THEOLOGY AS CONVERSATION:
GERTRUD OF HELFTA AND HER SISTERS AS READERS OF AUGUSTINE

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This dissertation analyzes the use of Augustine’s life and thought, especially as recorded in his Confessions, in the Herald of Divine Love. It argues that Gertrud collaborated with her sisters at Helfta to produce a book adopting, advancing, and inviting readers into Augustine’s conversational model of theology.

The first chapter introduces Gertrud and Helfta, reviewing the literature and suggesting some modifications to the standard accounts. The second chapter analyzes the work’s composition history, described in its Prologue with the feminine and collaborative metaphor of childbirth. The combination of her autobiography with the convent’s hagiography expresses God’s choice of Gertrud through and for the holiness of others.

The third chapter discusses Gertrud’s spiritual autobiography in Book II, written in the prayerful style of Confessions. She uses Augustine’s image of the pierced heart as a “book” in which to read God’s merciful love, created
through conversational narratives connecting personal and communal salvation history.

The fourth chapter analyzes Gertrud’s “Life and Revelations” in the compiled portions of *Legatus*, especially Books I and V. In Book I her sisters advocate a model of female holiness as converted scholarship, comparing Gertrud to Augustine as an inspired theological teacher formed by a holy community. In Book V they conclude the work with divine promises of the book’s wonderworking power as Gertrud’s relic. Along with Gertrud, the Helfta women offer the *Legatus* in praise of God and to enable readers’ holiness by assisting them to discover and respond to grace in their personal salvation history.
For my beloved daughter
Rachel Marie Grimes

God did not make death, nor does God rejoice in the destruction of the living.
Wisdom 1:13
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CHAPTER ONE

GERTRUD AND HELFTA

On the feast of the Epiphany 1256, a baby girl was born somewhere in Saxony—modern day northeastern Germany—and named Gertrud. Four years later that little girl was placed to live out her days in the monastery of St. Mary at Helfta near the village of Eisleben, best known as the birthplace of Martin Luther some two centuries later. Gertrud’s background, and the reason for her oblation, remained completely unknown even to herself. This made her an anomaly among the convent’s other students and choir novices, cherished by their noble families. Perhaps in compensation, she quickly distinguished herself as the most brilliant student the nuns had ever known, with sweet compliance initially masking an arrogance which would become evident in her adolescence.

Gertrud grew up to join the community, but this apparently stemmed from a devotion to learning, rather than piety. A prosperous, learned convent like Helfta was the natural refuge for a scholarly medieval woman without family resources. She says that she complied with the
Rule but had no inner faithfulness until, in 1281 at the age of twenty-five, she experienced a dramatic and alluring vision of Jesus calling her to himself. This experience began a conversion process which transformed Gertrud from a proud, spiritually empty scholar to—by the time of her death, about 1302—a humble and eloquent teacher of God’s Word in both speech and theological writing.

Ensuing centuries would see the orphan with no surname become St. Gertrud of Helfta, the only woman in Christian history entitled “the Great.” This exalted epithet both distinguishes Gertrud and symbolizes her ambiguous historical status. For unlike Gregory, Basil or Albert, this gifted and prolific writer was not, and is officially still not, further titled “doctor of the church.” Instead, Gertrud was classified as a virgin and, as long as an erroneous identification with her own superior persisted, an abbess.

Most of Gertrud’s theological works have been lost, but fortunately two have survived.¹ Her slender,  

¹ There is no specific catalog of Gertrud’s works extant, but her contemporary biographer gives some sense of their scope in the first book of Legatus. “Elucidating and clarifying what lesser minds found obscure, she made compilations from the sayings of the saints, gathered as a dove gathers grain, and committed to writing many books filled with all sweetness, for the general profit of those who wished to read them. She also composed many prayers, ‘sweeter than the honeycomb’, and many other examples of spiritual
liturgically inspired Exercitia spiritualia is a gem still awaiting in-depth analysis. But Gertrud’s most important legacy is universally acknowledged to be the Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis, or Herald of the Memorial of the Abundance of Divine Love. This complex work, usually abbreviated in English to The Herald of Divine Love, is worthy of attention both in itself and as a fascinating test case for the study of medieval women’s theology.

Like Julian of Norwich, Gertrud recounts intense mystical experiences; like Hildegard of Bingen, she records explicit divine commands for writing. Both were prudent strategies for medieval women exercising theological teaching authority, which have sometimes marginalized them in the study of historical theology. In-depth treatments of such women are increasingly attentive to their erudite and creative treatment of theological sources. But modern scholars are sometimes...
still misled by their narrative style, and perhaps too-effective protestations of humility, into making sharp distinctions between female "mystics" and male "theologians." Such false dichotomies also fail to do justice to the centrality of religious experience and commitment in the lives and work of medieval men such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas.

This dissertation will embark upon a new reading of Gertrud’s classic, relying on and furthering the work of editors, translators, and previous commentators. It will discuss the Legatus’ sophisticated integration of Augustinian themes and textual allusions, highlighting Gertrud’s resemblance to Augustine as a highly skilled, intensely spiritual theologian. And it will emphasize the work’s collaborative composition with the community that formed and cooperated in Gertrud’s theological vocation. Though outstanding, the monastery of Helfta was not

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2 As Barbara Newman points out after comparing the extensive contents of Hildegard of Bingen’s Scivias to those of Hugh of St. Victor’s Sacraments of the Christian Faith: “If Hildegard had been a male theologian, her Scivias would undoubtedly have been considered one of the most important early medieval summas.” Introduction to the Classics of Western Spirituality translation of Scivias by Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1990), p. 23. Cf. also Nicholas Watson’s discussion of the dating of the short and long texts of Julian of Norwich’s Showings, “The Composition of Julian of Norwich’s Revelation of Love,” Speculum 68 (1993): 637-683.
unique. It stands as a symbol of many other houses of women religious who studied, taught, copied manuscripts, and wrote, sometimes anonymously, throughout the middle ages. The primary original arguments of the dissertation will begin in Chapter Two. This chapter will first introduce Helfta and the women of the community, and then discuss contemporary scholarship on Gertrud’s life and extant works, suggesting modifications to some areas of the usual accounts. This will lay the groundwork for the textual analysis of the ensuing chapters.

1. The Helfta community

Kloster St. Maria, which would become most renowned in its third home at Helfta, was initially founded at Mansfeld in 1229 (see timeline in Table 1). The checkered history of the convent, beginning in the chaotic period shortly after Gertrud’s time, complicates the search for detailed historical information. Some founding documents

TABLE 1: HELFTA TIMELINE

1229  Count Burchard of Mansfeld and Elisabeth of
      Schwarzburg found Kloster St. Maria at Mansfeld.
      Cunegund of Halberstadt serves as first abbess.

1234  Convent moves to second location at Rodarsdorf.

1241  Mechthild of Hackeborn is born.

1248  Seven year old Mechtilde of Hackeborn visits
      convent and successfully begs to enter.

1251  Gertrud of Hackeborn is elected second abbess.

1253  Daughter house founded at Hedersleben.

1256  Gertrud the Great is born in unknown
      circumstances on the feast of the Epiphany.

1258  Convent moves to Helfta, upon land donated by
      the von Hackeborn family.

1260  Four year old Gertrud the Great enters community.

ca. 1270  Beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg seeks refuge in
         the convent and there completes Das fliessende
         Licht der Gottheit with assistance of sisters.

1281  Gertrud the Great has first of many visions.

1289  Gertrud the Great writes Memoriale abundantiae
      divinae pietatis (predecessor of Legatus II),
      beginning on Holy Thursday.

1291  Gertrud of Hackeborn dies; Sophia of Mansfeld is
      elected third abbess. Mechthild of Hackeborn
      reveals she has been having visions for years,
      and two other sisters begin to write them down as
      the Liber specialis gratiae.

1298/1299 Mechthild of Hackeborn dies. Helfta sisters
       complete Liber specialis gratiae.

1301/1302 Helfta sisters complete Legatus divinae pietatis
       (predecessor of Legatus I, III, IV, and V). Together
       with Gertrud, they combine this with her Memoriale
       to form final text of Legatus memorialis
       abundantiae divinae pietatis. Gertrud dies.
led the founding group of seven sisters from the nearby Cistercian monastery of St. Jacobi-St. Burchardi in Halberstadt. These sisters probably continued to wear gray Cistercian-style habits, but the new foundation could not be officially connected to Cîteaux because it began the year after the general chapter of 1228, forbidding the founding of any more convents of Cistercian nuns. Scholars from the turn of the century, and sometimes more recently, engaged in fierce and anachronistic debate about whether the sisters were Benedictine or Cistercian. Michael Bangert convincingly argues that the primary self-identification of the nuns was with their own community, and that they took advantage of their independent status to draw freely on both Cistercian and Benedictine traditions, among others.  

The monastery’s first site was near the castle of its lay founders, Count Burchard of Mansfeld and his wife Elisabeth of Schwarzburg. Elisabeth spent the last years of her life in the convent after being widowed, and her devout prayers while on pilgrimage are credited with eliciting a healing miracle from her patroness St. 

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Elisabeth of Hungary.\textsuperscript{5} After Burchard's death, the community moved to its second home at Rodarsdorf in 1234 for reasons of safety. This placed them conveniently near the headquarters of another family of noble benefactors, the von Hackeborns. Finally, in 1258 a water shortage led them to settle at Helfta, near the town of Eisleben, upon land donated by the von Hackeborn family.\textsuperscript{6}

It was this third foundation which would see a flowering of learning and piety under the long ministry (1251-1291) of its most renowned Abbess, Gertrud of Hackeborn. Her election at nineteen no doubt bore some connection to her family's patronage, but her own work would validate this choice. Much of the surviving information about Abbess Gertrud stems from the hagiographical material concerning her in both Gertrud of Helfta's \textit{Legatus} and Mechthild of Hackeborn's \textit{Liber specialis gratiae}. These sources mention her commitment to obtaining books and ensuring a high level of intellectual training for the choir nuns. She is praised for the motherly compassion which led all the sisters, and in particular the convent's child oblates and young students, to be attached to her. Gertrud of Hackeborn was

\footnote{Finnegan, pp. 1-2.}
\footnote{Finnegan, pp. 2-3.}
financially capable, stewarding the convent’s resources and convincing her brothers to donate land for both for the new Helfta convent and a daughter house begun at Hedersleben in 1253.\(^7\) And she defied the trends of her time by insisting on frequent communion, perhaps in both kinds, for her nuns. After her death, her sister Mechthild of Hackeborn had a vision of Christ rewarding the deceased abbess with sweet kisses because she “had so faithfully demanded that the sisters freely and frequently communicate.”\(^8\)

This talented woman fostered others’ achievement, but left no surviving writings of her own, and should not be identified with St. Gertrud the Great of Helfta. This confusion did hold sway for several centuries, however, and is responsible for the incorrect artistic depiction of Gertrud of Helfta bearing a crosier she never held in life. It is somewhat difficult to understand how the error began. Book V of *Legatus* clearly describes the death of Abbess Gertrud, at which Gertrud of Helfta is present, and goes on to discuss numerous other visions by the latter. Perhaps it was made attractive by a

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\(^7\) Finnegan, pp. 11-13.

\(^8\) Liber specialis gratiae V.2, Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae II (Solesmes, 1877), p. 319.
hagiographic desire to connect St. Gertrud to a noble family, thus emphasizing her renunciation in entering the convent. A closer connection to Abbess Gertrud’s younger sister, Mechthild of Hackeborn, may also have been a motivating factor. The latter, along with Abbess Gertrud’s younger sister St. Mechthild of Hackeborn (1241-ca. 1298) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (ca. 1208-ca. 1282/1294), helped produce a number of outstanding mystical texts during the second half of the thirteenth century, often referred to as the convent’s Golden Age.

Three years before Gertrud of Hackeborn’s election as abbess, her seven year old sister Mechthild was brought on a visit from their nearby family home. She unexpectedly

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9 In the first English translation of Legatus in 1870, Frances Clare Cusak replaced Book I with a fabricated hagiography confusing Gertrud of Helfta with Gertrud of Hackeborn. A major theme is the nobility and wealth of the von Hackeborn family, and the impressiveness of Gertrud’s and Mechthild’s generosity in renouncing it. Cf. The Life and Revelations of Saint Gertrude, Virgin and Abbess, of the Order of St. Benedict, second edition, translated by M. Frances Clare Cusak (London: Burns and Oates, 1876) [henceforth “Life and Revelations”].

10 As will be discussed below, in the nineteenth century Louis Paquelin corrected the confusion between Gertrud of Helfta and Gertrud of Hackeborn, but postulated a close spiritual friendship between Gertrud of Helfta and Mechthild of Hackeborn. Contemporary scholars have continued to repeat Paquelin’s belief, which exceeds the textual evidence in either the Legatus or the Liber specialis gratiae.

insisted on remaining in the community, prevailing on the sisters to help convince her dismayed mother to leave her there. After being educated in the convent school, professed and consecrated, Mechthild became the convent’s chantress and choir director. Her beautiful voice led her to be called “the nightingale of Christ.” Mechthild apparently began to have mystical experiences in childhood, but kept them secret for most of her life. Only after her sister’s death in 1291 did Mechthild begin to reveal her visions. Two other members of the community then compiled them, at first without her knowledge, into the Liber specialis gratiae, or Book of Special Grace.


The work was initially composed of five Books of Mechthild’s visions, preceded by a brief biographical notice. Then two additional Books were written expanding on the holy deaths and posthumous glory of Gertrud of Hackeborn and Mechthild herself.\textsuperscript{14} The book was most influential through its Middle English adaptation, The Book of Gostlye Grace.\textsuperscript{15} Caroline Walker Bynum sums up some of the characteristics of Mechthild’s spirituality as evident in the Liber.

Mechthild’s visions are much more vivid, poetic, and affective than Gertrude’s and, to some tastes therefore, more beautiful....She has a keener sense of emotional identification with Christ’s suffering and of the theological significance of the crucifixion. Her personal asceticism appears (at least in this account) to have been somewhat harsher. She seems to have been a more tender counselor to others than Gertrude....She rests securely in her role as nun, mediator, and counselor; and that role is described as a kind of apostolate. Although she uses the image of the soul as bride to express her lowliness as well as the extraordinary personal favors she receives, she makes no reference to the weakness of women, nor does she underline certain religious activities as female, certain as male.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} The extant Prologue to the Liber still describes the original five Book division, though in most manuscripts the text itself contains the additional two Books.

\textsuperscript{15} The title change derived from an inaccurate expansion of the manuscript abbreviation “sp.” to spiritualis instead of specialis. Cf. Theresa A. Halligan, ed., The Book of Gostlye Grace of Mechthild of Hackeborn, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Studies and Texts 46 (Toronto, 1979).

\textsuperscript{16} Bynum, pp. 212-213.
Gertrud the Great is commonly asserted to be the primary compilatrix of Liber specialis gratiae, though there is no significant textual evidence for this.\textsuperscript{17} The Liber was written during the 1290s, at the same time that Gertrud struggled with her own workload of writing and spiritual counseling in the face of increasing health challenges. After writing her spiritual autobiography, presently the second Book of the Legatus, Gertrud turned over the responsibility of recording and theologically analyzing her visions to the anonymous nun or nuns who compiled the remaining Books of Legatus. It is difficult to imagine Gertrud writing the extremely lengthy account of Mechthild’s experiences at the same time as other sisters were writing the similarly lengthy text describing her own.

There are four reasons generally given for the claimed attribution. The first is that Gertrud and Mechthild were close spiritual friends and would naturally have been one another’s confidants. The second is the Liber’s similarity in style to portions of Gertrud’s Legatus. The third is the fact that some of the same events are recounted. The fourth is a statement

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. Doyère, p. 21; Finnegan, pp. 35-36.
in the Liber that no one equal in holiness to Mechthild dwelt in the community, which it is argued only a humble Gertrud would say. On closer examination, all four arguments prove to have significant weaknesses.

The first assertion, of their friendship, was initially made by Louis Paquelin in his introductions to the Solesmes critical edition of both works.\textsuperscript{18} It continues to be repeated by most scholars, though Gertrud is never mentioned in Mechthild’s text, and Mechthild appears only a few times in Gertrud’s. In Book I of Legatus, Mechthild is only one of many sisters to have visions concerning Gertrud, some of which contain explicit or implicit criticisms of the latter. Her visions of Gertrud do not differ in content from those of other sisters, only in the fact that Mechthild is identifiable while the others remain anonymous. This is presumably because Mechthild’s established reputation for holiness lends additional credence to Gertrud’s.\textsuperscript{19} In

\textsuperscript{18} Paquelin also seems to have begun the double insistence, on slender textual evidence, that Gertrud was one of the Liber’s two compilers, and that Mechthild was commonly meant in various texts of Legatus where Gertrud mentions confiding her experiences to another unidentified sister. Modern editors and translators often repeat these assertions, without explanation or argument, in their own footnotes. Cf. for instance Pierre Doyère, SC 139, n. 3. on p. 251.

\textsuperscript{19} Mechthild is identified in Books I and V of Legatus as “Dame M. our chantress,” domna M. cantrix nostra. Cf. Leg. I.11.9; I.14.6; I.16.1; I.16.4; and V.4.
Book V of *Legatus* Gertrud is depicted as being present at Mechthild’s deathbed along with many other community members, according to custom. Gertrud’s only special role was to have visions of Mechthild’s glorified soul, as she did for Abbess Gertrud many other deceased nuns and *conversi*. Nowhere is there any indication that the two share an intimate friendship.

The second reason, similarity of style, is also problematic. The vast majority of *Liber specialis gratiae* bears little linguistic or theological resemblance to the extant texts personally written by Gertrud: Book II of *Legatus* and *Exercitia spiritualia*. Instead, the *Liber* is virtually identical in both style and theme to other sisters’ compiled accounts of Gertrud’s visions in Books III through V of *Legatus*, which are more moralizing in content and written in simpler Latin. The third reason, the inclusion of some repeated material, is easily explained by the fact that a number of sisters seem to have been involved in writing both books and information was freely shared to make this possible. In any case, much of the common information concerns the glorious death of the community’s beloved abbess Gertrud of Hackeborn, which was a major event clearly worthy of inclusion in both works. The fourth
reason, the statement in the *Liber* that no one in the convent could rival Mechthild’s holiness, is a hagiographical commonplace. It would hardly be effective in a work focusing on and lauding Mechthild to remark parenthetically that Gertrud (or any other outstanding Helfta woman) was, in fact, her equal or superior in sanctity.

The third Helfta mystic is the Beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg. Like Mechthild of Hackeborn, she was born to a noble family and began having extraordinary spiritual experiences at a young age, beginning with being “greeted by the Holy Spirit” at the age of twelve. However, rather than enter a convent she became a Beguine in her early twenties, and began writing *Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*.

Gottheit, or Flowing Light of the Godhead, at the encouragement of her confessor in her forties. Mechthild’s original Middle Low German text is lost, but the work survives in a partial Latin translation as well as a complete Middle High German version produced under the direction of Heinrich of Nördlingen. A crucial step for modern scholarship on the work was Hans Neumann’s preparation of the first critical edition in 1990. Mechthild retired to Helfta in her old age to escape persecution brought on by her outspoken critiques of clerical corruption. The seventh Book of Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit was dictated at Helfta, where Mechthild lived until her death, possibly about 1282 or 1294. Having grown up in the world, she wrote in the vernacular,

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22 Tobin, Introduction, pp. 6-9. Tobin cites Hans Neumann’s argument that the similarity between the northern and southern dialects makes the Middle High German version less a translation than a “transplanting” or “transferring” of Mechthild’s original.


24 Tobin, Introduction, pp. 5-6.
Unlike Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrud of Helfta, whose Latin literacy was due to being educated in the convent from a young age. Mechthild also differs from them in having a dependent relationship on a male spiritual guide. It is unclear to what extent her text influenced theirs, but a major resemblance is the centrality of heart images in all three works.

In essence Mechthild of Magdeburg’s book, The Flowing Light of the Godhead, is nothing more than the moving story of God’s heart and the human heart, and of Lucifer’s cunning attempts to interfere with the ties that join them....Regarding her mission of proclamation she perceives the words of Christ: “Truly, I say to you, in this book my heart’s blood is written” (V.34). This way of speaking alludes to her own existential giving of herself in her writing to the last drop of blood.

The heart is the principle and center of one’s life as a person. It is also the place “where the human being in its own source borders on the mystery of God.”

Caroline Walker Bynum suggests that Mechthild of Magdeburg, because she spent most of her life immersed in a misogynistic culture, felt more self-doubt than the child oblates Gertrud of Helfta and Mechthild of Hackeborn. Frank Tobin agrees that Mechthild probably felt anxious among the Helfta sisters, but points out

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that they respected her greatly and sought her spiritual counsel. He also argues that her work significantly influenced that of the two younger Helfta mystics.\textsuperscript{27}

Mechthild’s reliance on the Dominican Heinrich of Halle as both spiritual guide and textual assistant is perhaps a contributing reason for a common overstatement of the general Helfta connection to the Order of Preachers.\textsuperscript{28} The strongest version of this comes in modern Dominican Mary Jeremy Finnegan’s assertion that the friars both taught theology to the Helfta women and served as their spiritual directors.\textsuperscript{29} Michael Bangert points out the lack of textual basis for the common assertion that only the Dominicans of Halle provided sacramental services at Helfta.\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{Approbatio doctorum} appended to some manuscripts of \textit{Legatus} suggests that the Helfta women relied on Franciscans as well as Dominicans as confessors.

\textsuperscript{27} Tobin, Introduction, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{28} Cf. Maximilian Marnau’s introduction to Margaret Winkworth’s translation of \textit{Legatus, The Herald of Divine Love} (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993) [henceforth “HDL”]. Marnau ignores the Franciscan presence at Helfta and postulates a reversed explanation of the limited data. “The spiritual directors of the monastery were neither Benedictines nor Cistercians, but the Dominicans of Halle; perhaps that was one of the motives which led Mechthild of Magdeburg, that lover of St. Dominic, to choose Helfta as a retreat in which to end her life.” HDL, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{29} Finnegan, pp.6-7.

and eucharistic celebrants. It also shows that a number of devout and respected male theologians saw the Helfta women as colleagues, and that the spiritual mentoring appears to have gone both ways.

[The book] was examined and approved by distinguished theologians, friars of the Orders of Preachers and Minors....Dom Gotfried Felix, a master of tested ability, was fired by this person’s words with so great an enthusiasm for God’s will that from then onwards he happily spent his whole life in wonderful devotion and longing for God.  

The texts of Gertrud of Helfta and Mechthild of Hackeborn never mention their dependence on male spiritual directors or teachers. Instead, they depict the sisters of Helfta teaching and directing each other as well as both lay and clerical visitors to the convent.

2. Gertrud the Great of Helfta

Gertrud of Helfta entered the convent as a child oblate at the age of four. Unlike the majority of the choir sisters, whom surviving records indicate to have

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come from significant local families, nothing is known of her family background. Alexandra Barratt takes Gertrud’s status as a choir sister to indicate that she was “of noble, or at least gentle, birth.” However, Gertrud’s early entrance and brilliance ensured a high degree of Latin literacy, the most important requirement for such a role. And in a convent careful to maintain records of its impressive connections, it seems unlikely that a respectable family history would have been neglected in Gertrud’s case. This may of course have been due to illegitimacy or a worse scandal, since noble bastards were fairly common and accepted at the time. Barratt argues that Gertrud’s metaphors of family life for spiritual experiences suggest she had happy memories of being a beloved young child. This also seems unlikely; when God offers to deal with Gertrud as a mother does a child, her stricken silence implies that she has no idea what that would be like. God points out that she should know it, not from her own experience, but from watching a recent visit of a mother to a daughter in the convent school or

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33 HGLK, p. 10.
novitiate.\textsuperscript{34}

Book I of \textit{Legatus} says that the child immediately stood out among her fellow students, and grew into an accomplished scholar. Reflecting a standard monastic model associated with men like Jerome or Augustine, Gertrud was pridefully distracted from the inner life by her studies until her conversion at age twenty-five.\textsuperscript{35} Commentators often downplay Gertrud’s need for conversion because her sins were not dramatic sensual ones.\textsuperscript{36}

Despite her constant insistence on her unworthiness, her negligences, and even her wickedness, as well as her statement that she had formerly been living in a “land of unlikeness” to God, we must not imagine that Gertrude had been living a life which could be described honestly as sinful. At no point in her writings does she give any indication of the spiritual struggles we find in an Augustine or even in a Teresa of Avila. Sin, even in the form of laxity, was never attractive to Gertrude.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Leg.} III.30.38, SC 143 pp. 160, 162.


\textsuperscript{36} Augustine’s self-accusations are similarly downplayed by many commentators. Cf., for instance, Peter Brown, “Far from being the libertine that some authors have imagined, converted at the age of 32 from a life of unbridled sensuality, Augustine was, in reality, a young man who had cut the ebullience of his adolescence dagerously short.” \textit{Augustine of Hippo: A Biography}. Second Edition (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000), p. 27.

\textsuperscript{37} Maximilian Marnau, \textit{Introduction to HDL}, p. 8. Cf. also
Gertrud and her sisters, in contrast, agreed with Augustine that pride and failure in charity were more, not less, serious than sins of the flesh. Gertrud’s biographer therefore appropriately describes her sinful state as living in a “land of unlikeness” to God, an expression taken from Confessions VII. A major theme of Legatus, like Confessions, is that ongoing conversion and reliance on grace are constant necessities for the holiest of human beings.

After her conversion experience, Gertrud focused her study and writing on Scripture and theology, and became an accomplished spiritual director. She produced a number of books, of which only the collaboratively composed Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis and the beautiful and little-studied Exercitia spiritualia remain. The remainder of Gertrud’s works were probably lost in one of two disasters to strike the community. In 1342 it was destroyed by Albert of Brunswick when his hopes of becoming bishop were dashed in favor of a relative of the current Helfta abbess. The refounded nearby convent of

Alexandra Barratt’s introduction to her translation of Books I and II. “Gertrud’s early life was uneventful, though makes much of her misspent youth. But her ‘malice and wickedness’ merely amounted, it seems, to a somewhat lukewarm and passive commitment to her vocation and an excessive devotion to her literary studies.” Barratt, Introduction to HGLK, p. 11.
New Helfta, in turn, became a casualty in the Peasants’ Revolt in 1525 after one of Luther’s pamphlets, written in 1524, branded the abbess of his day a “modern Jezebel.” By 1546 the community was completely wiped out, though it enjoyed a brief resurgence in the nineteenth century at New Helfta. The original cloister was recently refounded by the diocese of Magdeburg and a group of Cistercian sisters, and serves as a center of spirituality and re-evangelization for the former communist area.

The Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis consists of five Books, preceded by a brief but critically important Prologue. On Holy Thursday 1289, moved by a “most violent impulse of the Holy Spirit,” Gertrud began to record the gifts and challenges of her experience in a spiritual autobiography, Memoriale abundantiae divinae suavitatis. This would eventually become Book II of the complete Legatus. Over the course of the next decade, as Gertrud’s health slowly declined, her sisters reflected on her experiences and insights in another book entitled Legatus divinae pietatis. Shortly after its completion,

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38 Finnegan, pp. 4-5.

39 Cf. the website, www.kloster-helfta.de. A major international conference on the Helfta mystics was held at Kloster Helfta in September 1997; the lectures form the basis of the essays in Bangert and Keul’s Vor dir steht die leere Schale meiner Sehnsucht.
as Gertrud’s death approached, it was combined with the Memoriale to form a final, hybrid work entitled Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis.

The first Book of the combined work, written by an anonymous Helfta sister, gives some hagiographical information about Gertrud. The second Book was the only one written independently by Gertrud, in eloquent Latin and with a prayerful style resembling Augustine’s Confessions. The third and fourth Books contain accounts of, and theological reflections on, Gertrud’s visions by one or more of her sisters, with a special emphasis on liturgical themes and texts. The fifth Book treats the theme of death, including deathbed scenes of other community members and Gertrud’s visions of their heavenly or purgatorial fates. It concludes with a vision of her own upcoming death, and the offering of the completed Legatus to God for divine glory and the spiritual benefit of readers.

Gertrud’s Exercitia spiritualia is composed of seven unequal parts, deeply rooted in liturgical sources and with overtones of Bernard’s sermons Super cantica as well as works of Augustine. In the Exercitia Gertrud gives readers concrete devotional instructions, analogous to those from her sisters in the compiled Books of Legatus.
Both follow naturally from Gertrud’s insistence in *Legatus* II that her graces were given in order to enable the same or greater achievements by her readers. In accord with its liturgical inspiration and the normal medieval practice of reading aloud, the exercises are series of prayers to be recited by the exercitant rather than subjects for mental contemplation. The first exercise is a renewal of the sacraments of initiation, the foundation of Christian life. The second, third, and fourth similarly recall important rites of passage in religious life—clothing with the habit, consecration of virgins, and profession of vows respectively. Gertrud interprets these rites as a means to mystical union and parenthetically remarks that readers in other states of life should make the appropriate translation to their own circumstances. The fifth and sixth exercises deepen her extravagant presentation of union with Christ, the Bridegroom, as the destiny of every Christian soul. Throughout the work, Gertrud returns again and again to a longing for death in order to experience full union with the divine. The seventh exercise is explicitly directed to preparing the exercitant to avoid purgatory and meet Christ “without delay” at the moment of death. The work presents an extensive and systematic theology in the form
of recommended spiritual practices, an important but too often neglected form of Christian theological literature.\textsuperscript{40} It has thus far, unfortunately, received little sustained analysis.

Gertrud suffered increasing ill health until her death in 1301 or 1302. No canonization process was attempted, perhaps because of the chaos which surrounded and invaded the convent. However, her cult gradually grew in monastic circles until, like Mechthild of Hackeborn, she was eventually added to the Roman martyrology and her feast extended to the whole church.\textsuperscript{41}

3. Scholarship on Gertrud and Legatus

There is no extant autograph of \textit{Legatus}; its earliest manuscripts—some partial and some complete—date to the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{42} The first printed edition of Gertrud’s works was prepared by the Carthusian Lanspergius at Cologne in 1536, and led to wide dissemination both of her Latin works and of vernacular

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. Margaret Miles, \textit{Practicing Christianity} (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

\textsuperscript{41} Finnegar, pp 148-149.

\textsuperscript{42} There are eight now known, and five of these were used in the \textit{SC} critical edition, according to Bernard McGinn in \textit{The Flowering of Mysticism}, n.10, p. 446.
translations. Gertrud was especially popular in the nineteenth century, when Louis Paquelin and the monks of Solesmes produced the first Latin critical edition in 1875. The first English translation of Legatus was produced in 1870, unfortunately just too soon to make use of Paquelin’s edition. Exercitia spiritualia did not appear in English until 1956. The foundation for modern scholarship was provided by the new critical edition of Legatus, included along with Exercitia spiritualia in the Sources Chrétiennes series. The SC editions have been

43 Cf. SC 139, pp. 58-77.


45 The Life and Revelations of Saint Gertrude, Virgin and Abbess, of the Order of St. Benedict, second edition, translated by M. Frances Clare Cusak (London: Burns and Oates, 1876). Cusak based her translation on Nicholas Canteleu’s 1662 edition of Legatus; the most important ensuing problem is that she continues the mistaken identification of Gertrud of Helfta with her abbess, Gertrud of Hackeborn. Cusak goes beyond Canteleu, however, by omitting Book I of Legatus entirely and replacing it with a romanticized and highly inaccurate account. She includes the story of Gertrud of Hackeborn’s death from Legatus V.1 to fill the hagiographic lacuna left by the Legatus’ omission of Gertrud of Helfta’s death.


the basis of new English translations of both *Legatus*[^48] and *Exercitiae spiritualia*.[^49]

Gertrud also became a model for the liturgical movement of the mid-twentieth century, commended for combining individual and liturgical spirituality. Key figures in this literature are Pierre Doyère and Cyprian Vaggagini. Doyère’s extensive introduction to the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition of *Legatus* treats Gertrud’s historical context, spiritual teaching, and the transmission and influence of her works. He also contributed the entry on Gertrud in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*,[^50] and

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published several articles on her mystical theology.\textsuperscript{51} Vaggaginì contributed an article on the Sacred Heart in the thought of Gertrud of Helfta and Mechthild of Hackeborn to the important collection \textit{Cor Jesu},\textsuperscript{52} and included an in-depth treatment of Gertrud’s liturgical spirituality in his \textit{magnum opus} on the liturgy.\textsuperscript{53} Vaggaginì attributes Gertrud’s joyous trust in God and her Christocentric and Trinitarian spirituality to the harmony of Gertrud’s personal contemplation with the liturgical prayers of the monastery. He also notes the Helfta women’s sophisticated distinction between the ineffable essence of Gertrud’s visions and the plethora of concrete images of Christ, Mary, and the saints which make them usable as a source for teaching others.

Gertrudian studies have slowly but surely grown in recent years, in accord with the general interest in medieval women’s spirituality and theology. Cheryl Clemons, in the only English dissertation to date, relates Gertrud’s thought on the Eucharist to that on the humanity


Gertrude believed that the privileged locus of contact with God was the humanity of Jesus; the privileged locus of contact with this sacred humanity was the Eucharist; and the privileged means of access to the eucharistic body and blood of Christ was in sacramental communion.\textsuperscript{54}

Clemons’ exhaustive study examines the key texts of Legatus and Exercitia spiritualia reflecting Gertrud’s devotion to the infant and crucified Christ, his five wounds and sacred heart, and her eucharistic theory and practice. She situates Gertrud in relation to the theology and spirituality of her male and female contemporaries on all these issues, as well as to high medieval developments in both popular devotion and official regulations. Clemons sums up Gertrud as:

...a woman who, in the context of a supportive superior and a community of spiritual friends, had learned to trust her own deep desires for union with Christ and her spiritual insights and experiences which she perceived came directly from Christ. Within the context of her struggle over the reception of communion, she was led to rely on her visionary encounters with Christ more than on the commonly held wisdom of most spiritual leaders of her day. She developed and practiced a serene confidence in Christ’s desire to dwell with her and transform her by that union of love. Perhaps she had adopted as her own the ideal proposed by Gérard of Liége as part of her Cistercian birthright: “In the

reception of this sacrament a person is changed into Christ."\(^{55}\)

Gertrud has also been the subject of several recent dissertations published in German. Sabine Spitzlei discusses the heart as the locus of spiritual experience in both Gertrud and Mechthild of Hackeborn.\(^{56}\) Spitzlei begins by discussing the history of Helfta and the liturgical and scriptural sources of its mysticism, relating it to issues of women's religious life in the thirteenth century. Then she engages in close readings of selected texts from the *Legatus* and the *Liber specialis gratiae*, dealing with the heart as the symbol of the person and the place of encounter between God and humans. Spitzlei says that the Helfta women focused on spiritual formation as a process of opening the heart through memory of the pierced heart of Christ. This occurs through meditation on the passion, liturgical recitation and the Eucharist.

Michael Bangert analyzes the theme of humility in Gertrud's works, tracing the influence of Scripture,

\(^{55}\) Clemons, p. 716.

Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Francis of Assisi.\textsuperscript{57} Bangert says that Gertrud follows Augustine in seeing pride, or \textit{superbia}, as the primal human sin. Christ’s humility, as shown in the Incarnation, the paschal mystery, and the eucharist, is the medicine which cures human pride.\textsuperscript{58} Christians are called to imitate Christ’s humility through the acceptance of human finitude and dependence on God, confession and repentance, service of neighbors, and obedience to the Church. Bangert describes Gertrud as having an “Augustinian anthropology” which sees true human beauty as grounded in conversion of life, and humility as the foundation of one’s “spiritual house.”\textsuperscript{59}

Maren Ankermann studies the literary form of \textit{Legatus}, and the relationship between Gertrud’s experience and the conscious crafting of its reports by herself and the community.\textsuperscript{60} Ankermann presents careful background research on women’s mysticism and the problem of verbalizing mystical experiences. She pays careful

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\textsuperscript{57} Michael Bangert, \textit{Demut in Freiheit: Studien zur Geistlichen Lehre im Werk Gertruds von Helfta}, Studien zur systematischen und spirituellen Theologie 21 (Würzburg: Echter, 1997).

\textsuperscript{58} Bangert, pp. 43-46, 110, 295.

\textsuperscript{59} Bangert, pp. 110, 355-365.

\textsuperscript{60} Maren Ankermann, \textit{Gertrud die Grosse von Helfta: Eine Studie zum Spannungsverhältnis von religiöser Erfahrung und literarischer Gestaltung in Mystischen Werken} (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1997).
\end{flushright}
attention to allegory, metaphor and imagery, and mentions Augustine in her discussion of Gertrud as a rhetorician. Ankermann engages in a close structural analysis of Legatus II, arguing that the text is an artful presentation of Gertrud’s experience rather than merely a spontaneous record of it. She is also unusually nuanced in discussing the question of Gertrud’s role in compiling Mechtild’s Liber specialis gratiae.

The final relevant German dissertation is by Claudia Eliass, who compares Gertrud’s work to that of Hildegard of Bingen and Elisabeth of Schönau.\footnote{Claudia Eliass, Die Frau ist die Quelle der Weisheit: Weibliches Selbstverständnis in der Frauenmystik des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts, Frauen in Geschichte und Gesellschaft Band 28 (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1995).} Eliass begins with a methodological introduction analyzing traditional and feminist approaches to women’s history, followed by reflections on women’s monastic life and spirituality in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Then she compares each of the three women’s progress from receiving her visions to composing the works based on them. Eliass examines in detail the visionaries’ justification of female theological authority, as well as their relation of contemplation and action. Each found a unique way of grappling with, and ultimately taking advantage of, their
femininity and physical illnesses in the face of their contemporaries’ beliefs about female weakness.

Johanna Lanczkowski has completed the first modern translation of the *Legatus* into German, as well as several significant articles.\(^{62}\) Lanczkowski has published an introduction to the three major Helfta mystics,\(^{63}\) and a discussion of the influence on their work of Bernard of Clairvaux’s commentary on the *Song of Songs*.\(^{64}\) She also discusses the centrality of obedience in Gertrud’s thought, natural to someone who entered a community governed by the Rule of Benedict as a young child.\(^{65}\)

There have been two French licentiate theses, and an assortment of articles, on Gertrud. Hugues Minguet has issued his thesis as a series of three articles comparing the style and themes of Gertrud’s autobiography in Book II of *Legatus* to Augustine’s in *Confessions*. Minguet


emphasizes Gertrud’s connection of high medieval mysticism, with its emphasis on the heart of Christ, to Scripture and traditional patristic sources.  

Olivier Quenardel has published his thesis as a book on eucharistic communion in Gertrud. Quenardel relates this issue to an in-depth study of Gertrud’s key term pietas for God’s merciful love. Marie-Geneviève Guillou writes of the centrality of praise in Gertrud’s theology, discussing Book II of *Legatus* as a double confession of Gertrud’s own sinfulness and God’s extravagant mercy. Guillou also compares Gertrud to Thérèse of Lisieux in a two-article series emphasizing each woman’s self-identification as God’s beloved child, the forgiven publican, and a sacrificial self-offering for God’s people.

Caroline Walker Bynum includes a major article on the

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67 Olivier Quenardel, *La communion eucharistique dans le héraut de l’amour divin de Sainte Gertrude d’Helfta: Situation, acteurs et mise en scène de la divina pietas* (Brepols/Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1997).


three Helfta mystics in her collection *Jesus as Mother*.\(^7\)

This article stresses Gertrud’s role as a “tough and tender” spiritual writer and counselor to her sisters and people from outside the monastery. Bynum also examines the Helfta mystics’ balanced relation to ecclesial authority. Gertrud’s and Mechthild’s visions at times grant them priestlike power of access to the Eucharist. Like the women studied in Bynum’s *Holy Feast, Holy Fast*, though without the corresponding physical asceticism, the Helfta mystics behold Jesus giving communion to themselves and others who have been unjustly deprived of it.\(^1\)

Gertrud is also sometimes authorized by Christ to declare people’s sins forgiven and welcome them to the Eucharist. This is a somewhat daring claim after the Third Lateran Council had made abbesses cease absolving their nuns in 1179, and Fourth Lateran had mandated yearly confession to a priest in 1215. Yet ultimately the Helfta women built up, rather than challenged, ecclesiastical authority. Bynum points out that their eucharistic devotion countered two threatening heresies: antisacerdotalism and


antiphysicalism. Gertrud’s and Mechthild’s emphasis upon frequent communion and sacramental confession kept the sisters dependent upon the priests who administered these sacraments to them. Bynum argues that it was this theological orthodoxy and harmonious relations with clerical authorities led to their works being approved, rather than condemned.\textsuperscript{72}

Gertrud is particularly appealing to modern people for her confident exercise of spiritual and theological authority, and her positive feminine self-image and membership in a strong women’s community. One of the most important scholars to focus on this aspect of Gertrud’s work is Gertrud Jaron Lewis, co-translator of the Cistercian Publications edition of \textit{Exercitia spiritualia} and author of numerous works on medieval women’s mysticism. In “Gertrud of Helfta’s \textit{Legatus divinae pietatis} and \textit{ein botte der götlichen miltekeit}: A Comparative Study of Major Themes,” Lewis examines the truncation and domestication of Gertrud’s work—including the omission of her priestly charisms—in a vernacular adaptation dating from a century after her death.\textsuperscript{73} Lewis

\textsuperscript{72} Bynum, pp. 255-256.

has also published an article on the crucial concept of freedom of heart in Gertrud’s thought\textsuperscript{74}; a history of the reception of Legatus\textsuperscript{75}; and essays on Gertrud’s theology of death,\textsuperscript{76} of the Virgin Mary,\textsuperscript{77} and her images of God and humanity.\textsuperscript{78}

This chapter has treated the basic information on Gertrud, Helfta, and the corresponding secondary literature. The next chapter will turn to a specific focus: the composition history and collaborative authorship of \textit{Legatus}. It will first survey the scholarship on this aspect of the work. This scholarship is generally focused on Gertrud as an extraordinary holy woman, and fairly dismissive about the writing of her sisters. Then the chapter will analyze the composition


\textsuperscript{77} "Maria im mystischen Werk Gertruds von Helfta," pp. 81-94 in Bangert and Keul.

history in the Prologue of *Legatus*, offering a distinctive story more faithful to the text and more positive about collaborative authorship. The communally produced form of the work exemplifies its Augustinian theme of the communally and narratively mediated aspects of holiness.
As discussed above, Gertrud’s most significant remaining work is the Legatus, or Herald of Divine Love. The most immediately apparent feature of the Legatus is its shifting voice and Latin style. It begins with a third person account of Gertrud’s virtues in Book I, and moves on to her first person, prayerful conversion story in Book II. Finally, the work returns to a third person account of her visions, with theological commentary, in Books III through V. These shifts of authorial voice reflect the fact that Gertrud composed Legatus in collaboration with one or more anonymous sisters of Helfta over the course of at least a decade. Its lengthy and complicated redaction history is recounted in plentiful but not completely clear descriptions which appear at various places throughout the text’s five Books. Most importantly, the work’s Prologue describes its composition with the feminine and collaborative metaphor of childbirth. Two earlier books are said to have been joined by God’s will: the Memoriale abundantiae divinae
suavitatis, written by Gertrud herself, and the Legatus divinae pietatis, compiled by her sisters. The combination of these two works is likened to their giving birth to the final blended text, bearing the cumbersome and rarely used title Legatus memoriale abundantiae divinae pietatis.\textsuperscript{79}

To the frustration of modern scholars, the Prologue does not precisely specify the contents of the predecessor “parent” books, or how they relate to their “child,” the present text of Legatus. Many modern studies have tended to downgrade the part that the community played in its composition. The compiled Books are too often seen as veiling, rather than complementing, access to Gertrud’s personality and directly written words as found in Book II. The work is rarely analyzed in its original order and context. Instead, thematic studies tend to discuss its sections in the order of their perceived importance and composition: first Book II, then Books III-V, and finally

\textsuperscript{79} These titles for the component parts and the whole of the combined work are given in its Prologue. Despite this, the work has had many titles through its long history. Modern scholars, perhaps because of the length of the accurate title, have generally referred to the whole work as Legatus divinae pietatis--ironically, not the part written by Gertrud herself. This dissertation will follow the Prologue’s usage, using Legatus divinae pietatis only for the predecessor work composed by the other nuns. Legatus will be used as the short form of the full, correct title for the final hybrid work: Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis.
This chapter analyzes the composition history of *Legatus* as recorded in its Prologue, which has received little sustained textual analysis. A close reading of the rich, deceptively brief Prologue will prove a key to the interpretation of the complex Helfta masterwork. This chapter will suggest some weaknesses in the usual reading of the composition history, and how they can lead to misunderstanding the themes of the work. Then it will attempt a reading more faithful to the textual evidence, in which communal authorship is recognized as a strength, not a weakness. It fittingly expresses the point both Gertrud and her sisters want to make: that all are called to holiness, that it comes about only in community, and that extraordinary gifts given to one are meant to edify all.

1. Scholarship on Composition History

Helfta scholars often assert or imply that Book II, since it was written independently by Gertrud, is the most

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80 For instance, Michael Bangert, in *Demut in Freiheit*, divides his excellent treatment of humility into its appearance in Gertrud’s “authentic” works, Book II and *Exercitia spiritualia*, and then her “edited” works, Books III, IV, V, and finally Book I. Johanna Lanczkowski even begins her German translation of *Legatus* with Book II and displaces Book I to the end of the text, after Book V.
important part of *Legatus*, and that Books III through V have value in direct proportion to her influence on them. Book I, since it was completely written by another sister, is considered even less important. Doyère points out that the compiled Books are far longer than Book II, yet still opines they are “far from its worth.”

Alexandra Barratt argues that “Book Two must inevitably overshadow, not only Book One but also the remaining books of *The Herald*, as it alone comes directly from the pen of Gertrud.” Book II is seen as the jewel for which the other four books provide the setting, or the kernel from which the rest grew. Books III-V are seen as an inferior continuation of it, and Book I a least important introduction to the combined text.

In his introduction to the SC critical edition of *Legatus*, Pierre Doyère gives an account of its composition history and of the nature and worth of its component parts. Doyère’s hypotheses have strongly influenced how all later scholars discuss these issues, and thus bear careful analysis.

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81 SC 139, Introduction, p. 23.
82 Introduction to Barratt, p. 19.
83 This task is complicated by the fact that Doyère draws from both the Prologue to the entire Legatus and the prologues to Books II and III, without clearly indicating which is his source at any
Doyère calls Book II the "primitive and central" part of the complete work, since it was written first and by Gertrud herself. This is evident from the first person style of Book II and from the evidence the Prologue offers regarding the whole text. He says that Gertrud began to write it in April 1289, then broke off and resumed her work in October of the same year. This can be corroborated by the Prologue to Book II and by a comment interpolated between Chapters 5 and 6.\textsuperscript{84}

Thus far Doyère's arguments are unexceptionable, but in discussing the composition of the rest of \textit{Legatus} he becomes more speculative.

Books III, IV, and V were written by another nun, a confidant of the saint, and during her lifetime, at least for the most part. The redactor specifies that the work was completed twenty years after the grace received, that is to say without doubt near to the death of Saint Gertrude.

The prologue to Book III says that its stories were written by another nun, at the superior's command, after hearing of Gertrud's experiences. And the Prologue to the entire \textit{Legatus} does say that the second part of the composite work was completed about twenty years after Gertrud's initial conversion experience (in January given time.

\textsuperscript{84} SC 139, Introduction, p. 22.
1281). However, in quietly conflating these pieces of evidence, Doyère makes a critical assumption which has had profound consequences for the interpretation of the completed Legatus. He believes that the unspecified contents of what the Prologue calls simply the “second part” of the hybrid text consist only of Books III, IV, and V—to the exclusion and denigration of the crucial Book I. Without citing any textual evidence, and in spite of the Prologue’s account of the hybrid text having been composed from two, not three, parts, Doyère relegates Book I to the status of an introduction.

This work of compilation having been completed, Book I was composed in praise of Saint Gertrude and to make known the themes of her holiness, and it constitutes a sort of Prima Vita.

This leads to the misinterpretation not only of the first Book, but of the Legatus as a whole.

Figure 1 is an interpretation of Doyère’s account of the composition history, in which the influence went only one way, from Gertrud to the other sister or sisters, and is thus labeled “dictation” rather than “conversation.” Her experience is the source and only truly interesting element represented in the text, so Books III–V are

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Figure 1: Doyère’s Composition History (per Grimes)
necessarily of lesser importance. Book I is least important and does not make up a part of *Legatus divinae pietatis*, the earlier book combined with Gertrud’s *Memoriale* to make up the completed hybrid *Legatus*. Book II is represented in large scale, out of its actual proportion in the composite text, because in Doyère’s view it is much more important than the rest of the work.

Doyère’s assumption is perhaps determined by his overriding interest in Gertrud’s experiences and writing, to the exclusion of that of the community. Besides downgrading her sisters’ talents and insights, this approach does not do justice to Gertrud’s own achievement in empowering and coordinating a rich community theological project. This may be seen in Doyère’s discussion of the composition of Book III.

Book III is full of disparate confidences, for the most part without doubt faithfully enough reproduced, perhaps dictated by the saint herself. However, Gertrude was, in her last years, often sick enough that one may presume that the confidant, encouraged by the superiors, took a larger part in the redaction herself. The sixty-five first chapters, comprising three quarters of the book, constitute the nucleus of it, to which are added certain revelations not concerning the personal life of Gertrude, but that of other persons for whom she prayed.\(^7\)

\(^7\) *SC* 139, Introduction, pp. 22-23.
Doyère envisions the writing of the compiled Books as a process of dictation continuing her story—though in an inferior way—as it had been begun in Book II. He sees the other sister or sisters’ authorial role increasing only as Gertrud herself became incapacitated, and judges their contribution by its “faithful reproduction” of her point of view. The dictation model is perhaps influenced by explicit or implicit comparisons to some other women mystics without the high level of Latin literacy enjoyed by the Helfta community. If Gertrud had used dictation, however, it would have been as a convenience, like her male contemporaries. She would in this case have maintained the first person authorial voice rather than ceding it to another sister. The other Books are better seen as a conscious choice of conversational theology and true authorship by the other sisters. Doyère also judges the chapters concerning “the personal life of Gertrud” to be the nucleus of Book III, and those in which she had insights about the spiritual life of others to be less important. But the latter make up twenty-four of the Book’s eighty-nine chapters, a significant amount, and were presumably included because Gertrud and her sisters thought them equally worthy of attention.

Doyère’s account of Legatus’ composition history, and
his evaluation of the relative worth of its different parts, have been followed by virtually all other modern interpreters. The focus is on Gertrud as an individual, and on her theological contribution, which is understandable, and in many ways commendable, in a climate in which retrieval of important women theologians is still a pressing task. However, his account, and the corresponding tendency to see collaborative authorship as a weakness, is not borne out by a deeper analysis of the evidence of the Prologue. A careful reading of the text of *Legatus* shows that the communally produced form of the work expresses and emphasizes its content, in which a major theme is the graced and communal aspect of conversion and holiness. Both Gertrud and her sisters emphasize that God bestowed holiness on Gertrud through, and for the sake of, her entire monastic community—and ultimately to enable the same holiness in the extended community of her readers.

Kurt Ruh and Bernard McGinn have made a crucial contribution to Helfta scholarship by departing from Doyère’s negative evaluation of the collaborative authorship. They have emphasized and validated the creative contribution of the other main sister (whom Ruh calls “Schwester N”) or group of sisters responsible for
Books I, III, IV, and V. After McGinn discusses Abbess Gertrud of Hackeborn and the three major Helfta mystics, he goes on to say:

Many other members of the community were literate; indeed, its most prolific writer was the unnamed nun (she calls herself the compilatrix) who collaborated with Gertrude and Mechthild in producing the two lengthy collections that summarize the mysticism of the Cistercian women of Helfta, the books called *The Herald of Divine Love* and *The Book of Special Grace*. These two scholars have, however, continued to accept the story of Book I being written separately from Books III-V as Gertrud’s *vita*. This skews the textual interpretation of the combined *Legatus* by missing its place in the important medieval subgenre “life and revelations,” as will be shown in Chapter Four below.

2. Prologue: The “Birth” of *Legatus*

The writer of the Prologue uses the feminine and collaborative metaphor of childbirth to describe the composition of the final text of *Legatus* from a divinely willed union of two earlier works. The communal process of theological reflection which produced the work is highlighted in the Prologue because that is what the work

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89 McGinn, p. 268.
intends to encourage in other communities of women and men religious. The current hybrid form, so challenging to interpretation, is a perfect expression of the content of Legatus understood as the model and instruction manual for conversation with and about the Word and Wisdom of God.

As has been demonstrated above, neglecting the integrity of each of Legatus’ parent books leads to the explicit or implicit devaluing of the collaborative parts of Legatus. That Gertrud and her sisters had a higher view of the worth of the collaboratively written portions is clear from carefully examining Legatus in order and in context. Though Book II was written first, it does not begin the combined text, and makes up only about ten percent of the compiled work. The Prologue repeatedly uses the passive voice--scriptum est, conscriberetur--to describe the composition of the second part and the ensuing combination of the two parts, situating Gertrud’s role firmly within the communal context.\footnote{This point is obscured in Barratt’s translation of the Prologue, which turns many of these passives into actives.} And its table of contents mention that Book II was written by Gertrud’s own hand, but the rest of the work is by no means seen as lesser because of this.

Thus it is divided into five parts to suit the powers of discernment and abilities of those who
read it. The first...contains commendations of her character and testimonies to her grace. The second book contains what she herself recorded, as an act of thanksgiving, at the instigation of God’s Spirit, concerning how she received this grace. The third...expounds something of the favors lavished on or revealed to her; the fourth records the visitations by which the divine loving-kindness consoled her on certain feast-days. Then the fifth...expresses something of what the Lord condescended to reveal to her on the merits of departed souls. It also adds something of the consolations which the Lord condescended to advance to her just before her death.  

Figure 2 suggests an alternate reading of the composition history of Legatus, which a detailed analysis of the Prologue will support. The diagram names the interaction between Gertrud and her sisters as “conversation,” rather than Doyère’s “dictation.” These conversations have a transforming influence at each stage of the writing process, represented by the convolution symbols on the arrows. And the diagram names Book I as an integral part of Legatus divinae pietatis, rather than an

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91 Barratt, p. 34. "...ad discretionem legentium et capacitatem divisum est in quinque. In quorum primum continetur de commendatione personae et testimoniiis gratiae. In secundo libro continentur quae ipsamet, instigante spiritu Dei, per gratiarum actionem conscriptam de modo susceptae gratiae. In tertio vero exponuntur aliqua de beneficiis sibi impensis, sive revelatis; in quarto autem annotantur visitationes quibus in quibusdam festis consolata est a divina pietate. In quinto deinde exprimuntur aliqua de his quae sibi Dominus dignatus est revelare ex meritis animarium decedentium. Et subjunguntur aliqua de consolationibus quibus Dominus extrema ipsius dignata est praevenire." Prologue paragraphs 6 and 7, SC 139, p. 114.
Figure 2: Grimes’ Composition History
introduction, and represents Books I and II in their accurate percentage of the final work.

The Prologue focuses on the complex composition history of Legatus; the text is the center of attention, not Gertrud herself, who does not even appear by name. The long time period from her initial conversion experiences to the composition of Legatus emphasizes her deep reflection on them, and the active role of her and others’ writing about them. This is a contrast to an image of ecstatic, trancelike writing and a challenge to views that would only accept such writing from women, even as the Helfta women claim divine inspiration for Gertrud’s ongoing spiritual life and this writing project. The community of authorship, including God and various writers, transcribers, and readers is also highlighted.

The Prologue begins by evoking the Holy Spirit, often overlooked in Helfta scholarship in favor of a focus on the incarnate and crucified Christ.

The Spirit Paraclete, dispenser of all good things, who breathes where he wills, as he wills, and when he wills, seeks (as is most fitting) to keep his inbreathings secret. Yet for the salvation of many he also ordains a fitting way of bringing his inbreathings to light, as is clear in this handmaid of God. Although the vast flood of God’s loving-kindness never ceased to flow into her without pause, he nonetheless ordained a pause before it flowed out. So it was that this book was written down
The Spirit is identified as the Paraclete, “who breathes where he wills, as he wills, and when he wills.” The author expands upon John 3:8 to emphasize that the Spirit breathes not just where he wills, but also “as” and “when” he wills. This reminds possible skeptics that they do not know where the Spirit comes from or goes, and that inspiration can also happen in a community of female theologians.\(^{93}\)

The Spirit, “distributor of all good things,” breathes secretly into Gertrud and then breathes out through the composition of the work “ad salutem plurimorum.” Just as Jesus at the Last Supper says that his blood will be poured out “for the salvation of many,”

\(^{92}\) HGLK, p. 31. “Omnium bonorum distributor Spiritus Paraclitus, qui spirat ubi vult, prout vult et quando vult, sicut congruentissimum quaerit secretum aspirandi, sic etiam ad salutem plurimorum congruentem ordinat modum aspirata in lucem proferendi, ut patet in hac famula Dei, quam licet larga supereffluxio divina pietatis non desierit sine intervallo temporis immanare, emanandi tamen ordinavit intervalla. Unde et liber iste diversis temporibus est conscriptus, ita ut pars una conscriberetur post octavum annum acceptae gratiae et pars altera circa vicesimum annum perficeretur.”

\(^{93}\) John 13 through 17, Jesus’ farewell discourse to the disciples at the Last Supper, contains the only four mentions of “paracletus” in the Vulgate: John 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, and 16:7. The connection of text and experience, and the endorsement of female theological authority, are highlighted by Gertrud’s and her sisters’ identification with the disciples as Gospel witnesses formed by the Spirit, witness and teacher.
the Prologue says that the *larga effluxio divinae pietas*, closely identified with the Spirit, flows into Gertrud through her experiences and out of her by the composition of *Legatus*.\(^{94}\)

The first paragraph also calls Gertrud God’s handmaid, *famula Dei*, a common term in saints’ *vitae*; the synonym *ancilla Dei* is sometimes used to refer to Mechthild of Hackeborn in the *Liber specialis gratiae*. Her initial identification this way emphasizes Gertrud’s chosen status and signals the hagiographical nature of *Legatus*. However, the work never calls her so again, nor does it use her name; instead she is simply referred to as “*ista*” or “*ipsa*.” This emphasizes her insertion in the community and presages the transformation of hagiographical conventions which will be apparent in the rest of *Legatus*, especially Book I. In their transformation of the *vita* genre to present Gertrud’s and their own theological insights, the Helfta sisters highlight the communal nature of sanctity. Their explicitly embedding the story of Gertrud’s conversion and achievements within her formation and interactions at

\(^{94}\) Olivier Quenardel analyzes the use of the term *pietas* in *Legatus* in “La Communion Eucharistique dans Le Héraut de L’Amour Divin (1) La Divina Pietas (1),” *Cîteaux* XLIV (1993) 253-286. He traces its patristic and liturgical roots and points out its centrality to the Prologue and Book II, in particular (260).
Helfta emphasizes that personal transformation occurs in and for the Christian community. This is a key theme of Benedict’s Rule, by which the monastery was governed, and reflects Augustinian influence on the Rule.

The author of the Prologue then goes on to describe the Legatus’ history of composition in “two parts.” The preceding section has detailed Pierre Doyère’s belief that these are Book II and Books III-V of the present combined text, and argued that it makes more sense to include Book I in the second part. As Chapter Four will explain in more detail, the four combined Books cohere very well and are an excellent example of the medieval subgenre “life and revelations.” What has often been overlooked is that the Memoriale abundantiae divinae suavitatis and the Legatus divinae pietatis are not simply parts of the hybrid work. The Prologue shows that each is a complete book in itself, with its own textual integrity, detailed composition history, and divine commissioning and approval.95 The metaphor of childbirth emphasizes that the final production is synergistic, a whole going far beyond

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95 This issue is confused by the Prologue author’s indiscriminate use of “liber, libri” to refer to each of the parts before the combination, the combined Legatus in its present form, and the latter’s five parts. This study, for the sake of clarity, will reserve “book” for the Memoriale and the Legatus divinae pietatis before their combination, and for the five books of the present Legatus after it. The latter will be referred to instead as a “work.”
the sum of its parts. Like the child of a marriage, the final text of Legatus is connected to, yet distinct from, either of its parent books; it has a fullness which could never have been achieved without their union. This highlights the main point of the composite work: the intricate interplay between individual and community, and the fruitfulness of sharing through spiritual conversation, here extended to writing.

The Prologue first describes Gertrud’s writing of “part one,” the Memorial of the Abundance of the Divine Sweetness, eight years after her initial conversion. The Memoriale is thus generally presumed to have been begun by Gertrud (as described in its Prologue) on Holy Thursday in 1289, since her initial conversion experience took place shortly before Candlemas in 1281. The connection between Gertrud’s experience and the readers’, is emphasized by her interaction with God upon the completion of the Memoriale and her devout offering of the text to God. Upon receiving the response: “No one can take from me the memorial of the abundance of my divine sweetness,” she concluded that the book should be titled Memorial of the abundance of the divine sweetness.96 This title is a

96 “Nam cum prima pars conscripta fuisset et ipsa cum humili devotione eam Domino commendasset, tale a benignissima pietate Dei accepit responsum: ‘Nemo a me elongare potest memoriale abundantiae
reference to Psalm 144/145:7 (Douay), “They shall publish the memory of the abundance of thy sweetness: and shall rejoice in thy justice.” This psalm alternates individual and communal praise of God, so it suits the predecessor of Book II, in which Gertrud, like Augustine in the Confessions, writes in order to praise God and move others to praise God together with her. The inclusion of suavitas in the title is fitting because the overflowing sweetness of God’s love is a major image for Gertrud throughout the Memoriale. Augustine also emphasizes the alluring sweetness of God’s Word, and human words that are formed by it, in the two works which most influence Legatus: Confessions and On Christian Doctrine. The mention in the Prologue hints at this connection and lays the groundwork for later, resonant uses of suavis, dulcis, and mellitis, throughout the text of Legatus.97

God gives Gertrud extravagant promises of the book’s efficacy, highlighting its ability to give readers and


97 The centrality of this image for Gertrud, as well as its connection to Augustine, are somewhat obscured in the recent Cistercian Publications translations of both Legatus and Exercitia spiritualia. They often render suavis, dulcis, and terms related to mel, honey, as “gentle” or “pleasant” for fear of Gertrud’s sounding overly sentimental. Augustine’s rhetoric of sweetness in Confessions often suffers a similar fate at the hands of translators.
collaborators mystical experiences like hers. Devout readers will experience God’s presence as if God were holding the manuscript for them, in the common medieval practice of joint reading.

And the Lord added, ‘If anyone wishes to read this book with a devout intention of spiritual progress, I shall draw him so closely to myself that he will read it as if my own hands were holding the book and I myself shall keep him company at the task. As when two people are reading the same page, each is aware of the other’s breath, so shall I draw in the breath of his longings. This shall move my loving-kindness to have mercy on him. Moreover I shall breathe into him the breath of my divinity which, through my Spirit, will create him anew within.’

The breathing image is the same used for Gertrud’s inspiration by the Holy Spirit in the preceding paragraph. A similar comparison is made by in the ensuing divine promise to scribes who copy the work.

The Lord also added, ‘If anyone transcribes what is written here with a similar intention, for every single word I will fire at him, from the sweetness of my divine heart, an arrow of love which will set in motion in his soul the most delightful pleasures of divine [sweetness].’

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98 HGLK, pp. 31-32. "Et adjecit Dominus: 'Si quis cum devota intentione spiritualis profectus in hoc libro legere desideraverit, ipsum mihi attraham in tantum quod quasi inter manus meas leget in eo, et ego memetipsum illi in hoc opere sociabo, ut sicut fieri solet quando duo legentes in una pagina, unus alterius sentiat flatum, sic ego intraham flatum desideriorium ipsius, quae viscera pietatis meae commoveantur super eum. Insuper aspirabo ipsi afflatum meae divinitatis, quo ipse interius per spiritum meum renovetur.'" SC 139, p. 110

99 HGLK, p. 32. "Subjunxit etiam Dominus: 'Qui vero simili intentione in eo conscripta deseripserit, pro singulis immittam ei a
This is a reference to the mystical grace of transverberation, one of Gertrud’s most treasured experiences and, again, one strongly associated with Augustine and the Confessions later in Legatus. The mention here prepares the reader for Gertrud’s interpretation of the pierced heart image in Book II. It also demonstrates Gertrud’s and the community’s belief that her experiences were given and recorded in order to help others receive the same gifts.

The Prologue then shows Gertrud in conversation with God during her sisters’ writing of Legatus divinae pietatis (the second part of the hybrid work). The Legatus divinae pietatis strongly resembles in style and structure a similar Helfta project, the Liber specialis gratiae. Like the Legatus divinae pietatis, the Liber describes Mechthild of Hackeborn’s visions but contains no portion personally written by her. The Prologue says that “part two” was completed (perficeretur) approximately twenty years after Gertrud’s initial conversion, or just before or after her death ca. 1302. It was apparently written by other sisters with Gertrud’s active

suavitate divini Cordis mei tot sagittas amoris, quae in anima ipsius jucundissimas delectationes divinae suavitatis commovebunt.”
SC 139, p. 110.
cooperation, presumably because of her other workload and the increasing ill-health that led to her early death at about the age of forty-five.

One night, while the second part was being written [conscriberetur], to the great delight of God’s will, she was making complaint to the Lord. He soothed her with his usual kindness and said, among other things: “I have given [you] to be the light of the Gentiles, that [you may] be my salvation even to the farthest part of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). As she knew that he was speaking of the book, which was scarcely begun, she said wonderingly, “And how, O my God, could anyone be granted the light of knowledge through this little book, since I do not want any more to be written [conscribantur], and I will not allow the little that is already written [scripta] to be shown to anyone?”

The passive verbs show that the community is doing the writing, recounting Gertrud’s experiences based on conversation with her. Along with the shift to the third person in the compiled Books, this makes it clear that they are active authors of the work and not simply taking her dictation, as some secondary literature describes it. But Gertrud retains an active role in the process,

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100 Winkworth, p. 48. “Secunda vero pars dum conscriberetur, etiam nimis voluntatem ipsius demulcens, et ipsa hoc nocte quadem querulando Domino proponeret, ispe eam solita benigne demulcens, inter caetera sic dixit: Dedi te in lucem gentium ut sis salus mea ab extremis terrae. Quod cum illa de libro isto, qui tunc vix incoepus fuerat, dictum intelligeret, admirans ait: ‘Et quomodo, Deus, per hunc libellum aliquis poterit percipere lucem cognitionis, cum voluntatis meae nullatenus sit ut plura conscribantur, et etiam ipsa jam pauea scripta neguaquam permittam manifestari?’” Prologue Paragraph 3, SC 139 p. 110.

101 Cf. Sister Maximilian Marnau’s introduction to the Paulist
as the focus on her here indicates. In a climate in which female theological teaching was often justified by extraordinary spiritual experiences, recounting and analyzing Gertrud’s visions gives a more confident voice to other sisters.

The Prologue to Book III focuses on its composition process, in which another sister wrote about Gertrud’s experiences at the superior’s command. The anonymous sister is clearly named as the author of the work; she offers her own text reflecting on Gertrud’s stories rather than taking dictation. This compilatrix draws morals from Gertrud’s experiences and recommends devotions based on them. Her voice can clearly be heard in the text along with Gertrud’s, as demonstrated in the following example translation: “Books 3, 4, and 5 were written by another nun, or possibly more than one, during Gertrude’s lifetime and probably at least in part at her dictation. Perhaps she, like Mechthild of Magdeburg when she dictated the seventh book of her revelations, was by then prevented from writing by her poor health. It is striking that there is no description of Gertrude’s death, but only of her own presentiment of it....It is likely, then, that the compiler of these books did not feel herself competent to add anything to what she had been told by Gertrude. In this she resembles the amanuensis of Mechtild of Magdeburg, who took down what Mechtild dictated and seems to have added nothing to it,” p. 12. Doyère, similarly, refers to Gertrud’s collaborators as her “secretaries” SC 139, 23.

from chapter 18. She begins by faithfully reporting Gertrud’s experience and exegesis of it, in this case a postcommunion meditation on minding the tongue.

After receiving communion, one day while she was meditating with what great care one should guard the mouth, as it in particular among the other parts of the body is the receptacle of the precious mysteries of Christ, she was instructed by this analogy: if someone does not guard the mouth from idle, untruthful, ugly, slanderous words and so on, she comes impenitent to holy communion and in such fashion receives Christ—as far as she can—like someone who buries a visitor on his arrival by piling up stones on the doorstep, or hits him on the head with a hard crow-bar!103

The compilatrix then goes on to appeal directly to the readers to be mindful of this admonition, and expands its meaning to cover sins besides those of speech.

Anyone who reads this should consider with a deep sob of compassion what congruity there is of such great savagery with such great goodness, that he who came for human salvation with such great mildness, is so cruelly persecuted by those who were to be saved. It is possible to have similar thoughts about any other sin.104

103 HGLK 3, p. 74. “Post sumptam communionem, die quodam dum revolveret quanta diligentia os esset observandum, quod praecipue inter alia membra est receptaculum pretiosorum Christi mysteriorum, hac similitudine edocta est: quod, si quis non observans os a verbis vanis, falsis, turpibus, detractoriis et similibus, impoenitens ad sanctam accedit communionem, tali modo suscepit Christum—quantum in se est—sic ut qui hospitem in ipso ingressu lapidibus in superliminari congregatis obrueret, vel vecte duro caput ejus obtunderet.” Leg. III.18.9, SC 143, p. 88.

104 HGLK 3, p. 74. “Haec legens alto compassionis singultu consideret, quae conventio tanta feritai cum tanta benignitate, ut ille qui cum tanta mansuetudine venit ad humanam salutem, a salvandis tam crudeliter persequeatur. Et hoc idem sentiri potest de quibuslibet peccatis.” Leg. III.18.9, SC 143, p. 88.
The compilatrix clearly feels ownership of the text, and her preaching intensity here recalls Gertrud’s, as described by the biographer in Book I.

As the Prologue to the hybrid work continues, God calls Gertrud “a light to the nations,” comparing her to the messianic servant of the Lord, anointed by the Holy Spirit, in Isaiah 49:6. God also compares her to Jeremiah, who thought he did not know how to speak, but whose eloquence illuminated the nations.

To which the Lord answered: “When I chose Jeremiah to be my prophet (Jer. 1:5), he thought he was incapable of speaking with knowledge or discretion, yet by the words of his mouth I reproved peoples and kings. In the same way, my intention to clarify certain things through you by the light of knowledge and truth shall not be frustrated, for no one can hinder what has been predestined from eternity. For those whom I have predestined I shall call, and those whom I have called I shall justify, in the way which pleases me.”

A divine comparison of Gertrud to prophets who spoke for

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105 Cheryl Clemons points out that this verse recalls Simeon’s Nunc dimittis, familiar to the monastic audience from its daily recitation at Compline. The canticle is also central to the liturgy for the feast of Candlemas, which is strongly connected to Gertrud’s conversion in Book II. Clemons, pp. 76-77.

God and authored biblical books, and of the work written by her sisters to the Gospels, is a strong endorsement of women’s spirituality and scholarship. It claims authority for her, for them, and for the book itself, which will again be divinely likened to Scripture later in the text.\(^{107}\) Gertrud’s converting eloquence, like that of the prophets, will also be central in Book I’s description of her.

The Prologue author stresses Gertrud’s reluctance to write of her experiences, revealing that it is not just God’s will, but that of the monastery superiors. This is a standard medieval humility trope, particularly helpful for women theologians, but also underlines the status of the work as a community project. Gertrud declares that she will do everything she can to prevent its being written, and God responds that it is not just her

\(^{107}\) Cf. Gertrud’s similar attempt to escape writing her own part of the work in Book II. She justifies herself by reflecting that she has, at least, shared the graces bestowed on her in conversation with others. God disagrees, using a verse from that day’s Matins, which insists on the importance of Jesus’ saving words being written down in the Gospels “for the salvation of many” who could not hear them personally. “Et cum animo revolverem quod omnia nominata prae scripta, etsi non per scripta, tamen per dicta ad utilitatem proximorum reposuissem, Dominus objecit verbum illud quod ipsa nocte ad Matutinas audieram lectum: ‘Si Dominus doctrinam suam praesentibus tantum dixisset, dicta tantum essent non scripta; sec [sic] nunc etiam scripta sunt propter plurimorum salutem.’ Et addidit Dominus: ‘Absque contradicione certum divinae pietatis meae testimonium volo habere in scriptis tuis, his novissimus temporibus, in quibus dispono benefacere multis.’” *Leg. II.10, SC* 139, pp. 272-274.
superior’s command, but the divine will, that she cooperate with the process.\textsuperscript{108} Submitting to this direction, Gertrud asks God to title the book, as she had asked for the Memoriale, and receives the answer “Legatus divinae pietatis.”

Then she, conforming her entire will to the divine pleasure, said to the Lord, ‘What title do you want this book to have, most loving Lord?’ The Lord replied, ‘This book of mine will be called The herald of the divine loving-kindness, for some of the overflowing abundance of my loving-kindness will spill over into it’.\textsuperscript{109}

God twice calls the Legatus divinae pietatis “my book” in the Prologue, and refers to the composite Legatus in the same way in the closing chapters of Book V.\textsuperscript{110} This

\textsuperscript{108} “Altera vice, dum iterum in orando niteretur obtinere a Domino, ut permitteret se prohibere scribentem hunc librum, quia tunc obedientia praelatorum eam tam violenter non cogeret ad scribendum sicut antea fecerat, Dominus benigne respondit: ‘An nescis quia quemcumque voluntas mea cogit, super omnem obedientiam est coactus? Ergo cum voluntatem meam, cui nemo potest resistere, scias in scribendo libro isto, ut quid turbatis? Nam et ego scribentem instigo et fideliter juvabo atque quadr meum est illaesum conservabo.’” Prologue paragraph 4, SC 139 p. 112.


\textsuperscript{110} In Gertrud’s final appearance in Legatus, after the dramatic vision of her approaching death, she beholds Jesus holding the completed work to his heart and calling it “my book.” “Cum liber iste conscriptus esset, apparuit illi Dominus Jesus, habens ipsum impressum pectori suo, dicens: ‘Hunc librum meum ad hoc intimis divini pectoris mei impressi...’” He promises to permeate each word with divine sweetness as mead soaks into bread, then makes the sign of the cross over it and compares its saving power to that of the

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emphasizes the work’s authority and likeness to scripture, and the importance of the text rather than Gertrud herself or her physical relics as the locus of divine grace and revelation.\textsuperscript{111}

Gertrud responds not to the focus on God’s \textit{pietas}, but to the title of “herald,” pointing out rather coyly that heralds have great authority and asking what authority God intends for it in granting such a name.\textsuperscript{112} She promptly receives a divine promise of graces for devout readers:

\begin{quote}
The Lord replied, “By virtue of my divinity I grant this, that anyone who reads it to praise me with correct faith, humble devotion and religious gratitude, and who seeks to be edified, may receive remission of venial sins and will obtain the gift of spiritual consolation and will, moreover, become capable of more ample graces.”\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{111} This resembles the emphasis on Augustine’s works as his relics in Possidius’ \textit{vita}, as Chapter Four will discuss in more detail.

\textsuperscript{112} “Quod illum multum admirans ait: ‘Cum personae illae multum admirans ait: ‘Cum personae illae quae nominantur Legati majori fungantur auctoritate, quid huic libello, quem tali denotas vocabulo, dignaris concedere auctoritatis?’” Prologue paragraph 4, \textit{SC} 139 p. 112.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{HGLK}, p. 33. “Respondit Dominus: ‘Ex virtute divinitatis hoc concedo ut quicumque ad laudem meam cum recta fide et humili devotione devoteaque gratitudine in ipso legerit, et aedificari quiserit, venialium peccatorum remissionem consequatur, et obtemebit gratiam spiritualis consolationis et insuper habilitabitur ad...
After the lengthy story of the completion and blessing of each book, the fifth paragraph recounts Gertrud’s realization that God wanted them to be “joined together into one,” “conjungerentur in unum.” The marital overtones of this term are highlighted by the feminine metaphor of childbirth used to describe the hybrid work’s genesis. When Gertrud asks in prayer what the latter should be titled, she receives the answer:

Just as the birth of a lovely child sometimes leads each of its parents to look on the other more affectionately, so I have preordained that this book should result from a union of both...and the title emerge from both, that is, The Herald: A memorial of the abundance of the divine loving-kindness, for it will herald my loving-kindness in the memory of those that I have chosen.”

It is all the readers who are here referred to as “chosen,” not just Gertrud. This resembles her insistence in Book II of Legatus that her extraordinary experiences have been granted for the good of the community, and because of her own need for the intercession and grace gained from those to whom she ministers.

Though the Prologue began by saying that Legatus was gratiam ampliorem.’” Prologue paragraph 5, SC 139, p. 112.

114 HGLK, p. 33. Leg. Prologue Par. 5. The ellipses leaves out her expansion “from a union of both parts” (the Latin reads simply ex utrisque, SC 139, p. 112). Barratt’s glossed translation is an example of the very point in question, misdefining the earlier books merely as parts of the combined “child” book.
written in two parts, here it clarifies that the final
text is the offspring and childbirth of the "marriage" of
two previous, complete books. The cumbersome title of the
combined work, Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae
pietatis, is a reminder of its genesis.\footnote{115} This fuller
story significantly changes the interpretation of the
final text. Seeing it simply as one book in two parts
furthers the tendency to an overemphasis on Book II to the
neglect of the rest. The compiled materials are in this
case given value and considered complete only when they
are connected to the section written by Gertrud herself.
Seeing the hybrid as a "child" reveals it and each part as
distinct but connected, and each worthwhile in itself.
The metaphor of birth is not just feminine, but inherently
communal: aside from the Virgin Mary, no woman can give
birth without a father to help her begin the pregnancy.
And it is crucial for the well-being of mother and child
to have at least one birth assistant—in medieval times,
normally a midwife, along with female relatives and
friends.

\footnote{115} Olivier Quenardel points out that the title imitates the
make-up of the whole work, with the term "memorialis abundantiae"
being embedded between "Legatus" and "divinae pietatis" just as
Gertrud’s Memoriale is placed between books composed by her sisters.
"La Communion Eucharistique dans Le Héraut de L’Amour Divin (1) La
The Prologue contains a sophisticated discussion of the different types of Gertrud's visions, focusing on their communal and teaching function. Gertrud is said to enjoy the divine presence constantly, but to be given "images of bodily likenesses" to enable her to describe them to others.

Since it will become clear from what follows that she constantly enjoyed the presence of the divine generosity, and yet [it is sometimes inserted] 'he appeared' or 'the Lord was with her', this must be understood to mean that although he was indeed often with her, by a special privilege, nonetheless there were periods when for some reason or some time he appeared to her in a form more amenable to the imagination, in conformity to the capacity of those around her, to whom he preordained that a particular revelation should be communicated.

Similarly it is also essential to know, in regard to the varied material that follows, that God, the lover of all that exists, in visiting one seeks in different ways the salvation of many.\textsuperscript{116}

The Helfta re-visioning of hagiography in communal terms is emphasized here with a return to the theme "\textit{ad salutem plurimorum.}" Their view of sanctity is summed up in what the Prologue says with regard to Gertrud's visions, "in

\textsuperscript{116} HGLK, pp. 33-34. "Et cum in consequentibus pateat huic jugiter affuisse divinae dignationis praeexistentia et tamen quandoque inseratur 'apparuit' vel 'affuit ei Dominus', sic intelligendum est, quod quamvis vere frequentier affuerit ipsi speciali quadam praerogativa, pro causa tamen et pro tempore quandoque magis imaginatorium exhibuit illi formam, ad capacitatem proximorum quibus hoc notificandum praerodinavit. Similiter etiam sciem est de his quae in consequentibus videntur diversa, quia Deus amator universorum, in visitatione unius, plurimorum diversimode quaerit salutem." SC 139, p. 114.
visiting one God seeks the salvation of many." This theme will be highlighted again in Book IV, where Gertrud turns down exalted and ineffable mystical experiences in favor of mundane ones which improve her proficiency in teaching scripture for the benefit of her neighbors.

For she enjoyed God in two ways: first, by a rapture which absorbed her entirely in God, so that she could not explain much of what she learned therein for the edification of others, and secondly, by a grace which God conferred on her of instructing her in Holy Scripture, of which He imparted to her the spirit and meaning, so that it seemed to her as if she conversed with God familiarly, as a friend would with his friend. This enabled her to be extremely useful to others. God then asked her which she preferred—that He should serve her in the first manner or that she should serve Him in the second? But as she sought not her own things, but those of the Lord Jesus, she preferred having the labour of instructing her neighbour for the glory of God, to seeking her own satisfaction by tasting His sweetness. God appeared well pleased with her choice.\footnote{Doheny, pp. 169-170. Leg. IV.2.3. "Habebat enim duos modos divinae fruitionis: unum videlicet, quo ita totaliter per excessum mentis ferebatur in Deum, quod de illa fruitione perpauca respectu veritatis ad utilitatem proximorum enarrarare potuit; alium vero modum, quo sensus per Scripturarum exercitationes exacuans Domino cooperante, spiritualis intellectus fruebatur mirabili sapore et delectatione, tamquam praesentialiter facie ad faciem colluderet Domino, sicut amicus amicissimo suo quandoque super tabulam colludit in secreto. Et ex his valebat aliorum utilitatis deservire. Et hoc erat quod Dominus requirebat ab ea, utrum eligeret ut ipse serviret ei per primum modum, an ipsa vellet sibi servire per modum secundum. At illa non quaerens quae sua sunt, sed quae Jesu Domini sui: potius cum labore ministrare ad laudem ipsius, quam vacando et gustando quam suavis est Dominus, propriae satisfacere delectationi. Quod Dominus miro modo videbatur acceptare." SC 255, pp. 24, 26.}
them in the writing process. The author points out her addition of scriptural and theological authorities in the margins of the manuscript and invites later readers to continue this process. The copious citations in several of the extant manuscripts are evidence that this invitation was enthusiastically accepted. Scriptural citations, as well as those to Augustine and Bernard, are the most prominent.  

But as Hugh says, ‘I hold suspect all truth which is not confirmed by scriptural authority’, and again, ‘No revelation, however truthful it appears, should be endorsed without the witness of Moses and Elijah, that is, without the authority of Scripture’, I have therefore recorded in the margin what my simple wit and inexperienced understanding could recall on the spur of the moment, in the hope that if anyone of keener wit and more experienced understanding should come across it, he would be able to cite far more credible and appropriate witnesses.  

The communal authorship which is shared between Gertrud and her sisters is here opened up to the readers, in a vivid proof that they mean their assertion that Gertrud is

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HGLK, p. 34. “Sed quia Hugo dicit: ‘Suspecta est mihi omnis veritas quam non confirmat Scripturarum auctoritas.’ Et infra: ‘Nec rata poterit esse quantumlibet verisimilis revelatio sine attestatione Moysi et Helyae, id est, sine Scripturarum auctoritate.’ Ergo in marginibus annotavi quae simplex ingenium et inexcitatus sensus meus in instanti ad memoriam potuit revocare, sperans ut, si quis acri ingenio et exercitato sensu affuerit, multo probabiliora atque convenientiora testimonia possit adhibere.” Prologue, paragraph 8, SC 139, p. 116. A footnote on that page points out that the quotations actually come from Richard, not Hugh, of St. Victor’s Benjamin minor.
visited with grace for the salvation of the community. The writing of the very book which records these visitations is envisioned as a fully communal process open to ongoing interpretation from all who read it with insight and inspiration and make their own contribution to the work.

This openness to learning from the readers, and invitation to join the writing project, recalls Augustine’s openness to dialogue and correction, especially in several places in The Trinity.

Accordingly, dear reader, whenever you are as certain about something as I am go forward with me; whenever you stick equally fast seek with me; whenever you notice that you have gone wrong come back to me; or that I have, call me back to you. In this way let us set out along Charity Street together, making for him of whom it is said, Seek his face always (Psalm 105:4)....if anyone reads this work and says, "I understand what is being said, but it is not true," he is at liberty to affirm his own conviction as much as he likes and refute mine if he can. If he succeeds in doing so charitably and truthfully, and also takes the trouble to let me know (if I am still alive), then that will be the choicest plum that could fall to me from these labors of mine. If he cannot do me this service, I would be only too pleased that he should do it for anybody he can.\footnote{Saint Augustine, The Trinity I.1.5, translated by Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), p. 68. Cf. also the prefaces to Book III, pp. 127-128, and Book V, pp. 189-190.}

This chapter has argued that the communally produced form of the complete Legatus is not a weakness, but a
conscious choice reflecting the value the Helfta women placed on mutually transforming spiritual conversation. The next chapter will move on to an in-depth textual analysis of Book II, Gertrud’s Memoriale abundantiae divinae suavitatis. It will demonstrate her deep integration of her experiences, through such a conversation process, with the themes of Augustine’s Confessions. Gertrud reclaims and reinterprets Augustine’s emphasis on conversion through narrative practices in the Christian community.
CHAPTER THREE

HEART AS BOOK

Legatus II, Abundance of the Memorial of the Divine Sweetness, is Gertrud’s spiritual autobiography and the first part of the composite work to be written. She uses the style of, and numerous allusions to, the most famous of all Christian conversion stories: Augustine’s Confessions. Gertrud reads her memories through Augustine’s, and his story through her experience, to illuminate each for the spiritual benefit of her readers. Both Gertrud and Augustine describe union with God as transformation of the human heart through the memory of Christ’s passion.

Gertrud’s central metaphor for Christian holiness in Book II is having one’s heart pierced by divine love. This piercing, known in mystical theology as

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transverberation, occurs through hearing, reading, and writing narratives of individual and communal salvation history. It stabilizes the affections by firmly establishing the memory of Christ’s saving love in the heart. The pierced heart of the Christian believer thus becomes a “book,” in which the narratives of God’s mercy may be read by the self and others. Gertrud describes her own dramatic mystical experiences of this kind in Chapters 4 and 5. But careful analysis of her text shows that she sees this experience not as an extraordinary spiritual feat reserved for the few, but an inner transformation accessible to each believer. Gertrud writes of her experience in a style patterned after Augustine and using themes characteristic of the Confessions to show that transverberation is not merely an experience of the individual alone. Instead, it is a profound conversion effected through a community’s liturgy and spiritual sharing.

This chapter analyzes Gertrud’s evocation of Confessions while describing her experience in key passages of Book II. It will thus suggest a broader understanding of Legatus than merely as a record of Gertrud’s spiritual experiences. Like the Confessions, the Legatus is a sophisticated theological and exegetical
text which uses a personal narrative as a lens through which to view the drama of human salvation in Christ. Gertrud’s work is an accomplished integration of prayer and textual commentary, written as a model and resource for her sisters and other readers. The account encourages readers to reflect in community on their own experience in the light of Scripture, and so to recognize and respond ever more deeply to God’s presence in their own hearts.

Augustine’s texts at Helfta

Investigating the Helfta women’s use of Augustinian themes and texts immediately raises the question of what access they had to his works. Since there is no library catalogue extant for Helfta, it cannot be conclusively proven that Gertrud and her sisters had read the Confessions or any of his other works in their entirety. The Confessions is explicitly cited once in the main text of Legatus, in the fourth Book’s account of Gertrud’s vision of Augustine with his heart as a fragrant rose “wounded with divine love”.\(^{122}\) Gertrud prays to Augustine

\(^{122}\) *Leg.* IV.50.3., SC 255, p. 406. “Ejusdem igitur gloriosissimi Pontificis festo, dum ad Vesperas cantaretur responsorium Vulneraverat caritas, apparuit idem praeclarus antistes in magna gloria stans, et quasi utrisque manibus cor suum sanctissimum toties in amore Dei vulneratum expandens, illud Domino in laudem praesantatabat in modum rosae pulcherrimae...”
for the Helfta community and all devoted to him, and he in turn prays that their hearts would be transformed by divine love, as his had been. Then she reflects on the “wonderful sweetness” he had found in “contemplating the height of the divine plan for the salvation of the human race, as he testifies in his book of Confessions.”¹²³

There are also literary echoes of Confessions in key phrases used by Gertrud and her sisters in Legatus.¹²⁴

The manuscripts of Legatus contain many marginal citations to Confessions, as well as to Bernard’s Sermons on the Song of Songs. While some of these may have been added by later copyists, their number and placement lead the SC editors to argue that the house indeed possessed copies of both works.¹²⁵

The centrality of education at Helfta means that they may have had a copy of On Christian

¹²³ Legatus IV.50.4. “Inter Matutinas vero, dum pro posse suo intenderet devotioni, desiderabat agnoscere quo praemio Deo dignus Praesul Augustinus remuneraretur pro eo quod, ut ipse in libro Confessionum testatur, etiam vivens adhuc in corpore non satiabatur ‘dulcedine mirabili considerare altitudinem consilii divini super salutem generis humani.’” SC 255, p. 408.

¹²⁴ For example, in Book I Gertrud’s compilatrix uses Augustine’s term for his prodigal wanderings, in regione dissimilitudinis, to describe the state of Gertrud’s soul before her conversion. Leg. I.1.2, SC 139, p. 120. In Book II, Gertrud like Augustine, tells God that she writes her prayerful confessions amore amoris tui, and in Book V the compilatrix twice echoes this declaration when offering the work to God’s glory and human salvation. Leg. V. 34, SC 331, pp. 268; Leg. V.35, SC 331, p. 272.

Doctrine as well.\textsuperscript{126} The prologue to Mechthild of Hackeborn’s Liber specialis gratiae contains a quote from On Christian Doctrine IV.2.

“Si qua vero minus apte, minusve litteratorie posita invenerit, hoc quasi usum dictandi non habentibus in charitate ignoscat; quia, ut beatus dicit Augustinus: Bonorum ingeniorum insignis est indolis in verbis verum amare, non verba.”\textsuperscript{127}

There is, of course, no way to determine whether the writer found the quote in a full or partial manuscript of the work itself, or in a florilegium. The Helfta women would certainly have known extracts of various Augustinian works through florilegia and Matins readings. And there are key Augustinian themes and texts that they would have encountered through the mediation of his medieval interpreters, like Bernard and the Victorines.

Though it is likely in some cases, the next two chapters do not require pervasive textual dependence of the Legatus on any particular work of Augustine’s.


\textsuperscript{127} Liber specialis gratiae, p. 2. The Prologue author’s statement excusing any infelicities of literary style because she is not accustomed to writing [usum dictandi non habentibus] perhaps calls into further question the usual identification of Gertrud as the Liber’s primary compilatrix. Though such humble disclaimers are a standard part of medieval prologues, this one would be a drastic exaggeration on the part of the convent’s most eloquent and elegant writer.
Instead, they suggest that the Helfta women’s theological project reflects an Augustinian vision and a creative reception of his thought, which probably came partly from his texts directly, and partly through a variety of medieval sources. By including in their work sustained thematic resemblances and allusions to key Augustinian passages and images, Gertrud and her sisters joined, enriched, and extended a theological conversation inspired by Augustine. This hypothesis may be tested by reading the text of Legatus in relation to Augustine’s work. If the process proves to mutually illuminate Gertrud’s texts and the Augustinian themes it takes up, it will have been a fruitful exercise.

Prologue: Writing as prayerful confession

Book II begins with a third person prologue, presumably added when it was combined with the remaining Books to form the composite Legatus. The narrator describes how Gertrud was moved by the Spirit to begin her story, while waiting for the eucharist to be brought to the infirmary on Holy Thursday.

The ninth year of her favored state had run from February to April when, on the evening of Holy Thursday, she was standing with her sisters waiting for the body of the Lord to be carried to a sick nun. Compelled [most violently] by
the Holy Spirit, she snatched up the tablet hanging at her side. Out of the overflowing abundance of thanksgiving, to his praise, she described with her own hand in these words which follow [what her heart felt] when she held intimate converse with her Beloved.  

By giving the circumstances in which Gertrud began her writing, the prologue places the work in a communal and eucharistic context. The Spirit compels her to write while she is in the presence of her sisters and they are gathered to bring communion to another sister. Gertrud’s spiritual experiences, her “intimate converse with her Beloved,” are not individualistic raptures but conversations which overflow from the community’s prayer and praise. Her converted life of conversation with Jesus is a life lived within the community of shared life and worship, which empowers Gertrud to write of her experiences. This writing is eucharistic because it is a thank-offering to God, as well as a means of ongoing conversion for both Gertrud and her readers. It recalls to her memory the grace she has received and makes it available to others, as the eucharist does for the

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128 HGLK, p. 99. “Post acceptam gratiam anno nono, de Februario usque ad Apriliem, revoluto die sancto Coenae Dominicae, dum inter Conventum staret expectans quosque corpus Domini deferretur ad infirman, compulsa violentissimo impetu Spiritus Sancti, lateralem tabulam arripiens, quod corde sentiebat cum dilecto in secreto confabulans, haec ex superabundantia gratitudinis ad laudem ipsius et manu describethat in haec verba...” Leg. II Prologue, SC 139, p. 226.
incarnation and passion of Christ.

The rest of Book II is written in Gertrud’s own voice, beginning with her description of a dramatic conversion experience eight years before the Holy Thursday inspiration to begin writing. Gertrud recounts many further visions of and conversations with Christ, and the text reflects her continuing struggles to understand and appropriate her mystical experiences. In accord with the eucharistic intent of her writing, Gertrud’s style throughout Book II is one of prayer and praise. She addresses herself eloquently to God in the presence of her human readers. This cannot fail to remind one of Augustine’s style in the *Confessions*. The tremendous influence of the latter work would have made this immediately recognizable to medieval readers. Like Augustine, Gertrud’s lyrical language resembles and is filled with specific allusions to the psalms, the

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129 The stylistic resemblance of Book II to Augustine’s *Confessions*, and a few specific allusions, have been noted by some Gertrudian scholars; Hugues Minguet has pursued the comparison furthest. Minguet suggests that the prayerful style of both Augustine’s and Gertrud’s writing makes the theological point that human finitude and sin cannot prevent union with the God whose mercy is revealed through Christ. “Théologie spirituelle de Saint Gertrude: le Livre II du ‘Héraut’,” I, II, III Collectanea Cisterciensia 51 (1989): 147-77, 252-80, 317-28.

preeminent prayers of Scripture and Christian tradition. She follows Augustine’s double use of “confession” to mean recounting her own sinfulness and, even more importantly, praising the mercy of God which calls and welcomes her to return and be saved.

May my soul bless you, Lord God my Creator; may my soul bless you. Sweetest lover, may the mercies [miserationes tuae] with which your unbounded loving-kindness has so unconstrainedly surrounded me make confession to you from the inmost depths of my being [ex medullis intimarum confiteantur tibi].

Gertrud takes the unusual expression in which God’s mercies are said to do the confessing from Psalm 106:8, confiteantur Domino misericordiae eius, by way of Confessions VI.

Let the man who does not reflect upon your mercies [miserationes tuas] keep silent in your praise, for those mercies confess to you from the bottom of my heart [de medullis meis confitentur].

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The likelihood that Gertrud intends a reference to Augustine and not just to the psalm verse is shown by two features of her text. The first is that, like Augustine, she specifies the mercies of God as confessing from the inmost depths of her being, *ex medullis*. The second is that she uses Augustine’s term for God’s mercies, *miserationes*, rather than the Vulgate’s *misericordiae*.

Augustine’s prayerful, confessional style is particularly apt for spiritual autobiography because it puts the focus on divine mercy, rather than human virtue. Other such works attempt a similar style, for instance Guibert of Nogent’s *Monodiae*, but it is very difficult to sustain effectively.¹³³ Gertrud’s address to God, like Augustine’s, rings true because they are not just narrating past events. Instead, a transformation in their perception of these events is evident as they remember and write about them. The writing itself is an occasion of grace, inspiring deeper gratitude to and desire for God. As Augustine says with a reference to Psalm 130:1,

To whom do I tell these things? Not to you, my God, but before you I tell them to my own kind, to mankind, or to whatever small part of it may come upon these books of mine. Why do I tell these things? It is that I myself and whoever else reads them may realize from what great depths we must cry unto you.\textsuperscript{134}

For both Gertrud and Augustine, the process of writing prolongs and deepens their conversion experiences. It is also an indirect but highly effective style of preaching, making the Gospel credible and personally appealing to readers. Their dramatic narratives give examples of the incarnation of the Christian story in a particular time and place, inviting the reader to imitate their search for grace. Their prayerful style naturally draws the reader to join in their prayer of thanksgiving, both for the mercy shown to the writer and for that evident in the reader's own life. The writing process both exemplifies and calls forth "crying unto God from the depths," moving both writer and reader to an ever-deepening praise of God.

\textsuperscript{134} Conf. II.3.5. Ryan, p. 67. Cf. also Conf. X.3.3, "For when they are read and heard, these confessions of my past sins—which "you have forgiven and covered over," so that you may make me blessed in you, changing my soul by faith and your sacrament—stir up the heart. Then it will not sleep in despair and say, "I cannot," but it will awaken in love of your mercy and in your sweet grace. Through this grace whoever is weak is strong, when by its means he comes to know his own weakness. Good people like to hear about the past misdeeds of others who are now rid of such things, not because those deeds are present evils, but because once they were but no longer are." Ryan, p. 230.
Legatus II.1: Conversion within community

Before recounting her initial conversion experience, Gertrud begins Chapter 1 with a prayer which evokes the opening passage of the Confessions.

“May the abyss of uncreated wisdom invoke [invocet] the abyss of admirable omnipotence to extol such stupendous benevolence, which through the superabundance of your mercy [misericordiae tuae] has flowed down to the valley of my misery!”

Gertrud praises God as a trinity of “uncreated wisdom,” “admirable omnipotence,” and “stupendous benevolence.” These trinitarian images—power, wisdom, and goodness—are unmistakably Augustinian. When combined with the word “invoke,” and the mention of divine mercy, Gertrud’s opening recalls the beginning of the Confessions.

Lord, grant me to know and to understand which is first, to call upon you [invocare te] or to praise you, and also which is first, to know you or to call upon you [invocare te]?...Lord, let me seek you by calling upon you [invocans te], and let me call upon you [invocem te] by believing in you, for you have been preached to us. Lord, my faith calls upon you [invocat te], that faith which you have given to me, which you have breathed into me by the [humanity] of your Son and through the ministry of your preacher.

135 “Abyssus increatae sapientiae invocet abyssum admirabilis omnipomnipotentiae ad extollentiam tam stupendae benevolentiae, quae supereffluentiam misericordiae tuae per ima defluxit ad vallem meae miseriae!” Leg. II.1.1, SC 139, p. 228.

136 Conf. I.1.1, Ryan p. 43.
This famous first paragraph of Confessions repeatedly uses forms of *invoco*, *invocare*. It also contains a trinitarian image when Augustine speaks of the faith God has "breathed" into him—an image of the action of the Holy Spirit--by the incarnation of Christ and the preaching of the church. And Augustine speaks repeatedly of God’s mercy throughout the opening paragraphs of the Confessions.\(^{137}\)

Yet grant me to plead before your mercy [*misericordiam tuam*], grant me who am dust and ashes to speak, for behold, it is not a man who makes mock of me but your mercy [*misericordia tua*] that I address. Perhaps even you deride me, but when you have turned towards me, you will have mercy on me [*misererabis me*]....Your consolation and your mercies [*miserationum tuarum*] have raised me up...\(^{138}\)

This quotation begins Augustine’s autobiography, as he reflects on God’s grace experienced through his conception and birth. It occurs after lengthy questioning how he as a sinner is to begin his address to the holy and transcendent God. Augustine turns to God’s mercy alone to enable this writing, and as the text progresses he

\(^{137}\) Cf. also Conf. I.4.4, “What, then, is my God?...Most high, most good, most almighty; most merciful and most just [*misericordissime et iustissime*]...”, Ryan p. 45; Conf. I.5.5, “Unhappy man that I am, in your mercy [*miserationes*], O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me,” Ryan p. 46.

\(^{138}\) Conf. I.6.7, Ryan p. 46.
continues to reflect on the course of his life in light of that saving mercy.

Gertrud continues her first chapter by describing the distress leading up to her initial conversion experience during the evening of January 27, 1281, just before the feast of the Presentation which celebrates Christ as light to the nations.\textsuperscript{139} She first addresses God, confessing God’s providential action in her life, with a phrase which is almost an exact quote from Book IX of the \textit{Confessions}.

My God, you who are all truth, clearer than all light, yet hidden deeper in our heart than any secret [\textit{omni luce serenior, sed omni secreto interior}], when you resolved to disperse the darkness of my night, you began gently and tenderly by first calming my mind, which had been troubled for more than a month past. This trouble, it seems to me, served your purpose. You were striving to destroy the tower of vanity and worldliness [\textit{turrim vanitatis et curialitatis}] which I had set up in my pride [\textit{superbia}], although, alas, I was—in vain—bearing the name and wearing the habit of a religious. This was the way in which you sought to show me your salvation.\textsuperscript{140}

Gertrud’s address to God as “clearer than all light, yet

\textsuperscript{139} Cheryl Clemons is particularly sensitive to the strong liturgical overtones of Gertrud’s story in this chapter. Cf. pp. 87-92.

\textsuperscript{140} HDL, p. 95. “\textit{Tu veritas, Deus, omni luce serenior, sed omni secreto interior, densitatem tenebrarum mearum temperare decreveras, blande leniterque initians cum sedatione turbationis illius quam ante mensem in corde meo commoveras, cum qua perturbatione, ut credo, destruere nitebaris turrim vanitatis et curialitatis meae, in quam superbia mea excreverat, quamvis heu! inaniter nomen et vestem Religionis gestarem, ut vel sic invenires iter quo ostenderes mihi salutare tuum.” \textit{Leg. II.1.1, SC} 139, p. 228.
deeper than any secret,” is also part of Augustine’s prayer of praise immediately after his conversion in Book IX.

How sweet did it suddenly become to me to be free of the sweets of folly: things that I once feared to lose it was now joy to put away. You cast them forth from me, you the true and highest sweetness, you cast them forth, and in their stead you entered in, sweeter than every pleasure, but not to flesh and blood, brighter than every light, but deeper within me than any secret retreat [omni luce clarior, sed omni secreto interior] higher than every honor, but not to those who exalt themselves.\footnote{Conf. IX.1.1, Ryan p. 205. Cf. also Conf. III.6.11, “But you were more inward than my inmost self [interior intimo meo], and superior to my highest being.” Ryan p. 84.}

Like Augustine, Gertrud diagnoses her central problem as pride or \textit{“superbia,”} a Babel-like tower of “vanity and worldliness.” The clear light of God within the soul is what frees the human person from Gertrud’s “pride and vanity” and Augustine’s “self-exaltation.”\footnote{Cf. also the first lines of Confessions, which contain the first of Augustine’s numerous uses of that term to sum up his own and all human sin. “You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit. And man, who is a part of your creation, wishes to praise you, man who bears about within himself his mortality, who bears about within himself testimony to his sin and testimony that you resist the proud [superbis resistis].” Conf. I.1.1.}

Gertrud describes her inner turmoil, which had begun during Advent and prepared her heart for conversion, in Augustinian terms. Her \textit{“turbationis”} and \textit{“perturbatione”} recall Augustine’s state just before going into the garden
in *Confessions* VIII, "troubled both in mind and in countenance," "tam vultu quam mente turbatus." Gertrud dramatically recounts her own "garden scene," with echoes of and allusions to Augustine’s that have been thus far overlooked in studies of *Legatus*. She meets an older nun in the dormitory and bows to her, in accordance with the Rule. When Gertrud arises her sister appear to have been replaced by a beautiful young man.

He was lovely and refined, and looked about sixteen; his appearance was such as my youth would find pleasing. With kindly face and gentle words he said to me, ‘Your salvation will come quickly; why are you consumed by sadness? Do you have no counsellor, that sorrow has overwhelmed you?’

This act of humility, reverencing Christ in another, is a step against her pride, and highlights the importance of the community as mediating Christ to her. The presence of the other sister throughout her vision also recalls Alypius’ presence with Augustine in the garden. The sexual appeal of the young man is highlighted when Gertrud says that he was all that her youth could have desired. This recalls Augustine’s vision of “virtuously alluring”

Lady Continence, that is Christ in the form of holy wisdom.

For from that way in which I had set my face and where I trembled to pass, there appeared to me the chaste dignity of continence, serene and joyous, but in no wanton fashion, virtuously alluring, so that I would cometh to her and hesitate no longer. To lift me up and embrace me, she stretched forth her holy hands, filled with varied kinds of good examples....

She smiled at me with an enheartening mockery, as if to say: "Cannot you do what these youths and these maidens do? Or can these youths and these maidens do this of themselves, and not rather in the Lord their God. The Lord their God gave me to them. Why do you stand on yourself, and thus not stand at all? Cast yourself on him. Have no fear. He will not draw back and let you fall. Cast yourself trustfully on him: he will receive you and he will heal you." \(^{145}\)

As the beautiful young man does for Gertrud, Continence draws Augustine with her beauty and gently teases him as she challenges him to rely on God’s grace. The young man is more explicitly identified with Christ, and thus speaks in the first person; he takes Gertrud’s right hand in his in a gesture of betrothal while speaking his words of challenge and promise.

While he said this, although I knew I was physically in the place mentioned, it seemed to me that I was in choir, in the corner where I used to make my lukewarm devotions, and it was there that I heard the following words: ‘I shall free you and I shall deliver you; do not fear’.  

\(^{145}\) Confessions XIII.11.27.
At these words I saw a tender, finely-wrought hand holding my right hand as if confirming what had been said with a promise. He added, “You have licked the dust with my enemies, and you have sucked honey among thorns; return to me at last, and I shall make you drunk with the rushing river of my divine pleasure!”

Gertrud’s impression of being transported to the monastery church emphasizes the importance of the community’s liturgical prayer in her conversion process. The young man’s words, “I shall make you drunk with the rushing river of my divine pleasure,” evoke both Psalm 35/36:9, a favorite text of medieval mystics, and the bridegroom of the Song of Songs, inviting his friends into his winecellar. They also recall a text from the opening chapters of Confessions, in which Augustine asks:

Who will help me, so that you will come into my heart and inebriate it, to the end that I may forget my evils and embrace you, my one good?

After the young man speaks to her Gertrud suddenly finds they are separated by an immense thorny hedge, until

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147 Song of Songs 2:4, 5:1.

148 Conf. I.5.5, Ryan p. 45.
he lifts her over it to stand with him. This recalls his previous statement that she had sucked honey among thorns—the metaphor takes on a powerful reality.

While he spoke, I looked and saw that between us (to his right and to my left) there was a hedge of such endless length that I could not see where it ended in front or behind me. On its top the hedge seemed to bristle with such a great mass of thorns that I would never be able to cross it to join the young man. While I stood hesitating because of it, both burning with desire and almost fainting, he himself seized me swiftly and effortlessly, lifted me up, and set me beside him.\footnote{HGLK, p. 101. "Quod cum diceret, respiciens vidi inter me et illum, scilicet ad dexteram illius et sinistram meam, sepiem tam infinitae longitudinis ut nec ante me nec post tergum finis longitudinis illius appareret. In summitate vero ejudem sepiem tam grandi strue spinarum videbatur communita ut nusquam mihi transitus pateret ad praedictum juvenem revertendi. Et cum hinc haesitans et desiderio aestuans et quasi deficiens starem, ipse repente absque omni difficultate apprehendens me levavit et juxta se statuit." Leg. II.1.2, SC 139, p. 230.}

The young man’s effortlessly lifting Gertrud over the impenetrable thorny hedge emphasizes her Augustinian vision of the free abundance of grace given through Christ, the only way of salvation. Augustine uses images of thorns in speaking of human sin, and the suffering resulting from it, in \textit{Confessions}.\footnote{Conf. II.2.3, “Even so do you fashion the offspring of our mortality, for you have power to stretch forth a gentle hand and soften those thorns that had no place in your paradise.” Ryan, p. 66. Conf. II.3.6, “During the idleness of that sixteenth year, when, because of lack of money at home, I lived with my parents and did not attend school, the briars of unclean desires spread thick over my head, and there was no hand to root them out.” Ryan, p. 67. Conf. XIII.19.24, “Whence then so many thorns, if the earth is fruitful? Go, root up the spreading thicket of covetousness, ‘sell what you have,’ and be filled with fruits by giving to the poor, and
also an image of the “perverse sweetness” Augustine discusses in *On Christian Doctrine*. In Book I Augustine speaks of the thorny hedge of sin which blocks human return to God. In the same passage he alludes to Colossians 2:14, in which Paul says that the passion of Christ has cancelled the decree of condemnation against sinful humanity.

Moreover, since we are on a road which is not a road from place to place but a road of the affections, which was blocked, as if by a thorny hedge, by the malice of our past sins, what more liberal and merciful thing could He do when he wished to lay down Himself as a means for our return than to forgive all our sins, after we turn to Him, and to tear away the firmly fixed prohibitions preventing our return by being crucified for us?\(^{151}\)

Gertrud’s “burning” and “almost fainting” desire for the young man she views across the impossible obstacle of the hedge is a vivid image of Augustine’s “road of the affections” blocked by sin. After the young man brings her over the hedge, fulfilling and becoming her new desire, she explicitly recognizes him as Jesus by seeing on the hands which lift her “the bright jewels of those you shall have treasure in heaven.” Ryan, p 350.

\(^{151}\) DDC I.17.16, Robertson p. 16. Cf. also Conf. IX.13.36, “…she desired only that she be remembered at your altar, which she had served without the loss of a single day. For she knew that from it would be dispensed that holy Victim by whom ‘the handwriting of the decree that was against us, which was contrary to us,’ was blotted out…” Ryan, p. 228.
wounds which have cancelled the decree written against us."

But [since] I recognized [cum...recogoverim] on that hand, from which I had received the promise already mentioned, the glorious gems of those wounds which cancelled the [decree written against us all,] [quibus omnium irritantur chirographa] I praise, adore, bless and offer thanks (as far as I can) to your wise mercy and merciful wisdom.  

Like Augustine in the passage from On Christian Doctrine, Gertrud here combines the image of the hedge of sin with the "decree written against us" which the crucifixion cancels in Colossians 2:14. And the transformation of her affections is not restricted to the initial vision, but continues as she remembers it and describes it to others. When Gertrud says "I praise, adore, bless and offer thanks" to God’s mercy and wisdom, she means as she is writing of it, eight years after the experience she describes. As she recounts her recognition of the young man as Christ through his glorious wounds, her memory and thankful awareness of God’s love are deepened. The writing process itself has a converting power similar to and flowing from the initial vision, for her and for the

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readers who will join her in marveling at the works of God’s grace. ¹⁵³

At the end of Chapter 1 Gertrud sums up her experience in terms of God preparing a “medicine” suitable for her illness, which makes the yoke of Christ sweet and his burden light. The term “yoke” recalls the Rule of Benedict and the religious life to which she confesses infidelity, but also a passage crucial to her view of conversion, inspired as it is by Augustine’s: Matthew 11:28-30.

...for you, my creator and redeemer, were seeking in this way to submit my stiff neck to your sweet yoke, concocting a most tempered medicine fitting my sickness. For from then on, calmed by a new cheerfulness of the spirit, I began to go forth in the odor of your ointments, that I too might consider sweet your yoke and light your burden, which a little before I had judged unbearable. ¹⁵⁴

Augustine also uses the image of the sweet yoke and light burden from Matthew 11 in his prayer of praise for his conversion in Confessions IX.1, noteworthy as the single

¹⁵³ Translators often neglect Gertrud’s use of the cum clause with subjunctive [recogoverim] in the above passage, breaking the long sentence into two and obscuring the dynamic connection between past and present. Cf. SC 139 p. 231, HGLK pp. 101-102, HDL pp. 95-96.

¹⁵⁴ “...quia tu, creator et redemptor meus, tali modo cervicem meam indomitam suavi jugo tuo submitere conabaris, conficiens temperantissime potionem invalitudini meae congruentem. Nam ex tunc nova spiritus hilaritate serenata in suaveolentia unguentorum tuorum procedere coepi, ut et ego jugum tuum suave et onus tuum leve reputarem, quod paulo ante velut importabili judicavi.” Leg.
instance in the work where he addresses Christ directly.

But throughout these long years where was my free will? Out of what deep and hidden pit was it called forth in a single moment, wherein to bend my neck to your mild yoke and my shoulders to your light burden, O Christ Jesus, "my helper and my redeemer?"  

Augustine also uses the Matthean passage in Confessions VII to refer specifically to intellectual conversion, which both he and Gertrud experienced as interdependent with moral and spiritual conversion.  

"I found out in those books, though it was said differently and in many ways, that the Son, 'being in the form of the Father, thought it not robbery to be equal with God,' for by nature he is the same with him. But those books do not have it that he 'emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man,' and that he 'humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross....For 'you have hidden these things from the wise, and have revealed them to little ones,' so that they who labor and are burdened might come to him and he would refresh them. For he is meek and humble of heart, and he guides the meek in judgment, and he teaches the mild his ways, seeing our abjection and our labor, and forgiving all our sins."  


155 Conf. IX.1.1, Ryan p. 205.  

156 In Book I of Legatus, discussed below in Chapter 4, Gertrud's biographer describes her conversion more explicitly for an audience outside the convent walls. She reveals what is not evident in Gertrud's own story in Book II, that as was the case with Augustine, intellectual arrogance was a major form of Gertrud's pride and lack of charity before her conversion.  

157 Conf. VII.9.14, Ryan p. 169. Cf. also Conf. VII.21.27, "All these the writings of the Platonists do not have. In them no man
Augustine says that the proud books of the Platonists—the intellectual elite of his time—prepare him for the Gospel, but cannot unite him with God. The sinner is both pridefully closed to the truth about God and addicted to behavior that defies God’s commandments. Only the divine love and humility displayed in the incarnation and passion of Christ can transform the mind to understand, and the heart to embrace, God’s vision for human life. Likewise, in *On Christian Doctrine* accepting the sweet yoke of Christ means studying the liberal arts for the sake of interpreting Scripture, thus despoiling the Egyptians.\(^{158}\)

Gertrud combines the Matthean passage with imagery from the Song of Songs when she says that Christ’s yoke became sweet and light when she “began to go forth in the odor of [his] ointments.” The Song of Songs passage has both feminine and communal overtones in its original Vulgate context: “Thy name is as oil poured out: therefore hears him calling to us: ‘Come unto me, all you that labor.’ They scorn to learn of him because he is meek and humble of heart. ‘For you have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them to little ones.’”  \(^{158}\) Ryan p. 180.

\(^{158}\) “‘For Christ our pasch is sacrificed,’ and the sacrifice of Christ emphasizes for us nothing more than that which He said as if to those whom He saw laboring under Pharaoh: ‘Come to me, all you that labour, and are burdened, and I will refresh you. Take up my yoke upon you, and learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls. For my yoke is sweet and my burden light.’ To whom is it thus light except to those of meek and humble heart whom knowledge does not inflate but charity
young maidens have loved thee. Draw me [trahe me]: we will run after thee [post te curremus] to the odour of thy ointments [fraglantia unguentis optimis].”

Augustine also honors the original communal reference of this Song text as he uses it in discussing how Simplicianus’ story of Victorinus’ conversion set him “on fire to imitate him” (Conf. VIII.5.10).

Lead us, O Lord, and work within us [Age, domine, fac]: arouse us, and call us back [excita et revoca nos]; enkindle us, and draw us to you [accende et rape]; grow fragrant and sweet to us [flagra, dulcesce]. Let us love you, and let us run to you [amemus, curramus]. Are there not many men who, out of a deeper hell of blindness than Victorinus, have turned back to you and drawn near to you.... Yet if they are known to fewer people, so also those who know them rejoice less over them. For when many men rejoice together, there is a richer joy in each individual, since they enkindle themselves and they inflame one another.

159 Canticle of Canticles 1:2b-3a, Douay. “fraglantia unguentis optimis / oleum effusum nomen tuum / ideo adulescentulae dilexerunt te / trahe me post te curremus,” Vulgate.

160 Conf. VIII.4.9, Ryan p. 187. Cf. also Conf. XIII.15.18, “For even as to ourselves, although we are the well-beloved of your Son, ‘It has not yet appeared what we shall be.’ He looked through the lattice of the flesh, and he spoke tenderly, and aroused our love, and we ran after his odor.” Ryan, pp. 346-347. Bernard’s sermons on the Song of Songs are of course the outstanding influence on its later medieval interpreters. However, Augustine refers to the biblical book in a number of lyrical passages of Confessions. Both Augustine’s stress on the whole church as the bride of Christ, and Bernard’s emphasis on the individual soul, are subtly resonant in Gertrud’s use of the Song’s phrases and images. Cf. Ulrich Köpf, “Bernhard von Clairvaux in der Frauenmystik,” pp. 48-77 in Peter Dinzelmacher and Dieter R. Bauer, eds, Frauenmystik im Mittelalter, edited by Peter Dinzelmacher and Dieter R. Bauer (Ostfildern bei Stuttgart: Schwabenverlag, 1985); Johanna Lanckowski, “Einfluss der edifies?” DDC II.XLI.62.
For Gertrud, as for Augustine, God draws people to love and “run after” Jesus the bridegroom through the Christian community. This occurs especially through the narratives of spiritual experience found in scripture and liturgy, and the common life and conversations which are formed and inspired by them. Such narratives enkindle the heart and draw both speakers and listeners to the sweet, alluring fragrance of Christ.

**Legatus II.4: Christ’s wounds written in the heart**

Throughout the rest of Book II, Gertrud continues to recount dramatic visions and locutions, along with her ongoing struggle to let her daily life be transformed by the graces she has received. Like Augustine in Book X of *Confessions*, she confesses to God and her readers ongoing temptations and failures along with the persistent mercy of God. Gertrud is especially concerned about her tendency to “forget” the vivid assurances of God’s love received through her mystical experiences, in spite of the fact that one of them had initiated a strong sense of God’s constant presence within her. These failures in

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161 Cf. Leg. II.3.3. “For although I [wandered] mentally and
memory do not literally obliterate recollection of her experiences, but display a lack of effective, transforming memory of them. This recalls Augustine’s insistence in the Confessions that God is always present in our hearts, but we ourselves are absent from them until called and enabled to return through Christ.\footnote{162} Gertrud mourns that the conversion of life that should naturally flow from such repeated and intensive encounters with God’s mercy is elusive. So she writes in the hope of stirring up her gratitude for and effective memory of grace, in order that her life may finally come to reflect God’s desires.

Chapters 4 and 5 of Book II contain accounts of two enjoyed certain dangerous pleasures, when I returned to my heart—after hours and even after days, alas, and after weeks, I fear to my great sorrow—I always found you there. The result is that I could never complain that you withdrew from me for even the blink of an eye from the hour mentioned to the present day, now that [the ninth year has revolved]. The only exception was on one occasion, eleven days before the feast of St. John the Baptist...” \textit{HGLK} pp. 106-107. “\textit{Ego enim licet mente vagarer, in quantumvis lubricis delectarer, cum post horas et heu! post dies, et ut proh dolor! timeo, post hebdomadas, redivi ad cor meum semper in id ipsum inv eni, ut nunquam causari possem vel ad ictum oculi te mihi substrahat a praedicta hora usque in praesens, ubi jam revolvitur nonus annus, exceptis semel undecim diebus ante festum Joannis Baptistae...}” \textit{SC} 139, p. 238.

\footnote{162} “\textit{He is within our very hearts, but our hearts have strayed far from him....For he did not delay, but he ran forth and cried out by words and deeds, by death and life, by descent and ascension, crying out for us to return to him. And he departed from our eyes, so that we might return into our own hearts and find him there....}” \textit{Conf. IV.12.18-19, Ryan} pp. 104-105. “\textit{Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you! Behold, you were within me, while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you.”} \textit{Confessions} X.27.38, Ryan p. 254.
of Gertrud’s most well-known mystical experiences. The first, related in Chapter 4, is the inscribing of Christ’s wounds on her heart. The second, found in Chapter 5, is the piercing, or transverberation, of her heart by divine love as the soldier’s lance pierced Jesus’ side on the cross. The two experiences are closely related by the theme of Christ’s wounds entering Gertrud’s heart, and both reflect high medieval devotion to the passion, wounds, and sacred heart of Christ. More importantly, the two experiences share a common meaning in Gertrud’s particular interpretation of this theme, found with varying emphases in Bernard, Francis, and different women mystics contemporary with Gertrud.¹⁶³ For Gertrud, the fixing of Christ’s wounds in her heart has few if any

¹⁶³ Mechthild of Hackeborn, for instance, has an erotic vision in which she enters the heart of Christ in the form of a beautiful house. She prostrates herself upon a large cross on the floor, and a sharp golden spear [aureum jaculum acutum] shoots from the middle of the cross and transfixes her soul [animam pertransibat]. Liber specialis gratiae II.25. The scholarly and ascetic Cistercian Beatrice of Nazareth has a similar experience during the chanting of the Gospel at mass. “The ever-kind Lord of mercies suddenly pierced (perfodit) her soul with the fire of his love as with a fiery javelin (ignito iaculo), and with the mighty cutting-edge of his thrust penetrated (penetravit) it as with a flaming sword (flammanti gladiio).” The Life of Beatrice of Nazareth, tr. Roger DeGanck (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1991), 2.19.170, p. 201. The Dominican Margaret Ebner’s repeated accounts of heart piercing begin after she prays to receive the stigmata like Francis, and resembles Teresa of Avila’s later account emphasizing the combined pain and pleasure of the experience. Margaret’s viscera become engorged as if she is pregnant and eating becomes extremely difficult; she is alternately bound to lengthy silence or compelled to dramatic outcries. Cf. Revelations pp. 103, 110, 114, 135, 145, 156, 158, in Margaret Ebner, Major Works, tr. and ed. Leonard Hindsley (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993).
physical manifestations, and is above all a gift aimed at converting her unfaithful memory. To have her heart inscribed by Christ’s wounds, and pierced with his love, is to have her inmost being intensely formed by the saving grace poured out in the passion of Christ. It is to have the memory of God’s mercy in Christ, both in common salvation history and in her own particular history, made powerfully and effectively present to transform her into Christ’s image. As will be discussed below in more detail, this recalls Augustine’s proclamation in Confessions IX that his and Alypius’ hearts were pierced with God’s love through their conversion in the garden.164

Even after she has experienced these mystical graces, however, Gertrud confesses that she is unable to adequately remember and praise God for the mercies she has received. Commentators rarely notice that the inscribing of Christ’s wounds described in Chapter 4 occurs shortly after her initial conversion, and the piercing of her heart found in Chapter 5 happens years later, shortly before she is inspired to begin writing what is now Book II.165 The long timespan between the two experiences is

164 “Your love pierced our heart like an arrow, and we bore within us your words, transfixing our inmost parts.” Conf. IX.2.3, Ryan p. 206.

165 The connection of Leg. II.5 to Leg. II.4, by the common
emphasized when Gertrud begins her account of the second one by pointing out that it occurs six years after the first. This highlights her ongoing struggle for effective memory and conversion of life. When the inscribing of Christ’s wounds does not fulfill her desire for salvifically effective memory, Gertrud prays for her heart to be pierced with love; after this prayer is answered, she still experiences herself as struggling with ingratitude and sin. Therefore Gertrud writes of her experiences in her manuscript in order to “write” them more effectively in her mind and heart, by deepening her remembrance and thanksgiving for the graces she has received. The writing process is another means of attempting to let her heart be fully “inscribed” and “pierced” by grace. She also writes in order to inspire gratitude for God’s mercy to her in fellow believers who hear her story, and to encourage them to seek the same powerful action of grace in their own hearts and lives.

The first of these two experiences, the inscribing of

theme of Christ’s wounds marking one’s heart, has been noted in the literature; what has been missed is their Augustinian background and the long time between them, emphasizing the ongoing aspect of conversion. Cf. Clemons’ and Ankermann’s analyses of the structure of Book II, correctly pairing Chapters 4 and 5 but separating them completely from Chapters 1-3, because they see only the first three chapters of Book II as dealing with conversion.

166 “…post haec anno septimo…” Leg. II.5.1, SC 139, p. 248.
Christ’s wounds in Gertrud’s heart, is recorded in Chapter 4. Gertrud says that during the first or second winter after her initial conversion, she began to repeat a prayer she had found in a book, asking for Christ’s wounds to be written in her heart. The prayer emphasizes the need for affective engagement with Christ’s passion to fix his saving love in her unfaithful memory.¹⁶⁷

Inscribe [scribe] with your precious blood, most merciful Lord, your wounds on my heart [vulnera tua in corde meo], that I may read [legam] in them both your sufferings and your love. May the memory of your wounds [vulnerum tuorum memoria] ever remain in the hidden places of my heart, to stir up within me your compassionate sorrow, so that the flame of your love may be enkindled in me. Grant also that all creatures may become vile to me [omnis creatura mihi vilescat], and that you may become the only sweetness of my heart [tu solus in corde meo dulcescas].¹⁶⁸

The prayer which Gertrud found in an actual book asks for her heart to become a metaphorical book by being “inscribed” with Christ’s wounds. Then she may “read”

¹⁶⁷ Gertrud’s inclusion of the precise words which evoked her experience serves a double purpose. The first is theological, assisting readers to understand her interpretation of the significance of the inscription of Christ’s wounds in her heart. The second is catechetical, making it possible for readers to recite the prayer if they choose and perhaps achieve the same grace of being able to “read” Christ’s sorrow and love in their own hearts.

there Jesus’ suffering and love, through contemplation of the memory of his passion in her heart. It requests that his wounds remain in her memory in order to enkindle love for God as the true sweetness, and detachment from everything that is not God. Augustine hopes that reading the Confessions will perform the same service for the hearts of his readers, as well as his own, since he reveals his heart by confessing in writing.

...with what fruit, I ask, do I confess, not only in your presence but to men also by these writings, what I now am, not what once I was?... But as to what I am now, at this very time when I make my confessions, many men wish to know about this, both men who have known me and others who have not known me. They have heard something from me or about me, but their ear is not placed close to my heart, where I am whatever I am. Therefore, they wish to hear me confess what I am within myself...

The prayer which Gertrud finds and repeats concludes by saying that the effect of Christ’s wounds being inscribed in her heart will be to make God grow sweet to her heart, *tu solus in corde meo dulcescas*. At the same time everything less than God will grow vile to her, *omnis*

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170 Conf. X.3.4, Ryan pp. 231.
creatura mihi vilescat. Dulcescere, God becoming sweet to a person, is a key term throughout Legatus II, divinely titled "Memorial of the Abundance of the Divine Sweetness." It is also a crucial term for Augustine in Confessions and On Christian Doctrine. A key instance of the use of this word is this passage from Book IX where Augustine recounts his meditations at Cassiciacum. He is discussing the role played by reading the scriptures, especially the Psalms, in reflecting on and deepening his recent conversion.

For there, within my chamber, where I was angry with myself, where I suffered compunction, where I made sacrifice, slaying my old self and, with initial meditations on my own renewal of life, hoping in you, there you began to grow sweet to me [mihi dulcescere coeperas] and you "gave joy to my heart" [dederas laetitiam in corde meo] I cried out, as I read those things outwardly and found them within myself....

Augustine says that this reading of the sweet Word of God, as well as remembering God’s mercy in the face of his own

171 In Book I alone, Augustine addresses God as dulcedo mea three times (1.4.4, 1.6.9, and 1.20.31).

172 Conf. IX.4.10, Ryan p. 212. Cf. also Conf. I.15.24, "Graciously hear my prayer, O Lord, lest my soul falter under your correction, lest I falter in confessing to you your mercies [confitendo tibi miserationes tuas], by which you have delivered me out of all my most wicked ways. Grant this, so that you may grow sweet to me [dulcesces mihi] above all the allurements that I followed after." Ryan, p. 58. Conf. II.1.1., “In the bitterness of my remembrance, I tread again my most evil ways, so that you may grow sweet to me [ut tu dulcescas mihi], O sweetness that never fails [dulcedo non fallax], O sweetness happy and enduring [dulcedo felix et secura]...” Ryan, p. 65.
sins, is what made God become sweet to him and fill his heart with joy. There is a parallel between what he reads in the external book of Scripture and in the internal “book” of his heart and memory. Both reveal to him the mercy of God poured out in Christ, which had freed him from his errors and inner turmoil and made him long to share the same saving truth with others.

Gertrud says that not long after she began to repeat the prayer, it was answered: she felt internally that Christ’s wounds had indeed been written in her heart. This mystical experience occurs through her exercise of memory and of spiritual conversation with another Helfta sister.

A short while later during that same winter, I was sitting in the refectory at supper after Vespers beside a certain person to whom I had, in part, revealed the secrets of my experiences....At the time I mentioned, when my [memory] was occupied with this subject with great devotion, I became aware that what I had just sought in the prayer I mentioned had been conferred on me, [an utterly unworthy woman], as if by divine intervention. Inwardly in my heart, as if in physical places, I realized the Spirit had impressed the worshipful and adorable imprint of your most holy wounds. By those wounds you healed my soul and gave me the cup of the nectar of love to drink.\textsuperscript{173}

\textsuperscript{173} HGLK, p. 110. “Nam brevi temporis intervallo eodem hieme, cum post Vesperas ad collationes in refectorio ad latus cujusdam personae, cui in talibus secretum meum aliqualiter detexteram...In praedicta enim hora, cum memoriam circa hujusmodi haberem devotius occupatam, sensi quasi divinitus collata mihi indignissimae que in
Gertrud says that the wounds inscribed in her heart became a nectar-sweet cup of divine love, as well as medicine to heal her soul. Both images hearken back to her initial conversion in Chapter I, when Christ promises to make her drunk with the rushing river of his love, and she says that God had prepared a drink “suitable for her illness.” The most remarkable feature of the event is that it happens not while she is praying alone, or even at the liturgy, but as she sits and talks with another sister about her inner life at the refectory table after Vespers. She can only fully internalize the passion of Christ through remembering her spiritual experiences and aspirations, and disclosing both to a sister who listens to them reverently. This enables the conversation to become a form of prayer and communion with God for both women, as they take delight in God’s work in Gertrud’s heart. Gertrud’s experience here resembles the most important “mystical” experience in the Confessions, the vision at Ostia, during which Augustine and Monica are talking the whole time.\textsuperscript{174} As John Cavadini points out:

\begin{quote}
\textit{antedicta oratione dudum petieram, scilicet in corde meo quasi corporalibus locis per spiritum cognovi impressa colenda illa et adoranda sanctissimorum vulnerum tuorum stigmata; quibus vulneribus animae meae medicasti, necnon mihi polum nectarei amoris propinasti.”} \textsuperscript{174} \textit{Leg. II.4.2-3, SC 139, p. 242, 244.}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{174} \textit{Conf. IX.10.23, Ryan p. 221.}
The so-called ‘vision’ at Ostia could equally well be called the ‘conversation’ at Ostia, for Augustine and Monica’s dramatic vision of truth is wholly coincident with their conversation. The vision does not come after it as its fruit, but in the course of it....Further, the vision is shared. It is not the Neoplatonic escape of each ‘alone into the alone,’ but the sudden deepening of a conversation to the point of shared insight, arising from and experienced through talk.\textsuperscript{175}

The communal context of Gertrud’s experience is heightened by an aside emphasizing the usefulness of spiritual sharing, such as she was engaged in with the other sister. Gertrud inserts this discussion after saying that the prayer for Christ’s wounds to be inscribed in her heart was indeed answered, but before she narrates the details of that inscription.

I add this here for the benefit of the reader, for I often felt the fervor of my devotion increased by such an interchange. Whether it was your Spirit, Lord God, that prompted this or human affection, it is not clear to me. I have however heard from someone skilled in such matters that such a secret may be more profitably revealed to someone who is not only a close friend by reason of her faithful goodness but also a superior in respect of her greater age.\textsuperscript{176}


\textsuperscript{176} HGLK, p. 110. “...quod ad salutem legentis hic interpono, quia multoties mihi sensi auctum fervorem devotionis tali occasione, et utrum hoc promoverit Spiritus tuus, Domine Deus, seu affectio humanitatis non mihi liquidum constat, cum tamen a quodam in talibus exercitato audierim tale secretum utilius revelandum ei, qui non
The specific centrality of the conversation to this experience, as well as the general importance Gertrud places on such spiritual conversations, is shown by the fact that she interrupts her description of such an exalted mystical experience to include this discussion. By doing so, Gertrud implicitly encourages readers to follow her example and more deeply honor God’s moving in their hearts by discussing spiritual experiences with an appropriate listener. Such conversations help the heart to become a book, written on with the wounds and precious blood of Christ. This means being able to reflect deeply on one’s experience and see God’s providence within it, for the benefit of both the self and the community.

Gertrud describes a quasi-liturgical attempt to retain and deepen the fruits of this experience by daily spiritual “visits” in which she recites five verses of Psalm 106 corresponding to the wounds of Christ’s feet, hands, and side. Then she ends Chapter 4 by saying that shortly after the experience described, she nevertheless lost the ability to “read” Christ’s sorrow and love through his imprinted wounds.

solum benignitate fidelitatis familiaris, verum etiam majoritatis reverentia superior habeatur.” Leg. II.4.2, SC 139, p. 244.

177 Leg. II.4.4, SC 139, pp. 244, 246.
I declare that together with these blessings were conferred the requests made in that prayer, that I might read in those wounds your sorrow and your love alike. But to my great sorrow, though I cannot accuse you of having withdrawn this privilege from me, I mourn having shortly lost it through my own ingratitude and carelessness. But your great mercy and limitless loving-kindness, turning a blind eye, preserves to this very day that first, greater gift, the totally undeserved imprinting of [the] wounds, without any merit on my part. For this be honor and power, praise and rejoicing, through endless ages.\textsuperscript{178}

Gertrud says that through grace the wounds themselves remain in her heart. Though obviously they are not a visible physical manifestation like the stigmata, they somehow continue to mark her inmost being (perhaps on the analogy of the “character” conferred on the soul in baptism). Her ability to read the wounds, however, is lost. This presumably means that she loses the power of the experience to transform her affections. It no longer makes God grow sweet to her, and everything less than God become vile to her. In accord with her overarching theme of praise for God’s mercy, though, she does not end her account with a focus on her own failure. Instead, she

\textsuperscript{178} HGLK, p. 111. “Cum quibus fateor mihi collata ea quae infra orationem petuntur, scilicet, ut in eis legam dolorem tuum pariter et amorem. Sed heu! parvo tempore, cum tamen non causer te mihi hoc abtulisse; sed propria ingratitudine et negligentia me querulor perdidisse. Quod tamen dissimulans immensa misercordia et copiosa pietas tua primum et majus donum, scilicet, vulnerum impressionum sine meritis meis nimis indebitie usque in praesens conservat. Pro quo sit tibi decus et imperium, laus et jubilatio per aeterna saecula.” Leg. II.4.5, SC 139, pp. 246, 248.
focuses on glorifying God for the mercy shown in first granting both gifts, and then preserving one of them, in her unworthy soul.

**Legatus II.5: Divine love piercing the heart**

Gertrud’s failure in effective memory of Christ’s wounds written in her heart sets the stage for her account of the piercing of her heart by divine love in Chapter 5. A similar emphasis on the communal mediation of that grace is present when Gertrud begins her account by saying that she asked another person to pray before the crucifix for that Gertrud would receive the grace of transverberation. Again, Gertud includes the precise words of the prayer used in her text.

Six years later, before Advent, as you, Source of all good, had ordained, I had laid a certain person under an obligation to slip these words on my behalf into her daily prayer before the crucifix. She was to say, ‘By your heart that was wounded through and through, [transvulneratum Cor], most loving Lord, pierce [transfige] her heart with the [lance] of your love [jaculis amoris tui], so that it may be unable to possess anything that is of this earth, but may be possessed by the unique power of your divinity’.¹⁷⁹

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¹⁷⁹ HGLK, p. 112. “Post haec anno septimo, ante Adventum, te auctore totius boni ordinante, obligaveram quamdam personam ut singulis diebus ante imaginem crucifixi pro me orationi suae intersereret haec verba: Per tuum transvulneratum Cor, transfige, amantissime Domine, cor ejus jaculis amoris tui, in tantum ut nihil terreni continere possit, sed a sola efficacia tuae divinitatis...”
Gertrud says that the prayer began to be answered on Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent. She specifically prays for the merits of the community to mediate the grace to her during mass. She prays as she approaches to receive communion in terms reminiscent of the *Domine, non sum dignus* before receiving the eucharist:

> It was these prayers, I believe, that spurred you into action during Mass on the Sunday when ‘Rejoice in the Lord’ is sung. Out of the overflowing generosity of your goodness and by the permission of your mercy I was coming to receive the sacrament of your most holy body and blood, when you infused me with a [desire] which compelled me to break out and say, ‘Lord, I admit that, as far as my merits go, I am not worthy to receive the least of your gifts. But by the merits and [desires] of all those around, I beseech your loving-kindness to pierce my heart [transfigas cor meum] with the arrow of your love [tui amoris sagitta].’

Having received and returned to her place, Gertrud sees a ray of light like a sharp arrow stretch from the side

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HGLK, p. 112. “Cujus precibus, ut confido, provocatus in Dominica in qua canitur Gaudete in Domino, infra Missam, cum nimia ex copiosissima liberalitas tuae supereffluentia, misericordia tua permittente, ad tui sacramissimi corporis et sanguinis accederem communionem, infudisti mihi desiderium quo cogente in haec verba prorupi: ‘Domine, fateor quod secundum merita mea non sum digna accipere minimum donorum tuorum; sed tamen meritis et desiderio omnium adstantium supplico pietati tuae, ut transfigas cor meum tui amoris sagitta.’” Leg. II.5.1, SC 139, p. 248. The previous prayer’s use of *jaculis* highlights the connection with Christ’s side and heart, pierced by a lance; Gertrud’s shift her to *sagitta* highlights the connection to Augustine’s heart, since *sagittas acutas* is one of the terms in the liturgical text *Vulneraverat caritas*, which will appear in the account of her vision of Augustine on his feast in Legatus IV.
wound of the crucified Christ painted in a liturgical book to her own heart, stirring up her desire.

Soon I became aware that the force of these words had reached your divine Heart, as much because of an inflow of inner grace as because of the manifestation of an unmistakable sign on an image of your crucifixion. For when I had received the life-giving sacrament, and had returned to my place in choir, it seemed to me as if something like a ray of the sun came out from the right-hand side of the crucified Christ painted on the page, that is from the wound in the side. It had a sharp point like an arrow and, astonishingly, it stretched forward and, lingering thus for a while, it gently elicited my love.¹⁸¹

Gertrud’s vision of the ray of light stretching toward her shows the connection of the believer’s pierced heart to that of Christ. The fact that this occurs after Gertrud has received communion also emphasizes the eucharistic nature of the grace she seeks. The piercing of her heart will mean a powerful and salvific appropriation of Christ’s passion, of which the eucharist is the living memorial.

Gertrud says that the desire elicited by her vision,

¹⁸¹ HGLK, pp. 112-113. “Cujus verbi virtutum mox sensi appropinquasse divino Cordi tuo, tam per interioris gratiae infusionem quam per evidentis signi in imagine crucifixionis tuae demonstrationem. Igitur cum post suscepta vivifica sacramenta, ad locum orationis reversa fuissem, videbatur mihi quasi de dextro latere crucifixi depicti in folio, scilicet de vulnere lateris, prodiret tamquam radius solis, in modum sagittae acutus, qui per ostentum extensus contrahebatur, deinde extendebatur, et sic per moram durans, affectum meum blande allexit.” Leg. II.5.1-2, SC 139, pp. 248, 250.
however, was not fulfilled until the following Wednesday. During a devotion after mass in honor of the incarnation, perhaps the Angelus, Christ appeared and bestowed the longed-for wound by his word. The Word made flesh is the means of God’s mercy being spoken to the world and being once again “written” in her pierced heart.

But my longing was not thus satisfied until the following Wednesday when, after mass, the faithful honor the generous gift of your incarnation and annunciation, which all must adore. I too, although less worthily, was concentrating on this devotion. Suddenly you were there unexpectedly, opening a wound in my heart [infigens vulnus cordis meo] with these words: ‘May all your [affections] [affectionum tuarum] come together in this place; that is may the sum total of your delight, hope, joy, sorrow, fear and your other [affections] [affectionum tuarum] be fixed firmly in my love [stabiliantur in amore meo].’

The second stage of the experience, like the first, occurs in a communal and liturgical context. Gertrud is taking part in a devotion that honors the incarnation, along with though “less worthily” than her sisters, when the fulfillment of her desire for transverberation is granted. Earlier in Book II she recounts how she was lifted over

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182 HGLK, p. 113. “Sed nec sic quidem satisfactum est desiderio meo usque in feriam quartam dum post Missam a fidelibus recolitur tuae adorandae Incarnationis et Annuntiationis dignatio; cui et ego quam vis minus digne intendebam; et ecce tu aderas velut ex improviso infigens vulnus cordis meo cum his verbis: ‘Hic confluat tumor omnium affectionum tuarum verbi gratia: summa delectationis, spei, gaudii, doloris, timoris, caeterarumque affectionum tuarum stabiliantur in amore meo.’” Leg. II.5.2, SC 139, p. 250.
the hedge after bowing to an older nun in the dormitory, and had her heart inscribed with Christ’s wounds while conversing with another sister in the refectory. She now has her heart pierced with Christ’s love in a similar communal context, during the prayer of all the sisters in the convent chapel. This emphasizes the ongoing “incarnation” of Christ in his mystical body, the community of Christians through which his transforming mercy is received.

The emphasis on the piercing of Gertrud’s heart as the healing and stabilization of her affections through contact with Christ’s passion is another way of looking at effective memory, of salvation history becoming personally appropriated. It recalls the key text from *On Christian Doctrine* which inspired her image of the thorny hedge in *Legatus* II.1—that humans are on a road of the affections, with the obstacle of sin torn away by Christ’s crucifixion. An image of heart piercing in Augustine is found in a text from *Confessions* IX.2, part of Augustine’s prayer of praise after his and Alypius’ conversion experience in the garden.183

183 Cf. also *Conf.* X.6.8, “By your word you have transfixed [percussisti] my heart, and I have loved you,” Ryan, p. 233; *Conf.* X.41.66, “With a wounded heart [corde saocio] I have looked upon your splendor...,” Ryan, p. 272. Recent scholarship on the patristic background of transverberation has emphasized Origen’s
...to us who were now mounting up from the vale of tears and were singing a gradual canticle you had given sharp arrows [sagittas acutas] and consuming coals [carbones vastatores] against a deceitful tongue...

Your love pierced our heart like an arrow [Sagittaveras tu cor nostrum caritate tua], and we bore within us your words, transfixed our inmost parts [transfixa visceribus]. The examples set by your servants, whom you had turned from black to shining bright, and from death to life, brought together in the bosom of our thought, set fire to our heavy torpor and burned it away, so that we would not turn towards lower things.\(^{184}\)

The first person plural reference is crucial not just because Alypius was converted along with Augustine in the garden, but because Book VIII carefully embeds their experience in a chain of mutually fruitful conversion narratives. Simplicianus’ description of Victorinus’ conversion emphasizes the necessity of joining the visible body of the church and the communal praise evoked thereby.\(^{185}\) Then Ponticianus recounts his friends’ conversion through the story of Anthony’s call, which in role, following Henri Crouzel’s groundbreaking article, “Origines patristiques d’un thème mystique: le trait et la blessure d’amour chez Origène,” in Kyriakon: Festchrift Johannes Quasten, Vol. 1, ed. Patrick Granfield and Josef A. Jungmann (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1970), pp. 309-319. Augustine is also a crucial source for the image, however, and arguably the major direct one for medieval Latin theology. Confessions was a widely disseminated and influential Latin work, while Origen’s Greek text and dubious reputation made his exegetical influence significant but indirect and often unattributed, as in the Glossa ordinaria and Bernard’s sermons Super cantica.

\(^{184}\) Conf IX.2.2-3, Ryan p. 206.

\(^{185}\) Conf. VIII.2-5, Ryan pp. 183-190.
turn evokes a commitment to celibacy from Ponticianus and another friend, and finally from the women to whom each was betrothed.\textsuperscript{186} As Augustine proclaims, it is these "examples set by [God's] servants" that pierced his and Alypius' hearts and set them on fire with divine love. Finally, the garden experience is not perfected until Augustine and Alypius enter the house and share it with Monica, which converts her to a higher hope for Augustine than her previous worldly one for his career and family success.\textsuperscript{187}

The centrality of this text from \textit{Confessions} IX.2 in the high medieval image of Augustine is demonstrated by its appearance in a variety of contexts. Artistically, the text provided the warrant for one of Augustine's standard iconographic representations, with a pierced and/or flaming heart.\textsuperscript{188} Liturgically, it was tranformed

\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Conf.} VIII.6, Ryan pp. 190-193.
\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Conf.} VIII.12.30, p.203.
\textsuperscript{188} Jeffrey Hamburger has described a variety of artistic depictions of both Christ's and Augustine's pierced heart, and the connections between them. In one manuscript initial which depicts the crucified Christ missing his side wound; it is, however, present on the sides of both Augustine and Bernard, who flank him. The pierced side and heart of Christ have here been transferred to his followers. Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland ca. 1300 (New Haven, 1990), fig. 137. Another manuscript initial shows Augustine's pierced heart adorned with the words \textit{Vulneraverat caritas}. Jeffrey Hamburger, \textit{Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent} (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. 118.
into an antiphon for his feastday, *Vulneraverat caritas*, which features in Gertrud’s vision of him (discussed above) in *Leg. IV.50.3*. Augustine uses the expression of God piercing his and Alypius’ hearts as a metaphor for conversion. The intense thirteenth century preoccupation with experiences like stigmata, however, led to the belief, most likely shared by Gertrud, that Augustine was describing a concrete mystical experience in his text. Nevertheless, Gertrud is cautious of some currents of interpretation that tended to see it as an individualistic ecstatic experience sent to demonstrate its recipient is a saint. In non-Helfta sources the *Confessions* passage is customarily made singular, omitting the piercing of Alypius’ heart along with Augustine’s. This misses his point about the communal context of conversion. Gertrud follows Augustine, however, in emphasizing the meaning of heart piercing as the converting memory of God’s love which is found through communal faithsharing and open to

189 "The charity of Christ had wounded his heart, and he carried his words in his viscera like sharp arrows; and the examples of the servants of God, whom from death God had made alive, as devastating coals." "Vulneraverat caritas Christi cor eius, et gestabat verba ejus in visceribus quasi sagittas acutas * et exempla servorum Dei, quos de mortuis vivos fecerat, tamquam carbones vastatores." Breviarium iuxta ritum Ordinis Praedicatorum, pars altera (Roma ad S. Sabinae, 1962), p. 721. The antiphon is cited in *Legatus* only by its incipit. It appears neither in the traditional monastic nor Roman breviaries, but survives in the Dominican breviary as the seventh responsory at Matins, perhaps because of Dominic’s devotion to Augustine reflected in the adoption of his Rule.
all believers.

The contrast between Gertrud’s interpretation of the **Confessions IX** passage and that in the standard hagiographic sources of her time may be seen by examining the **Golden Legend** entry for Augustine’s feastday, which mentions the text in two crucial places.\(^{190}\) The first citation is during the customary etymological beginning of the entry, stressing his affective devotion to God that “burned” like the August sun. “In his **Confessions** he says of himself: ‘You have pierced my heart with the arrow of your love...’”\(^{191}\) The second occurrence comes during a long passage presented as a quote from **Confessions** and placed at the time of Augustine’s conversion. It is actually a mélange of texts from Book IX, in which the line about heart piercing is highlighted by being placed out of order at the beginning of the series.

Now that he was so wondrously confirmed in the Catholic faith, Augustine relinquished all his worldly hopes and left behind the schools he had governed. In his **Confessions** he tells how sweet was the love of God that he enjoyed thereafter. He says: “You have pierced my heart with the

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\(^{190}\) The **Golden Legend** has not been dated precisely, though it is roughly contemporaneous with Gertrud. However, de Voragine drew his material from earlier standard **vitae** of his subjects, so if Gertrud did not know his specific account she would have known other similar **vitae** based on **Confessions**.

arrow of your love, and I carried your words transfixed in my loins. The examples of your servants, whom you brought from darkness to light and from death to life, crowded into the heart of my thought, burned there, and took away all heaviness and languor. To me as I came up out of the vale of tears and sang the gradual canticle, you gave sharp arrows and devastating coals.”\(^{192}\)

Both instances mutate the passage into the first person singular: “you have pierced my heart with the arrow of your love,” rather than Augustine’s “your love pierced our hearts like an arrow.”\(^{193}\) The **Golden Legend** account even omits Alypius’ presence and conversion in the garden along with Augustine. This presents Augustine’s conversion as an individual and extraordinary experience directly from God, rather than his own view that it was mediated through the Christian community.\(^{194}\) And Augustine’s insistence on his own sinfulness is downplayed as exaggerated humility. Most striking is the treatment

\(^{192}\) **Golden Legend**, p. 121. The lines from IX.2 are reversed, with the image of heart piercing preceding instead of following that of singing the gradual canticle. Then they are placed at the beginning of the combined texts, before those from IX.4, IX.6, and IX.1. The passage continues with texts from **Conf. IX.6-7**, then **Conf. IX.4**, and finally IX.1.

\(^{193}\) The liturgical antiphon, *Vulneraverat caritas*, similarly makes the passage singular, as well as putting it into the third person: “The charity of Christ had wounded his heart.”

\(^{194}\) The individualistic emphasis is carried out throughout the **Golden Legend** entry. Other characters from Augustine’s story appear, but their influence on him is diminished in comparison to his own account in the **Confessions**, and vanishes entirely after his conversion.
of the pointless act of gang destruction which evokes Augustine’s meditation on the mystery of human sin in Confessions II.

Such was his purity, such his humility, that in his book of Confessions he confesses and humbly accuses himself to God of sins so slight that we would think nothing of them....He accuses himself of stealing a pear from a tree near his own vineyard, when he was sixteen years old.195

Augustine’s story of completely stripping a pear tree of its fruit, which he and his friends did not even eat but threw to the pigs, is transformed to the theft of just one pear. In this lengthy section, De Voragine also explains away all of the childish faults regretted by Augustine in Book I, as well as his searching self-examination in Book X. This implies that his conversion was a unique and immediately perfecting occurrence, contradicting Augustine’s passionate beliefs about the necessity of grace and the ongoing nature of conversion. Gertrud’s portrait of Augustine is far closer to his own convictions. The incisiveness of her analysis demonstrates the profit of looking at Gertrud’s texts as readings of Augustine’s own work, rather than general

195 De Voragine’s mention that the pear tree was “near his own vineyard,” is based on Augustine’s text. But his inclusion of that detail, while omitting so many other crucial ones, seems to imply that perhaps Augustine became mixed up and thought it was his family’s pear tree in the first place. Golden Legend, p. 123.
impressions gained through hagiographic reductions of his thought.

Gertrud follows up on her transverberation, as she had for the inscribing of Christ’s wounds in Chapter 4, with a devotional attempt to keep the experience in her memory. It is significant that in this case she must rely on another sister for advice on how to metaphorically care for the wound in her heart by a trinity of meditative practices.

I immediately remembered that I had sometimes heard that wounds should be washed, anointed and bound up. At that time you had not yet taught me, once and for all, how to do this. But after a while you revealed it more fully to me, by means of someone who to your praise, I believe, has attuned her inner ear much more reliably and sensitively than I have, I am afraid, to catch the continual flow of your loving whispers.\textsuperscript{196}

The other sister directs Gertrud to “wash” the wound with the devotion to Christ’s Passion, “anoint” it with thanksgiving for God’s sweet loving-kindness, and “bind” it with the strength of charity to enable the transformation of her “thoughts, words, and deeds.”\textsuperscript{197}

\textsuperscript{196} HGLK, p. 113. “Et statim incidit memoriae meae quod quandoque audieram, vulneribus necessario adhibendum lavacrum, Unguentum, et ligamentum. Sed qualiter hoc perficere possem non tunc finaliter docuisti, sed postmodum plenius aperuisti per aliam personam, quae, ut spero, ad laudem tuam mentales aures suas multo stabilius magisque tenue assuefecit venis amatorii susurri tui, quam heu! ego.” \textsuperscript{Leg. II.5.3, SC 139, p. 250.}

\textsuperscript{197} \textsuperscript{Leg. II.5.3, SC 139, pp. 250, 252.}
However, once again Gertrud finds that she is unable to demonstrate gratitude and conversion of life commensurate with the grace she has received.

May the power of that love whose fulness lives in him who, sitting on your right hand, has become bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, make up for whatever I have distorted as a result of my malice and wickedness in this account. For it is through him, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that you have given us this capacity, with nobility of compassion, humility and reverence. Through him too I offer you mourning for my far too numerous offenses against your divinely noble goodness, which I have assaulted so variously, in thought, word and deed; but especially in that I made such faithless, careless and disrespectful use of the gifts of yours I have mentioned. For if you had handed over to me, unworthy as I am, a hempen thread in memory of yourself [in memoriam tui], I should rightly have treated it with a more conscientious respect!  

Gertrud specifically mentions her “faithless, careless and disrespectful” failures in reverent memory of these extraordinary graces, and in the ability to write about them properly, without “distort[ing]...this account.” She also repents, as in the Confiteor, her ensuing sins of  

198 HGLK, p. 114. “Quidquid in his ex malitia et nequitia mea depravavi suppleat vis amoris cujus plenitudo habitat in eo qui sedens ad dexteram tuam factus est os ex ossibus meus et caro de carne mea. Nam per eum in virtute Spiritus Sancti cum ea nobilitate compassionis, humilitatis et reverentiae sic dediste nobis posse; per eundem offero tibi querimoniam infelicitatum mearum nimium multarum contra tam divine nobilem bonitatem tuam quam cogitatu, verbis et factis tam multimode impugnavi, sed specialiter in eo quod praedictis donis tuis tam infideliter, negligenter et irreverenter usa sum; si mihi tam indignae filum de stuppa in memoriam tua tradidisses, jure studiosori reverentia respexissem.” Leg. II.5.4, SC 139, p. 252.
"thought, word, and deed"—the three areas of conversion of life she had specifically sought in the devotional practices recommended by her sister. Thus she ends her chapter by imploring the readers of Legatus to offer compassion to the God whom she has failed, and make reparation for that failure by their own prayers.

My God, you who know my secrets, you know that this is the reason which compels me, reluctantly or rather against my will, to commit these experiences to writing: I consider that I have profited so little from them that I am unable to believe that they have been given me for myself alone, since your eternal wisdom cannot be set aside by anyone. Therefore, Giver of gifts, you who have given me gifts so free and undeserved, give the reader of these words too the gift that the heart of your friend may at least feel pity for you, in that your passion for souls has for so long confined a jewel worthy of a king to the muddy bilge-water of my heart!  

Gertrud turns her failures into the occasion of even greater thankfulness to God, whose surpassing mercy is shown by dwelling in such a sinful heart. She also comes to see in them God’s providence for other Christians, whom she calls “[God’s] friend[s].” She says that her own

199 HGLK, pp. 114. “Tu scis, occultorum meorum cognitor Deus meus, hanc esse causam quae me tam nimir extra, imo contra placitum meum cogit haec scriptis commendare; quod considero me tam per nihilum in eis profecisse, quod nullomodo consentio credere mihi tantummodo ea data fuisse, cum tua aeterna sapientia a nullo possit seduci. Ergo, o dator munerum, qui tam gratuita et indebita mihi dedisti, da etiam ista legenti ut saltem compatiatur tibi cor amici tui pro eo quod zelus animarum tot horis tam regalem gemmam continuit in limo sentinae cordis mei.” Leg. II.5.5, SC 139, p. 252.
sinfulness is almost a felix culpa, proving that the graces she has received are not for her own benefit but for that of other Christians. It requires her to write of her experiences, enabling readers to marvel at God’s mercy and offer the fitting praise of God that her own ingratitude and forgetfulness make her unable to fulfill. Gertrud therefore requests that the readers engage in practices of thanksgiving, offering God appropriate praise for the divine compassion in the face of her ongoing sinfulness.

While offering prayer and thanksgiving, may [the reader] extoll your mercy and say with heart and mouth the antiphons Te Deum patrem, Ex quo omnia, Te iure laudant, Tibi decus, Benedictio et claritas. In this way some reparation may be made to you for my deficiency.200

These antiphons of extravagant praise recommended to the reader come from the liturgy of Trinity Sunday. The graces which came to Gertrud through the mediation of liturgical prayer find fulfillment in bringing the reader to participate in that ritual of community praise. The immensity of God’s mercy shown to even one unworthy heart, Gertrud argues, both demands and enables the thanksgiving

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of the church, the whole body of Christ.

In her conclusion in *Legatus* II.24, Gertrud says that she has written for “love of God’s love.” This means writing to praise the overflowing love of God, and give and receive that love with others by creating a community of praise.

Here it is, most loving Lord: the talent of your most generous friendship which you entrusted to me, unworthy [woman] as I am, lowest point of worthlessness. I display it to public view in what I have written already and am yet to write for love of your love [*amore amoris tui*], to increase your praise.\(^{201}\)

Augustine also tells God that he writes *amore amoris tui* in more than one place in the *Confessions*, including at the beginning of his exegesis of the creation narrative in Book XI.

Why then do I set out in order before you this account of so many deeds? In truth, it is not that you may learn to know these matters from me, but that I may rouse up towards you my own affections, and those of other [people] who read this, so that all of us may say: “The Lord is great, and exceedingly to be praised.” I have already said this, and I will say it again: for love of your love [*amore amoris tui*] I perform this task.\(^{202}\)

\(^{201}\) *HGLK*, p. 172. “Ecce, amantissime Domine, talentum tuae dignantissimae familiaritas mihi extremae vilitatis indignae creditum, amore amoris tui ad lucrum laudis tuae tam in praescriptis quam in postpositis expono...” *SC* 139, p. 350.

\(^{202}\) *Conf*. XI.1.1, Ryan p. 277. Cf. also *Conf*. II.1.1, “I wish to bring back to mind my past foulness and the carnal corruptions of my soul. This is not because I love them, but that I may love you, my God. Out of love for your love [*amore amoris tui*] I do this.”
Likewise, Gertrud says that she writes in order to increase her own gratitude to God, and that others may join her in praise. She also here makes explicit her hope that her story will inspire readers to attend to their own souls and seek there the eucharistic “hidden manna” of intimate spiritual experiences.

You are also witness that I long to praise you so that some people who read this account may take delight in the sweetness of your loving-kindness, and under this inducement may achieve personal experience in their inmost being of ampler graces, just as students sometimes come to the study of logic by way of the alphabet! In the same way, may they be led by these pictures, so to speak, that I have painted, to taste within themselves that hidden manna which cannot share any trace of material imagery; he alone who eats of it will still hunger for more.\(^{203}\)

Finally, Gertrud shifts focus from her earlier emphasis on the heart of Christ and her heart to her readers’ hearts. As they participate in her confessions by marveling at God’s mercy shown to her, their hearts become in Augustine’s terms (inspired by Revelation 8:3) golden censers offering fragrant praise to God.

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203 HGLK, pp. 172-173. “...et etiam in eo desidero te laudari, ut aliqui ista legentes in dulcedine pietatis tuae delectentur, et inde tracti in intimis suis ampliora experiantur, sicut per alphabetum ad logicam perveniunt quandoque studentes, sic per istas velut depictas imaginationes ducantur ad gustandum intra se manna illud absconditum, quod nulla corporearum imaginationum admixtione valet partiri, sed solus qui edit adhuc esurit.” Leg. II.24.1, SC 139, p. 350.
But meantime, according to your faithful promise and the humble longing of my will, grant to all who read this account in humility, gratitude for your generosity, compassion for my unworthiness and compunction at their own progress. Out of the golden censers of their loving hearts may so sweet an odor ascend to you that it may make abundant recompense to you for my every failure of ingratitude and negligence.  

This passage recalls the beginning of Confessions X, where Augustine uses the same image of readers’ hearts as censers, in his discussion of why he writes. His goal is to move his readers to praise God for the mercy shown to him, as well as to pray for his continuing conversion.

But with what benefit do they wish to hear me? Do they wish to share my thanksgiving, when they hear how close it is by your gift that I approach you, and to pray for me, when they hear how I am held back by my own weight? To such men I will reveal myself....May they sigh for my good deeds, and may they sigh over my evil deeds....May hymns and weeping ascend in your sight from the hearts of my brethren, your censers. Be pleased, O Lord, with the odor of your holy temple, and 'have mercy on me according to your great mercy' for your name’s sake. Do not abandon in any way what you have begun in me, but make perfect my imperfections.

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205 Conf. X.4.5-6, Ryan pp. 231-232. Cf. also Conf. X.37.62, “I beseech you, my God, show me to myself, so that to my brothers, who
Like Gertrud, Augustine praises God and prays for help through the transformation of his readers' hearts, which will complete the saving work that God has begun in him.

This chapter has discussed Gertrud's own reading of her experience together with Augustine's, as evident in the sustained thematic and textual resemblances between Legatus II and the Confessions. The two writers share a vision of narratives and conversations inspired by Scripture, liturgy, and spiritual experience as the means of Christian conversion. They describe the human heart being "written on" and "pierced" by divine mercy, poured out through the paschal mystery of Christ, and accessed through the life and praise of the Christian community. The next chapter will examine Gertrud's "Life and Revelations," written by her sisters in the compiled Books of Legatus and giving a fuller picture of her life within the convent. Gertrud is compared to Augustine as a proud scholar converted to use her wisdom for the service of her community and all who read her works. Her holy relic is the Legatus itself, consecrated "for love of God's love," to widen the community which praises divine mercy and seeks a similar conversion of life, to the glory of God.

will pray for me, I may confess what wounds I find in me." Ryan, p. 270.
CHAPTER FOUR

HOLY WOMAN AS SCHOLAR

This chapter turns to the Helfta sisters’ portrait of Gertrud in Books I and V of the complete Legatus.206 Along with Books III and IV, they form the successor to the Legatus divinae pietatis composed by Gertrud’s sisters and eventually combined with her own work to form the hybrid Legatus. Books I, III, IV, and V can be seen as Gertrud’s “Life and Revelations,” a hagiographical companion piece to the autobiographical Book II.207 The writer of Book I complements Gertrud’s self-disclosure with additional information about Gertrud’s relationships and service within the Helfta convent. Her account of Gertrud recalls both Augustine’s self-portrait in

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206 As discussed above in Chapter Two, it is unclear whether the compiled Books were written by one or several of Gertrud’s sisters. For simplicity, scholars tend to speak of a single “biographer,” or “compilatrix,” while postulating varying levels of collaboration from other sisters. This study uses these terms interchangeably to represent the main organizer of the community writing project, as well as sometimes referring to the “sisters” who wrote the compiled Books.

207 Books III and IV, as discussed above in Chapter Two, contain her sisters’ records of Gertrud’s visions, with accompanying exegesis and devotional suggestions for readers. Considerations of length, as well as the fact that Books III and IV have been more extensively studied, dictate this chapter’s focus on the more specifically hagiographical material in Books I and V.
Confessions, and his portrayal in the vita composed by his friend and follower, Possidius. Like Augustine in both sources, Gertrud is depicted as a proud but spiritually empty scholar who is transformed by grace. She then uses her exegetical and homiletical skills for the benefit of her religious community and the larger community of those who read her works. This image of converted scholarship is a common motif in the hagiography of male monastics, but an innovative claim as a model of female holiness recommended for the imitation of other women (and men) religious.

The biographer also repeats Gertrud’s own emphasis that her conversion has been a communally mediated process, dependent on help and edification from her sisters. She even repeats Gertrud’s own admission of continuing faults, giving surprisingly candid examples of her failures in charity. Such humble confessions are a required part of spiritual autobiography, but highly unusual in a hagiographical context. To include acknowledgments of real, continuing flaws in Gertrud’s

conduct reinforces her own Augustinian emphases on the persistence of human weakness and the centrality and transforming power of grace.

Book V treats the crucial hagiographic theme of the holy death, but lacks a conventional account of Gertrud’s deathbed, miracle-working physical relics, and tomb as a recommended destination for pilgrims. Instead, its writer describes the deaths of many other community members before describing Gertrud’s final illness and premonitory vision of her own dormitio. The focus of the work then shifts from Gertrud to the book itself, which both she and the compilatrix offer to God for blessing and authorization. Instead of her bones or habit, the relic of Gertrud the converted scholar appropriately takes the form of a book, the collaboratively written Legatus. Like the powerful physical remains of other holy people, so precious to medieval devotion, the Legatus is God’s gift to continue and extend the saving mercy she has been given through and for the Christian community. After Gertrud’s death, the book will survive her and keep the memory of God’s grace manifested to her in her community salvifically alive for believers through all time. It will also enable readers to imitate her search for God, thus fulfilling her Augustinian and communal vision of
holiness.

**Thirteenth-century hagiography**

Vitae, or sacred biographies, of both legendary and historical holy women were a widespread and influential medieval genre.209 Various scholars have postulated that hagiography changed its emphasis over the course of the middle ages to focus more on inner, spiritual experiences than outward actions. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a new subgenre had emerged, variously referred to as the *gnadenvita* or "vita et revelationes."210 Traditional *vitae* had often included their subjects’

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visions, but the high medieval “life and revelations” genre placed vastly more emphasis on dramatic spiritual experiences, sometimes to the virtual exclusion of external occurrences. These works often expanded on the visions recorded with theological reflections, along with explicit and implicit devotional instructions for readers. Women seem to have been especially common as writers, subjects, and audiences for the new subgenre.211

According to the Prologue to Legatus, Book I of the Legatus “contains commendations of [Gertrud’s] character and testimonies to her grace." Modern scholars commonly refer to it as her vita.212 Commentators point out but do not analyze in depth the way Book I departs from accepted vita conventions, most notably in its lack of a deathbed scene and post-death miracles which are


212 HGLK, p. 34. “In quorum primo continetur de commendatione personae et testimoniiis gratiae.” SC 139, p. 114.

213 As discussed above in Chapter Two, Book I is often presumed to have been written last of the five, as an introduction to the rest, and is passed over quickly with mention of a few noteworthy passages. This assumption has helped delay recognition of the relation of both the Legatus divinae pietatis and the composite Legatus to the “life and revelations” subgenre.
normally used to definitively establish a saint’s holiness and record the beginnings of his or her cult.\textsuperscript{214} What has not been recognized is that the \textit{vita} continues with more of Gertrud’s revelations in Books III and IV, and concludes with an innovative treatment of her death in Book V. Both the \textit{Legatus divinae pietatis} and Mechthild of Hackeborn’s \textit{Liber specialis gratiae} contain extensive reports of their heroines’ inner experiences and minimal external detail, coupled with in-depth theological and devotional commentary. They fit beautifully into the “life and revelations” subgenre, as does the composite \textit{Legatus} integrating Gertrud’s own record and interpretation of her spiritual experiences.\textsuperscript{215}

\textsuperscript{214} Alexandra Barratt, among others, cites the biographer’s failure to use various \textit{vita} conventions. “There are no pre-natal predictions of future sanctity, no quasi-miraculous nativity scenes, no childhood anecdotes pointing to a precocious holiness. Indeed, there is nothing at all about Gertrud’s birth, family background, or life before she entered the monastery. There are no youthful struggles against the temptations of the flesh (a passionate absorption in one’s education is inevitably unsensational), nor do we find later any accounts of miraculous cures, the most common type of miracle in medieval hagiography. There is no account of an edifying death-bed scene, apparitions to others after death, or miracles performed at the saint’s tomb.” Introduction to HGLK, p. 15. Possidius’ \textit{vita} of Augustine, similarly, almost completely omits any performance of miracles.

\textsuperscript{215} Past editions of the complete \textit{Legatus} have, in fact, borne lengthy titles often including the term \textit{vita et revelationes}. For instance, the 1599 Madrid edition of Juan Castañiza is titled \textit{Insinuationum divinae pietatis libri quinque in quibus vita et acta sanctae Gertrudis monialis Ordinis sancti Benedicti continentur...}; the 1662 Salzburg edition of Laurence Clement, \textit{Insinuationes divinae pietatis sive legatus memorialis divinae pietatis a Christo sic nominatus in quo praeter vitam S. Virginis Gertrudis Abbatisae Elpidianae in Saxonia Ordinis Sancti Patriarchae Benedicti...}
In creating the composite *Legatus*, adding the autobiographical second Book to the “life and revelations” in the compiled Books amplifies both Gertrud’s themes and her sisters’. It combines her own self-reflection with their experience of her to form a coherent portrait of female holiness involving true Christian scholarship in community, after the model and exhortation of Augustine.\(^{216}\) The combined *Legatus* presents Gertrud as a wise and divinely called theological teacher in a holy community, and offers her and their teaching to readers at length.\(^{217}\) The Helfta women also undertake a reworking of the genre itself by presenting holiness as attainable by any devoted Christian, recommending imitation of Gertrud rather than merely veneration. They reinterpret sanctity, in accord

continentur revelationes, gratiae etc...; the 1662 Paris edition of Nicholas Canteleu, *Insinuationes divinae pietatis seu vita et revelationes S. Gertrudis Virginis et abbatissae O.S. Benedicti...* SC 139, pp. 64-77. Canteleu’s edition was the one used by M. Frances Clare Cusak for her 1870 English translation, for which she adopted the second half of his title, *The Life and Revelations of Saint Gertrude, Virgin and Abbess, of the Order of St. Benedict.*


\(^{217}\) Cf. Aviad Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially Chapter 5’s treatment of the vita of Lukardis, a Cistercian nun contemporaneous with Gertrud. Kleinberg calls attention to the complex process of negotiation within a community to both establish a member’s holiness, and to claim it as also demonstrating the holiness of her community.
with Augustine’s thought, to mean knowledge of one’s own sinfulness combined with the grateful acceptance of God’s mercy in Christ, mediated through the Christian community. Like Augustine in *Confessions*, Gertrud and her sisters call readers to conversion of both mind and heart through reflection on Scripture, participation in the liturgy, mutually transforming conversations, and constant reliance on grace.

**Legatus I.1 and I.7: Scholarship transformed through grace**

*Vitae* often imitate the Gospel portrait of Jesus by beginning with the subject’s birth—accompanied by miraculous portents whenever possible—and outstanding childhood holiness. Gertrud’s life story in Book I begins not with her birth, but with her entrance as a young child to the “wedding chamber” (thalamo) of religious life. While this in part reflects a lack of data about her circumstances, it also emphasizes the holiness of the Helfta convent, her true family, which

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218 The *Liber specialis gratiae*, for instance, relates the emergency baptism of Mechthild of Hackeborn when it appeared that she would die immediately after her birth. The priest who performed the ceremony prophesied that she would not die, but live a long life as a holy nun “in whom God would work many wonders.” It was later revealed that God sent the apparent frailty which hastened the baptism in order to ensure that “from her mother’s womb” Mechthild would become the grace-filled temple of the Lord. The *Liber* likewise makes much of Mechthild’s successful demand to enter the convent at the age of seven. *Liber specialis gratiae* I.1, p. 5.
will play such an important role in teaching and shaping her.

All this is made manifest in this his chosen woman, whom he graciously planted like a dazzling white lily in the garden of the Church, amidst a bed of spices, that is, in the company of the righteous. When she was a little girl, less than five years old, he set her apart from the hustle and bustle of the world and called her to the wedding-chamber of the religious life. To her dazzling whiteness he so lavishly added the springtide beauty of every kind of flower that, graceful in the eyes of all, she inclined the souls of many to love her.\textsuperscript{219}

Gertrud’s role as “bride of Christ” is emphasized by the images of the garden, the lily, and the bed of spices, all taken from the Song of Songs. These images emphasize her femininity and her chastity, to balance the upcoming comparisons to Augustine in intellectual excellence and arrogance. She is described as a lovable young girl “old” in wisdom (\textit{sapientia}) and doctrine (\textit{doctrina}), who stands out from her schoolmates through intelligence and excellence in the liberal arts.

She was indeed tender in years and body, but in her perceptiveness old and wise: lovable [\textit{amabilis}], quick [\textit{habilis}], articulate [\textit{facunda}], and so consistently easy to teach that all those who heard her were astonished.

\textsuperscript{219} HGLK, pp. 37-38. “...ut patet in hac electa sua, cum quasi candens \textit{Illicium} in horto Ecclesiae inter areolas aromatum, id est, congregationes justorum gratuito collegit, dum ipsam puellulam in quinto anno a mundi perturbationibus segregans, in thalamo sanctae Religionis collocavit, cujus candori omnigenorum florum vernantium tam abundanter adauxit, ut omnium oculis gratiosa plurimorum animos in sui affectum inclinaret.” \textit{Leg. I.1.1, SC} 139, p. 118.
When she started school she was distinguished by such quickness of perception and such natural understanding that she outstripped all her contemporaries and other companions in all wisdom [sapientia] and instruction [doctrina].

Medieval women’s vitae, in particular, often describe their subjects as being prematurely “old and wise.” However, this normally takes the form of a preference for prayer, and often physical penances, over playing with other children. The description of Gertrud as a precocious scholar excelling her classmates instead recalls Augustine’s self-portrait in Confessions I.

For what good was I, for my declamation, acclaimed above so many of my schoolmates and boys of the same age? What was all this but smoke and wind? Was there no other subject on which to exercise my talents and my tongue?

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221 Cf. Jaques d’Vitry’s description of the young Marie d’Oignies: “Cast in this way upon the Lord (cf. 1 Pt 5:7) almost from the womb, she never or rarely mixed with those who were playing as is the custom of small girls nor ‘did she makes herself partaker with them that walked in lightness’ (Tb 3:17). Rather, she kept her soul from the concupiscence and vanity of them all and foreshadowed in her youth what, through a divine sign, she would be in the future in her old age. Wherefore when she was still young, she would frequently kneel before her bed at night and offer up certain prayers which she had learned to the Lord as the first fruits of her life (cf. Ex 22:29). Thus mercy and righteousness grew in her from her infancy and she loved the ascetic life as with a natural affection.” Jacques de Vitry, The Life I.11A, translated by Margot H. King, in Two Lives of Marie D’Oignies (Toronto: Peregrina, 1998), p. 53.

222 Conf. I.17.27, Ryan p. 60. Cf. also Conf. IV.16.30, “What did it profit me that I, who was then a most wicked servant of base
Gertrud’s biographer is careful to subtly mention here, as she will more explicitly later, that Gertrud’s love of learning preserved her from the fleshly temptations to which Augustine succumbed in his youth.

In this way she passed the years of childhood and youth with a pure heart and an eager delight in the liberal arts, shielded by the Father of mercies from the many childish aberrations that often occur at that age. For that, let us give him thanks and infinite praise.²²³

Vitae follow two major patterns: early and continuing holiness or dramatic conversions. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell have argued that medieval hagiography tended to focus on the former pattern for women and the latter for men.²²⁴ Gertrud’s biographer describes a serious conversion in Gertrud’s life—a pattern more typical in medieval men’s vitae. It takes the form of a transformation of her scholarship, familiar as a male

lusts, should read and understand all the books on the liberal arts, as they are called, whatever of such books I could get to read?...Whatever concerned the arts of speaking and reasoning, whatever there was on the dimensions of figures and on music and numbers, I understood without much difficulty and without instruction from men.” Ryan, p. 111.

²²³ “Sicque annos pueritiae simulque adolescentiae puro corde, avidaque liberalium artium delectatione transgrediens, a multis puerilibus quibus illa aetas aberrare consuevit, a Patre misericordiarum est custodia, cui proinde sit laus et actio gratiarum infinita.” Leg. I.1.1, SC 139, p. 120.

²²⁴ Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).
pattern in monastic theology. Not just Augustine, but Benedict and Jerome excelled in worldly learning, fled from its corrupting aspects, and then transformed their skills of tongue and pen in the service of the church. However, Gertrud’s biographer neither calls her spiritually male, as in Perpetua’s vision of herself as a gladiator, nor paradoxically claims outsider status as a “weak woman” as a warrant for Gertrud’s teaching, as does Hildegard. Instead she mounts a consistent defense of female teaching authority, claiming this model of holiness as equally appropriate for men and women. The biographer describes Gertrud’s learning, displays her own through marginal and textual citations of authorities, and includes other sisters’ theological reflections throughout the compiled Books. In so doing, she both praises Gertrud and shows that she is not an extraordinary exception.

Chapter 1 continues by saying that before her conversion, Gertrud’s excessive devotion to the taste of “human wisdom” had deprived her of the “sweetest taste of divine wisdom.”

...she then realized that she had been far from God, in a land of unlikeness [in regione dissimilitudinis], for while clinging too closely to the liberal arts, she had until that moment failed to adjust the eye of her mind to the light of spiritual understanding. By attaching herself too eagerly to the pleasure
delectatione] of human wisdom, she had deprived herself of the most [sweetest] [suavissimo] taste of true Wisdom. All outward things now suddenly seemed worthless to her, and rightly so, for the Lord then led her into a place of joy and gladness, to Mount Sion, that is, to the vision of himself. There she put off her old nature with its deeds and put on the new nature which is created after God’s likeness in true righteousness and holiness.225

Augustine uses taste and sweetness images in Confessions and On Christian Doctrine to describe both God’s Word and Wisdom, and human speech when formed by them. Her resemblance to Augustine is also highlighted by the use of his phrase in regione dissimilitudinis for her prodigal “far country.”226 In Confessions VII Augustine says that says that before his conversion his proud ignorance left him in a “region of unlikeness,” in need of transformation through the eucharistic presence of Christ.

225 HGLK, pp. 38-39. “Unde et tunc recognovit se longe fuisse a Deo in regione dissimilitudinis, dum studiis liberalibus nimis inhaerendo, neglexisset usque ad tempus illud mentis aciem lumini spiritualis intelligentiae adaptare, atque humani sapientiae delectatione avidius adhaerendo, verae sapientiae gustu suavissimo privasset. Coeperuntque ipsi tunc repente vilescre omnia exteriora, et hos merito, quia tunc introduxit eam Dominus in locum exultationis et laetitiae, in montem Sion, hoc est, speculationem sui ubi, exuens eam veterem hominem cum actibus suis induit eam novem hominem qui secundum Deum creatus est in justitia et sanctitate veritatis.” Leg. I.1.2, SC 139, p. 120.

226 This has been neglected by scholars who cite earlier monastic theologians such as William of St. Thierry as the source of the term “in regio dissimilitudinis,” without realizing that they in turn were quoting Augustine. Whether Gertrud’s biographer found the term directly in Augustine’s text, or through the mediation of earlier medieval writers, both she and her readers would likely have been aware of it as a key Augustinian concept.
I found myself to be far from you in a region of unlikeness [in regione dissimilitudinis], as though I heard your voice from on high: "I am the food of grown men. Grow, and you shall feed upon me. You will not change me into yourself, as you change food into your flesh, but you will be changed into me."\(^{227}\)

Augustine’s return from the region of unlikeness also required turning from the proud writings of the Platonists to the humble scriptures, which in turn record the humility of the incarnate and crucified Word.

Gertrud’s conversion experience, like Augustine’s, is summed up as an intellectual one which is also moral: "from a grammarian she was made a theologian.”

[From a grammarian she was made a theologian] [exhinc de grammatica facta theologa], and tirelessly ruminated on all the books of the Bible she could obtain. The basket of her heart she packed to the very top with the more useful, and honey-sweet, texts of holy Scripture, so that she always had at hand an instructive and holy quotation. Hence she could give a ready and suitable answer to anyone who came to her, and turn aside any kind of error with scriptural witnesses so appropriate that almost no one could refute her.\(^{228}\)

The intellectual excellence which made Gertrud proud and

\(^{227}\) Confessions VII.10.16, Ryan p. 171.

\(^{228}\) HGLK, p. 39. “Unde exhinc de grammatica facta theologa omnes libros divinae paginæ quoscumque habere vel acquirere potuit infastidibîliter ruminans, copinum cordis sui crebro utilioribus et mellitis Scripturae sacrae sacrae eloquios ad summum replebat, ita ut semper praesto sibi esset sermo divinus et ædificatorius; unde quoslibet ad se venientes posset satis convenienter expedire atque cuilibet errori tam congruis sacrae Scripturae testimoniis obviare, quod a nullo penitus posset confutari.” Leg. 1.1.2, SC 139, pp. 120, 122.
spiritually empty is destined to be transformed, rather than renounced. After her conversion she devotes her gifts to constant scriptural study and meditation, which enables her to use her intellectual gifts to serve her community as theologian and teacher.

And in those days she was not sated by the wonderful sweetness and the extraordinary pleasure of constant application to divine contemplation or to the careful reading of holy Scripture. To her it seemed honeycomb in the mouth, harmonious music in the ear, and spiritual joy in the heart. Elucidating and clarifying what lesser minds found obscure, she made compilations from the sayings of the saints, gathered as a dove gathers grain, and committed to writing many books filled with all sweetness, for the general profit of all those who wished to read them. She also composed many prayers, 'sweeter than the honeycomb', and many other examples of spiritual exercises, in a style so fitting that it was impossible for any [of the masters] [magistrorum] to find fault with it, or do anything except delight in its aptness, which was founded on such honeyed texts from holy Scripture that no one, theologian or believer [theologorum sive devorum], could scorn it.”

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This passage gives some sense of the wide variety of genres present in Gertrud’s “many writings which are of the greatest value.”\textsuperscript{230} Along with original works, these include florilegia, commentaries, and various sorts of prayers and spiritual exercises. The biographer mentions recognition of Gertrud’s work by the ordinary faithful [devotorum] as well as by other theologians [theologorum], including university trained masters [magistrorum]. The success of Gertrud’s style and content alike are attributed to her exegetical and devotional immersion in the sweet text of Scripture. This recalls Augustine’s passionate prayer in Confessions XI to understand Scripture both for his own sake and to teach it to others.

For a long time I have burned to meditate upon your law, and therein to confess to you both my knowledge and my lack of wisdom, the first beginnings of your enlightenment and the last remains of my darkness, until my infirmity be swallowed up by your strength....O Lord my God, ‘be attentive to my prayer,’ and in your mercy graciously hear my desire, for it burns not for me alone but desires to be for the use of fraternal charity. You see that in my heart it is so. I will sacrifice to you the service of my thought and tongue; give me what I may offer to you....May your Scriptures be my chaste delights! May I never fall into error in my reading of them, may I never deceive others by misuse of them.\textsuperscript{231}

\textsuperscript{230} HGLK, p. 72. “...in pluribus scriptis suis valde utilibus...” Leg. I.11.4, SC 139, p. 174.

\textsuperscript{231} Conf. XI.2.2-3, Ryan p. 278.
Gertrud’s portrait in Book I resembles, not just Augustine’s self-portrait in Confessions, but also the ideal exegete and preacher described by Augustine in On Christian Doctrine. The biographer demonstrates that Gertrud’s speech has been made sweet and powerful by her intense study of Scripture and consequent power to convert through her words. She is a living example of Augustine’s words, “For a man speaks more or less wisely to the extent that he has become more or less proficient in the Holy Scriptures.”

The emphasis on Gertrud’s knowledge of and delight in scripture, particularly the images of dripping sweetness—mellitis, suavis, dulcis—recall Augustine’s portrait of the converted and converting preacher in On Christian Doctrine. Augustine admonishes the Christian preacher to speak with sweetness, as did Christ, God’s Word and Wisdom, in order to make the truth saving and effective for hearers.

On Christian Doctrine begins with the image of the journey to our true home, and warns against becoming enamored of the means on the road—

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232 DDC IV.5.7, p. 122.

enjoying what we should merely use—as being taken in by “perverse sweetness” and thus distracted from the true sweetness of heaven.\footnote{DDC I.4.4, pp. 9-10.} This is the perfect description of Gertrud’s prideful absorption in “human wisdom,” her own brilliance and learning for its own sake. After her conversion Gertrud is instead described as loving God’s sweet wisdom, and pouring it forth in “floods of that instruction [doctrina] which leads to salvation.”

She was a most strong pillar of the religious life, a most steadfast champion of justice and truth, so that what is said in the book of wisdom about Simon the High Priest could fairly be said of her, that ‘during his life he was the prop and stay of the house’ of the religious life, ‘and in his days he fortified the temple’ of spiritual devotion; that is, her admonitions and example greatly encouraged in many people a zealous striving for greater devotion. Yet it could be said of her that in her day ‘the wells of water poured out’ and so forth, for in fact no one in our day has produced in greater profusion than she the floods of that instruction which leads to salvation.\footnote{HGLK, p. 40. “Erat enim fortissima Religionis columna, justitiae et veritatis propugnatrix constantissima, ita quod juste de ea dici posset illud quod in libro Sapientiae dicitur de Simone sacerdote magno, quia in vita sua suffulsit domum, videlicet Religionis, et in diebus suis corroboravit templum spiritualis devotionis, scilicet quantum ipsius monistis et exemplis plures incitabantur ad studium majoris devotionis. In diebus autem ejus dici posset quod emanaverunt putei aquarum etc., quia revera fluenta doctrinae salutaris nemo temporibus nostris profusius edidit illa.” Leg. I.1.3, SC 139, p. 122.}

The term doctrina, in combination with so many references to sweetness, wisdom, and persuading eloquence, strongly
recalls *On Christian Doctrine*, whose educational theory was so cherished by medieval scholars.

She also possessed a sweet and piercing eloquence [dulce eloquium et penetrans], an articulate tongue [linguam...disertam], and speech so persuasive, effective and gracious [suadibilem, efficacem et gratiosum] that most of those who heard her testified, by the miraculous softening of their hearts and the change in their wills, that God’s spirit was speaking in her. It was the Word—living, effectual and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of the soul and the spirit—dwelling in her, which did all this. Some she goaded by her words to salvation, others she enabled to see both God and their own shortcomings; to some she brought the help of consoling grace, and the hearts of others she caused to burn more brightly with divine love.\(^{236}\)

Augustine says that the preacher should be formed profoundly by the wise eloquence of God’s Word—both incarnate and scriptural.\(^{237}\) Gertrud has this combination of wisdom and eloquence, and she makes people’s hearts burn as did the risen Christ at Emmaus when he opened the Scriptures to two fleeing disciples (Luke 24:32).

In Chapter 7, Gertrud is lauded for making the words

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\(^{236}\) *HGLK*, p. 40. “Habebat etiam dulce eloquium et penetrans, linguam tam disertam, sermonem tam suadibilem, efficacem et gratiosum, quodquamplures verba ipsius audientes revera testimonium evidens reddebant spiritui Dei qui loquebatur in ea, per mirabilem cordis emollitionem, et voluntatis mutationem. Verbum siquidem vivum et efficax et penetrabilius omni gladio ancipiti, peringens usque ad divisionem animae et spiritus, habitans in ea operabatur haec omnia. Quosdam per verba ejus compungens ad salutem, alios illuminans in cognitione tam Dei quam etiam defectuum propriorum, quibusdam consolationis gratiosae ministrans subsidium, aliquorum etiam corda in amore divino ardentius inflammans.” *SC* 139, p. 124.
of Scripture more intelligible to others by writing commentaries and paraphrases.

For the same reason, if she found anything useful in holy Scripture which seemed hard for the less intelligent to understand, she would alter the Latin and rewrite it in a more straightforward style, so that it would be more useful to those who read it. She spent her whole life in this way, from early morning until night, sometimes in summarizing lengthy passages, sometimes in commenting on difficulties in her desire to promote God’s praise and her neighbor’s salvation.  

Gertrud’s dedication to teaching is shown in offering her own insights on the scriptural text in her commentaries. She also assists others to undertake their own efforts at interpretation by working to make manuscripts of biblical books more widely available [Leg. I.4.2], as well by writing her paraphrases. These paraphrases, like the *florilegia* mentioned in Chapter 1, are a particularly humble genre. They recall Augustine’s insistence in *On Christian Doctrine* that teachers should choose the words most easily understood by their hearers, even if they are technically incorrect.

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237 DDC IV.4-6, pp. 124.

238 HGLK, pp. 57-58. “Unde et quaecumque in Scripturarum sanctis inveniebat utilia, si videbantur sensui minus intelligentium difficilia, latino mutato, stylo describente planiori, quo legentibus fierent utiliora; et sic totam vitam suam a mane usque ad vesperum consumebat, nunc longa decurando, nunc difficilia explanando, desiderabat laudem Dei et proximorum promovere salutem.” Leg. I.7.1, SC 139, pp. 152, 154.
...Good teachers have, or should have, such a desire to teach that if a word in good Latin is necessarily ambiguous or obscure, the vulgar manner of speech is used so that ambiguity or obscurity may be avoided and the expression is not that of the learned but of the unlearned....He who teaches should thus avoid all words which do not teach. And if he can find other correct words which are understood he should select those; but if he cannot find them, either because they do not occur to him or because they do not exist, he should use words less correct, provided that the thing taught is taught and learned without distortion when they are used.\footnote{DDC IV.10.24, p. 134.}

The biographer’s description of Gertrud’s long hours of labor in exegesis and writing also recalls Augustine’s self-description in \textit{The Trinity}.

So I cannot decently refuse the brethren when they insist on their rights over me as their slave and demand that I should above all serve their praiseworthy studies in Christ by my tongue and my pen, a pair of horses in my chariot of which Charity is the driver. I must also acknowledge, incidentally, that by writing I have myself learned much that I did not know.\footnote{The Trinity III.Prol.1, p. 127. Cf. also The Trinity I.1.5, “All I am concerned with is to meditate on the law of the Lord, if not day and night, at least at whatever odd moments I can snatch (Ps 1:2), and to prevent forgetfulness from running away with my meditations by tying them down to paper; trusting in God’s mercy that he will make me persevering in all truths I am sure of, and that if in anything I am otherwise minded he will reveal this also to me himself (Phil. 3:15), either by hidden inspirations and reminders, or by his own manifest utterances, or by discussions with the brethren.” P. 68.}

Gertrud’s theological skills are dedicated to the service of the Helfta sisters’ “praiseworthy studies in Christ,”
just as Augustine spoke and wrote for his religious community. Both are also aware of serving a wider audience by the copying and transmission of their works.

**Legatus I.9: Chastity through Scripture**

Chapter 9 focuses on Gertrud’s chastity, a key requirement for a medieval holy woman. The importance of this virtue is shown by the plethora of Latin terms used by her biographer. Over the course of the chapter Gertrud is said to possess continence [contintentia], chastity [castitas], purity of heart [munditia cordis], and modesty [verecundia and pudicitia]. In a hagiographical commonplace applied to both genders, Gertrud is praised for custody of the eyes when meeting with male visitors for spiritual direction or theological conversation.

She used to say, with complete conviction, that in all her life she had never looked at a man’s face with such interest as to know anything about its appearance. And likewise all who knew her could say with her that, however holy the man, however intimately and lengthily she had to speak to him, she parted from him without having looked at him even once. And it can be said not only of her sense of sight, but also of her speech, hearing and her other senses, that the beauty of her wonderful [continece] shone so brightly in her that her close friends used sometimes to say jokingly that she ought rightly to be put on the altar among the relics, because of the purity of her heart!\(^{241}\)

\[^{241}\] HGLK, p. 63. *“Continentia etiam, quam beatus Bernardus ponit loco lunae, in ista per lucide emicuit; quod constantissime fatebatur*
Purity of thought, word, and deed was an absolute requirement for women religious, and would be taken for granted within the community. In this light, the other sisters' teasing about putting Gertrud "on the altar with the relics" suggests an outstanding, even slightly excessive, dedication to that virtue. The most interesting feature about Gertrud's chastity, however, is that it is attributed to her reading of Scripture.

This is not surprising, since it was her habit to take a delight in holy Scripture beyond that of anyone I know, and consequently she also took a delight in God, and this is what chiefly preserves chastity [castitatis]. So Gregory says: 'When one has tasted the spirit, all flesh is distasteful', and Jerome: 'Love the scriptures, and you will not love the vices of the flesh.' But if other evidence were lacking, the clearest indication of [continence] [continentia] shines brightly in this single fact, that she concentrated on the meditative reading of Scripture.  

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se in omni vita sua nunquam alicujus viri faciem ita curiose vidisse, quod aliquid sciret de forma illius. Et hoc simul cum ea fateri possent omnes qui noverant eam, quod quantumvis viro sancto, quantumcumque familiariter, per quantam moram loqui deberet, sic ab illo discessit, quod nunquam vel semel ad ipsum oculos deflexerat. Et non solum dici potest de visu, verum etiam de loquendo, audiendo, caeterisque corporis motibus, quod tam mirae continentiae decor in ipsa resplenduit, quod familiares sibi sodales dicere solebant quandoque jocando, quod jure propter munditiam cordis inter reliquias super altares poneretur." Leg. II.9.1, SC 139, p. 160.

Gertrud’s wonderful chastity is attributed to her intense love and study of Scripture, rather than to harsh physical penances, which appear nowhere in Legatus. This is the biggest difference from the treatment of chastity in the vitae of holy women contemporary with Gertrud.243

She also devoted a great deal of effort to collecting and writing down everything which she thought might sometime be of use to anyone. She did this purely with God’s praise in mind; she never hoped for anyone’s thanks for this, but wished only for the salvation of souls. Consequently she was quick to share what she had written, especially with those in whom she hoped for more success. Also, where she knew there was a special shortage of the sacred books, she willingly did what she could to get hold of the necessary copies, so as to win everyone for Christ. To interrupt the peace and quiet of her sleep, to postpone her meals, to do without anything which concerned the comfort of her own body, these things she considered a joy rather than a trouble.244

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243 Cf. Jacques De Vitry’s description of Marie d’Oignies’ chastity. He classifies it under the virtue of fortitude, and includes a more typical emphasis on Marie’s mastering her body through physical discipline. “She not only had patience for resisting those who were opposed to her with the spirit of fortitude but she was also patient in her abstinence from all carnal allurements. Thus she chastised her body and placed it in servitude so that it obeyed the bidding of the spirit and did not contradict it nor did she ever excuse herself with any pretence. She did not grumble against the Lord but by imitating the fortitude of the Lord, she never became careless through sloth and never or rarely did her body fail through hard work. Thus did that youthful drummer, as it were, dry out her body by stretching it between two crosses so that she did not feel even the first stirrings of lust rise against her for many years.” Jacques de Vitry, The Life II.75, pp. 117-118.

244 HGLK, pp. 50-51. "Laborabat crebrius in colligendis et scribendis omnibus quae alicui unquam credebat esse proficua; et hoc ad laudem Dei ita pure facebat, quod nullius unquam grates ex hoc affectabat, sed solum salutem animarum desiderabat. Unde et in quibus majorem fructum sperabat, his alacrius quae conscriptaserat impertiebatur, et etiam in quibus majorem locis inopiam Scripturae
The biographer here depicts Gertrud’s physical self-denial as moderate and driven by her scholarly service to the community. The close combination of the highly prized virtue of chastity, particularly essential for women religious, and learning, provides a subtle but strong defense of sacred study as a normal and praiseworthy feminine path to God.

The one problem with recommending Scripture as the reinforcer of chastity is that it is filled with accounts of sexual activity, some of them shocking. This drawback is acknowledged when the biographer describes Gertrud’s attempt to omit bible passages with the slightest sexual connotation when reading aloud to the sisters.

Even if she occasionally found something in the scriptures, as sometimes happens, which could in any degree introduce a suggestion of something carnal, guided by her virginal sense of modesty [virginali verecundia] she would, as it were, stealthily omit it and pass it by. Or if she could not do this, she would pretend not to notice it, reading it quickly as if she did not understand it at all—although she was not able to hide the rosy beauty of gracious modesty [pudicitiae] on her cheeks. But if it happened that the less comprehending asked her questions about such passages she would refuse to answer, claiming ignorance with great modesty [verecundia]. She thought she would hardly find a sword wound to her body more painful than listening to such talk. If, 

\[\text{sacrae sciebat[,] ibi libentius quae poterat utilia procurabat, ut omnes Christo posset lucrari.} \] \hspace{1em} \text{Leg. I.4.2, SC 139, pp. 142, 144.}
however, it were ever essential to speak of such things for the salvation of souls, she would say what she considered necessary without any hesitation, as if she had no distaste for it at all.\textsuperscript{245}

It is surprising to find Gertrud the devoted exegete praised for leaving out, or rushing through, whole sections of Scripture readings.\textsuperscript{246} Even more startling is the portrayal of Gertrud the brilliant teacher dishonestly refusing to answer questions (unless they were absolutely necessary for someone’s salvation). These anecdotes indicate the importance of thoroughly validating Gertrud’s chastity. No thirteenth century

\textsuperscript{245} HGLK, p. 64. “Nam et si aliquando aliquid in ipsa sacra Scriptura, ut assolet, invenit quod aliqualiter potuit inferre memoriarn alicujus carnalitatis, hoc virginali verecundia ducta quasi furtim subtrahendo praeterivit; vel si hoc non potuit, saltem cursim proferendo quasi omnino non intelligeret, dissimulavit, excepto quod gratiosae pudicitiae roseus décor in genis ejus latere non valebat. Sed et si contiguit eam a minus intelligentibus require aliqua de similibus, haec cum tanta verecundia dissimulando declinabat, quod vix poenalius se credebat posse ferrum vulnerans carnem suam tolerare, quam talem audire sermonem. Sed tamen si quando propter animarum salutem necesse fuit talia loqui, hoc quasi omnino non abhorreret, absque haesitatione protulit ut videbatur expedire.” Leg. II.9.1, SC 139, pp. 160, 162.

\textsuperscript{246} This behavior presents a strong contrast to Gertrud’s usual excellence in the oral proclamation of Scripture, as reflected in an anecdote found in Leg. I.3.6. “Again, before Lent, when she was reading aloud the passage set for the community and was reciting with special care, among other things, that we must love the Lord with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength, one nun, stung by her words, said to the Lord: ‘Ah, Lord God, how greatly you are loved by that woman, who teaches with such convincing words that we must love you!’” HGLK, p. 48. “Item ante jejunium, dum Conventui legeret statutam lectionem et inter caetera hoc attentius recitaret, quod Dominus toto corde, tota anima totisque viribus esset diligendus, una ex verbis ejus compuncta dixit ad Dominum: ‘Eia Dominus Deus, qualiter amaris ab ista quae te tam efficacibus verbis docet amandum!’” SC 139, pp. 138, 140.
holy woman could overcome a sexually sinful past like Augustine’s—especially if she challenged gender boundaries in other respects. After such a strong comparison of Gertrud to Augustine as a converted scholar, it would be crucial to differentiate her from the pre-conversion Augustine in the realm of sexuality.

The biographer’s final touch to resolve this question is to connect Gertrud to the post-conversion Augustine, who both exemplified and preached chastity. She marshals an Augustinian quotation to elaborate on Gertrud’s outstanding purity of heart, as well as its connection with her revelations.

Once, when she had confided in an older man of proven experience on the subject of her intimacy [with God], he gave the following testimony, after pondering the purity of her heart [munditia cordis]: that he had never known anyone as much a stranger to carnal emotion [carnalis commotio] as she was. Therefore (I shall not quote all of it) as he had made careful observation of this single gift of God in her, it was no surprise to him if God had revealed his secrets to her rather than to others, since he says himself in the gospel: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart [Beati mundo corde], for they shall see God’. Augustine says: ’God is not seen by the eyes of

247 From a safe historical distance Mary Magdalene was a highly popular icon of repentance, and “desert harlots” such as Pelagia and Mary of Egypt were also known to some extent. But newly composed female vitae heavily emphasized chastity. (Gertrud’s contemporary, the Franciscan tertiary Margaret of Cortona, is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. Her past as a nobleman’s mistress, however, would still have barred her from entering the higher-status Poor Clare nuns).
the body but by the heart, and just as the sunlight can only be seen by eyes cleansed of any impurity, so God can only be seen through purity of heart [munditiam cordis], a heart which conscience does not accuse of sin but which is the holy temple of God’.\textsuperscript{248}

Like the beatitude, Augustine’s use of “purity of heart” in this passage from letter 147 refers to freedom from all varieties of sin, not merely those connected with “carnal emotion.” Its use in this context therefore seems both a reflection of medieval concern for female chastity, and a subtle attempt to connect Gertrud with the celibate monk and bishop Augustine became. Possidius’ account of the post-conversion Augustine praises his absolute dedication to chastity. He records that Augustine never spoke to a woman alone, nor permitted any woman to spend even one night in his house. This prohibition applied even to his sister and nieces, all of whom were nuns and therefore offered special dispensation to live with the male monks by

\textsuperscript{248} HGLK, p. 64. “Dum autem vice quadam cum valde probato seniore de suis familiaritibus contulisset, ille considerata munditia cordis ejus, postmodum tale ipsi testimonium dedit, quod scilicet nunquam hominem cognovisset a quo omnis carnalis commotio esset tam penitus aliena sicut ab ista. Ergo, ut de caeteris taceam, quia hoc solum donum Dei in ea diligenter prospexerit, non mirabatur, si praecae teris ipsi Deus secretae sua revelaverit, cum ipse in Evangelio dicat: Beati mundo corde, quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt. Augustinus: ‘Non exterioribus oculis sed corde videtur Deus, et sicut lumen hoc videri non potest nisi oculis mundis, ita nec Deus nisi per munditiam cordis, quod non arguit conscientia peccati, sed templum Dei sanctum est.’” Leg. I.9.2, SC 139, p. 162.
ecclesiastical legislation.

He used to say that even though no suspicion of evil could arise from his sister or his nieces stopping with him, they would have to have other women attending on them and staying with them, and other women again would be coming to see them from outside, and all this might give scandal or prove a temptation to the weak. Thus, the men who happened to be staying with the bishop or with one of the clergy, when all these women were stopping there together or coming and going, might fall victims to the common temptations of mankind and would certainly suffer the grossest defamation by suspicious people.

For these reasons he used to say that the servants of God, however chaste they might be, ought never to have women staying in the same house with them, for fear (as I have said) of setting an example that might give scandal or provide temptation to the weak. Even when women asked to interview him, or just to pay their respects, they might never come into his room unless there were clergy there as witnesses. He would never talk to them alone even if the matter were strictly private.  

Augustine may of course have undertaken such practices—at least in part—in order to balance the public acknowledgment of his fleshly sins and temptations in the *Confessions*. These stringent, not to say misogynistic,

249 Possidius 26, p. 58. Possidius also emphasizes the dedication to chastity Augustine inculcated in the monks and clergy he trained. "As divine truth made headway, those who had been serving God in the monastery with the holy Augustine, and under his rule, began to be ordained as clergy for the church at Hippo. The result was to make better known and more evident every day the truths preached by the Catholic Church, the way of life of the holy servants of God, their chastity, and their utter poverty....[N]o less than ten men, known to us as holy and venerable, chaste and learned, were supplied by the most blessed Augustine to various churches, including some of the most important, in response to requests." Possidius 11, p. 42.
measures recall Gertrud’s uncharacteristic mangling of her beloved Scriptures when reading aloud. Both figures take their dedication to chastity to almost ridiculous extremes from a modern perspective. It should be noted, however, that neither acted solely out of concern for individual purity. Instead, Augustine sought to protect the virtue and reputation of his brothers, as Gertrud did for her sisters. Their somewhat excessive steps toward this goal are more intelligible in the context of their overriding passion for both personal and communal fidelity to God.

Legatus I.10 and I.14: Teaching the Eucharist

Chapters 10 and 14 of Book I treat Gertrud’s eucharistic practice, one of the most frequently discussed aspects of her theology and spirituality. Chapter 10 describes Gertrud as frequently receiving communion, due to her trust in God’s abundant mercy. Chapter 14 depicts her as authoritatively assuring those who feel unworthy

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250 Cf. The Rule of St. Augustine 4.6: “Therefore, in church or wherever you may be in the company of women, you are to consider yourselves responsible for one another’s chastity. Then God who dwells in you (2 Cor. 6:16) will watch over you through your responsibility for one another.” The Rule of Saint Augustine: Masculine and Feminine Versions, tr. Raymond Canning, OSA (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), p. 17.
that God will welcome them to communion as well.\textsuperscript{251} Gertrud herself treats the same issues in \textit{Leg.} II.20, including stronger claims of being able to judge the severity of, and promise forgiveness for, particular sins. As many scholars have pointed out, Gertrud here exercises quasi-priestly functions.\textsuperscript{252} Gertrud’s service in this area, however, also fits into Book I’s portrait of her as a teacher, exegete, and theologian resembling Augustine.\textsuperscript{253} Gertrud teaches people the true meaning of the eucharist through her example and counsel to those seeking spiritual direction, as well as through the text of \textit{Legatus}. She reminds her contemporaries that it is a thanksgiving for, and living memorial of, Christ’s

\textsuperscript{251} A similar doubling of material, with some differences in emphasis, is found in Gertrud’s and her sisters’ discussions of her reasons for writing. Cf. \textit{Leg.} I.15 and \textit{Leg.} II.21, treated below. This tends to support the position that what is now Book I was an integral part of the \textit{Legatus divinae pietatis} composed by the Helfta sisters, rather than an introduction to the final hybrid text. If Book I had been composed last and separately, as Doyère and others hypothesize, there would have been no compelling reason for the other sisters to repeat material that had already been clearly covered in Gertrud’s own portion of the work.

\textsuperscript{252} The privileges claimed for Gertrud are somewhat daring in her historical context. As will be demonstrated below, a close reading of the text shows that both she and her sisters are careful to make clear in a variety of ways that her unusual authority remains within the bounds of current orthodoxy.

\textsuperscript{253} As Bynum has demonstrated, other medieval holy women were known for dramatic eucharistic powers—being able to live solely on the host, or receive it miraculously when unjustly denied by a priest. These were usually restricted to their own practice, however; Gertrud’s ability to admit others to communion more closely resembles Augustine and other priests who celebrated the eucharist and administered it to others.
passion, through which God’s mercy was freely bestowed upon sinful humanity. Thus, receiving with repentant gratitude and awareness of one’s unworthiness displays at least equal—if not greater—reverence than fearfully abstaining.

Chapter 10 of Book I names Gertrud’s trust in God as one of her most significant spiritual gifts. The biographer says that it allowed Gertrud to remain peaceful whether she was experiencing spiritual consolation or desolation.254 She also recounts the sisters’ surprise that Gertrud did not fear a fate universally dreaded by her contemporaries: a sudden death deprived of the last sacraments.255 Gertrud’s frequent communion, even though she is humbly aware of her own unworthiness, is likewise attributed to her surpassing trust in God’s love and mercy.

Again, from the trust we mentioned above she possessed such grace concerning the reception of communion, that reading in Scripture or hearing from anyone about the danger run by those who receive communion unworthily could not prevent her from always receiving communion gladly, with a firm hope in the Lord’s loving-kindness. She considered her own efforts so feeble and virtually null that she never failed to receive communion even if she had neglected the prayers or other exercises which with people usually

254 Leg. I.10.1, SC 139, pp. 164, 166.

prepare themselves. She judged that all human effort, compared to this supremely excellent free gift, is like tiny drops compared to the vast expanse of the ocean. And although she could settle on no way of preparing worthily for communion, nonetheless she placed her trust in the unchanging nature of divine generosity as better than any preparation, and did her utmost to receive the sacrament with a pure heart and devoted love.\textsuperscript{256}

It is initially surprising, after such emphasis on Gertrud's knowledge of Scripture, for her biographer to say that she disregarded its warnings about “the danger run by those who receive communion unworthily.” The most serious is undoubtedly the bedrock text for medieval eucharistic discipline: 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.

\begin{quote}
Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.
\end{quote}

It is this passage, combined with an ever-increasing reverence for Christ’s eucharistic presence, that helped

\textsuperscript{256}HGLK, p. 67. "Item ex jam dicta confidentia tantam habuit gratiam communicandi, quod nunquam nec in scriptura, nec ab hominibus tantum audire potuit de periculo indigne communicantium, quin semper firma spe super pietate Domini libenter communicavit. Tam exigua et pene spe super pietate Domini libenter communicavit. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.

It is this passage, combined with an ever-increasing reverence for Christ’s eucharistic presence, that helped
fuel an ever-decreasing frequency of reception over the course of the middle ages. The more seriously Paul’s exhortations were taken, the less people were willing to receive and thus risk “eating and drinking judgement against themselves.”

The text of *Legatus* suggests that Gertrud did not disregard the 1 Corinthians passage, however, so much as propose an alternate exegesis of it. As the biographer says, Gertrud “judged that all human effort, compared to this supremely excellent free gift, is like tiny drops compared to the vast expanse of the ocean.” Since she knew she could never prepare worthily, “she placed her trust in the unchanging nature of divine generosity” as the best way of striving to receive with a pure heart instead. This suggests that for Gertrud, self-examination is not aimed primarily at determining whether one is virtuous enough to receive or sinful enough to abstain.

Instead, it is analogous to her memory

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257 The prescriptions of IV Lateran, in 1215, reflect a double concern that people should comply with Paul’s requirements for self-examination and worthy reception, but not overreact to the point of refraining from communion altogether. The Council insisted on confessing all grave sins to one’s parish priest or his approved substitute before receiving, but also enacted a minimum requirement of communing at least once a year during the Easter season. It also attempted to ease one source of anxiety about the newly required confessions by instituting the severest of penalties (defrocking and a lifetime of penance in a strict monastery) for breaking the seal.

258 Gertrud’s faithful participation in sacramental confession is emphasized by a detailed account of her preparation and thanksgiving on a particular occasion in Leg. III.14. She would undoubtedly endorse sacramental confession when individually
practices in prayer and writing, modelled on Augustine’s, throughout Book II. The most fruitful self-examination would be aimed at stirring up the memory of both one’s own sinfulness and God’s extravagant mercy, poured out in the passion of Christ and made present in the Eucharist. For Gertrud, remembrance of these truths would constitute “discerning the body,” and trustfully receiving communion the appropriate response of humble thanksgiving.

Gertrud explicitly refers to this 1 Corinthians passage in a difficult chapter of Book II, when she describes God recommending that people purposely “receive their own condemnation” in the sacrament in order to glorify divine mercy. The stage is set for this unusual revelation as she is approaching to receive communion. Gertrud prays to die and free God from continuing to shower graces on such an unworthy recipient. In response, she sees a vision of Christ flying out of heaven towards her, shedding drops of sweet nectar which bring joy to the saints. He says that it would be more for divine glory for her to stay alive, because “...the more unworthy the

necessary; her primary audience of monastic men and women would in any case have it prescribed as a frequent part of community practice. However, the overall thrust of her thought is to counter the excessive anxiety evident in overly frequent devotional confession, as well as the elaborate preparatory devotions mentioned in Leg. I.10.3.
one to whom I condescend, the greater the reverence with which I am rightly glorified by the whole of creation."^{259}

The story then proceeds to the divine recommendation of unworthy—possibly even sacrilegious—communions.

Since I had been granted this [consolation] at the moment when I was approaching your life-giving sacrament, I was therefore, quite properly, concentrating on it. You then granted me, in addition to the revelation I have just described, this moment of understanding: that everyone ought to approach the most sacred sharing of your body and blood in this way and with this intention: for love of the sacrament they should discount their love of your glory even to the extent, if it is possible, of receiving in that sacrament their own condemnation [damnationem]. Then the divine loving-kindness may shine out the more, in that God did not disdain to give himself in communion to someone so unworthy.^{260}

This story carries Gertrud’s emphasis on the divine condescension in God’s self-gift to unworthy souls to an almost impossible extreme.^{261} This is emphasized when she

^{259} HGLK, p. 149. "...quia quanto ad indigniorem me inclinavero, tanto majori reverentia merito ab omni creatura extollor." Leg. II.19.1, SC 139, p. 304.

^{260} HGLK, p. 149. "Et cum haec consolatio mihi praestita esset in illa hora qua ad tua vivifica accederem sacramenta, et inde circa illa, ut justum erat, haberem versam intentionem, addidisti jam dictae revelationi etiam et hunc intellectum: quod scilicet eo modo et intentione quilibet accederet deberet ad sacratissimam corporis et sanguinis tui communionem, ut amore ejus amorem gloriandum tuae vilipenderet etiam, si possibile esset, quod magnam damnationem sibi in hoc sacramento suumet, ut tantummodo divina pietas magis clarescet, per hoc quod se tam indigno non designaretur communicare." Leg. II.19.2, SC 139, pp. 304, 306.

^{261} Cf. Mechthild of Magdeburg’s desire to go to hell that her Lover “might be praised beyond measure by all creatures.” The Flowing Light of the Godhead I.5, p. 44.
replaces the Vulgate’s warning against eating and drinking one’s “judgement” \[iudicium\] with a reference to receiving one’s own “condemnation” \[damnationem\]. In the context of the ecclesiastical discipline of her time, “receiving the sacrament to [one’s] own condemnation” connotes, at the very least, doing so strongly aware of oneself as a serious sinner. There is even the possibility that Gertrud means receiving while aware of an unconfessed mortal sin. The passage at least raises the question of whether Gertrud was claiming such a shocking message to have been divinely revealed. Thus, she immediately puts a similar question to God, and receives a clarifying response.

When, however, I brought forward the objection that those who abstain from communion because of their own unworthiness, abstain with the intention of not bringing dishonor on so exalted a sacrament by their presumption, I received your blessed answer to this as follows: ‘No one could ever come to communion unworthily who relied on an intention such as that’. For this be glory and praise to you for ever and ever!\textsuperscript{262}

Whatever the meaning Gertrud places on “receiving one’s own damnationem,” this divine answer provides welcome

\textsuperscript{262} HGLK, p. 149. “Ad hoc tamen cum ego excusationem subinferrem quod quisquis respectu suae indignitatis abstinet a communione, ea intentione abstinet ne praesumptuose irreverentiam inferat sacramento tam praedigno, ad hoc benedictum responsum tuum accepit in haec verba: ‘Tali intentione praesumens nunquam aliquis irreverenter accedere potest.’ Pro quo sit tibi laus et gloria per infinita saeculorum saecula.” Leg. II.19.2, SC 139, p. 306.
reassurance to both her and the reader. The least dramatic explanation of this thought-experiment would be that the hypothetical person is receiving in fairly serious but not technically mortal sin. In this case, God’s statement would emphasize the abundance of divine mercy poured out in communion to overcome all human sinfulness. A middle course would be that the person believed herself to be in a state of unconfessed mortal sin, but did not have a corresponding inner disposition (e.g., because her sinful choice had lacked sufficient reflection or free consent of the will.) In this case, the divine answer would mean that the intention of self-sacrifice to dramatize divine mercy reveals that the person’s inner state of soul was not gravely sinful. The most radical explanation would be that Gertrud believed God to recommend reception by a person actually guilty of mortal sin. In this case, the good intention would presumably provide a miraculous absolution directly from God, along the lines of perfect contrition. Whatever Gertrud’s original meaning, the clarification shows that she is using a graphic example to stress the extravagance of divine mercy, not actually challenging the orthodoxy of her time.

Chapter 14 describes various examples of Gertrud’s
prophetic ability to speak for God, both by challenging and reassuring those who come to her for counsel. Among these is God’s granting Gertrud spiritual authority to allow all who consult her to receive as freely and trustfully as she does.\(^\text{263}\)

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!\(^\text{264}\)

She seems to have been consulted regularly about the reception of communion, and to have shared the fruits of her exegesis by strongly urging—“almost forcing” other sisters to receive. Gertrud humbly asks God if she is presuming in giving such strong encouragement, and is

\(^{263}\) The fourth paragraph of this chapter shows that Gertrud’s encouragement of frequent reception is not due to a general laxity of moral or devotional standards. As in the call of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:9) God touches her tongue and says “I have put my words in your mouth,” telling Gertrud that her words will henceforth have divine authority. Gertrud’s immediate response is to worry that she may warn someone that their sin would not go unpunished, and they would consequently suffer condemnation [damnum consequi deberet]. She is not reassured until God promises that every time that “justice” or “zeal for souls” leads her to make such a threat, divine grace will move the person to repent and receive forgiveness. \textit{Leg. I.14.4, SC} 139, pp. 196, 198.

\(^{264}\) \textit{HGLK}, p. 82. "Cum enim plures saepeius requirerent ab ea de quibusdam dubiis et specialiter si propter talia et talia deberent abstinere a communicatione, et ipsa singulos rationabiliter expeditos ob gratiam et misericordiam Dei confidenter ad sacramentum dominicum accedere consuleret et etiam quandoque quasi vi compelleret." \textit{SC} 139, p. 196.
answered that only those worthy of communion will be allowed to consult her.

You shall hold this sure promise from me, that I will never allow anyone whom I judge to be unworthy of the life-giving sacrament of my body and blood to seek out your advice on this. So if I [choose] to send you for assurance anyone who is weary or oppressed, you shall declare to that person that it is safe to approach me. Because of your grace and love, I will never bar them from my fatherly heart, but I shall open my arms to them, to embrace them in dearest love; nor shall I deny them the delectable kiss of peace.  

The biographer is careful to include this divine reassurance making it clear that Gertrud is neither claiming to absolve people’s sins, nor encouraging them to receive in grave sin. Instead, this privilege is rooted in her theological acumen and spiritual discernment. She is apparently able to reassure people generally of God’s mercy, and specifically that their deeply regretted sins were not actually mortal sins requiring sacramental confession.

In Book II, Chapter 20, Gertrud discusses this

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\[265\] HGLK, pp. 82-83. "...hoc certum in promisso tenebis ex me quod nullus unquam quem ego sacramento vivifici corporis et sanguinis mei censeo indigne sinetur a me super hoc requirere a te, ideoque quemcumque fatigatum vel gravatum tibi delegavero expediendum, huic securum ad me denuntiabis accessum; quia ipsi ob amorem et gratiam tui nunquam paternum concludam sinum, sed amicissimi affectus ipsi pandam amplexum, nec pacis osculum suave denegabo." SC 139, pp. 196, 198. "...si quem justitia tua non permetteret dignum judicari, nunquam permetteres ad meum consilium humiliari." Leg. II.20.1, SC 139, p. 308.
privilege of admitting people to communion with a different rationale than in Book I. She begins by praising God for overlooking the many times she had received communion "improperly prepared," indecenter parata. Then she says that God’s mercy went beyond this to bestowing the prophetic ability discussed in Leg. I.14, allowing her to reassure those with a "fearful conscience" that they may receive.

Your inexhaustible superabundance toward me, the most worthless and useless of your instruments, condescended to tinge your gift with added beauty: from your grace I received an assurance that if anyone who longs to approach the blessed sacrament but has a fearful conscience and holds back in trepidation is prompted by humility to seek support and strength from me, the very least of your [maidservants]: for the sake of that humility your loving-kindness, which bursts all bonds of restraint, will count them as worthy of so great a sacrament, which they will indeed receive as the fruit of eternal salvation.²⁶⁶

Gertrud says that it is the humility of those who seek her advice which will lead God to count them worthy of the sacrament. Then she goes on to say that God has given

²⁶⁶ HGLK, p. 150. "...non suffecit pietati tuae dissimulare quod toties indecenter parata accedere non vereor ad tui sanctissimi corporis et sanguinis superexcellentiam convivium, nisi etiam abyssalis supereffluentia tua mihi, instrumentorum torum vilissimo et inutilissimo, hunc colorem dono tuo superaddere dignata sit: quod gratia tua certitudinem accepit, quod omnis qua ad tuum sacramentum accedere desiderans, sed habens timorem conscientiae, trepidans retrahitur, si humilitate ductus a me famularum tuarum minima quaeerit confortari, pro hac ipsius humilitate, tua incontinentis pietas dignum ipsum judicat tantis sacramentis, quae vere percipiet in fructum salutis aeternae..." Leg. II.20.1, SC 139, p. 308.
her this privilege for her own salvation, as well as that of others. In has in fact been given, she argues, precisely because she has received unworthily so many times.

O heavenly Governor, you who dwell on high and look down on the [humble], how can it be that your divine compassion should pass such a decree, when you saw me so often approaching communion unworthily and, if weighed in the balance of your justice, deserving judgement [iudicium]! You wished to make others worthy by means of the power of humility, even though you could do this better without me. Nonetheless your loving-kindness, aware of my poverty, made the decision to accomplish this through me, so that in this way if in no other I could have a share in the merits of those who would, through my words of advice, come to possess the fruit of salvation.267

God’s plan to have others consult such an unworthy person for encouragement to receive glorifies God’s mercy, and also provides spiritual benefit for both them and Gertrud. It exercises them in humility, and makes reparation for her failures by allowing her to share in their merits. This is a particularly Augustinian version of humility, which does not just mean recognizing one’s sinfulness and unworthiness in relation to God. Instead, Gertrud and 267 HGLK, p. 151. “O dominator excelsa qui in altis habitas et humilia respicis, quid divina dictavit miseratio tua cum videres toties indigne accedentem, justitia librante, iudicium promoreri, tu volens alios dignos efficere per virtutem humilitatis, quamvis sine me hoc melius posses, indigentiae tamen meae consulens pietas tua hoc per me perficere decrevit, ut vel sic participari possemeritism epsorum, qui monitis meis fructum salutis potirentur.” Leg. II.20.1, SC 139, pp. 308, 310.
Augustine stress the need for mutual interdependence and
gratitude as people bring one another to God. Augustine
includes a similar treatment of communion in the closing
paragraphs of Confessions X. Having reflected on his
ongoing struggles with sin, Augustine concludes the Book
by praising the mercy and humility of God mediated through
Christ who is both “victim and victor,” “priest and
sacrifice.”

How you have loved us, O good Father, who did
not spare your only Son, but delivered him up
for us sinners....For us, he is before you both
victor and victim, and therefore victor for the
reason that he is victim. For us, before you,
he is both priest and sacrifice, and therefore
priest because sacrifice, making us your
[children] instead of servants, by being born of
you, and by becoming servant to us.

Then Augustine presents the eucharist as the ultimate
remedy for a stricken conscience, since it provides access
to the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

Struck with terror at my sins and at the burden
of my misery, I had been tormented at heart and
had pondered flight into the desert. But you
forbade me, and comforted me, saying: “Therefore
Christ died for all: that they who live may now
live not to themselves but to him who died for
them.” Behold, Lord, I cast my cares upon you,
so that I may live, and “I will consider the
wondrous things of your law.” You know my lack
of wisdom and my infirmity, teach me and heal
me. He, your only Son, “in whom are hid all the
treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” has redeemed
me by his blood. “Let not the proud calumniate
me,” for I think upon my ransom, and I eat and
drink, and share it with others, and as a pauper...
I desire to be filled from him amid those who eat and are filled, “and they shall praise the Lord that seek him.”

In different but analogous ways, both Augustine and Gertrud “eat and drink and share with others” Christ’s body and blood, the ransom of human salvation. Both teach its meaning through their speech and writing, and enact its reality with their brothers and sisters. Augustine celebrates the Eucharist for his community; Gertrud tirelessly encourages its reception in hers. Augustine describes himself as a hungry pauper coming with others to the breadline; Gertrud finds consolation for her own sinfulness in the virtues of those she counsels. For both, the most important meaning of the sacrament is a communal sacrifice of thanksgiving for God’s overflowing mercy: “they shall praise the Lord that seek him.”

**Legatus I.12, I.15, 1.16: Miracles in community**

A crucial feature of vitae from the patristic period onward was the inclusion of miracles performed during the saint’s lifetime, after death, or both. In imitation of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, the most common type of miracle—especially in medieval vitae—is physical healing. Gertrud performs no physical healings in the

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268 Conf. X.43.70, Ryan pp. 274-275.
Legatus, though Book I does include some token physical miracles like stopping a rainstorm and finding a needle or stylus in a haystack. However, her biographer places more emphasis on the divinely granted prophecies and insights with which Gertrud was able to reassure her sisters and free them from temptations. Above all, she argues that Gertrud’s formation by God’s word gives her the more significant power to teach and convert others (who are also called “chosen”) through her eloquent words.

God condescended no less to cause the dew of his grace to fall by means of her words on those whom he had chosen. There are many people who could testify that they once felt greater pangs of remorse at a single word of hers than at a lengthy sermon by seasoned preachers. Another witness to this are the tears, which cannot lie, of those who came to her at a time when they seemed so rebellious that they could not be subdued. After listening to a few words from her, they were pierced with such great compunction that they promised that they would give way in all that they ought.

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269 Leg. I.13, SC 139 pp. 190-196.

270 Leg. I.2, SC 139, pp. 128-132. This chapter recounts Gertrud’s correct predictions, revealed initially to the abbess, about the election of the Holy Roman Emperor, and a lawsuit threatening the monastery. It also contains the closest approach to a typical medieval miracle story when another sister surreptitiously cuts a piece of cloth from Gertrud’s cast-off footrags. It is significant, however, that the cloth does not work a miracle of physical healing. Instead, it frees the sister from a recurring temptation that was threatening her peace of mind as she prepared for communion.

271 HGLK, pp. 78. “Non minus etiam Deus dignatus est per verba ipsius electis suis gratiam irrogare, cum plures testarentur se quandoque plus ad unum verbum compungi quod audierant ab ore ejus, quam ad sermonem longum quorumdam probatorum praedicatorum. Et hoc etiam testabantur veridicae lacrymae ipsorum qui quandoque ad eam
It is the inner transformation worked by her example, words, and prayers that the biographer calls miraculous.

These facts seem to me not very different from the lightning flashes of miracles, since I regard the easing of souls as no less a cause for gratitude than the easing of bodies.\footnote{HGLK, p. 78. \textit{"Et haec quidem mihi videntur non multum distare a fulgorisibns signorum, cum non minori gratitudine censeam esse recipiendam alleviationem animarum quam corporum."} SC 139, p. 188.}

The biographer here sounds both proud of Gertrud’s converting powers and slightly defensive about her lack of conventional healing powers. This reflects her awareness of how much Gertud’s story defies the standard expectations for medieval hagiography.

Possidius paints a similar portrait of Augustine’s spiritual powers. He does briefly record one healing miracle during Augustine’s life, but his repeated and in-depth emphasis is on Augustine’s power to convert others through his learned and charitable speech. Possidius

\begin{quote}
venientes, cum tam rebelles viderentur quasi omnino vinci non possent, et post audita pauca verba ejus in tantum compungetur, quod promittebant se velle cedere in omnibus quibuscumque deberent." Leg. I.12.1, SC 139, pp. 186. Cf. also Leg. I.6.1, \textit{"She would dip [the pen of her tongue] in the blood of her heart and choose her words with devout love born of loving-kindness, and grace born of wisdom. Scarcely anyone could be so stubborn and perverse, at least no one having any spark of loving-kindness, as not to be softened by her words, at least to the extent of desiring correction."} \textit{\textquotedblleft...calamum linguæ tingens in sanguinem cordis, tam devoto affectu pietatis ac sapientiae gratia verba formabat, quod vix aliquid esse posset tam duræ ac perversæ mentis, cui tamen aliqua inessen scintilla pietatis, qui non per verba ejus emolliretur, saltem ad voluntatem vel desiderium emendationis."} SC 139, p. 150.
\end{quote}
relates numerous examples of Augustine’s efficacy as a preacher and debater with heretics—either vanquishing or converting them. The most detailed story describes Augustine’s accidentally losing his train of thought in a sermon and branching into a refutation of Manichaeism. Augustine tells Possidius and the other brothers afterward that God’s spirit must have inspired this diversion for the good of one of his listeners. His hypothesis is confirmed a few days later when a businessman named Firmus tearfully relates his conversion through that very sermon.

The holy Augustine was in the monastery, sitting with us round him, and the man flung himself down on his knees at his feet and, with tears falling, asked the bishop to intercede, together with the saints, with the Lord for his sins. He confessed that he had been a follower of the Manichaean sect and had lived in it for many years...He had just lately, by the mercy of God, been shown his errors by Augustine’s arguments in church and been made a Catholic. Our revered Augustine and those of us who were present carefully inquired of him what exactly in the sermon has especially satisfied his mind. He told us, and it brought back to all of us the whole course of the sermon. We contemplated with wonder and stupefaction the depth of God’s plans for the salvation of souls...²⁷³

Gertrud’s influence on others, however, is not one-sided. She also learns from them, and they testify to her holiness, in another significant departure from

²⁷³ Possidius 15, p. 47.
hagiographic convention. Many anonymous people in Book I have visions and locutions confirming her holiness, not just recognized holy people like Mechthild of Hackeborn.

The second reliable testimony is that of many prudent people. Although different from each other, they are unanimous in affirming that in all they ever understood about her through divine revelation, when they asked God to amend her faults or to increase her perfection, she was always presented as being especially chosen and privileged to receive extraordinary graces.\textsuperscript{274}

It is striking that so many ordinary people are presented as praying for Gertrud, not just the other way around. Even more important is the fact that they pray for her spiritual growth and ongoing conversion—not scrupling at times to mention specific weaknesses. An anonymous person asks God why Gertrud still lives so imperfectly after all her mystical experiences.\textsuperscript{275} Mechthild of Hackeborn, likewise, inquires about Gertrud’s tendency to harsh judgement.

Then Dame M[echthild] said, ‘My Lord, if her life is like this, why then is she able to judge rather severely on occasions the aberrations and failures of others?’ The Lord

\textsuperscript{274} HDL, p. 57. “Secundo, etiam testis verificans est hominum discreta et uniformis relatio, quam diversi tamquam uno ore fatebantur, quia quidquid de ea per divinam revelationem intellexerunt, cum sive pro defectibus ejus emendandis, sive pro augmentandis prefectibus orarent, hoc semper tale fuisset quod ipsa videretur specialiter electa et principaliter potioribus gratis privilegiata.” \textit{Leg.} I.3.1, SC 139, pp. 132, 134.

\textsuperscript{275} \textit{Leg.} I.16.6, SC 139, pp. 216, 218.
kindly replied, ‘Surely because she herself does not allow any blemish to find a place in her heart, and she cannot bear with equanimity the failures of others.’

Mechtild is also happy to comply with Gertrud’s request to pray for an increase in gentleness and patience, on another occasion. This sharply diverges from hagiographic convention, in which a near-perfect saint’s self-reproaches would be praised as an example of the crucial virtue of humility. Reading Book I in light of Augustine’s emphasis on ongoing, communally mediated conversion illuminates this unusual but effective subversion of genre expectations.

After discussing Gertrud’s extraordinary charisms, the biographer goes on to say in Chapter 15 that God willed them to be written down. Gertrud protests her

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276 HGLK, p. 74. “Tunc illa: ‘Domine mi, si talis est conversatio sua, unde tunc esse potest quod quandoque gravius judicat excessus et defectus aliorum?’ Ad quod Dominus benigne respondit: ‘Ex eo certe quod ipsa nullam maculam cordi suo inhaerere permittit, non potest etiam aliorum defectus aequanimiter tolerare.’” Leg. II.11.9, SC 139, p. 178.


278 Compare, for example, Jacques d’Vitry’s life of Marie d’Oignies. He praises Marie for both the humility which led her to frequent confession, and the virtue which challenged him to keep a straight face as she searched for sins to confess. “Although she guarded herself against small and venial sins, it often happened that after a fortnight she could not detect even one disordered thought in her heart. Since it is a habit of good minds to recognize a sin where there is none, she often flew to the feet of priests and made her confession and never stopped accusing herself. We could barely restrain from smiling when she remembered something she had idly said in her youth, for example some words she had uttered in her childhood.” Jacques de Vitry, The Life I.19, p. 60.
unworthiness and Jesus compares her both to the apostle and evangelist John, and to the learned virgin and martyr Catherine of Alexandria. This provides authorization for Gertrud’s teaching authority, and depicts a combination of spiritual and scholarly wisdom as a natural path to holiness for both genders.\(^{279}\)

The Lord replied to these thoughts by saying: ‘What do you think is the utility of reading Saint Catherine’s account of my visiting her in prison and saying: “Be steadfast, daughter, for I am with you” or of my visiting my beloved John and saying “Come to me, my beloved”, and many other accounts of the experiences of these and others? Is it not that people’s devotion grows as a result, and my loving-kindness toward humankind is revealed?’ The Lord added: ‘The mind of some can be set ablaze with longing for those graces they hear you received; and while they consider this, they will do all they can to amend their own life.’\(^{280}\)

The biographer portrays Christ as telling Gertrud that if she writes, readers will aspire to imitate Gertrud and

\(^{279}\) In a reversal of the normal gender emphases, John is portrayed here as Christ’s beloved contemplative, without mention of his own attributed scriptural writings. And Catherine’s role as the most scholarly female saint is heightened by saying that she wrote her own story, though no surviving account of Catherine’s passio is in the first person. This claim increases her resemblance to Gertrud.

change their own lives. Then he says that reading her story will help readers attend to the spiritual experiences of their own hearts. Most surprisingly, it says that any reader may have attained gifts like Gertrud’s, yet like her failed to remember and offer gratitude to God for them.

The Lord taught her by these words: ‘I have so invested my grace in you that I demand a large return for it! So I will that those who possess similar gifts, and through negligence do not realize their true value, should grow in gratitude when they hear about you. They are to achieve a true recognition of their own gifts, and my grace may in this way increase in them.’

In saying that reading Gertrud’s story can inspire readers “to achieve a true recognition of their own gifts,” Book I asserts that she is worthy of note primarily as an icon of God’s merciful grace offered to all. This is a strong claim given the dramatic mystical experiences and teaching authority claimed for Gertrud throughout Legatus. It makes sense, however, as a creative development of Augustine’s emphasis on community as the context for conversion and rationale for his own writing.

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281 HGLK, p. 87. “...Dominus eam per haec instruxit verba, dicens: ‘Ego tali modo in te posuit gratiam meam quod magnum ex ea fructum exigo; unde vellem ut similia dona habentes et per negligentiam parvipendentes, cum de te intelligent, et donum proprium recognoscentes, in gratitudine crescant, et sic gratia mea
In *Legatus* II.21 Gertrud insists, similarly, that her greatest sin was forgetfulness of and ingratitude for her gifts. She believes that God has chosen her to help others overcome a similar forgetfulness of the graces they have received.

Although the rose is far more delightful when, fresh and blooming, it gives off a sweet scent than it is in winter when, long since withered, people say that it did once smell sweet, nonetheless recalling the past does seem to kindle some small pleasure. For this reason I too long to offer a description, with what imagery I can muster, of what my littleness perceived in that most delightful vision, with your praise in mind. Then if some of my readers have perhaps received similar or greater favors, my account may stimulate them to give thanks.\(^\text{282}\)

This passage repeats Gertrud’s assertions throughout Book II that she writes in order to stir up her unfaithful heart to grateful memory of God’s gifts. But it goes beyond her previous exhortation to readers to join in her praise, and implicit invitation to imitate her by seeking similar graces. Here she says that readers may well have

\[^{282}\text{HGLK, p. 158. "Sed quamvis longe aliter placeat rosa tempore vernali cum virens et florens dat odorem, quam tempore hiemali, cum diu arefecta dicitur redoluisse suaviter, aliquantulum tamen excitare videtur delectionem recordationem recordatio praelibatorum. Unde et ego quali possim similitudine proferre desidero quid parvitas mea in illa praejucundissima visione tui senserit ad laudem amoris tui; ut si quis legentium forte similia vel major accepit, per recordationem ad gratiarum actionem excitetur. Et egomet saepius recolendo etiam caliginem negligentiarum mearum aliqualiter reprimam per gratitudinem, hoc speculo solari vibrato."} \text{Leg. II.21. 2, SC 139, pp. 322, 324.}\]
already received the same or greater experiences, but like her failed to properly praise God for them, and that her story may remind them to do so. This is a dramatic claim because in this case the vision she is attempting to gratefully remember was a highly exalted mystical experience: a foretaste of the beatific vision.

What more am I to say of that sweetest of visions, as I must call it? For to tell the truth as I see it, the combined eloquence of all tongues throughout my entire lifetime would never have persuaded me of the existence of this dazzling mode of seeing you, even in the glory of heaven, had not your generosity, my God, the one and only salvation of my soul, introduced me to it through personal experience. I rejoice to say, however, that if what is true in human matters is also true in divine, the full force of your glance far exceeds that moment of vision. I guess—or rather I declare—that, had not that divine power restrained itself, it would never have allowed the soul which had been granted this favor, even for a moment, to remain in the body.  

In accord with scriptural tradition about “seeing God,” Gertrud says that only a special providence muted the intensity of her experience enough to keep her alive.

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283 HGLK, p. 158. “O quid amplius dicam de ista, ut ita dicam, dulcissima visione? quia ut verum fateor secundum quod mihi videtur, omnium linguarum eloquentia per omnes dies meae mihi hunc praeclarum modum videndi te, etiam in coelesti gloria, nunquam persuasisset, si dignatio tua, Deus meus, unica salus animae meae, per experimentam me ad illum non induxisset. Hoc tamen dicere me delectat, quod si est in divinis sicut in humanis, quod scilicet virtus oculi tui in tantum excedit istam visionem, sicut ego aestimo, vere dico, nisi divina virtus contineret, nunquam permitteret animam in corpore manere, cui hoc vel momentaliter indultum fuerit...” Leg. II.21.4, SC 139, pp. 324, 326.
She also says that she would never have believed previously that bliss like this could occur even in heaven. To say that readers may have had similar or greater experiences presents a strongly democratized view of sanctity. Any Christian may, if God so chooses, have intense spiritual experiences; any Christian is prone to the temptation to fail in ensuing gratitude and conversion. And a primary means of God preventing or calling people away from such forgetful misuse of gifts is mutual aid through reading and writing narratives of God’s mercy.

Gertrud’s biographer defers treatment of her death to Book V, thus placing all the material of Books III and IV (and Book II, when the two “parent” books are combined) within the authorization of the vita genre. The return to that theme will be with a distinctive twist, however. Book V highlights the community’s holiness as much as Gertrud’s, and portrays the Legatus as the holy relic which can help its readers achieve the same holiness as Gertrud. The Legatus does not invite readers merely to venerate Gertrud or to passively absorb her insights. Instead, it presents her as the most effective kind of teacher: a member of a community of ongoing learning, in which the other sisters are both her teachers and her
first students. Gertrud and her sisters are together images of Lady Wisdom, God become flesh to redeem humanity by the sweet and persuasive exposition of divine love. And the work intends to enable its readers’ theological reflection and teaching by modeling the Helfta women’s conversational reading of written and experiential texts.

**Book V: Consecration of the book**

The final and in many ways most important vita convention is a saint’s holy death, which proves her final perseverance. The body left behind may be beautiful and fragrant, while the fragments of it and the garments that clothed it are sought as powerful relics. Miracles after death, often produced by pilgrimage to the tomb, provide the beginnings of the cult and invite readers to pray to the saint in the hopes of similar favors.

Book V is organized around the general theme of death and thus anchors the work in the “life and revelations” subgenre, while treating the theme innovatively to continue the unique Helfta re-visioning of sanctity and hagiography. Gertrud’s own death is presaged but not recorded. The death stories of numerous community members are included, however, along with explicit and implicit recommended devotions to prepare for one’s own death and
intercede for deceased loved ones. Book V contains almost twice as much discussion of the deaths of other members of the Helfta convent than of Gertrud’s own preparation for death. This follows through on the importance placed on the interdependence of Gertrud and her community by the biographer in Book I (and III and IV) and by herself in Book II. The overall effect is to emphasize the holiness of both the Helfta community, and the potential holiness of the work’s readers, as much as Gertrud’s own, and to tie these all together in a community of mutual edification and benefit.

The Prologue to Book V describes its subject as the revelations granted to Gertrud about the fate of the dead for the good of the living.

Since for the salvation of the living, the Lord often revealed to her the merits of the deceased, to give examples either of prizes to be obtained or obstacles to be avoided, here also is written something of what the Lord deigned to reveal to her about departed souls.

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284 The first twenty-two chapters, 196 pages in the SC edition, treat the deaths of community members; the remaining sixteen, 86 pages in the SC 331, deal with Gertrud’s own death. These last pages are in fact named as an addition: “Hinc adjungere libet ea quibus benignissima Dei pietas ipsam super transitu suo dignata est fideliter consolari.” Leg. V.23, SC 331, p. 196. The initial chapters also demonstrate Gertrud’s holiness, in that she has visions of people’s after death situations; but even this situates her role of imminent sainthood firmly within the communal context.

285 “Cum ad salutem viventium Dominus frequentius revelet merita decedentium, quatenus exempla sumat aut praemium agendi aut impedimentum praecavendi, hinc etiam simul sunt conscripta de quibusdam animabus quarum merita Dominus huic revelare dignatus est.”
Book V thus emphasizes from the start that Gertrud’s visions are recorded, not only to show her effectiveness as an intercessor, but that readers may find instructions for virtuous living and gain their own heavenly rewards. This reinforces the devotional instructions in Books III and IV. It also prepares for a climax in which Gertrud’s relic is her collaboratively composed book rather than miracle-working physical remains—the perfect memorial of a life combining scholarship and holiness, mediated through a supportive and challenging community.

As the Prologue also reveals, a major feature of Book V is the exaltation of Abbess Gertrud of Hackeborn; this also glorifies the Helfta community, which she represents. In the lengthy first chapter of Book V the abbess is praised with a full description of each stage of her holy deathbed and post-death appearances to Gertrud of Helfta. It is she, rather than her younger namesake, who is described with the hagiographic commonplace of having virtues difficult to imitate but worthy of

Et primo, de gloriosissima et amabilissima venerabili Domna G. benignissima abbatissa, cujus facta etsi arduum sit imitari, pium tamen est admirari, et Deo, qui omne bonum dignatur conferre, devotas pro ea grates referre. Amen.” 


286 Leg. V.1, SC 331, pp. 1-62.
admiration. Book V then goes on to describe the deaths of both outstanding and ordinary members of the Helfta community, including Mechthild of Hackeborn, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and various sisters and lay brothers. Embedding Gertrud of Helfta’s preparation for death within the death stories of so many other community members reaffirms the emphasis on the holiness of the whole convent. In the case of those who are in purgatory Jesus explains to Gertrud how their punishment fits the crime, and how to pray for them effectively. These stories instruct the reader in effective methods of avoiding purgatory for themselves, as well as interceding for deceased loved ones. The community of Gertrud, her sisters, and her readers portrayed in the first four Books of Legatus is thus extended in Book V to the entire communion of saints.

Book V then describes Gertrud’s own spiritual preparation for death. The detailed portrayal of a week of Gertrud’s spiritual exercises at this juncture invites

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288 Leg. V.4, SC 331, pp. 78-108.

289 Leg. V.7, SC 331, pp. 122-128.

imitation by readers, thus portraying her as a model for others as much as a future intercessor.\textsuperscript{291} A preparatory devotion Gertrud performs is to increase her gratitude by calling to memory all of God’s promises to her, whether received personally or through the mediation of others.\textsuperscript{292} Standard hagiographic expectations are fulfilled by promises of the special graces Christ will grant the church at the moment of Gertrud’s death and afterwards. These include the conversion of many sinners, and the liberation of a great number of souls from purgatory to accompany Gertrud into heaven like servants accompanying a bride to her new home.\textsuperscript{293} Gertrud is also granted a glorious vision of her upcoming death, including the promise that Jesus will come with all the saints to welcome her to heaven.\textsuperscript{294} However, the dramatic vision of Gertrud’s entrance to heaven does not end the work. Instead, the final chapters shift focus to the book itself. The composition of Legatus makes it possible for readers to praise God for the graces given through Gertrud, and attempt to imitate her quest for conversion.

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{291} Leg. V.27, SC 331, pp. 210-228.
\item \textsuperscript{292} Leg. V.27.3, SC 331, p. 234.
\item \textsuperscript{293} Leg. V.29.5, SC 331, p. 236.
\item \textsuperscript{294} Leg. V.32, SC 331, pp. 256-264.
\end{itemize}
The replacement of Gertrud’s physical death, relics, and tomb by the manuscript shows that the book itself is the wonderworking relic the community wishes to emphasize. This is a fitting consummation and memorial for a life whose holiness consisted of teaching and learning through reading and conversation.

Possidius ends his life of Augustine with a similar twist. He describes Augustine’s deathbed scene, complete with his meditation on the penitential psalms he had inscribed on his walls. But instead of following up with stories of Augustine’s tomb or physical relics, he emphasizes that the saint’s legacy is the communities he formed and the books he left to form and educate them.

To the church he left an adequate body of clergy, as well as convents for men and women, full of celibates under their appointed superiors. He left also a library with books containing writings by himself and other holy men. It is through these, thanks be to God, that his quality and stature in the church is known to the world; and in these he will always live among the faithful.\(^{295}\)

Possidius even attaches a list of Augustine’s works to his vita, so readers can pursue the transformation they offer by obtaining copies, reading, and sharing them.

However, not to be thought in any way to fail those who are particularly eager for the words

\(^{295}\) Possidius 31, p. 72.
of truth, I have decided, if God furthers it, to append to this little work of mine a catalogue of these books, pamphlets, and letters. Anyone who reads it, and who cares more for God’s truth than for earthly riches, will be able to pick out for himself the book he wants to read. If he wants to make himself a copy of it, he should apply to the church at Hippo, where the best texts can generally be found. Or he may make inquiries anywhere else he can and should make a copy of what he finds and preserve it and not grudge lending it in his turn to someone else asking to copy it.²⁹⁶

Chapters 33 and 34 return to the themes of Gertrud’s interactions with God in the Prologue to the combined Legatus. The book is offered to God, and Christ is shown in response blessing and authorizing “his” book, with exalted promises of its salvific power for devout readers. It is described with Augustinian images of powerfully converting sweetness like those in Books I and II. These chapters show a development, however, in more actively featuring the compilatrix who represents both the writing team and the entire Helfta community. The Prologue showed Gertrud offering to God, and receiving assurances about, both her own Memoriale and the Legatus divinae pietatis which her sisters composed based on her experiences. These final chapters of the hybrid Legatus feature a precise parallel between Gertrud and the compilatrix,

²⁹⁶ Possidius 18, p. 51.
showing equal ownership of the text. Gertrud makes the offering and receives the promises in Chapter 33, and the compilatrix does the same in Chapter 34. This reinforces even more strongly the themes of communally mediated conversion and holiness seen in both Book II and the compiled Books.

In Chapter 33 Christ appears to Gertrud, blesses “his book,” and promises great spiritual benefits to readers.

After this work was finished, our Lord Jesus appeared to her who had completed it, holding it in His Hand. Pressing it to His Heart, He said to her: “I have placed this book thus upon My heart, that every word contained therein may be penetrated with Divine sweetness, even as honey penetrates bread. Therefore, whoever reads this book devoutly will receive great profit for his salvation....I desire, therefore, that this work should be fructified by My most holy Life and My Five Wounds. The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit shall be the seven seals of Divine mercy with which it shall be sealed, so that none may be able to take it out of My Hand.”

Christ’s holding the work to his heart, and the impression of his five wounds on the book, recalls the description of Gertrud’s heart as wounded and pierced with his love in

\[297\] Doheny, p. 314 (slightly altered). "Cum liber iste conscriptus esset, apparuit illi Dominus Jesus, habens ipsum impressum pectori suo, dicens: "Hunc librum meum ad hoc intimis divini pectoris mei impressi, quo singulas litteras in eo conscriptas dulcedine divinitatis meae pertranseam medullitus, sicut medo suavissimus micam recentis similaginis efficaciter pertransit, ut omnis qui ad laudem meam cum humili devotione in ipso legerit, fructum ex hoc consequatur aeternae salutis....Et subjunxit Dominus: 'Sic, inquit, delectat me labor hunc librum meum mihi conscribentis...’" Leg. V.33, SC 331, pp. 264, 266.
Book II. His statement that it will be sealed with the seven gifts of the Spirit likens it to the seven-sealed scroll in Revelation 5:1-5.

Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

This passage from Revelation is followed by John’s vision of the saints and elders falling down around God’s throne, offering their praises like fragrant incense to God and to the Lamb. This evocative image perfectly describes the fullness of salvation intended in the composition of Legatus. Christ then compares his blessing of the work to the transubstantiation of bread and wine at mass.298

By the same effect by which bread and wine are transubstantiated for the salvation of all in the mass, I have sanctified everything written in this book with my heavenly benediction for anyone who, as was said above, reads it with humble devotion seeking true salvation.

This is a strong affirmation of the book’s sacred nature

298 “Eodem effectu quo in hac missa panem et vinum transubstantiavi omnibus in salutem, etiam omnia in libro ista conscripta caelesti benedictione mea modo sanctificavi omnibus, sicut supra dixi, cum humili devotione in ipso legere volentibus in veram salutem.” Leg. V.33, SC 331, p. 264.
and transforming power as Gertrud’s relic. It is a fitting image to conclude the work which emphasizes the converting power of both receiving communion and giving thanks to God in prayerful writing. Connecting *Legatus* to the eucharist recalls Gertrud’s and Augustine’s offering their confessions as a gift of praise to God. This joyful thanksgiving sacrifice is described with the psalmist’s terms, “hostiam jubilationis” and “hostiam laudis.”

Permit me, I beseech you, and enable me to follow around in present recollection the windings of my past errors, and to offer them up to you as a sacrifice of jubilation [hostiam jubilationis]. For without you, what am I to myself but the leader of my own destruction? What am I, when all is well with me, except one sucking on your milk and feeding on you, the incorruptible food?

This passage from *Confessions* IV emphasizes the overflowing abundance and utter graciousness of God’s saving love. Like a child at his mother’s breast, Augustine trustfully receives the mercy of God in the eucharist as the living memorial of Christ’s paschal mystery. Both the *Confessions* and the *Legatus* offer their writer’s hearts and selves, within the community of praise, as the humble and grateful response to that love.

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299 Cf. *Leg.* II.2.2 and II.23.6; *Conf.* VIII.1.1, IX.1.1, and 12.24.33.

Chapter 34 shows the *compilatrix* offering the book to Christ as she receives communion, reinforcing the Helfta women’s vision of the work as a means of extending the grace offered in that sacrament.

On another occasion, when the compiler of this book communicated, she had it hidden in the sleeve of her habit, under her mantle, to offer it to our Lord for His eternal praise and glory. As she prostrated before receiving the Body of the Lord, one of the religious saw our Lord approaching her with great manifestations of joy and tenderness. He addressed her thus: “I will penetrate with My Divine sweetness and enrich every word of this book which you have offered me and which you have written by the direction of My spirit. I will manifest to whoever comes to me with humility, desiring to read this book for love of my love what will be most useful for him, pointing to it as if with my own finger, and will take him into My bosom, breathing into his soul life and truth.”

Christ gives the *compilatrix*, like Gertrud, promises of the book’s efficacy for those who read it “for love of my love,” *amore amoris mei*. Christ speaks here with the

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301 Doheny, pp. 314-315 (slightly altered). “Hinc alia vice, dum compilatrix hujus libri communicatur eundem occulte in manica sub pallio suo deferret oblaturum Domino in laudem aeternam, hoc nullo penitus hominum sciente, et more solito flexis genibus in obviam dominici corporis profunde inclinaret, visus est ab alia persona Dominus, quasi ex incontinentia profusivi amoris, cum ingenti gaudio in obviam ejus genua flectendo eam blande circumplecti, dicens: ‘Ego dulcedine divini amoris mei penetrabo et penetrando fecundabo omnia verbi libri hujus mihi modo oblati, immo veraciter impulsu spiritus mei conscripti. Et quicumque humilitato corde ad me veniens, amore amoris mei in eo legere voluerit, huic ego revera in sinu meo quasi digito proprio sigillatim quaeque sibi utilia demonstrabo, et insuper me ipsi tam dignanter acclinabo quod, quemadmodum quis diversis speciebus saturatus afflatu suo aspiraret se osculari volentem, sic ego ex afflatu divinitatis meae effectum animae suae salutarem ipsi efficaciter inspirabo.’” Leg. V.34, SC 331, pp. 266, 268.
Augustinian term Gertrud uses at the close of Book II to claim readers’ holiness as her reason for writing.\textsuperscript{302} Christ’s promise to draw people to the most useful parts of the text shows its purpose as a manual for imitation, rather than just admiration, of Gertrud’s holiness.

Finally, the third person “conclusion of this book” focuses on the transformation of its readers. It reaffirms that Gertrud was chosen for the sake of all people, to help them experienced the rivers of God’s grace which have flowed through her.

By no means was the river of divine inflowings exhausted on his chosen woman directly, but shared with us as was fitting for us....All that is written here, the unbounded loving-kindness of God can shower a hundredfold upon those found worthy to be written in the book of life.\textsuperscript{303}

The last words of the work restate the confidence of the Helfta women that their book will function as a powerful relic bringing many people to the fullness of God’s love.

It is surely no accident that the compilatrix chooses

\textsuperscript{302} An additional prayer of offering by the compilatrix prefaces the work’s conclusion. She intercedes at length for all who will follow the work’s recommendations “with humble devotion and for love of your love,” “cum humili devotione amore amoris tui.” \textit{Leg.} V.35, \textit{SC} 331, p. 272.

\textsuperscript{303} “Nequaquam tamen exhausto rivulo divinarum influxionem in hanc electam suam directo, sed partito nobiscum quod nobis congruebat....Quae tamen omnia incontinentissima Dei pietatis cum universis hic scriptis ad salutem egentium tam copiose faciat exuberare, quo, aducto centuplicato fructu, in librum vitae scribi digni inveniantur.” \textit{Leg.} V.36, \textit{SC} 331, pp. 272, 274.
“being written in the book of life” from among the many scriptural images for heaven. This is the perfect grace note for a work in which the transformed heart is a “book,” and an actual book is consecrated to draw other hearts to the same joyous consummation.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation has attempted to offer a new lens through which to view Gertrud the Great, her sisters at Helfta, and the complex text they produced together: the Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis. It has proceeded by reading important sections of Legatus in relation to works of Augustine, especially the Confessions. Both Gertrud herself in Book II, and her sisters, in Books I and V, liken her spiritual journey and theological project to Augustine’s. Like Augustine, Gertrud undertook this writing project, among others, after her dedication to secular scholarship was transformed by grace and put at the service of her religious community through exegesis and theology. And like Augustine, Gertrud relates her own story of ongoing conversion with the intention of creating a wider community of readers that praises God’s grace in the incarnation and paschal mystery of Christ.

The dissertation has engaged and reinterpreted the work’s intriguing hints of its composition process, arguing for a more positive view of its collaborative authorship than is generally held. A crucial warrant for
this has been a careful reading of the Prologue, highlighting its metaphor of two earlier books—one written by Gertrud and one by her sisters—“giving birth” to the final hybrid text of Legatus. This study has challenged the generally accepted hypothesis that Book I was composed last and separately from the other compiled materials, as an introduction to the hybrid text of Legatus. Rather, it has argued that Book I was an integral part of Legatus divinae pietatis, the book compiled by Gertrud’s sisters and then combined with Gertrud’s autobiographical Memoriale abundantiae divinae pietatis. This helps reveal the Legatus divinae pietatis, as well as the complete Legatus created by combining it with Gertrud’s Memoriale, as an example of the high medieval “life and revelations” genre. It also gives greater weight to the parts of the hybrid work written by the Helfta sisters. This furthers the argument that the form of Legatus’ collaboratively produced final text helps express its theme of the intimate relation between individual and communal appropriation of grace.

The dissertation has also pursued in greater depth the previously recognized resemblance of Gertrud’s Memoriale, which became Book II of Legatus, to Augustine’s Confessions. Beyond the similarity of style, Gertrud’s
work uses key images, themes, and phrases found in Augustine’s. Like him, she tells her story of ongoing conversion to praise God and form a community that praises God by attention to the work of grace in their own hearts as well as those of the writer. Both Gertrud and Augustine see the incarnate Word of God as piercing the human heart with a transforming assurance of God’s mercy, making it a “book” in which the story of salvation is read anew in every generation. The sustained and creative integration of Augustine’s work with the narrative of her experiences demonstrates beyond any doubt the theological sophistication of Gertrud and her text.

Finally, the dissertation reevaluates the majority of Legatus which was composed by Gertrud’s sisters. Instead of being seen as an inferior relating of her experience by her assistants due to her ill health, the compiled Books are seen as a complementary way of interpreting her experience. Gertrud’s sisters echo and develop her own creative reworking of both Augustine’s thought and some important conventions of medieval hagiography. The Helfta sisters use the “life and revelations” subgenre to compare Gertrud to Augustine as a converted scholar deeply formed by her community, and to depict the Legatus itself as the relic of the life she led with them. This expands the
possibilities of female holiness beyond that which was usual in their historical period.

The relevance of this study goes beyond a deeper analysis of the Legatus to make a methodological point about the study of medieval women theologians. Their texts are too often seen as simplistic records of their experiences, rather than sophisticated blends of mystical narrative and theological reflection. The description of spiritual experience in much medieval women’s writing was an important legitimating strategy in a climate ambivalent about women’s spiritual leadership and theological ability. However, it was not just a creative response to the limitations of their time. It was also a positive choice, which made theological discourse more accessible by presenting it in a narrative and devotional style.

Barbara Newman has recently proposed “imaginative theology” as a new angle of approach to both theological and literary texts of the middle ages. Newman uses this term to discuss works which include vision accounts and personifications of divine characteristics, whether they are presented as actual spiritual experiences or literary creations.
Monastic theology relies on personal and communal prayer as the key to the Scriptures: it is built on a belief in the infinite richness of the biblical text, which the Holy Spirit willingly opens to all who read and meditate with devotion. Mystical theology assumes that, by virtue of the imago Dei, some faculty of the human spirit—love or intellect or the ineffable “spark of the soul”—is capable of going forth to meet God or returning home to greet him. Imaginative theology may be compatible with any or all of these, but its methods are different. For the imaginative theologian, like the poet, works with images and believes, with Christine de Pizan, that “the road of the imagination...reveals the face of God to whoever follows it to the end.”

The Legatus fits all three theological categories Newman mentions here: monastic, mystical, and imaginative. A good example is Gertrud’s vision on Sexagesima, recorded in Legatus IV. Gertrud is confined to the infirmary during Matins and hears the sisters chanting the response, Benedicents ergo, which refers to the story of Noah’s ark. She mourns that she is not able to pray in the chapel with the community, and asks God to teach her how to build a spiritual “ark” during the days of Carnival. Gertrud receives a response proposing devotions corresponding to the birds, beasts, and humans in the three levels of the ark. Then she becomes concerned that this proceeded from her imagination,

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rather than divine inspiration.

Then she said to the Lord: "As I have asked this instruction of Thee so earnestly, I cannot feel certain that Thou, O best of teachers, hast taught it to me." He replied: "You ought not to esteem it less, because I have given it to you on account of the earnest desire you expressed, for I have created your senses for My service. Was it not a more wonderful thing to say, 'Let us make humanity to Our image and likeness' when I created them with deliberation and counsel than to say when I created other things: 'Let there be a firmament,' or 'Let there be light?'\textsuperscript{305}

The divine answer hinges on human creation with "deliberation and counsel" in the image and likeness of God. The powers of the mind and senses distinguish humans from the physical world, and when appropriately used with independence and creativity can rightfully be considered methods of truthful teaching in partnership with God.

Gertrud responds to this revelation by pointing out that the danger that it might tempt people to indiscriminately claim divine inspiration for their personal whims.

\textsuperscript{305} Doheny, p. 192 (slightly modified). "Tunc ista dixit ad Dominum: 'Cum ego hanc instructionem desideraverim a te studio sensuum meorum obtinere, non praesumo secure affirmare quod te, doctorum optime, eadem docueris me.' Ad quod Dominus: 'Cur, inquit, ob hoc debet donum meum parvipendi, si cum sensibus tuis, quod ad serviendum mihi creavi, diligentiore studio illud perfeci, cum tamen magis commendetur et acceptetur quod facturus hominem consilio deliberato dixi: Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram, quam quod alia creando dixi: Fiat lux, fiat firmamentum, etc.' Leg. IV.19.5, SC 255, p. 158.
She replied: “If I availed myself of this authority to introduce this exercise for the benefit of others, some one else might introduce other things, which might not be an effect of Thy Divine grace.” Our Lord replied: “Add this caution: whoever knows in his heart that his will is so united to Mine as never to dissent from it either in prosperity or adversity and who acts and suffers in all things purely for My glory, may certainly affirm that whatever he learns interiorly [interno sapere] is from Me, if it is seen not to lack the witness of Scripture, and is useful to neighbors.”

The divine response gives a brief but pithy guide to discernment, which sums up the Helfta women’s theory and practice in this area. Revelations are to be judged by their support in Scripture, and their usefulness in the service of the neighbor. What is perhaps as interesting is the criteria that do not appear. The mode of what has been “interiorly understood” [interno sapere] is not specified. If any sensory metaphor is privileged in this phrase, it is the vivid but mysterious “felt sense” of taste. Visions and auditions are not necessary, much

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less dramatic mystical experiences—though these would certainly not be ruled out. But insights gained through ordinary study and meditation on Scripture, which the Helfta women so often call sweet to the soul’s taste, would bear an equal chance of being judged “an effect of grace.” The interdependence of individual and community is at all times crucial. Not only is service of the neighbor a crucial criterion for evaluating claims, but the personal certainty of being committed to God’s will in all things would surely need verification through other’s experience of the person’s words and behavior.

The theological hinge of this passage, referred to in God’s answer to Gertrud’s concern, is Genesis 1:27-29. “God created humanity in the divine image; in the divine image were they created; male and female were they created.” The creation of humankind in the divine image is absolutely central to Helfta spirituality and theology, and appears in three aspects of their thought. First, it demonstrates a high anthropology of the human being as absolutely capax Dei. This is shown in the Legatus’ advocacy of spiritual experience and theological reflection being open to all community members, and ultimately all readers. Second, the Genesis text specifies this image of God enabling creative partnership
with the divine as found equally in men and women. This is abundantly evident in the Helfta women’s advocacy of an integration of scholarship and spirituality, according to individual giftedness, as a praiseworthy vocation for both male and female Christians. The egalitarian emphasis is continuous with some strands of Augustine’s thought and practice, while significantly discontinuous from those that helped give rise to medieval restrictions on women in church and society.

Third, the image of God in which humanity is created is trinitarian, and therefore fundamentally relational. This was of course the medieval interpretation of the puzzling divine statement in Genesis that humanity was to be created in “our image.” The trinitarian focus is ultimately, perhaps, the greatest theological insight that the Helfta women share and echo in Augustine. The God in whose image humans are created is essentially self-communicative love, both within the Godhead and as it reaches out to the world, and one way of viewing this self-communication is as a conversation. God reveals Godself to humanity through the Word, and the Spirit of love which unites God and the Word also inspires all human words which respond and testify to God’s self-gift. Gertrud and her sisters joined the conversation between
God and humanity through their common worship and individual prayer, their teaching, reading, and writing. They listened carefully to the words of Scripture, tradition, and liturgy; they spoke eloquently to each other, to their visitors, and to the readers whom they invited to join this ceaseless conversation. Woven throughout the Legatus’ record of their life are countless references to the chants of the office and the eucharist. From beginning to end, the words of Legatus unite the Helfta women’s patient, sacrificial labors of “faith seeking understanding” to these acts of common worship: the endless song of praise which forms, consummates, and surpasses all human speech to and about God.
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