, some discovered a group of medieval women from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward known as Beguines. Seemingly appearing out of nowhere in many towns dotting Western Europe, they devoted themselves to the apostolic way of life (*vita apostolica*) of the earliest Christians, by ministering in a whole host of ways to meet the needs of folks in *their* day. In the process, many of them were acknowledged as preachers.

**So, who were these Beguines?** Originating in the Low Countries at the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, they were an unplanned phenomenon, rapidly spreading across emerging towns and cities on the European continent. First and foremost, they were women of profound faith, though not directly associated with religious orders. They cut across all social and economic lines, from rich to poor: daughters of wealthy or noble families, trades people, along with the poor of the countryside and emerging towns.

Spanning all ages, from teenagers to elders, they were single, widowed, and newly widowed with children. They were educated and uneducated, some even able to read Latin, while others could barely read the vernacular. Unique, one from another, they were mystics, poets, preachers and performers. Musicians and artists. Reformers of church and society. Astute in the ways of business and finance, able to confidently compete with the guilds that were taking hold in Western Europe, alongside emergent brisk trade. While a few Beguines lived by themselves, most lived in community: whether in convents of small groups or in court beguinages on the edges of towns (so-called because of the courtyards around which their row houses were built). These latter *could* house—and *did* house—hundreds of Beguines. Yet, because they never took religious vows, Beguines were free to leave their communities for any number of reasons, including marriage.

For all their differences, Beguines shared a passion for prayer, a simple lifestyle, voluntary poverty, and apostolic service to all those shunted to one side. The sick, the dying, the lepers, anyone in dire need found comfort in their embrace. In a day and age when men were in charge of church and society, they passionately welcomed the opportunity to define themselves, resisting male attempts to control their lives. Sometimes called the “gray women,” from their simple homespun gray attire, they became known as Beguines, at least in the Low Countries and German states. At first a term of derision, from the root *begg* (meaning to mumble, as in falsely pious), the name became a badge of honor and respect. In other locales, they were known by a variety of other names: *beatas* (blessing) in Spain, *penzochere* (devotee) or *penitentiae* in Italy, *humiliati* (the humble) in Lombardy, and *fins amans* (true lovers) in parts of northern France, for example.<sup>1</sup> Oftentimes, Beguines gathered around a respected leader of theology known as a *magistra*. Today we recognize the names of some of these outstanding women: Mechtild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch, Angela of Foligno, and Marie d’Oignies (considered the first Beguine).

**How and where did they emerge?** As has often been said over the years and centuries, “the times, they were a-changing.” The 13<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a first renaissance, well before the Italian renaissance of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was a time of emergence from a rural society, governed by landed

gentry, and worked by serfs who were tied to the land ... a time of newly created towns and cities, with their own merchant classes and innovative political structures.

What propelled such changes? The First Crusade (1096-1099) and others to follow opened up a whole new world. With the awareness of these new worlds came trade, a moneyed economy, schools and universities, and women—as well as men—moving toward new opportunities for work and learning. Within the Church, Pope Gregory VII (who governed 1073-1085) called for and instituted reforms. Soon thereafter, early in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, emerging mendicant religious orders—Franciscan and Dominican among them—emerged to meet the needs of many townspeople. Other new religious orders, like the Cistercians and Carthusians, were calling people to return to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was a time of bustling excitement, great need, and many new opportunities.

**Despite their many differences, Beguines shared a spirituality rooted in the absolute goodness of God.** For them, life was all about growing in a constant, deep, and richly imaginative prayer life, which was available to all people, not simply religious leaders. Such prayer was primarily focused on the earthly Jesus, the human face of God. Even three centuries before Ignatian prayer and Exercises, Beguines would often place themselves in the midst of Gospel stories, allowing the Spirit to engage their bodies, hearts, and souls. Yet, given the medieval air they breathed, the Passion of Jesus remained a significant focus of their prayer. Whatever the source of their prayer, Beguine response was rich and varied: in song, dance, poetry and other writing, mystical consciousness, preaching, and outreach to those who needed them most. As Beguine mystic Marguerite Porete put it, “Kindness toward others obeys no created thing but Love.”<sup>ii</sup> Late 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Angela of Folino taught that prayer would teach us who God is and who we are. “And when we know who we are and who God is, we love. And when we love, we want to possess what we love. That is the sign of true love. The lover is changed—not in part but wholly—into the beloved.”<sup>iii</sup>

So it was that divine compassion impelled them to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoners, as proclaimed in Matthew, chapter 25. The Spirit of God also led them in new directions, such as educating children and poverty-ridden adults with the skills to support their families in the newly

emerging towns, or, founding and developing infirmaries, the rudimentary hospitals and hospices of their day. In the process, they sought out and learned techniques of midwifery, nursing, and funeral practices, whatever was available to them at the time. The Beguines even reached out to lepers, the true outcasts of their day. How did they fund all these new projects? It was mainly through the business acumen of some Beguines, enough to even rival the emerging trade guilds. And donations poured in from grateful recipients of their services, oftentimes through their wills. It should come as no surprise, then, that Beguines were both treasured by many for their holiness, including some religious leaders, and scorned by others as rivals who dared to become independent of male structures in both church and society.

In summary, then, the Beguines taught by example, urging people to model their lives on the Gospel of Jesus. They tirelessly advocated for reform in a church that had grown lax and even corrupt at times. They preached in a whole host of ways. Some of them even experienced and revealed the Passion of Jesus in their bodies, as in the stigmata of Jesus' suffering. But the purpose was always to create fervent disciples of Christ.

### **How and where did they preach? On whose authority? With what results?**

What comes to mind when we consider preaching? Don't we imagine someone opening up the Scripture for us and bringing it to life in our daily lives? And, doesn't it usually happen in church, formally, during Mass? In *their* day, a number of Beguines were recognized as preachers, but their preaching ministry took quite a different turn from our experiences today.

Take Christina "the Astonishing," for example (1150-1224). Her life of preaching and performance became a continuous preaching of purgatory. Why? Because, as the story is told, she "died" before stirring in her coffin, then floating to the rafters of the church. During this time she told of a vision of the souls in purgatory; and, motivated by a love for suffering souls, she uttered a resounding "yes" to God's offer to preach her vision. It never mattered to her that others might call her a fool (for Christ). Hers was an embodied preaching, passionately presented. She would even put her hands and feet into fire, jump into boiling cauldrons, and stand in frigid waters during winter, all to awaken folks to the consequences of their sinful ways. While others were not as extreme, gifted

Beguine preachers offered dramatic performances to draw people in and exhort them to a deeper spiritual life. “People would have experienced a preaching beguine as a flesh-and-blood sermon, as a performed commentary or homily on the gospel story.”<sup>iv</sup> Elizabeth of Spalbeek (1246-1304, from present day Belgium), for example, preached in her small local chapel, attracting audiences far and wide for her pantomime of Christ’s Passion. In particular, she was concerned with reforming “neglectful and indifferent clergy.”<sup>v</sup> Rose of Viterbo (1233-51, a “penitentia” from central Italy), whose holiness was unquestioned, preached the “Word of God to large crowds of men and women but without church approval.”<sup>vi</sup> In addition to the Passion, Beguines often preached on the Holy Trinity, but not without harsh criticism from some theologians. After all, how could they possibly preach on a Mystery so far beyond human understanding? And yet, mystic and Beguine Marguerite Porete, in her *Mirror of Simple Souls*, spoke of the Trinity as “Power, Wisdom and Goodness,” as “One Power, One Wisdom, One Will,” or as “Lover, Loved, and Love.”<sup>vii</sup> For such naming emerged out of her mystical experiences of God. Perhaps these few samples of Beguine preaching are able to convey the nature of their giftedness in *their* day for *their* people.

On what authority did they preach? Only on this: the authority of God’s visions, entrusted to them to proclaim to the people. These were women mystics, alive with the Word of God and passionate about delivering that word to the people they loved. It was their mission, they truly believed, to awaken, nurture, and challenge people to become all that God intended for them.

The names of these Beguines do not roll off our tongues. Yet one woman we know well, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), the second woman to be named a Doctor of the Church in 1970. She wrote many letters, to many people, from everyday folks to the Pope. In fact, largely as a result of her bold correspondence with Pope Gregory XI, he summoned the courage to return to Rome in 1377, from his captivity in Avignon, at the hands of the French king. While we don’t name her as a preacher, these letters were often written in a preaching style, intended to move people beyond their comfort zones toward living the Gospel more fully.

**What might the Beguines say to us today about lay preaching?** Any one of them might have said something like this. “Be strong! Fear not!” How often I, as well as many of my sister Beguines, sensed these divine words in prayer. Here’s what

they came to mean for us. When all seems lost, when church reform seems so far away, when more and more and more people are in need of healing of all kinds, there's only One Source of strength and love, hope and healing. And that One Source, of course, is our God of all Goodness ... our Mercy ... our Compassion ... our Life. We can never accomplish what we hope for by our own lights. Never!

What, then, are we to do? Listen carefully to the One who loves us beyond imagining. Reflect with others we trust regarding where the Spirit of God is leading us. Then move in that direction, beyond fear, beyond any reprisals. Use your God-given gifts for the sake of human dignity, *every person's* dignity! Isn't that why the Spirit of God anointed you in the first place in your Baptism? Yes, indeed; and remember the women, as we always did.

Their voices, their gifts, and their very lives are every bit as sacred to God as those of the men. How often we lifted up the voices and gifts of women, whom our culture had tried to keep under a lid, controlled by men. Indeed, there were times when we were scorned for our efforts, but we knew—after prayerful reflection—that our actions were inspired by the Holy Spirit. So keep on preaching, in whatever ways you can, always faithful to the Gospel. For the Gospel—the person and ministry of Jesus—is *always* our constant guide. Despite fear, despite rejection of every kind, keep on listening to and following the One who loves us all, each and every one of us. And you will know God's blessings!

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<sup>i</sup> Laura Swan, *The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement*, (Katonah New York: BlueBridge Publishers), copyright 2014 by Sisters of St. Benedict, St. Placid Priory, p. 12; hereafter referred to as Swan.

<sup>ii</sup> Swan, p. 83.

<sup>iii</sup> Swan, p. 95.

<sup>iv</sup> Swan, p. 125.

<sup>v</sup> Swan, p. 128.

<sup>vi</sup> Swan, p. 129.

<sup>vii</sup> Swan, p. 130.