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“I Am Wholly Your Own”: Liturgical Piety and Community among the Nuns of Helfta¹

ANNA HARRISON

WHEN William James long ago characterized the God of the thirteenth-century Cistercian cloister of Helfta, in Saxony, as “full of partiality for his individual favorites,”² he might have illustrated his claim with any number of passages from three of the surviving works composed by the nuns of Helfta, the *Book of Special Grace*, associated with Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241–ca. 1298/99), the *Herald of Divine Love*, associated with Gertrude of Helfta (1256–ca. 1301/02), and the *Spiritual Exercises*, written by Gertrude.³ James drew his readers’ attention to the following account from the *Herald*:

¹I am grateful to Anne L. Clark, Rachel Fulton, Anna Trumbore Jones, Kathryn M. Rudy, Anne Bagnall Yardley, and participants of the California Medieval History Seminar for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay. I remain indebted to Caroline Walker Bynum and Joel Kaye for their encouragement and conversation. I owe special thanks to the anonymous *Church History* reader.

²William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902] New York: Random House, 1929), 339.

³*Le Héraut*, ed. and trans. Pierre Doyère et al., 4 vols., *Gertrude d’Helfta: Oeuvres spirituelles*, Sources chrétiennes 139, 143, 255, 331, Série des texts monastiques d’occident 25, 27, 48 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968–1986); *Sanctae Mechtildis, virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti, Liber specialis gratiae accedit sororis Mechtildis ejusdem ordinis Lux divinitatis*, vol. 2 of *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*, ed. the monks of Solesmes [Louis Paquelin] (Paris: H. Oudin, 1877). For the process of the composition of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* and for their audience, see Margarete Hubrath, *Schreiben und Erinnern: Zur “memoria” im Liber specialis gratiae Mechtildis von Hakeborn* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996); Margarete Hubrath, “The *Liber specialis gratiae* as a Collective Work of Several Nuns,” *Jahrbuch der Oswald von Wolkenstein-Gesellschaft* 11 (1999): 233–244; Laura Marie Grimes, “Writing as Birth: The Composition of Gertrud of Helfta’s *Herald of God’s Loving Kindness*,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 42:3 (August 2007): 329–348; Anna Harrison, ““Oh! What Treasure Is in This Book?”: Writing, Reading, and Community at the Monastery of Helfta,” *Viator* 39:1 (Spring 2008): 75–106. *Les Exercices*, ed. and trans. Jacques Hourlier and Albert Schmitt, *Gertrude d’Helfta: Oeuvres spirituelles*, Sources chrétiennes 127, Série des texts monastiques d’occident 19 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967). For the composition and audience of the *Spiritual Exercises*, see Columba Hart, “Introduction,” in *The Exercises of Saint Gertrude*, trans. a Benedictine nun of Regina Laudis [Columba Hart] (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1956), and Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis, “Introduction,” in *Gertrud the Great of Helfta: Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1989). There is a fourth work associated with the convent. Mechtild of Magdeburg

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Suffering from a headache, she [Gertrude] sought, for the glory of God, to relieve herself by holding certain odoriferous substances in her mouth, when the Lord appeared to her to lean over towards her lovingly, and to find comfort himself in these odors. After having gently breathed them in, He arose, and said with a gratified air to the Saints, as if contented with what he had done: "See the new present which my betrothed has given Me!"⁴

James declared this passage one in a relentless series of "paltry-minded" "proofs" the *Herald* offers in evidence of Christ's predilection for Gertrude.⁵ He dismissed the whole of this book as the musings of a personality so absorbed in love of God and so narrowly fixed on securing demonstrations of his love for her as to push from her purview "all human loves" and all "practical human interests."⁶ A range of writers has since James been struck by the ardent assertions of the mutual love between the Helfta visionaries, Gertrude and Mechtild, and Christ that the convent literature records.⁷

(ca. 1208–1282/97) likely composed the final portion of the *Flowing Light of the Divinity* at Helfta, perhaps with the assistance of some of the nuns; Mechtild of Magdeburg, *Lux divinitatis*, in *Sanctae Mechtildis*. For the composition and audience of the *Flowing Light*, see Sarah S. Poor, *Mechtild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁴James, *Varieties*, 338, 1.

⁵*Ibid.*, 338.

⁶*Ibid.*, 336 and 335–336. James, furthermore, described the *Herald* as the product of "inferior intellectual sympathies" (339). The modern reader who encounters the passage James quotes out of its original context may be tempted to dismiss it as mawkish and to agree with James. A contextualized reading lays bare the theological assumptions that inform the passage. As the *Herald* tells it, Christ, by his death, has freely paid a "debt of grace" for Gertrude (as for all human beings); he continues ceaselessly to make up for her ever-renewed deficiencies and offers Gertrude, in addition, a multitude of gifts (or spiritual gains), including his friendship. Although Christ has made the perfect satisfaction and although his mercy is a gift no human being can ever repay, he does demand something in return. Gertrude was confident that she met her obligations to make restitution to Christ through a wide variety of activities in which she participated. Christ informed her he would accept in union with and in memory of his mercy the least thing she did: lifting up a pebble or a straw; uttering a single word; showing kindness to anyone; reciting the *Requiem aeternum* for the dead; praying for the sinners or the just (*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:7:2, 100). In this context, the passage immediately preceding that which James quotes is instructive. It relates that Gertrude saw herself in Christ and him in her according to the biblical teaching: "If you do it to the least of these my brethren, you do it to me" (Matt. 25:40). The *Herald* states plainly that Gertrude, regarding herself in her unworthiness as the least of all creatures was, by seeking to soothe her headache, tending to Christ (*Le Héraut*, SC 139, 1:11:10, 180). In doing so, she understood herself to return to him some of what she owed Christ.

⁷See, for example, Alberta Dieker, "Mechtild of Hackeborn: Song of Love," in *Medieval Women Mystics: Wisdom's Wellsprings*, ed. Miriam Schmitt and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 231–242; Thomas Merton, "Saint Gertrude, Nun of Helfta, Germany," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 38:4 (2003): 451–458.

Scholars have also noticed, however, an interest in society and pronounced expressions of sociability in the Helfta writings. Indeed, virtually no major account of the nuns' piety neglects to remark on the women's preoccupation with community.⁸ In this article, I examine more deliberately than have previous studies the relationship between the Helfta nuns' sense of self in relation to God and their sense of community. Because nowhere is the nuns' sense of community felt more intensely than in their liturgical practices,⁹ and because nowhere do Mechtild and Gertrude experience more frequently the divine revelations and union with God that highlight their focus on the self than during liturgical observances,¹⁰ I do so through an examination of Mechtild's and Gertrude's reported experiences during liturgy.

⁸Mary Jeremy Finnegan devoted a chapter to "Gertrude in Her Community" in *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* ([1962] with additions, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 98–112. Caroline Walker Bynum has observed the varieties of ways in which Gertrude's and Mechtild's sense of self was permeated by their relationships with others; "Women Mystics in the Thirteenth Century: The Case of the Nuns of Helfta," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 170–262. Questions that focus squarely on community have come to occupy pride of place in important studies of the past decade, such as Rosalynn [Jean] Voaden, "All Girls Together: Community, Gender, and Vision at Helfta," in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Hubrath, *Schreiben*; Hubrath, "Collective Work"; Grimes, "Writing as Birth."

⁹Studies that have commented extensively on the liturgical content of the Helfta spirituality are too numerous to cite. The most comprehensive introduction is Cyprian Vagaggini's *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy: A General Treatise on the Theology of the Liturgy*, trans. Leonard J. Doyle and W. A. Jurgens from the fourth Italian edition, revised and augmented by the author (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1976), 741–802, which focuses on the relation between Gertrude's mysticism and her liturgical piety. Especially insightful is Jean Leclercq's "Liturgy and Mental Prayer in the Life of St. Gertrude," *Sponsa Regis* 31 (1960): 1–5, which is, however, too brief to offer satisfying demonstrations of his many provocative claims. Bruce W. Holsinger has examined the creative ways in which the Helfta nuns played with the liturgy in *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 240–253.

¹⁰For both Mechtild and Gertrude, as for thirteenth-century women more generally, receiving the Eucharist and viewing the elevated host often precipitated union with Christ. For the close connection for thirteenth-century women between Mass and ecstasy, see Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1991), esp. 125–129. A great deal of attention has focused on the Mass and, more specifically, on the place of eucharistic devotion in the Helfta spirituality. See, for example, Gilbert Dolan, *St. Gertrude the Great* (London: Sands, 1913), esp. 26–27; Hilda Graef, "Gertrude the Great: Mystical Flowering of the Liturgy," in *Orate Fratres* 20 (1945/46), esp. 171–172; Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*, 774–775; Bynum, "Nuns of Helfta"; Cheryl Clemons, "The Relationship between Devotion to the Eucharist and Devotion to the Humanity of Jesus in the Writings of St. Gertrude of Helfta" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1995); 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* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997). For the relationship of chant to visions in the Helfta literature, see Leclercq, "Mental Prayer," and Margot Schmidt ("Mechtilde de Hackeborn," in vol. 10 of

Though it is now much contested, there has long been a tendency to see late medieval spirituality as centering increasingly on individual, inner experience rather than on group practice or on communal religious response, even when the context is religious or monastic community. Some scholars have argued that the surge during the late Middle Ages in subjective spirituality—characterized, in part, by a deliberate curling inward of attention to the self in relation to God—drained enthusiasm for the common life and compromised a coherent sense of liturgical community.¹¹ Theologians and historians alike have pronounced non-clerical participants in Mass and the divine office both marginalized spectators and frankly self-preoccupied.¹²

Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire, ed. M. Viller, F. Cavallera, J. de Guibert, A. Rayez, A. Derville, and A. Solignac [Paris: G. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1980], col. 875). Holsinger points out that the nuns provided even the melodies they sang with visionary significance (*Music, Body, and Desire*, 245–246). For more general discussions of the relationship of chant to visionary experience, see Stephanus Hilpisch, “Chorgebet und Frömmigkeit im Spätmittelalter,” in *Heilige Überlieferung: Ausschnitte aus der Geschichte des Mönchtums und des heiligen Kultes*, ed. Odo Casel (Münster: Aschendorff, 1938), 263–284; Peter Dinzelbacher, “Die Offenbarungen der hl. Elisabeth von Schönau: Bildwelt, Erlebnisweise und Zeittypisches,” *Studien und Mittelungen zur Geschichte des Benediktiner-Orderns 97* (1985): 462–482; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, “Art, Enclosure, and the Pastoral Care of Nuns,” in *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone, 1992), 80–81.

¹¹For a classic treatment of late medieval spirituality as careening toward an ever greater reliance on subjectivity, streaked with high emotion and fueled by a feverish intensity, see Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 173–243. For a now standard discussion of the dissolution of a sense of community during liturgy, see Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* (Missarum Sollemnia), trans. Francis A. Brunner (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1988), esp. 103–127. On this matter, see, in addition, Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 97; John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians* ([1991] Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 113–114; Barbara Haggh, “Foundations or Institutions? On Bringing the Middle Ages into the History of Medieval Music,” *Acta musicologica* 68 (1996): 87–128, esp. 89; Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1997), 122–138. Clifford Hugh Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London: Longman, 1984), 221–233, identifies the thirst for introspective reflection as contributing to a waning commitment to monastic community. For signs of the splintering of community within the common life and speculation on its origins, see, for example, *ibid.*; Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries, c. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 315–340; Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. 193–206.

¹²See, for example, Jungmann, *Roman Rite*, 117; Klauser, *Western Liturgy*, esp. 98; Dorothy Gillerman, *The Clôture of Notre-Dame and Its Role in the Fourteenth Century Choir Program* (New York: Garland, 1977), 154–155 and 194–197; Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 212; Jef Lamberts, “Liturgie et spiritualité de l’eucharistie au xiii^e siècle,” in *Actes du Colloque Fête Dieu, 1246–1996* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut d’études médiévales de l’Université catholique de Louvain, 1999), 81–95.

A growing body of research has demonstrated, nonetheless, that medieval women and men, lay and religious, perceived themselves as thoroughly engaged in liturgical observances and taken up with their corporate implications as well as purposefully promoting others' active participation in the liturgy.¹³ Scholars such as Cyprian Vagaggini and Jean Leclercq as well as, more recently, Caroline Walker Bynum, Jeffrey Hamburger, Bruce Holsinger, and Anne Bagnall Yardley have, furthermore, told us much about the spiritual significance to religious women of the Mass and the office.¹⁴ There has, however, been little sustained examination of the sense of community among nuns as it relates to the liturgy. If we want to know more about religious women's attitudes about community in the context of the liturgy, we would do well to turn to the works produced at Helfta, which constitute the largest body of female-authored writings of the thirteenth century.

In the first section of this article, I situate the monastery's liturgical life in relation to broader aspects of the Helfta piety, I illustrate the prominence of the liturgy in Mechthild's and Gertrude's spirituality, and I consider the nuns' understanding of the relationship between an individual's subjective religious experience and formal prescribed communal worship—a topic that preoccupied medieval nuns more generally and the men who had responsibilities for their spiritual care.¹⁵ The convent's literature is flooded with accounts of its principal visionaries' experiences while in office and Mass, and in this article's second section, I examine such accounts for what they can tell us about the visionaries' sense of relatedness to the sisters with whom they worshiped—and their sense of separateness and difference from them. My interest is thus in the sisters' attitudes during liturgical observances toward community among themselves, although the women's understanding of who comprised their liturgical community was more expansive than this focus suggests. My concern throughout is not, therefore,

¹³See, for example, John Bossy, "The Mass as a Social Institution, 1200–1700," *Past and Present* 100 (August 1983), esp. 33, 59–60, and 92; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), esp. 92–154; Charles Caspers, "Augenkomunion or Popular Mysticism," in *Bread of Heaven: Customs and Practices Surrounding Holy Communion*, ed. Charles Caspers, Gerard Lukken, and Gerard Rouwhorst (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 90; Gary Macy, "Commentaries on the Mass During the Early Scholastic Period," in *Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), esp. 158; Jacqueline Jung, "Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches," *Art Bulletin* 82.4 (December 2000): 622–657.

¹⁴Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*; Leclercq, "Mental Prayer"; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*; Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*; Anne Yardley Bagnall, *Performing Piety: Musical Culture in Medieval English Nunneries* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).

¹⁵Hamburger, "Art, Enclosure," 88–89.

on the liturgy per se or liturgy as practice. It is, instead, about liturgy as context, as place and moment where experience occurs.

The *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* offer a wealth of information about what was on the Helfta nuns' minds during the liturgical observances that structured their daily life, information that is available to us primarily in the content of visions attributed to Mechtild and Gertrude. Both works consist largely in accounts of revelations, ecstasies, and spiritual teachings ascribed to Gertrude and Mechtild, the monastery's spiritual luminaries, and in their prayers. They contain, in addition, a variety of testimonies to the exemplary devotion of these two women as well as to the piety of the cloister's female inhabitants considered collectively. The centrality of community to the nuns' religiosity is exemplified by the endeavor that produced the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, which was a communal and collaborative one, calling on the collective resources of the female members of the household, and one with almost no discernible male involvement.¹⁶

Mechtild and Gertrude are the central figures of the work with which each is associated. According to the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald*, both women were revered by the nuns of their monastery as well as by clergy and laypeople. Each was counted a beneficiary of Christ's tender solicitude, his loyal oversight, and his indulgent correction; each was estimated a member of his close circle of friends, the saints and the angels, and a confidant of his mother, with all of whom, moreover, each woman had frequent dealings. In addition, both Mechtild and Gertrude exercised spiritual authority that accrued to them in large measure through the visions and ecstasies of which they were reckoned recipients. They served their sisters and others as intercessors and spiritual counselors and were valued as interpreters of the religious life, which they (as the works with which they are associated recount) embodied in their devoted observance of monastic rule and custom, their lavish love of Christ, and their reverent (if not always ready) obedience to his biddings.

The Helfta literature offers insight into the attitudes, ideas, and experiences of two remarkable women and their monastic family, and it is directed primarily to contemporary and future religious of the household. Mechtild joined in crafting the *Book of Special Grace*, and Gertrude participated in the production of the *Herald*. We should be wary, however, of identifying any particular devotion, teaching, or revelation with either person: recent work has shown that neither book is accurately characterized as a raw account of Mechtild's and Gertrude's self-disclosures or a simple recording of their

¹⁶See, for example, Hubrath, *Schreiben*; Hubrath, "Collective Work"; Grimes, "Writing as Birth"; Harrison, "What Treasure Is in This Book?"

sisters' observations of the two women. Composing this literature was a decades-long process that called on the varied contributions of an indeterminate number of nuns, whose own perceptions and concerns inform the style and color the content of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, and the nature of whose contributions to these works is impossible to determine with precision. Each book tells us about Mechtild and Gertrude as their thoughts and experiences were refracted through multiple collaborators for the well-being of their cloistered community.¹⁷

I. "COME AND READ, FOR I WILL HELP YOU": LITURGY AND THE HELFTA SPIRITUALITY

Daily Mass and the divine office were the sisters' primary activities and the pivot around which other matters of the monastery turned. The sisters sometimes attended Mass twice in one day, and they may have spent the majority of their waking moments chanting the eight canonical hours. Supplementary liturgical observances, such as the office of the dead, and quasi-liturgical gatherings, including chapter—the daily meeting in which business of the monastery was conducted—further filled their schedule.¹⁸ The liturgy was, to the nuns, marked off as an occasion for concentrated praise of God; it was shot through with opportunity to move closer to Christ, especially when he was received in communion. In the revelations they received regularly during liturgical observance, Christ often came all by himself to Gertrude and Mechtild; as the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* relate, he frequently came with others. Visions interspersed throughout both books indicate that the nuns' liturgical piety, in keeping with broader trends in late medieval religiosity, was undergirded by the conviction that the living and the saints regard one another as confederates who all together offer praise to God. As Gertrude is said to have related about a vision that came to her on the Feast of All Saints in which she

¹⁷See especially Kurt Ruh, "Gertrud von Helfta: Ein neues Gertrud-Bild," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 12:1 (1992): 1–20, and Anne L. Clark, "An Uneasy Triangle: Jesus, Mary, and Gertrude of Helfta," *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* 1 (August 2000): 37–56.

¹⁸For the celebration of Mass twice each day, see, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 331, *Missa*, 1:1–5, 284. And see, on this point, Dolan, *St. Gertrude*, 26. It is unclear how often the nuns received communion. They may have done so more frequently than once a week at Sunday Mass; *ibid.*, 39, and M. Camille Hontoir, "La dévotion au saint sacrement chez les premiers Cisterciens (XII^e–XII^e siècles)," in *Studia eucharistica, DCC anni a condito festo sanctissimi Corpus Christi 1246–1946* (Antwerp: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1946), 146–147. On the office of the dead at Helfta, see Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*, 797, and for its recitation by Cistercian nuns, see Ailbe J. Luddy, *The Cistercian Nuns: A Brief Sketch of the History of the Order from Its Foundations to the Present Day* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1931), 15.

beheld a multitude of saints assembled in the monastery's chapel, it is as if God the Father were a powerful *paterfamilias* who gathered into one great banquet all his chosen companions in a festival of praise.¹⁹ In office and in Mass, the nuns perceived that their voices raised in praise of God were frequently joined by a chorus of saints.²⁰ The sisters not only praised God with the saints, they also praised the saints themselves, and the saints responded with solicitude to the pleadings and needs of the nuns. When an interdict prohibited the nuns from receiving communion, and Mechtild was sad to be deprived of the opportunity to receive, Christ appeared to her, wiped the tears from her eyes, and promised: "Today you shall see miracles."²¹ She did. From the procession through the monastery and into the chapel that announced the beginning of the Mass to the final priestly blessing, Christ, Mary, and the saints joined with the sisters in a Mass in which the women were offered communion that would otherwise have been denied them. Christ was the celebrating priest; John the Evangelist and John the Baptist both assumed the role of lector; Luke and John the Baptist officiated with Christ; and the numerous saints gathered in the chapel chanted the psalms. When the sisters came before the altar, Christ offered to each the host, and the Virgin Mary held a gold straw [*fistula aurea*] to Christ's side from which the sisters drank.²² Ensnconed in their choir stalls, the nuns were thus not remote from a larger liturgical community, and the monastery's chapel was far more crowded than might be supposed.

As the Helfta literature tells it, public common worship was the arena in which the nuns experienced vividly, celebrated, and solidified the bonds linking in one association all the living and the dead, with the exception of those in hell. Theirs was a liturgical sensibility buoyed by confidence in human beings' capacity to provide to one another mutual assistance that made porous death's divide.²³ Liturgical observances were flush with possibility for the sisters to participate in lessening the penalties of souls in purgatory, to facilitate the washing of God's grace over all the living, and

¹⁹*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:55:2, 454–456.

²⁰See, for example, *Liber*, 1:12, 39–40, 1:27, 96.

²¹*Ibid.*, 1:27, 95: "Hodie videbis mirabilia."

²²As Holsinger has observed, the word *fistula* is ambiguous (*Music, Body, and Desire*, 398 n. 161). It may refer to the straws sometimes used to receive consecrated wine at communion (Margaret Winkworth, *Gertrude of Helfta: The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. and ed. Margaret Winkworth [New York: Paulist Press, 193], 248 n. 50; Clemons, *Devotion*, 544). The nuns of Helfta may have used the word *fistula* to mean a musical instrument, a "celestial pipe" (*Music, Body, and Desire*, 247 and 398 n. 161). For the presence of three principal ministers in the celebration of Mass—in addition to the celebrant, a deacon and subdeacon—see Harper, *Western Liturgy*, 121.

²³For a fine discussion of the late medieval expression of the communion of saints, see Brian Patrick McGuire, "Purgatory, the Communion of Saints, and Medieval Change," *Viator* 20 (1989).

even to augment the joy of the saints themselves.²⁴ On one occasion, so we read, Gertrude received the host and then saw her soul in the form of a tree, whose root was affixed to the wound in Christ's side. She felt Christ's humanity and divinity infuse her, and she prayed that Christ would give to others the favor he thus bestowed on her. Then seeing herself, she saw:

[that] each kind [of fruit] in which the fruit of the tree appeared began to exude a most efficacious liquid; some of which, flowing into higher places, increased the joy of those [in heaven]; some of which, flowing into purgatory, mitigated the punishments of those there; and some of which, flowing onto the earth, augmented the sweetness of the grace of the just and the bitterness of penitence of sinners.²⁵

In a variety of ways, therefore, the Helfta literature attests to a generous and coherent sense of the liturgical community.²⁶ This was a community characterized, in great part, by an almost continuous offering of praise to God and by the busy productivity associated with joining Christ in the

²⁴On the purgatorial piety of the nuns, see, for example, Dolan, *St. Gertrude*, 168–185, and Barbara Newman, "On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell, and Religious Women," in *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). For intercessory prayer during Mass among the nuns of Helfta, see Clemons, "Devotion," 548–550. The nuns incorporated heaven's inhabitants more than any other group into their sense of their liturgical community. Dolan (*St. Gertrude*, 144–153) and Vagaggini (*Theological Dimensions*) remark on the nuns' intense interest in the communion of saints, as does Schmidt ("Mechtilde de Hackeborn," col. 875). I am aware of little discussion of the nuns' attribution to themselves of the power to affect the experience of the saints in heaven, including the ability to increase their joy and their merit. See, for example, *Liber*, 1:11, 34–35, 1:31, 106, 1:32, 111, 5:2, 319; *Le Héraut*, SC 331, 5:1:1:28, 52, SC 331, *Missa*, 9:22–24, 298. On this matter, see Anna Harrison, "The Joy of the Dead and the Helfta Nuns" (working paper presented at Death: Mortality and Immortality in Early Cultures, annual meeting of the Group for the Study of Early Cultures, University of California, Irvine, November 2008), 1–17.

²⁵*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:18:6:20–25, 86: "coeperunt singula in quorum specie apparuit arboris fructus efficacissimum liquorem desudare; cujus pars defluens in superiores, ipsis gaudium cumulavit; pars vero defluens in Purgatorium, poenas eorum mitigavit; pars autem defluens in terras, justis dulcedinem gratiae, et peccatoribus amaritudinem poenitentiae augmentavit."

²⁶There are limitations to the nuns' notion of community, nonetheless. Thus, for example, they acknowledged explicitly the household's stewards as members of their congregation (*congregatio*), but indications that the nuns were curious and concerned about the religious experience of these individuals are rare and are noteworthy in large part because they are exceptional. See, for example, *ibid.*, SC 143, 3:17:3, 76–78, and SC 143, 3:68:1:1–11, 274. Moreover, the nuns during Mass gave scant consideration to the laity who sometimes joined them in the chapel; on the few occasions the Helfta literature refers to lay parishioners, it does so incidentally. See, for example, *ibid.*, SC 143, 3:16:3, 70. The nuns were, furthermore, for the most part indifferent to the experience of the priest celebrating Mass. For the relative silence in the *Herald* and *Book of Special Grace* with regard to clergy, see Voaden, "All Girls Together," 82. For a perspective that insinuates the "inclusivity" of the nuns' sense of community, see Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "Divine Communication: Mechtilde of Hackeborn's Imagery of the Trinitarian God," *Magistra* 14:2 (Winter 2008): 53.

work of salvation. It was one in which members cultivated the sharing with one another of the spiritual benefits associated with any one group or individual.

Virtually the whole of the nuns' life appears to have been permeated by the liturgy.²⁷ The annual cycles of feasts and seasons, together with the hours of the office, provided the basic chronological structure by which the nuns ordered and measured their days and the shifting seasons.²⁸ Moreover, the mark of the liturgy is evident everywhere in verbal communication within the cloister.²⁹ When Christ and the nuns express their longing and love, and when they rejoice in the satisfaction that they bring one another, they call upon the familiar and pliant language of the liturgy. For example, Christ on one occasion addressed Gertrude and avowed his love for her using words associated with the legend of St. Agnes, which the sisters may have known as an antiphon sung during the ceremony of a nun's consecration.³⁰ "Behold," Christ declared, "I see the person whom I have already desired; I have that person for whom I have hoped; I am joined with her whom I loved with complete devotion while on earth."³¹ The language of the liturgy furnished the means by which the nuns eavesdropped on God's conversations with his friends, the saints and angels, and listened to tales the holy dead told them about earthly exploits and eternal bliss. It was the language of quiet conversation, of homey and erotic intimacy, of awesome reverence, and of joyous worship that ran throughout the cosmos. It is not surprising that the liturgy helped to organize the sisters' thought and provided a governing framework for the convent's literary creations. The *Spiritual Exercises*, the only surviving composition of which Gertrude appears to have been sole author, is a series of loosely organized prayers, chants, and litanies that are saturated with the language of the liturgy and whose basic organization depends on liturgical ritual.³² The depth and breadth of the liturgy's impress on the form and content of the *Book of*

²⁷Leclercq has made this observation ("Mental Prayer"), and he presents a clear and thoughtful treatment of this topic. See also Jean Leclercq, "Dévotion privée, piété populaire et liturgie au moyen âge," in *Études de pastorale liturgiques*, Vanves, 26–28 janvier 1944, *Lex orandi*, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1944), 149–173.

²⁸See, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:6:2:1–6, 256–258, SC 139, 2:9:1:1–6, 268, SC 139, 2:23:5:8–10, 334.

²⁹Leclercq, "Mental Prayer," 4, makes this point.

³⁰*Le Héraut*, SC 331, 304 n. 14a, and 305 n. 1.

³¹*Ibid.*, SC 331, *Missa*, 14:3–5, 305: "Ecce quod concupivi jam video; quod speravi jam teneo; illi sum junctus in spiritu, quam in terris positus tota devotione dilexi." As Doyère notes (*ibid.*, SC 331, 305 n. 1), the ascription of this language to Christ is noteworthy not least because it attributes to Christ a yearning for union with the soul that parallels the soul's own desire for Christ.

³²The first four of Gertrude's *Spiritual Exercises* draw liberally from the liturgies for baptism, clothing, consecration, and profession, and the final three exercises have the office as their "background"; Lewis and Lewis, "Introduction," 11. See, in addition, Hart, "Introduction."

Special Grace and the *Herald* are conspicuous.³³ Indeed, it may be that the nuns' confidence in the fluency with which they spoke what they believed to be the language of the universal church contributed to the authority and significance with which they invested the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*.³⁴ They wrote in a language that was, to them, intelligible, personal, and universal; it was the language in which God revealed himself in his scriptures to the world and spoke in plain and caring conversation with them.³⁵

Just as the women's creative engagement with the liturgy colored the larger life of the cloister, so, too, did a nun's more obviously personal piety come with her when she entered into communal public worship and inform her experience of it, as Jean Leclercq argued over half a century ago and as Jeffrey Hamburger has more recently observed.³⁶ The *Herald* describes a vision of Christ's side pierced by an arrow of light that appeared to Gertrude in the chapel as one element in an extended process of supplication, desire, and fulfillment.³⁷ A few days earlier, Gertrude had asked someone to pray before a crucifix that her heart be wounded with the arrow of God's love. Gertrude subsequently received the wound of God's love. We know the wounding took place after Gertrude attended Mass; it may have been stimulated by it. The chapter in which Gertrude describes this interrelated series of events concludes with

³³Pierre Doyère, "Gertrude d' Helfta," in vol. 6 of *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. M. Villier, F. Cavallera, J. de Guibert, André Rayez, Charles Baumgartner, and M. Olphe-Galliard (Paris: G. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1967), col. 334; Pierre Doyère, "Introduction," in *Le Héraut*, SC 139, 25–30; Jean Leclercq, "Exercices spirituels," in vol. 4, part 2 of *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. M. Villier, F. Cavallera, J. de Guibert, André Rayez, Charles Baumgartner, and M. Olphe-Galliard (Paris: G. Beauchesne et ses fils, 1961), cols. 1907–1908; Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism—1200–1350*, in vol. 3 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 273; Lewis and Lewis, "Introduction," esp. 11–12; Hart, "Introduction"; Hourlier and Schmitt, "Introduction," in *Les Exercices*, SC 127; Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*, esp. 742 and 794–796.

³⁴Those responsible for the production of the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* insist that each work was written at God's command, that Christ was the primary author of each, and that each revealed God's interactions with and concerns for his special friends, especially Gertrude and Mechtild, who model for the reader a relationship with Christ that underscores their receptivity to him. See Harrison, "What Treasure Is in This Book?" for the spiritual significance to its authors of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*.

³⁵For Latin as the probable language of the composition of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, see *ibid.* For Gertrude's sense that she is speaking for all humanity, see Leclercq, "Mental Prayer," 4, and Anna Harrison and Caroline Walker Bynum, "Gertrude, Gender, and the Composition of the *Herald of Divine Love*," in *Freiheit des Herzens: Mystik bei Gertrud von Helfta*, ed. Michael Bangert, vol. 2 of *Mystik und Mediävistik* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004).

³⁶Leclercq, "Mental Prayer," and Hamburger, "The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions," in *The Visual and the Visionary*. Vagaggini (*Theological Dimensions*) has highlighted the intimate connection between public (liturgical) prayer and Gertrude's private prayer as described in the *Herald*. For a similar assessment of Mechtild's spirituality, see Dieker, "Song of Love," 240.

³⁷*Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:5:2, 248–250.

Gertrude's admission that she has not been sufficiently grateful for the wound, and she explains that, since she has profited little from this and other gifts from God, she must write about them for the benefit of others. She had in mind the composition of the *Herald*. As the *Herald* itself tells it, God's condescension toward her drove Gertrude's participation in the whole of the literary venture. Although Christ's merciful gifts are unmerited, he did demand something in return: Gertrude was constrained to share her gifts with others.³⁸ Her role in the making of the *Herald* was crucial to her endeavor to do so. The brief chapter charting Gertrude's wounding and her response to this gift and to others is, therefore, about much more than the satisfaction of one woman's want. It indicates that multiple discrete expressions of piety—a conversation between sisters, the prayer of a fellow nun—as well as other communal spiritual practices (in this case, the creation of the *Herald*) were tightly interwoven with the routine of corporate worship. There was easy congress and continuity between the religiosity that thrived inside and outside the confines of the liturgy.

However permeable the boundary between the spirituality of corporate religious worship and that which was alive outside the context of the liturgy, there seems to have been something about the liturgy that encouraged intellectual creativity, focused reflection on the self, induced vision, and provided a spur to ecstasy.³⁹ Gertrude herself locates Mass, the elevation of the host, and reception of communion as those occasions on which she received extraordinary gifts from God, including his visible presence and

³⁸Clark emphasizes gift-giving in all directions in the *Herald*: "An Uneasy Triangle," 51.

³⁹According to Felix Vernet, few works of mysticism "are more overtly liturgical" than is the Helfta literature; *Medieval Spirituality* (London: Sands, 1930), 220–223 and 270. Vagaggini (*Theological Dimensions*, 777) has examined the way Gertrude's mysticism and her liturgical observances influenced each other. Ann Marie Caron has shown that Mechthild's visions are structured according to the cycle of the liturgical year, and she has argued that Mechthild's visions should be understood as "visionary commentaries" on the "mystical meaning" of the cycle; "Taste and See the Goodness of the Lord: Mechthild of Hackeborn," in *Hidden Springs Cistercian Monastic Women*, vol. 3, bk. 2 of *Medieval Religious Women*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 512–513. Sabine B Spitzlei, *Erfahrungsraum Herz: Zur Mystik des Zisterzienserinnenklosters Helfta im 13 Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart-Bad: Connstatt, 1991), 77, identifies Gertrude and Mechthild as "liturgical mystics." McGinn (*Flowering*, 270) and Hamburger ("Art, Enclosure," 493 n. 221) are among the latest in a long line of scholars to have noted the important place of the liturgy in the visionary spirituality ascribed to Mechthild and to Gertrude. For visionary experiences outside of liturgical contexts that are as tender, intimate, and dramatic as any that occur during Mass or office, see, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:7:1, 260, SC 143, 3:45:2–3, 202–206; *Liber*, 2:26, 168–171, 3:10, 209–210, 3:31, 235–236. Ulrike Wiethaus has argued that "by recording where she experienced ecstatic pleasures and insights, Gertrude in turn filled the literal places and thus daily routine of her monastery with the promise of spiritual encounters with the divine"; "Spatial Metaphors, Textual Production, and Spirituality in the Works of Gertrud of Helfta (1256–1301/2)," in *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 136.

union with him. After Mechtild received communion, Christ pressed her heart to his heart so that they became one mass, and about Gertrude we read that:

When she approached and had received the body of Christ, she recognized that her soul was shining like crystal, bright with sparkling splendor, and that the divinity of Christ that she received in herself shone through the crystal like gold miraculously enclosed.⁴⁰

Objects associated with corporate worship sparked visions and became integrated into their content. One Sunday, Gertrude was in her choir stall when, gazing at a painted image of Christ in a book, she saw a ray of light like an arrow entering and withdrawing from the wound in Christ’s side.⁴¹ The particular words the nuns heard or chanted during liturgical observances also triggered visions. Such revelations are sometimes vivid visual manifestations of the nuns’ verbal declamations of devotion, and they are illustrations (and confirmations)⁴² of the efficacy of communal song. As the sisters processed to chapel singing the responsory *Vidi Dominum facie ad faciem*, the Lord showed his face to Gertrude.⁴³ When Mechtild sang the verse *Ora pro populo*, Mary got up from her throne, genuflected, and prayed for the congregation, and as the sisters made mention of each choir of saints, each did as Mary had done, offering on bended knee a prayer to Christ on behalf of the nuns.⁴⁴ To the holiest sisters—as the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* relate—the language of the liturgy was an object of limitless fascination and a regular source of thought about the saints, the self, and even the institutional history of religious orders and their place in salvation history. Thus, for example, we read that, on the Feast of St. Bernard, Mechtild reflected on the words *In medio Ecclesia*, and Christ instructed her in the Benedictine Order’s many salutary contributions to the universal church.⁴⁵ The Helfta literature suggests that the nuns were quick to embellish liturgical celebrations with questions peculiar to each and to delve

⁴⁰*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:37:1:31–34, 180: “Hinc accedens, dum sumpsisset corpus Christi, recognovit animam suam velut crystallum niveo splendore perlucidam et susceptam in se Christi divinitatem tamquam aurum miraculose inclusam per crystallum splendere.”

⁴¹*Ibid.*, SC 139, 2:5:2, 248–250. Hamburger (“The Visual,” 125–127) comments on this passage to draw attention to the way nuns harnessed art to foster visionary experience. For the Helfta nuns’ use of hand-held books during liturgical observances, see Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*, 251. For a general discussion of the use in thirteenth-century monasteries of art or devotional objects seen or handled in private and in communal settings to induce and focus visionary experience, see Hamburger, “The Visual,” 131–148, esp. 131.

⁴²See Bynum (“Nuns of Helfta,” 218) on the nuns’ assuredness of the power and utility of the monastic practices in which they engaged.

⁴³*Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:21:1, 322.

⁴⁴*Liber*, 1:31, 105–106.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 1:28, 97–98. Mechtild’s and Gertrude’s ruminations on a specific word or series of words routinely ushered in appearances of Christ or compelled the attention of his saints, who provided responses to their questioning thoughts.

into details of an observance that especially intrigued them. When Mechtild at Mass heard the priest recite the collect *Infirmi-tatem nostram respice, quaesumus* and wished to understand it more fully, Christ obliged her, pausing to tease out the meaning of each word and fashioning something like a gloss that might have been lifted from a written document or fitted into one.⁴⁶ Liturgical observance offered individual nuns the opportunity for intellectual productivity, perhaps paralleling, supplementing, or fueling the work a contemporary monastic reader might associate with the scriptorium.⁴⁷ Gertrude and Mechtild emerge as lively and engaged participants in the liturgy, sensitive to the intricacy of the individual components that comprised each observance. The physical objects Mechtild and Gertrude saw and touched, the words they chanted and to which they listened, seeped into their imagination. They give rise to and became the stuff of visions, suffusing communal song, reception, or a gospel reading with tangled layers of meaning, charging everyday routine with sometimes exalted, sometimes elaborate, and often weighty intellectual meaning, as well as deeply personal significance. As the literature relates, prescribed communal observances were, for Mechtild and Gertrude, vibrantly supple: both women were prepared to seek and to find in Mass and in office a response to shifting needs and to experience, during the liturgy, the quickening of intellectual curiosities and of desires as well as their satisfaction.

The Helfta nuns did not discount the practical difficulties of reconciling the inclination to tarry in meditative or mystical delights with the obligation to hold fast to behavior appropriate to liturgical observances.⁴⁸ They certainly did not perceive the extravagant spiritual proclivities of an individual sister and her commitment to rigorous observance of common worship as in opposition to each other; scholars such as Hilda Graef and Cyprian Vagaggini are right to assert that the literature of Helfta provides relatively little evidence of the visionary's exploits disrupting common religious observances.⁴⁹ The nuns knew, nevertheless, that an active inner life might draw a sister's concentration from communal worship.⁵⁰ They were conscious that an

⁴⁶Ibid., 1:20, 74–75. And see, for example, the extended gloss on the Alleluia of the Easter Mass: *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:27:4:264–266.

⁴⁷Holsinger has noticed that the “glosses” the nuns’ visions provided were not culled from authoritative texts; they are ones that the women themselves elaborated (*Music, Body, and Desire*, 243). He has argued that whereas women’s liturgical practice has often been seen as “inherently conservative,” the Helfta mysticism is exceptional for “the frequency with which it transforms the structure, practice, and meaning of Christian liturgy” (ibid., 242).

⁴⁸*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:44:1–2, 198–202.

⁴⁹Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*, 777–778; Graef, “Flowering”; and see, too, Marie-Geneviève Guillous, “La louange à l’école de sainte Gertrude,” *Collectanea Cisterciensia* 53 (1991): 175.

⁵⁰For example, *Liber*, 2:4, 140–141.

individual's spiritual ardor might drain her of the strength necessary to keep the rigorous schedule of Mass, office, and supplemental liturgical observances, that physical fortitude was essential to meet the taxing demands that chant exacted on the body.⁵¹ The visionaries did not always manage to balance the pull of revelation and ecstasy with the maintenance of public communal worship. Once, while the sisters were in choir, the Lord rushed from heaven with arms extended to embrace Mechtild, who became so wholly absorbed in God that members of the congregation were obliged to carry her as if lifeless from her stall.⁵²

Revelations also readied their recipient for her liturgical labors and shook her free of thoughts that vied with liturgical services for her attention. When during vespers, Mechtild's clothes were sprinkled with dust—a sign of a preoccupation that took over her mind—Mary appeared and with her hand wiped away the dust.⁵³ The *Book of Special Grace* thus indicates that the content of the vision swept away the remnants of what prevented its recipient from fully engaging in the office and not that the vision itself was a source of Mechtild's distraction. In addition, her revelations supported the visionary when her attention was divided.⁵⁴ During Mass on the Feast of St. John before the Latin Gate, Gertrude was reflecting on writings about the special gifts John received from God; when she determined to shift her attention to what was being chanted, the saint himself appeared before her, and, "in a wondrous way" (*mirabilis modus*), enabled her to continue to attend to the writings about him and at the same time to understand each verse of the sequence sung in his honor.⁵⁵ The Helfta literature, furthermore, documents the markedly practical assistance that Christ at times lent the sisters when their minds wandered from the business of the office during the canonical hours as well as when fatigue or weakness overwhelmed them. When Gertrude fixed her attention on the Baby Jesus at each note she chanted in office, she found she could sing more carefully.⁵⁶ As the time for communion approached on the Feast of All Saints, Gertrude worried because

⁵¹Sec, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:54:1, 232–234, and SC 143, 3:59:1–2, 242–244. For examples of the physicality of Mechtild's liturgical practice, see *Liber*, 3:7, 205, and 5:30, 366, and for the toll common worship took on the nuns' bodies, see Dolan, *St. Gertrude*, 134.

⁵²*Liber*, 2:4, 140–141.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 1:13, 42–43. For dust as image of sin in the *Book of Special Grace*, see Rosalynn Jean Voaden, "Articulating Ecstasy: Image and Allegory in *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Victoria, 1990), 63.

⁵⁴Finnegan (*Scholars and Mystics*, 107) observes that, during the office, Gertrude was able to "remain in a state of contemplation while conforming to the actions of the community," and Graef ("Flowering," 173) remarks that Gertrude received the grace to follow the office while in ecstasy.

⁵⁵*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:34:3, 286. The *Herald* does not tell us on what specific texts Gertrude was reflecting or whether during Mass she was holding in her hands the writings in question.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, SC 139, 2:16:2, 290–292.

she had asked no one to help her; as the text relates, she had for a long time been unable to walk without assistance. Christ brushed away her concerns as he came to her side. Bracing her with the “arm” [*ulna*] of divine grace, he ensured that she was able to receive communion.⁵⁷ During the course of liturgical observances, Mechtild’s union with God fortified her: as she sang, each breath she drew, she drew from the heart of God.⁵⁸ A passage from the *Book of Special Grace* illustrates both that Mechtild’s intense commerce with God tired her, compromising her capacity to join in the office, and that Christ’s presence provided the enervated visionary with the support she needed to assume her liturgical duties. It suggests, furthermore, that coincidence of this sort formed a common pattern in Mechtild’s routine:

many times it happened to her that when at matins she was fully with God in great fruition and sweetness—so that she seemed to have squandered all strength and was unable to read her lesson—the Lord said to her: “Come and read, for I will help you.” And beginning the reading in this way, she completed it with great constancy.⁵⁹

Elsewhere we learn that as Mechtild read the Gospel during matins, the Lord so fully filled her with the sweetness of his grace that she was carried out of the choir onto a couch. Resting here, she asked Christ to wake her at the appropriate time; at prime (so we read) she beheld standing before her a beautiful young man, whose presence charged her with energy.⁶⁰

The nuns of Helfta regarded a finely focused concentration on the self in relation to God as sometimes compromising an individual’s ability to join in liturgical practices conceived of as beneficial to others. They developed no elaborate or formal rationale reconciling individual religious experience and communal worship. The *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* provide evidence of the relative ease with which the nuns harmonized a bustling interior life with the demands of corporate worship. For much of her adult life, Mechtild was the convent’s chantress, in charge of liturgical celebration and responsible for leading the nuns’ chant in the divine office. Yet there is no indication in the *Book of Special Grace* that her visionary life undermined her in this role. In the nuns’ own depiction of their daily life, they claim to have worked out among themselves such challenges as exceptional individuals

⁵⁷Ibid., SC 255, 4:55:6, 460. For Gertrude’s concerns about her waning physical strength, see, for example, SC 255 4:34:1, 284.

⁵⁸*Liber*, 3:7, 205.

⁵⁹Ibid., 2:5, 141: “multoties sibi accidit ut, dum in Matutinis plena Deo in fruitione magna et dulcissime esset, ita ut omnem fortitudinem consumpsisse nec lectionem suam legere posse videtur, diceret ad eam Dominus: ‘Vade et lege; nam ego te iuvabo.’ Sicque cum magna constantia lectionem incipiens eam complevit.”

⁶⁰Ibid., 2:6, 141–142. For Christ’s energizing presence in Gertrude’s life, see *Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:13:1:1–5, 282.

among them brought to communal religious observances. Even as the Helfta literature acknowledges interruptions to communal observances that visions, ecstasies, and idiosyncratic physical manifestations of piety might bring about, it gives no indication that Mechtild's and Gertrude's sisters or their abbess regarded them as irksome. When disruptions did occur, the literature urges its cloistered readers to interpret them not as signs of laxity in observance but as testimonies to holiness: the picture *Special Grace* offers of Mechtild slipping from her liturgical duties and carried as if dead from the choir evokes Mary's assumption as related in a vision that comes to Mechtild—the *Book of Special Grace* describes both women as "wholly absorbed in God."⁶¹ Private, intimate encounters with Christ, Mary, and the saints sometimes hindered Gertrude and Mechtild from playing an active role in communal worship; frequently, as Vagaggini observed, they provided support that furthered the commitments associated with Mass and office.⁶² *Special Grace* and the *Herald* are sanguine about reconciling fervent individual piety with conformity to exacting communal standards of behavior. This seems to have been the case at least in part because the nuns detected that advantages redounded both to the individual visionary and to her sisters in consequence of such devotion.

II. "ENJOY ME, EACH OF YOU": SELF AND OTHER IN LITURGICAL OBSERVANCES

For the visionaries among the nuns, chanting with and to Mary and the saints in liturgy moved seamlessly to talking with them. The revelations and ecstasies that came to Gertrude and Mechtild while they were in the chapel or in chapter involved them in casual encounters and emotionally charged meetings with Christ's mother as well as the saints and angels. Complex discussions with Mary and the saints and consequential exchanges with them sometimes occurred within discrete assignments and lingered over a single antiphon, sequence, or alleluia, for example; they sometimes took place over the course of several meetings, extending through many days and a number of liturgical events. Thus, for example, the solicitousness and sternness Mary exhibits toward Gertrude, the stance, at once placating and demanding, that Gertrude assumes before Mary, and the sometimes fraught tenor of their relationship are evoked in a series of visions of the Virgin that came to Gertrude in Mass on successive feast days.⁶³ On the Feast of Christ's Nativity, Gertrude received the

⁶¹ *Liber*, 1:26, 90 and 2:4, 140: "tota absorpta in Deum."

⁶² Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*, 777.

⁶³ Gertrude's Marian piety has generated much interest. See, for example, Dolan, *St. Gertrude*, 124–143; Wilhelm Preger, *Geschichte der deutschen Mystik bis zum Tode Meister Eckharts*, vol. 1 of *Geschichte der deutschen Mystik nach den Quellen untersucht und dargestellt* (Leipzig:

Baby Jesus, fresh from his mother's womb, and clasped him to her breast; some days later, on the Feast of the Purification, Gertrude's own desires were at cross-purposes with the mother's determination to wrest her Son from Gertrude.⁶⁴ Addressing herself to Christ, Gertrude writes:

while the procession was taking place in which you . . . chose to be carried to the temple during the antiphon *cum inducerent*, your virginal mother—with a severe expression on her face, as though she were not pleased with the way I was taking care of you, who are the honor and joy of her immaculate virginity—asked me to return you to her, you, the beloved little Boy of her womb. And I—remembering that it was because of the grace she found with you that she was given to sinners for their reconciliation and to the desperate for their hope—exclaimed in these words: “O mother of goodness, was it not for this that the fountain of mercy was given to you as your Son, so that you might obtain grace for those who need it and that you might cover with your copious charity the multitude of our sins and defects (1 Pet. 4:8)?” At this, her face took on the expression of serene goodness. It was as if she showed me that, although I merited apparent sternness for my evil deeds, she was, nevertheless, wholly filled up with internal charity, and she was pervaded to the marrow with divine charity. Her face soon lit up at my humble words, which had driven away all appearance of severity and replaced [it with] the serene sweetness that was natural to her temperament.⁶⁵

Dörffling und Franke, 1874), 129, whose analysis of the role of Mary in Gertrude's piety anticipates claims in Sharon K. Elkins, “Gertrude the Great and the Virgin Mary,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 66:4 (December 1997): 720–734; Clark, “Unequal Triangle”; Gertrud Jaron Lewis, “Maria im mystischen Werk Gertruds von Helfta,” in “*Vor dir steht die leere Schale meiner Sehnsucht*”: *Die Mystik der Frauen von Helfta*, ed. Michael Bangert and Hildegund Keul (Leipzig: St. Benno Buch- und Zeitschriftenverlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 81–94. On Mechtild's Marian piety, which has attracted less attention, see Philibert Schmitz, *Les Moniales*, vol. 7 of *Histoire de l'Ordre de Saint-Benoît* (Liège: Les Éditions de Maredsous, 1956), 300–301.

⁶⁴*Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:16, 290–298. Kate Greenspan provides several examples from thirteenth-century hagiographies of similar encounters between holy women and Mary; “*Matre Donante*: The Embrace of Christ as the Virgin's Gift in the Visions of 13th-Century Italian Women,” *Studia Mystica* 13:2/3 (Summer/Fall 1990): 26–37.

⁶⁵*Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:16:3:1–19, 292–294: “cum celebraretur Processio illa qua tu . . . in templum duci elegisti, inter Antiphonam: *Cum inducerent*, virginea mater tua te filiolum dilectum uteri sui reddi sibi a me repetiit vultu severo, quasi minus ad placitum sibi educassem te, qui es immaculatae virginitalis ipsius honor et gaudium. Et ego recolens quod ob gratiam quam invenit apud te, peccatoribus in reconciliatricem et in spem desperatis data esset, prorupi in haec verbis: ‘O Mater pietatis, immo ad hoc datus est tibi misericordiae fons in filium, ut omnibus gratia egentibus eam obtineas, et multitudinem peccatorum ac defectuum nostrorum operat charitas tua copiosa.’ Inter quae illa benigna serenum et placibilem praetendens vultum, ostendit quod quamvis meis exigentibus malis mihi severa apparet repletam eam tamen usque ad summum visceribus charitatis, et pertransitam medullitus dulcedine divinae charitatis; mox enituit dum ad tam exigua verbula severitas praetensa discessit, et naturaliter ingentia serena dulcedo processit.”

There is not a hint in the Helfta literature that heaven's inhabitants are cocooned by the joy of eternity in serene indifference to the little victories, the trials, the impetrations of the living, or to their queries, anxieties, and devotions.⁶⁶ During her conversations at matins with John the Evangelist on his feast day, Gertrude put to John questions about his earthly life and the content of his writings. The author of the fourth Gospel responded by relating to Gertrude his experience of the Last Supper, explaining to her his mission, and divulging to her aspects of his experience about which he had until then kept silent.⁶⁷ At matins on Benedict's feast day, Gertrude asked the saint what reward he received for his death; Benedict informed her that because he breathed his last while at prayer, his breath—more delicious than that of all the other saints—charms heaven's inhabitants with its sweetness.⁶⁸ When, singing with her sisters on the Feast of St. Elisabeth of Hungary, Gertrude worried that her attention to God diminished the praise counted as Elisabeth's own, Elisabeth assured Gertrude that she accepted the nun's song with infinite gratitude.⁶⁹

The nuns believed that to enter into a fellowship with the saints was to approximate the closeness with Christ that belonged to his heavenly friends. Thus, we read, for example, that during matins John the Evangelist appeared to Gertrude and led her before Christ. John took Gertrude and placed her on the Lord's right side, where Christ's open wound lay—the wound that provided her with access to Christ's heart, source of all sweetness and the gateway to his divinity.⁷⁰ John subsequently granted Gertrude a vision by

⁶⁶Similar to Christ, the saints are easily moved by the sisters' desires and requests and sensitive to them. *Liber*, 1:25, 88; *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:4:4:1–12, 64–65.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, SC 255, 4:4:4, 64–66. Theresa A. Halligan (*The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*, ed. and trans. Theresa A. Halligan [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979], 41) remarks on the dramatic dialogue many of Mechtild's visions contain. On the centrality of dialogue to the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace*, see Spitzlei, *Erfahrungsraum Herz*. Their conversations attest to a collegiality and mutual engagement between the visionaries and particular saints that—with the exception of Gertrude's and Mechtild's conversations with Christ—is without parallel in the Helfta literature. See, for example, Gertrude's and Mechtild's relationship with John; *Liber*, 1:6, 21–24, and *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:4, 58–80. For Gertrude's devotion to John and the influence of his gospel on her thought, see Dolan, *St. Gertrude*, 144–149; Michael Bangert, "A Mystic Pursues Narrative Theology: Biblical Speculation and Contemporary Imagery in Gertrude of Helfta," *Magistra* 2:2 (Winter 1996): 3–30. I am aware of no studies on the role that John the Evangelist plays in Mechtild's devotions. Conversations between the individual visionaries and Christ are more numerous than conversations between the women and the saints. The nuns were, in fact, far more interested in the saints as a group than in individual saints among them. There is fairly little scholarship on the community of saints in the piety of Helfta. The most insightful consideration is Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*.

⁶⁸*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:11:4, 130.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, SC 255, 4:56, 462.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, SC 255, 4:4:3–4, 62–66. John placed himself on Christ's left side. He did so mindful that Gertrude could not easily penetrate as could he—now of one body with Christ—to the inside of Christ's body.

which she saw enclosed in Christ's heart "the immense ocean of the divinity," and in that ocean John swam, with delight and freedom.⁷¹ Surely this vision is something like a pledge and a beckoning toward like heavenly delights that Gertrude may hope will be her own. Through the accumulated weight of engagements such as this, Mechtild's and Gertrude's relationships with Mary and with a few of the saints—including John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, and Catherine of Alexandria—come to form distinctive patterns and to acquire the patina of a shared history.⁷²

Christ fostered the women's engagement with the saints, talking with the nuns about the saints' exemplary lives, holy writings, and celestial joys as well as about the women's devotion to the saints. During Mass on the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene, Christ recounted to Mechtild the laudable emotions Mary Magdalene directed toward him;⁷³ during Mass on the Feast of Pope Gregory, Christ and Gertrude spoke about Gregory's writings and about the honor he received from his fellow saints because his literary labors excited others to devotion;⁷⁴ on Bernard's feast day, Christ related to Mechtild the glory that now belonged to Bernard, who because he was so filled with love of God enkindled this love in others.⁷⁵

During liturgical observances, Christ himself showered Mechtild and Gertrude with his attentions.⁷⁶ In such instances, the visionaries fixed their sight on God, who showed them who *they* were and ought to be. When Mechtild received Christ in communion, she heard him say: "I am in you and you are in me, and I will not leave you for eternity."⁷⁷ Gertrude relates that Christ on occasion kissed her ten times or more as she chanted a single psalm.⁷⁸ Gertrude's and Mechtild's visions witness the mutuality of emotion that bound each woman with Christ, who repeatedly singled out each with a fierce proprietary love: "Your soul is mine," Christ made known to Mechtild in the middle of Mass.⁷⁹ Revelations received during liturgy were

⁷¹Ibid., SC 255, 4:4:58–9, 66: "immensus pelagus divinitatis."

⁷²See, for example, *Liber*, 1:32, 111, and *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:42, 332–336.

⁷³*Liber*, 1:25, 86–87.

⁷⁴*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:10, 124.

⁷⁵*Liber*, 1:28, 97–98.

⁷⁶For Christ's accessibility, see, for example, *ibid.*, 2:20, 157–158, and 2:23, 165–166. On this matter, see Preger, *Geschichte*, 116–132, and Bynum, "Nuns of Helfta," 185 and 210. In spite of occasional intrusions into their consciousness of doubts about Christ's love for them, Mechtild and Gertrude are portrayed as enjoying security in Christ's love for them and a strong sense of his nearness to their needs. It is sometimes Christ who aids the women in their relationship with the saints; he inserts himself repeatedly into the nuns' dealings with his mother (see, for example, *Liber*, 1:44, 128). On Christ mediating between Mary and Gertrude, and for examples of this, see Elkins, "Gertrude," and especially Clark, "Unequal Triangle."

⁷⁷*Liber*, 1:1, 10: "Tu in me et ego in te, et in aeternum non derelinquam te." And see *ibid.*, 2:24, 166.

⁷⁸*Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:21:4:18–26, 326.

⁷⁹*Liber*, 1:23, 82: "anima tua mea est."

characterized by the visionary's candid and potent preoccupation with herself in relation to God—cowering before God the Father, luxuriating in Christ's embrace, or comforted by his approbation. On the Feast of St. Matthew, Gertrude reclined on Christ's breast and, as the priest elevated the chalice, she determined that she had contributed little to the offering since she suffered insufficiently for Christ; she then cast herself on God's mercy as she threw herself on the floor at his feet. Christ immediately lay on the ground by her side and soothed her, saying that he could not live happily without her. In this moment, Gertrude knew Christ had selected her from among all souls, in heaven and on earth, as uniquely compelling his love.⁸⁰

Visions such as those I have discussed display Mechtild's and Gertrude's steady fascination with their own internal state—with their feelings of remorse, shame, or gratitude. Gertrude and Mechtild, so the *Herald* and *Book of Special Grace* relate, were convinced that Christ—as well as Mary and the saints—spoke directly to them during the liturgy. They were sure that Christ was desirous of their presence in the liturgy and that he was attentive to their contributions to it: "Lord, what do you do when I pray or recite psalms?" Mechtild asked Christ. "I listen," he replied.⁸¹ Indeed, the visionaries routinely placed themselves virtually at the center of the liturgy's significance. A sense of the self as singular in the sight of God—as singularly adored and singularly unworthy of such adoration—flourished in a corporate setting. Exactly because it promoted encounter with Christ and brought with it a bevy of social relationships with the saints, the liturgy sharpened a sense of self, offering the nuns opportunities to plumb with delicacy and deliberation their own varying inner states and to wonder about self in relation to God and his heavenly friends.⁸² Within this context, Mechtild and Gertrude reveled in the sense that they were special—in their peculiar needs and wants and devotions, different from those of others and worthy of their own (and God's) consideration—and they indulged in a relationship with Christ that they believed was marked off for *him* among his many relationships as precious, necessary, and vitalizing.

⁸⁰*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:5:1, 26. And see, for example, *ibid.*, SC 139, 3:21, 112–114, and SC 139, 2:14, 286. Vagaggini, *Theological Dimensions*, 758, comments on the loving encounters with Christ that Gertrude experienced in a liturgical setting.

⁸¹*Liber*, 3:16, 217: "Domine, quid agis cum oro, vel psalmos lego?" ... 'Ego ausculto.'"

⁸²The Helfta nuns were not, of course, unique in this regard, as literature on visionaries establishing relationships with the saints in the monastic context of the liturgy has shown. Scholars such as Barbara Newman and Anne Clark, for example, have drawn attention to the way in which the twelfth-century Benedictine nun Elisabeth of Schönau drew on her experience of liturgy to cultivate relationships with the saints and mined the liturgy as a source of profoundly personal significance: Anne L. Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: A Twelfth-Century Visionary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 101–111; Barbara Newman, "Introduction," in *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 46–47.

Although often stimulated by moments in the office or Mass, her revelations frequently cast members of the congregation outside the visionary's consideration and left her without recognition that she was in the choir. Such revelations suggest that Gertrude and Mechtild sometimes longed for distance between themselves and their sisters as well as for privacy and that they found both in abundance within corporate worship. Neither the *Herald* nor the *Book of Special Grace* describes the individual nun yearning to tear away from the routine rounds of common worship to sequester herself from her sisters so as to better search out God and savor him. It may be that the nuns' intensely corporate life both created the hunger in an individual nun to carve out for herself a world apart from that of her sisters and provided her with numerous occasions to become skilled at obtaining that for which she longed—of attaining, that is, to an arena in which the self, insulated from fellow nuns, might enter into reverie and ecstasy as well as into conversation with Christ and his holy friends and family. Visions may have offered a welcome and delicious respite from the hubbub of communal life. They may have been a retreat from its humdrumness, providing entry into a larger community, crowded with chatty and diverse companions, with whom the visionaries cultivated complex one-on-one relationships. Their brushes with Christ, his friends, and his mother were sometimes winsome and welcoming, and they were at other times strained; over and over again (so the Helfta literature insists), God and the saints during the liturgy trained their reserves on moving Mechtild and Gertrude toward salvation.⁸³ They encouraged both women's cultivation of private relationships with them during liturgical observances, and they abetted the visionaries' attention to their internal state.

Christ and the saints also strove against the women's sometimes inward focus, and the visionaries of their own accord liberally incorporated their

⁸³As the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* depict it, living in a community in which the majority of waking hours was spent in the company of others brought with it an array of burdens. Gertrude and Mechtild express a weariness of the company of others and a longing to withdraw from the presence of people and seek solace in isolated association with Christ. See, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:47:1, 212. See Preger (*Geschichte*, 131) for Gertrude's yearning to be alone with Christ. Scholars have long pointed to the desire on the part of late medieval religious for, as Penelope Johnson puts it, "respite from total togetherness" (*Equal in Monastic Profession*, 194). A. Mary F. Robinson ("The Convent of Helfta," *Fortnightly Review* 40 [1886]: 641–658) suggests that the visions that came to Gertrude and Mechtild delivered them from chronic tedium. Clark has noticed that her visions gave Elisabeth of Schönau entry into a world more interesting to her than that of the convent (*Elisabeth of Schönau*, 101) and the content of which helped to ease her "spiritual malaise" (*ibid.*, 107). Hamburger remarks on nuns' attempts to find arenas of privacy within the communal life ("Art, Enclosure," 80–89 and 477 n. 92). Jo Ann Kay McNamara documents sisters' efforts to protect their solitude: *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 332. For nuns' manipulation of the liturgy to elevate their mood and lift themselves out of depression, see Yardley, *Performing Piety*, 145.

sisters into their thoughts and actions. When, during a liturgical service, Gertrude or Mechtild brought into their exchanges with God a forceful focus on the self—on *their* feelings of unworthiness before his majesty, *their* fears about the public exposure of their revelations, *their* anxieties about not having sufficiently praised Mary—Christ, Mary, and the saints from time to time obliged the visionaries to expand the horizon of their concern, so that a reflection or revelation that begins with a starkly individualistic focus pans out to include other people. A movement from concentrated consideration of the self to a broader perspective that includes others is evident in the following vision, which Gertrude received during Mass. Gertrude was stung with a feeling of unworthiness, so that she dared not look up at the elevation of the host. Christ acknowledged Gertrude's lowliness, but he did not permit her to remain in self-referential reflection, however accurate her self-assessment. He urged Gertrude to participate in the Mass rather than burrow into her humility, insisting that Gertrude further the salvation of others by gazing at the elevated host:

When a skillful mother wishes something to be worked in silk or pearls, sometimes she places her little child in a higher place, so that the child can hold the thread or the pearl or help in another way. In this way, I have set you in an elevated place so that you take part in this Mass. If, truly, you extended your will to this task freely, [and] with whatever difficulties, you were willing to serve, so that this oblation would have full effect—in accord with its dignity—in all Christians, those living as well as those dead, in this way you [will] have helped me best in my work.⁸⁴

Gertrude would have refused to raise her eyes to the host. Christ had other plans for her. He did not countenance in Gertrude a sinking into the self that would disassociate her from productive devotions by which each member of the liturgical community might help Christ in his work on behalf of all Christians.⁸⁵

The revelations and reflections that came to Gertrude and Mechtild within Mass, office, and chapter contain numerous incidental remarks that indicate that a keen sensitivity to the needs and desires of other individuals as well as to the well-being of the nuns as a collective was an integral (if not always

⁸⁴*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:6:1:9–18, 28: "Cum mater aliqua artificiosa operari voluerit de serico vel margaritis, quandoque parvulum suum in eminentiori loco ponit, ut sibi filum vel margaritas teneat vel aliquod tale adjuvanmen impendat. Sic ego te in eminentiori statuens Missae huic interesse disposui; tu vero si extenderis voluntatem tuam ad hoc quod libenter, quanto-cumque difficili labore, ad hoc servire velles, ut haec oblatio in omnibus Christianis tam vivis quam defunctis secundum dignitatem suam plenum sortiretur effectum, tunc optime, pro modulo tuo, me adjuvisti ad opus meum."

⁸⁵For the notion that viewing the consecrated host with devotion integrated the viewer more fully into the community of the faithful, see Caspers, "Augenkommunion," 90.

welcome) component of their liturgical life. They underscore the visionary's attention to the piety of her sisters, as when the *Herald* relates that Gertrude noticed during chapter that, in the person of the prioress, the convent acknowledged its faults before the abbess and perceived subsequently that Christ offered absolution.⁸⁶ And they draw attention to the benefits to herself of the visionary's attentiveness: Gertrude on one occasion became aware of Christ's presence in chapter exactly by the devotion she observed in her sisters.⁸⁷ They convey, in addition, the visionaries' consciousness (or the ascription by their sisters to the visionaries) of God's gratification in their sympathy for their sisters and in pious practices in which the nuns engaged in common. When, at the introit of Christmas Mass, Gertrude held the delicate Baby in her arms, she linked her reception of this gift to prayers she had offered before the feast for someone in trouble.⁸⁸ An awareness of God's delight in the small favors she performed to further her sisters' liturgical practices intruded into Gertrude's thought: during Mass on another occasion, Gertrude noticed that her soul had been adorned with a garment encrusted with precious stones because at matins, although illness made her weak, she soldiered on to read a second time a nocturne with another sister.⁸⁹ The nuns' revelations often indicate Christ's (or the saints') approbatory recognition of the prayers the nuns recited together, and they sometimes contain his (or their) commentaries on such prayers. Thus, for instance, Mary appeared during Mass to Mechtild, and she conveyed to her the excellence of the prayer *Ave Maria*, explained to Mechtild the meaning of its component words, and related to her the sweetness that she, Mary, received from this prayer.⁹⁰ In a pattern we find again and again, Mechtild and Gertrude include in their visions prayers for others and routinely bring back to individual sisters the messages, pledges, and prayers they collect in the course of their excursions.⁹¹ Thus, for example, when Mechtild prayed to St. Catherine on behalf of a particular sister, Catherine urged the sister, through Mechtild, to recite an antiphon for the saint.⁹² When Mechtild proffered to John the Evangelist the prayers of another sister, John instructed Mechtild to tell her, "I shall prepare a feast for all the saints out of all she

⁸⁶*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:2:13, 42.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, SC 255, 4:2:8, 34.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, SC 139, 2:16:2, 290–292.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, SC 143, 3:61:1, 246–248.

⁹⁰*Liber*, 1:42, 126–127. As McGinn has observed (*Flowering*, 271), Gertrude's and Mechtild's visions and ecstasies "take place in and for the community."

⁹¹It would not be odd if portions of the material that comprises Gertrude's *Spiritual Exercises* came to Gertrude as she participated in the liturgy, although there is no direct evidence for this. It is, after all, in the context of the liturgy that Gertrude sometimes receives prayers as spiritual gifts for other nuns.

⁹²*Liber*, 1:32, 111.

has offered to me."⁹³ Mechtild's and Gertrude's revelations frequently concern the whole of the cloister, living and dead: Gertrude at Mass saw Mary sheltering under her mantle those who had commended themselves to her protection;⁹⁴ Mechtild beheld the provost's soul, which, in heaven, had assumed the form of a cloister and in whose beautiful windows sat souls in the form of statues—representations of deceased, holy members of the household.⁹⁵ Visions that highlight Mechtild's or Gertrude's intimacy with Christ in the liturgy sometimes express simultaneously a sense of service. When, during Mass on the Feast of All Saints, Christ came to Mechtild and pressed his mouth to the mouth of her soul, his kisses were more than a mark of love, desire, or union. They were a granting to Mechtild of the power to praise and to pray—and to preach.⁹⁶

The *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* insist that even while in the midst of spiritual exploits in which the visionary and Christ are wrapped in familiarity, a concern for the welfare of others might enter into the visionary's reverie. When Gertrude kissed the wound in Christ's side at each verse that she, together with her sisters, intoned in chapel, Christ expressed how welcome these kisses were to him. The modern reader may be struck by the graphic nature of the image and miss what comes next: Gertrude asked that Christ teach her a short prayer that others might recite and that would be equally pleasing to him as were her kisses.⁹⁷ Christ complied with Gertrude's request, impressing on her mind three brief verses, which, if uttered "in honor of the five wounds and kissing devoutly the same rosy wounds of the Lord," would honor him as greatly as did her kisses.⁹⁸ As this example illustrates, the Helfta literature attests to the fluidity with which the visionaries sometimes moved between engagement with Christ and purposeful attention to others. As the source of innovative meditation, this vision speaks to Gertrude's desire to help her sisters bring pleasure to Christ, and it gives value to the day-to-day practices in which all the sisters might engage. From God's vantage point—so the *Herald* conveys—there is no clear divide between Gertrude's vision and the visualizing meditation Gertrude offers her sisters; if the point is to gratify God, they are

⁹³Ibid., 1:6, 23: "Ex omnibus his quae mihi obtulit, sanctis omnibus convivium praeparabo."

⁹⁴*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:48:4, 360–362. As Doyère points out, the nuns of Helfta may have been aware of visual and literary representations of the Virgin thus depicted and sometimes termed Mother of Mercy (ibid., SC 255, 362 n. 1).

⁹⁵*Liber*, 5:10, 335.

⁹⁶Ibid., 1:1, 9. On this passage, see Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire*, 243. For the visionaries' priestly authority, see Bynum, "Nuns of Helfta," esp. 224.

⁹⁷*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:49:1, 216–218.

⁹⁸Ibid., SC 143, 3:49:1:24–25, 218: "in honorem quinque vulnerum Deo, et eadem rosea vulnera Domini devotius deosculando."

analogous.⁹⁹ Thus, even as the *Herald* does not shirk from documenting difference among the sisters—the Lord, “beautiful and delightful,” placed his “sweet wounds” within *Gertrude’s* immediate reach, and expressed to *her* the satisfaction he took in her ministrations—it forebears a rigid distinction between the anonymous sisters, who are the intended recipients of the meditation, and the holy woman at its center.¹⁰⁰ It bears witness to an ease in coupling and comparing the visionary forays of one respected sister with meditative prayers of a collective of anonymous nuns. Emphasizing (potential) commonality among all the nuns, the *Herald* calls attention to *Gertrude’s* exemplary familiarity with Christ, signals her preoccupation with her sisters in a moment of striking intimacy with him, and offers fellow nuns a means by which to approximate the quality of *Gertrude’s* relationship with Christ.

The visions that came to the nuns in public communal worship sometimes highlight a remarkable coincidence between sublime introversion and conscientious sociability. During Mass and before communion, Mechtild peered at her own heart, which had assumed the shape of a house, and she saw this house cupped inside another, larger house, which was Christ’s heart. Mechtild entered her house—that is, she entered into her heart—and there she found Christ, who invited her to enter his divine heart. Mechtild did so, and right away:

that blessed soul, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw fiery rays go forth from all her limbs, so that each person for whom she had prayed received a ray into herself. And after she communicated, she saw her heart as if liquefied with the heart of God into one mass of gold, and she heard the Lord say to her: “In this way, your heart shall adhere [to mine] in perpetuity.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁹The line between vision and visualization is sometimes a tenuous one. Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Image, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 184; Barbara Newman, “What Did It Mean to Say ‘I Saw’? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture,” *Speculum* 80:1 (January 2005): 16.

¹⁰⁰*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:49:1:4–7, 216: “apparuit ei Dominus quasi totus floridus et amoenus . . . praebuit dulcissimum vulnus.” Such visions seem to have brought enormous pleasure to their recipients, and it is clear they were sought after in part for this reason. Scholars have drawn attention to the encouragement the Helfta literature gives to its cloistered readership to cultivate visions: Clark, “Unequal Triangle,” 47, and Newman, “What Did It Mean to Say,” 22–25. Directions to visualization such as I describe above may have provided a platform from which the meditating nun might soar into visionary flight or enter into ecstasy. The *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* contain examples of and extol a broad range of routine practices (including corporate prayer, gazing at the elevated host, reading scripture) associated, according to Newman (*ibid.*), in monastic milieus of the later Middle Ages with fostering visionary experience: Anna Harrison, “Sense of Community among the Nuns of Helfta” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2007), 189–192.

¹⁰¹*Liber*, 1:19, 70: “illa beata anima Spiritu Sancto repleta de omnibus membris sui igneos radios progredi vidit, ita ut quilibet eorum pro quo oraverat radium ex ea in se susciperet. Et cum

Although the larger passage from which I quote contains among the most vivid and beautiful of descriptions in the Helfta literature of mutual assimilation, there is, from a certain perspective, nothing extraordinary about it. Images of melting and merging appear frequently in the pages of the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald*, and both works emphasize a correspondence between the visionaries' hearts and Christ's heart, the exchange of hearts, and the incorporation of the heart of one into the heart of the other.¹⁰² What is noteworthy for my purposes is that sandwiched between the three-fold nest of hearts and a classical image of mystical union is an expression of concern for others. Twice enclosed and enclosing Christ's heart, Mechtild engulfs and is engulfed by the divinity, two hearts become one mass, and Mechtild's limbs emit rays of light to those for whom she has previously prayed. Even as Mechtild is nestled in Christ, the ties that bind her to others do not dissolve. Those whose needs have at other times pulled her into prayer on their behalf do not fall away from her consciousness. As Giovanna della Croce has observed, Mechtild, when she is absorbed into God, dispenses to others the riches she receives.¹⁰³ At the most intimate part of the self, where God and self meet and seem to merge, others have access to the concerns of the visionary, who holds herself responsible for her sisters and whose desire to share with others the fruits of her experience is alive.¹⁰⁴ Thus drawn to others, the visionary draws God to them. Indeed, the *Herald* tells us that God sometimes seeks union with select sisters precisely in order to bring other people to him.¹⁰⁵ Mechtild and Gertrude were thus sometimes acutely

communicasset cor suum cum Dei Corde, velut massam auri in unum liquatum vidit, audivitque Dominum dicentem sibi: "Sic cor tuum in perpetuo adhaerebit."

¹⁰²See, for example, *ibid.*, 1:1, 8-11, 1:5, 18-20, 2:29, 166-167; *Le Héraut*, SC 139, 2:23:8, 336-338. For the connection in the *Book of Special Grace* between house, heart, and wound, see Voaden ("Articulating Ecstasy," 44-48, and "All Girls Together," 83), who comments on the intricacy of the passage to which I refer above. There is a large literature on the imagery of and devotion to the sacred heart in the Helfta literature. See, for example, Ursmer D. Berlière, *La dévotion au Sacré-Coeur dans l'Ordre de S. Benoît* (Paris: Abbaye de Maredsous, 1923), esp. 31-39, and Spitzlei, *Erfahrungsraum Herz*. The editor of the first Latin-text edition of the *Herald*, John Lansperg (1490-1539) of the Charterhouse of St. Barbara in Cologne, was himself a devotee of the sacred heart; Louis Gougoud, *Devotional and Ascetic Practices in the Middle Ages*, trans. G. C. Bateman (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1927).

¹⁰³Giovanna, della Croce, *I mistici del nord* (Rome: Edizioni Studium, 1981), 28.

¹⁰⁴Bynum has argued that for Gertrude service and contemplation were not in conflict, and she did not need recourse to theory to reconcile the two. Bynum has noticed, in addition, "an absolute certainty in the priority of service" in Gertrude's thought (and this seems to be Preger's assessment as well [*Geschichte*, 125]) that I have not found—although individual passages in the *Herald* (for example, *Le Héraut*, 4:2:3, 24-26) do support Bynum's claim. Hubrath has argued that Mechtild and Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn, respectively, are presented as models for the contemplative and active life; Hubrath, *Schreiben*, 11-17, and Hubrath, "Collective Work," 236-239. I have found no such division.

¹⁰⁵See, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:18:4, 82.

aware of their sisters in choir and sensitive to their needs exactly during moments of intimacy with Christ and union with him. In such situations, there is no indication that the concern for others or activity on their behalf distracted from, diminished, or otherwise undermined the enjoyment of such experiences for them or detracted from them *as* intimate and unitive.

An attitude of accountability for the other who is sister may be at play in the numerous visions in which their fellow nuns are folded into the revelations Gertrude and Mechtild receive, and through which they claim the ability not only to discern phenomena surrounding their sisters, but, in addition, to uncover their sisters' response to such phenomena. As the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* depict them, Gertrude and Mechtild are eager that others should share in exactly the kinds of contact with God and his holy companions from which they themselves benefit, and they strive to bring experiences such as their own to their sisters. During Christmas Mass, Mechtild cradled the Baby Jesus in her arms, offered the Infant to each of her sisters in turn, and saw him recline on the breast of each nun and kiss each woman.¹⁰⁶

Now and then, so their visions tell them, the prayers they offered precipitated Christ's presence among those for whom they prayed. Thus we read that, during Ember Week in Advent, the season in which the nuns readied themselves for Christ's coming and in which images of light figure prominently,

In the Mass *Veni et ostende*, when she [Mechtild] prayed on behalf of all who desired to see God with their whole heart, she saw the Lord standing in the middle of the choir, his face shining as if a thousand suns, enlightening each person with a ray of sun.¹⁰⁷

Mechtild and Gertrude regularly witnessed Christ moving among their sisters. Within the visions that the Helfta literature ascribes to both women, Christ, Mary, and the saints are over and over said to have come before an individual sister other than Mechtild or Gertrude as well as to the congregation as a whole, or they are said to have approached each person in choir.¹⁰⁸ That is, a vision that comes to one person claims to lay bare events that incorporate another woman, or many women. Such revelations reveal God's solicitous presence in the workaday doings of the monastery: Christ, so Mechtild perceived, walked alongside and approached each of her sisters

¹⁰⁶*Liber*, 1:5, 17.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 1:4, 13: "In Missa *Veni et ostende*, cum pro omnibus oraret qui Dei faciem toto corde desiderarent, vidit Dominum in medio chori stantem, cujus facies, velut mille soles radians, singulas personas solari radio illustrabat." For Gertrude and Mechtild as mediators, through whom the divinity flowed to their sisters, see Bynum, "Nuns of Helfta."

¹⁰⁸See, for example, *Liber*, 1:10, 34, 1:23, 84.

as they processed from the chapel after terce, and when Mechtild asked why Christ was clothed as deacon, he replied: "No deacon in his ministry was ever as zealous in ministering as I am in serving the faithful soul."¹⁰⁹ It is often scarcely possible to distinguish a vision from the setting in which it takes place; the contents of a vision seem to overlay like an elaborate transparency the events and people that swirl around the visionary as she receives a revelation, or to draw them into a vision that is something like a tableaux vivant in the midst of chapel or chapter. In chapter on the Feast of the Annunciation, Gertrude beheld Christ and Mary seated in the abbess' chair. As the community recited the *Miserere*, the Lord placed in his mother's hand each word the sisters uttered under the form of a pearl; Mary mixed these with perfume, thereby sweetening the prayers of the sisters with the troubles each had endured previously and committed to Mary.¹¹⁰ Gertrude once beheld Christ feeding spiritually her liturgical community at the moment each member received the host from the priest:

when the convent communicated, the Lord showed himself with great condescension to be present, so that he seemed to offer the saving host with his own venerable hand to each one who was approaching, while the priest, nevertheless, made the sign of the cross over each host.¹¹¹

The phenomena attributed to sisters who figure in Mechtild's or Gertrude's revelations often parallel the phenomena associated with the visionaries themselves. Thus, for example, Jesus appeared as a boy of about ten years old during matins on the Feast of John the Evangelist, and each sister was filled with joy.¹¹² On the Feast of St. Lawrence, Gertrude saw Christ draw into himself the desire of all those present at Mass and flow into them.¹¹³ As the congregation was communicating on another occasion, Christ stood in the middle of the choir; rays of light from his face illuminated the faces of Gertrude's sisters, and Christ's love for them caused the women's hearts to liquefy.¹¹⁴ All the sisters interact with the saints; all receive the kinds of favors to which Mechtild and Gertrude are accustomed. The sisters—as they are reported to have done in the vision accounts—respond to Christ when they are in his company. When we read of Christ flowing into the sisters and of the melting of their hearts when they are bathed in the light of his love, or of

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 1:19, 64: "Numquam etiam aliquis diaconus tam studiosus in ministrando fuit, sicut ego cuilibet animae fidelis assisto minister."

¹¹⁰*Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:12:1–2, 132–133.

¹¹¹Ibid., SC 143, 3:38:3:1–5, 184: "dum conventus communicaret, exhibuit se Dominus tanta dignatione adesse, quod videbatur singulis accedentibus manu sua veneranda hostiam porrigere salutarem, sacerdote tamen quaslibet hostias signo crucis consignante."

¹¹²*Liber*, 1:6, 21.

¹¹³*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:17:4, 78–80.

¹¹⁴*Liber*, 1:4, 13.

Mary moving among the nuns and offering her Son to each, we might be reading one of the many similar phenomena associated with Gertrude or Mechtild. Gertrude's and Mechtild's experience of liturgy—so the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* relate—thus underscores God's nearness and accessibility to the whole community of women with whom they worshiped. In their revelations, the visionaries often perceived their sisters as equal beneficiaries with them of God's presence, even while the sisters remained ignorant of this gift.

In the many visions in which one woman claims to disclose events that incorporate another woman, or many women, the boundary between self and other blurs. I have found no unambiguous indication that Mechtild or Gertrude, or the anonymous contributors to the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald*, believed that the sisters who figure in Mechtild's and Gertrude's visions were themselves conscious of the content of these visions—either of the events Mechtild and Gertrude saw surrounding them or of the events in which they took part (or which took place within them!)—as the visions unfolded.¹¹⁵ And yet, when Gertrude sees Christ flowing into each of those present at Mass and hears him address the congregation and say, "I am wholly your own. Then enjoy me, each according to your desire," Christ really *is* offering himself to all those gathered in chapel and all receive him—so the

¹¹⁵ Although the visionaries, as we read, claim to perceive the response of women who appear in their visions to the total content of the visions, the women do not themselves seem unaware of the visions in which they figure—at least not for the most part. Newman ("What Did It Mean," 24) calls a "shared vision" a vision that one of the anonymous authors of the *Book of Special Grace* receives (for which see *Liber*, 5:24, 356–357) and which incorporates Mechtild, an anonymous writer of the *Book of Special Grace*, and all the sisters as subjects of the vision. It is not entirely clear what Newman means by this. This vision appears to have come to one woman alone. Those vision accounts in which one nun's revelations contain many nuns are different from the visions recorded in the Sister-Books or convent chronicles of the fourteenth-century Rhineland. In the Sister-Books, we find numerous descriptions of visions that come to the nuns as a group as well as reports of sisters individually and one after the other receiving similar visions. Peter Dinzelbacher, "A Plea for the Study of the Minor Female Mystics of Late Medieval Germany," *Studies in Spirituality* 3 (1993): 91–100; Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1996); Rebecca L. R. Garber, *Feminine Figurae: Representations of Gender in Religious Texts by Medieval German Women Writers, 1100–1375* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 61–104; Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004). For a discussion of visions in the Helfta literature that may have come simultaneously to more than one nun, see Harrison, "Sense of Community," 181–189. See *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:2:9, 36–38, for one of a small number of visions that appears, perhaps, to have come at the same time to a group of nuns: "Cum vero praesentabantur ipsi corda magis in cognitione Dei illuminata, tunc obsequabantur angeli Domino de choro Cherubim. Quando autem corda se plus in virtutibus exercitantium, ad hoc serviebant de choro Virtutum. Et sic singuli angolorum chori ministrabant Domino quando corda sibi similibus in virtutum meritis offerebantur. Illarum vero corda quae ob praedictam revelationem ad specialem devotionem non errant incitata, non deferebant Domino per angelorum ministerium, sed in corporibus propriis apparebant in terra prostrata."

Herald insists.¹¹⁶ This matters. Exactly a central concern of the Helfta literature is to foster in its reader sensitivity to her liturgical environment so as to awaken in her awareness of the circumstances the visions claim to break open. The very effort to document Mechtild's and Gertrude's visions indicates a wish on the part of the authors to make palpable to their monastic community Christ's proximity in the liturgy—as well as that of Mary and the saints. Such awareness, the literature makes clear, is pregnant with possibility: *all* the nuns may aspire to have for themselves the kind of mutually gratifying relationship with Christ that belongs to Mechtild and Gertrude.¹¹⁷ The *Herald* and *Book of Special Grace* summon the sisters to reach after productive pleasures such as seem to have come regularly to Gertrude and Mechtild.

Revelations that introduce the visionary's regard for her fellow nuns do not unreservedly document her sympathy for them or her relatedness to them in a common march toward God. Remarks scattered throughout the *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald* and a number of revelations call attention, in addition, to tensions and animosities among the sisters, which sometimes come to the surface during liturgical observances.¹¹⁸ Thus, for example, Gertrude on one occasion prayed during Mass for a sister whom she found troublesome, and she and Christ spoke about why he appeared not to heed Gertrude's repeated entreaties to reform the woman's unruly temperament.¹¹⁹ In particular, the opportunity to receive communion seems not infrequently to have prompted unkind murmurings and spiritual one-upmanship and to have given rise to disagreement and to strife.¹²⁰

The spiritual power associated with communion and the weight of the worry about reception that pressed on the sisters combined to make reception an

¹¹⁶Ibid., SC 143, 3:17:4:21–22, 80: "Totus sum vester proprius. Ergo fruimini me quilibet vestrum pro desiderio suo."

¹¹⁷For the optimism of the Helfta literature, see, for example, Schmitz, *Les Moniales*, 7:299, and Bynum, "Nuns of Helfta," esp. 193–194. For religious women's attempts to open to their sisters the world within their visions, see McNamara, *Sisters in Arms*, 332.

¹¹⁸The texts, especially the *Herald*, otherwise attest to acrimony within the cloister and irritation among its members with one another, as when a sister who remains anonymous grumbles to God about Gertrude, whom she regards as obstinate (*Le Héraut*, SC 139, 1:16:2, 210–212), or when Mechtild asks God why Gertrude judges severely the failings of others (ibid., 1:11:9, 178). On tensions among the Helfta nuns, see Voaden, "All Girls Together," 79.

¹¹⁹*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:9:4:15–22, 40.

¹²⁰In the thirteenth century, communion became increasingly regulated by ecclesiastical authorities, and we find a heightened fascination with reception of the Eucharist, buoyed by the notion that reception was a principal occasion for affective response to his self-giving and for union with Christ. The piety of the period encouraged self-vigilance and self-appraisal as well as deliberate abstention from communion exactly because of the perception of the stringent requirements to communicate and because of the awe in which the host was held; see, for example, Caspers, "Augenkommunion." On thirteenth-century theologians' preoccupation with who might receive the Eucharist, concern for the disposition of the recipient, anxieties related to reception, and pressures exerted on Christians to receive, see Gary Macy, "Reception of the Eucharist According to the Theologians: A Case of Diversity in the 13th and 14th Centuries," in *Treasures from the Storeroom*, 36–58, and Macy, "Commentaries on the Mass," 142–171.

especially compelling topic of conversation at Helfta.¹²¹ The nuns were mindful that God would measure the strength of their desire and assess their worthiness to receive him, and they were cognizant that members of the congregation were primed to arrive at their own estimations. They were conscious of the care they needed to take to ready themselves for reception and sometimes expressed reluctance about communicating, believing they were unworthy to do so.¹²² Some sisters, aware that they communicated under the watchful eyes of others, confessed that they were scared of causing scandal when they approached the altar.¹²³

Although Gertrude sometimes entertained scruples about communicating, she nonetheless expressed little patience for the trepidations of others.

[Gertrude] saw one of the sisters approach the living sacrament with great fear, and turned away in disgust, as if in indignation, [and] the Lord reproved [her] affectionately in these words: "Do you not consider that I am no less worthily owed the reverence of honor than the sweetness of love? But because the defect of fragile human nature is unable to bring about both in one emotion, since you are members of one another (Rom. 12:15), it is right that what someone lacks in himself, he recuperates through the other; for example, he who with excessive sweet love submits to less feeling of reverence should rejoice that he is supplemented by him who extends greater reverence and should in return desire that he obtain the comfort of divine unction."¹²⁴

This vision both acknowledges and helps to resolve tension at the heart of the Mass.¹²⁵ It portrays Gertrude as fomenting rifts in the liturgical community

¹²¹See, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 139, 1:14:2, 196–197, SC 143, 4:7:4–5, 102–104. This is a subject about which the sisters spoke regularly with one another and with the saints, and it is one about which Gertrude and Mechtild offered counsel. The literature does not, it is interesting to note, report conversations between the sisters and a confessor about reception.

¹²²See, for example, *ibid.*, SC 139, 1:14:2, 196–198, SC 139, 2:5:1, 248, SC 143, 3:18, 80–104, SC 143, 3:34:1, 172–174, SC 143, 3:38:2, 182–184; *Liber*, 2:14, 147, 3:6, 203, 3:22, 225–226.

¹²³*Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:18:22, 98–100.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, SC 143, 3:18:19, 96: "Conspiciens unam ex Sororibus nimis trepidantem accedere ad Sacramenta vivifica sumenda, et inde se prae taedio quasi cum indignatione advertens, Dominus hoc pie in ea redarguit dicens, 'Nonne consideras quod non minus digne mihi debetur reverentia honoris quam dulcedo amoris? Sed cum defectus humanae fragilitatis uno affectu nequeat utrumque aequè perficere, cum vos alterutrum ad invicem sitis membra, dignum est ut quod per se quaelibet minus habet, recuperet per alium: verbi gratia, qui nimis dulci amore affectus reverentiae minus obsequitur, pro se suppletum gaudeat ab illo qui magis intendit reverentiae et vicissim desideret illum obtinere solatiae unctionis divinae.'" Gertrude's reflections on the attitude the communicant ought to assume while approaching communion is more complex than this particular vision attributes to her. See, for example, *ibid.*, SC 139, 2:19:2, 304–306. On the anxiety Gertrude herself sometimes felt about communicating, see Dolan, *St. Gertrude*, 42–44.

¹²⁵It may be that Gertrude did need such correcting as the vision provides her; hers was a more acerbic personality than Mechtild's, and she may have been a less emotionally generous and nuanced counselor than was Mechtild. Her sisters (and perhaps Gertrude as well) may have thought she might benefit from a tempering of her impulsivity and obstinacy (*Le Héraut*, SC

and, through the medium of revelations that came to her in the context of the liturgy, as helping to solder these fractures. Christ's response to Gertrude's dismissal of her sisters' anxieties seems calculated to calm nervous souls, asserting that to approach communion in love and to approach in fear are both courses agreeable to God; it appears intended to temper a tendency to compare and to compete in assuming the one right attitude toward reception. This vision contains more than an instruction in tolerance. God is due both fear, which accompanies reverent acknowledgment of his honor, and love, born (the overall context of the Helfta literature suggests) of the sort of familiarity with him to which Gertrude and Mechtilde are privy. Because human nature is defective, one emotion cannot encapsulate the reverence and love to which God is entitled. God places the onus on the community to address the frailties of human nature that come to the fore when each person communicates. The different attitudes with which the sisters approach communion are complementary: the sisters supply for one another what each lacks. Right worship requires exactly the diversity of attitude that is troubling to the nuns. God uses a cause of conflict in community to create a body of worshipers whose devotion is, from his perspective, necessarily more complete than that of any one individual.

This vision thus suggests that Gertrude found theological justification for varying attitudes toward communicating and that she made an effort to rejoice in exactly that which rankled her. Behind the notion that a variety of attitudes are complementary lies an insistence on the fragility of human nature. The nuns do not elaborate on expressions of such fragility evident in any one individual. They were more interested in diagnosing frailty as inherent in each individual, in recognizing it as a challenge to contentment in the common life, and in offering a remedy. From the perspective of the nuns, the fragility of each woman cries out for its corrective via community.¹²⁶ As illustrated in the person of Gertrude, perception of the failings of one member of the community rouses recognition—with Christ's intervention—of one's own weakness and the importance of mutual reliance and assistance.

139, 1:16:2, 210–212). For a comparison of the personalities of Gertrude and Mechtilde, and the different estimation in which their sisters held them, see Preger, *Geschichte*, 116, 122, 127, and Robinson, "Convent of Helfta," 647. For a comparison of the attitudes Mechtilde and Gertrude assumed as counselors, see Bynum, "Nuns of Helfta," esp. 187, 208, 212, and 225. Many readers of the *Herald* have commented on Gertrude's forceful personality. See, for example, D. A. Castel, *Les belles prières de ste. Mechtilde et ste. Gertrude* (Paris: Maredsous, Desclée de Brouwer-Lethellieux, 1925), xi–xii.

¹²⁶With a leap in logic that calls attention to the overriding preoccupation with community in the Helfta spirituality—and to the relative lack of interest in exploring interpersonal relationships between any two sisters—the *Herald* bypasses the notion that two individuals (one communicating in fear, another in love) can compensate for each other.

Acknowledgement of individual vulnerability is bound up with optimism about the opportunities the liturgical community holds out to each of its members.

III. CONCLUSION

Apprehensions about increasingly private and subjective demonstrations of piety and related anxieties about the fracture of communal religious experience have a long history stretching back into the Middle Ages;¹²⁷ the sisters at Helfta were not detached from such concerns. They recognized the complexity, during liturgy, of holding tight simultaneously to meditation, vision, and ecstasy, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the obligations associated with corporate worship. Drawing on the resources they perceived that the liturgy held out to them, the nuns were sure of their ability to do so. More than the sisters' successful juggling of responsibilities, desires, and delights is implied in the Helfta literature. The nuns invested considerable intellectual energy in elaborating on the relationship, during liturgical observances, between the individual sister and the company of women with whom she worshiped. The literature they composed insists that, within the communal context of the liturgy, the sisters carved out space for interiority in which self-exploration and contact with Christ, his mother, and his friends might take place. It indicates that a basic need for the other who is sister and responsibility for her were central to the sense of self cultivated during liturgical observances at Helfta. Animated by a robust sense of accountability for their sisters and a commitment to cooperating with Christ in the work of salvation, Mechtild and Gertrude—as the works with which they are associated relate—championed their liturgical community's relationship with Christ and credited themselves with contributing to the increase of Christ's happiness in part exactly by drawing their sisters toward him. The Helfta writings wed an insistent preoccupation with self in relation to God with a commitment to the liturgical community, which is both the context within which attention to the self flourishes and spiritual progress takes place as well as the beneficiary of the fruit of self-exploration and encounter with Christ, Mary, and the saints.

Mechtild, Gertrude, and the anonymous authors who shared in the making of the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* seem confident that, by opening up the visionaries' interior lives for their readers, they were at once offering models for the sisters' emulation and rendering visible precious and pervasive aspects of the daily routine of all the nuns, about which readers may otherwise have been insufficiently unaware. Among the central aims of

¹²⁷Hamburger, "Art, Enclosure," 88–89; Huizinga, *Autumn of the Middle Ages*.

this literature is to teach the reader about the exceptional sisters in her midst as well as about the inner workings of her community, and thus about herself—and so to shape her continuing experience of the liturgy.¹²⁸

James was surely right to emphasize that the God of the Helfta writings inclined with preferential prejudice toward those who captured his affection. Passage upon passage in the Helfta writings calls attention to Mechtild's and Gertrude's heady confidence in themselves as occupying a distinguished place in the ensemble of Christ's cherished friends. At Helfta, particular ties of affection bind the visionaries with Christ. James did not notice, however, that Gertrude and Mechtild perceived Christ as seeking out all their sisters, presenting himself as their just inheritance. When, in the middle of Mass, Gertrude heard Christ proclaim "I am wholly your own," he offered himself not to her alone but to the whole assembled community of sisters.

¹²⁸Harrison, "What Treasure Is in This Book?"