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## 'A New and Special Joy': Increasing the Happiness of Mary and the Saints in the Helfta Spirituality

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“A NEW AND SPECIAL JOY”:  
INCREASING THE HAPPINESS OF MARY  
AND THE SAINTS  
AT THE MONASTERY OF HELFTA<sup>1</sup>

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Convinced of the meaningfulness of virtually their every desire, every thought, and every action to Mary and the saints, the thirteenth-century nuns of Helfta celebrate the joy they brought to those already bathed in the bliss of eternity, as one reads in the nuns’ hybrid compositions, *Book of Special Grace* and the *Herald*. Collaboratively composed with almost no discernable male involvement, and consisting of revelations and ecstasies, teachings, prayers, and testimonies to the exemplary devotion of the monastery’s most esteemed members, Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241 - ca. 1298/99) Gertrude of Helfta (1256 - ca. 1301/02) as well as to the holiness of the household as a whole, this literature piles visionary account on top of visionary account to accentuate the privileged place the nuns understood themselves to occupy in the heavenly spheres.

Coupled with their conviction of the pervasive presence of Mary and the saints – whom the nuns perceived accompanied them in the chapel, the dormitory, and the refectory – the women of Helfta brought heaven and earth, the living and the holy dead, into such proximity with each other that difference between the places pales, and the relationship between the two populations becomes palpably intimate and roundly reciprocal.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on material from “*Thousands and Thousands of Lovers*”: *Sense of Communion Among the Nuns of Helfta*, forthcoming 2022 from Cistercian Publications. I dedicate this article to Caroline Walker Bynum.

<sup>2</sup> As Barbara Newman has observed, “no other visionary text is so preoccupied with heaven or so convinced of its nearness to earth.” “Introduction,” *Mechtild of Hackeborn: The Book of Special Grace*, trans. Barbara Newman (New York: Paulist Press, 2017) 16.

In the visions the nuns attribute to themselves, Mary and the saints sang with them in choir, Mary's voice sounding especially delicious;<sup>3</sup> John the Evangelist and Luke intervened to offer mass when an interdict would otherwise have prohibited the nuns from receiving;<sup>4</sup> Mary, ever ready in response to her supplicants, mixed the prayers the nuns offered with perfume, sweetening them;<sup>5</sup> she and the saints hovered in the infirmary, their presence a consolation;<sup>6</sup> established beside a sister's deathbed, Mary chased away demons,<sup>7</sup> and when a sister died, Mary transported the separated soul into Christ's arms,<sup>8</sup> while a company of saints attended to the body during its interment.<sup>9</sup> The Helfta writings draw attention to Mary's and the saints' investment in the details of the nuns' daily life, listening to the women carp about one another<sup>10</sup> and keeping vigilant watch over sleeping sisters.<sup>11</sup> They answered sisters' questions about Christ's earthly life,<sup>12</sup> recounted edifying tales about their personal histories,<sup>13</sup> confirmed the teaching about heaven the nuns had received,<sup>14</sup> and aided the nuns in tasting even now the delectable delights in store for holy souls.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Liber specialis gratiae," in *Sanctae Mechthildis, virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti, Liber specialis gratiae accedit sororis Mechthildis ejusdem ordinis Lux divinitatis*, vol. 2 of *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechthildianae*, ed. the monks of Solesmes [Louis Paquelin] (Paris: H. Oudin, 1877) 1:27, 96; hereafter cited as *Liber*.

<sup>4</sup> On the interdict, see, for example: *ibid.*, 1:27, 95; *Le Héraut*, ed. and trans. Pierre Doyère, et al., 4 vols., *Gertrude d'Helfta: Oeuvres spirituelles*, 139, 143, 255, 331, Série des texts monastiques d'occident, nos. 25, 27, 48 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968–86), *Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:16:1:1-25, 66, and SC 143, 3:17:1:8-15, 74; hereafter cited as *Le Héraut*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, SC 255, 4:12:1-2, 132-33.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*, SC 331, 5:28:1, 228, for example.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: *ibid.*, SC 255, 4:54:6, 452-54; SC 331, 5:1:21, 40; SC 331, 5:3:1, 66-68; *Liber*, 1:26, 92; 1:45, 130; 1:47, 133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:6, 383-84.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:6, 328.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 331, 5:8:1, 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:4:7, 70-72.

<sup>12</sup> *Liber*, 1:5, 20.

<sup>13</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:4:7, 70-72.

<sup>14</sup> *Liber*, 1:1, 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:50:9, 416.

Mary and John the Evangelist were the sisters' principal models, while other holy men and women exerted a special pull on individual nuns. Bernard of Clairvaux's honey-tongued words seem to have captivated Gertrude, herself a passionate writer,<sup>16</sup> and the love between Agnes and Christ appears to have beckoned Mechtild,<sup>17</sup> her own desires for Christ ferocious. Especially important to the nuns, Mary and the saints were exemplary exactly because of their commitment to mediation: they facilitated for the sisters a closeness to Christ that approximated their own.<sup>18</sup>

Considering them as friends and family members on whom they depended with an almost casual confidence and to whom they turned with an easy familiarity, even as they lavished them with formal expressions of praise, the nuns were attentive to their duty to cultivate and express love for Mary and the saints. In this regard, the sisters' beliefs and practices are familiar from a late medieval world in which love and praise are returns made to Mary and the saints in recognition of who they are and as payback for acts of intercession. This author's study has found that the sisters accentuated a sense of reciprocity that may, however, surprise those familiar with the standard accounts of the medieval communion of saints and which underscores the women's responsibility for triggering surges of joy within the celestial society.

The women of Helfta perceived that it was a privilege for heaven's inhabitants to help the nuns secure the many gifts that Christ bestowed on them, a privilege in which the nuns were sure the saints took great pleasure:<sup>19</sup> the sisters' need for heavenly intercession generated joy for those to whom they appealed for assistance and who responded obligingly. Moreover, witnessing the sisters receiving gifts of joy was contagious, one woman's happiness becoming a matter for celestial rejoicing. Thus, for example, when Christ prepared a wedding banquet for Mechtild,

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, SC 255, 4:49:1, 396.

<sup>17</sup> *Liber*, 1:11, 35.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:4:10:7-11, 76-78, and *Liber*, 5: 31, 370.

<sup>19</sup> See also *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:4:4:1-12, 64, and SC 255, 4:3:8:1-10, 56. On the nuns' notion of giving as a privilege, see Newman, "Introduction," 20-21.

at which all the heavenly household was in attendance, he took Mechtild's hand in his hand and made her jump with joy, and this gave new happiness and fresh joy to all the guests.<sup>20</sup> The joy of the love relation was not restrained to two (God and the self) but spilled outward to the whole celestial community.

The nuns perceived, furthermore, that they could integrate themselves into the love relationship Christ enjoyed with those in heaven, insinuating themselves into the pleasure-giving bonds between God and Mary, or between God and his saints. Once during Mass, Mechtild wished she were a queen so that she might make an offering of gold on behalf of her deceased sister, Abbess Gertrude of Hackeborn (1223-92). Christ right away appeared to Mechtild in the form of a young king, and Mechtild led him before the altar, at which, giving joy to the abbess, Christ offered himself with love to God the Father, and the abbess fell into Christ's embrace.<sup>21</sup>

In this account, the desire Mechtild directed toward her sister precipitated an expression of Christ's love for the abbess, his giving of himself to the Father. This vision thus suggests that the thoughts the living have about the dead in heaven and the yearning that permeates their musings call forth a cooperative response in Christ, which redounds to the benefit of the holy dead. Elsewhere one reads that, on the Feast of St. Agnes, Mechtild perceived that each of her sisters, worshipping in common, facilitated a flowing out of the divinity into the saint. Mechtild saw a ray of light proceeding from the heart of each woman who at matins chanted the responsory *Amo Christum*, a repetition of the declaration of love that Agnes had long ago made to Christ. The rays that proceeded from each nun's heart entered Christ's heart, from where they flowed, like a liquid, into the heart of Agnes.<sup>22</sup> Through the medium of chant in this instance, the sisters inserted themselves into Agnes' relationship with Christ, accentuating their own importance to the virgin martyr's experience of heaven. There is no hint in the *Book of Special Grace* that the love between Christ and Agnes is in any

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<sup>20</sup> *Liber*, 1:19, 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 6:9, 389-90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:11, 34-35.

way deficient. Mechtild's vision underscores both the ancient profession of love for Christ that Agnes made and the mutuality of their love that joins Agnes with Christ in a heavenly embrace. Nevertheless, the sisters made room for their contribution to the expression of this mutual love.

The Helfta literature relates that the memories the holy dead harbored of sources of satisfaction and delight while they were alive were central to souls' joy in heaven, and a number of passages in the *Herald* and *Book of Special Grace* makes evident the nuns' understanding that they might spark merry memories for the saints and for Mary.<sup>23</sup> Christ instructs Mechtild to remind the saints of their joy,<sup>24</sup> and when Mechtild prayed to St. Catherine on behalf of a particular sister, Catherine told Mechtild that if the sister chanted "Come my beloved, come into your spouse's bridal chamber," this would recall to Catherine the experience of martyrdom when, upon hearing Christ summon her with just these words, Catherine's heart melted with love.<sup>25</sup> Let her "remind me of this joy," Catherine directed Mechtild,<sup>26</sup> promising to look favorably on the sister who did so.<sup>27</sup>

Through their devotions, the sisters provided an opportunity for the saints to reflect on joy-filled experiences with Christ that took place before death catapulted them into heaven. Indeed, the sisters attributed to the sung prayer they offered during mass and office the jogging of Christ's own memories, to the benefit of Mary and the saints.

One passage from the *Herald* relates that a particular responsory the sisters intoned stirred Christ's recollection in such a way as to bring joy to his mother. When the sisters sang *Descendit de caelis* ("he descended from heaven"), a vision

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:12:4, 136.

<sup>24</sup> *Liber*, 1:34, 114.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:32, 111: Veni, dilecta mea, veni; intra thalamum Sponsi tui."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: "Admonens me gaudii." On the importance of memory, God's and the saint's, to the saints' joy in heaven, see *ibid.*, 1:34, 114-15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:41, 125. For indications of the value to Mary of recalling aspects of her experience to her, see: *ibid.*, 1:29, 99; 1:42, 126. For the medieval conviction that hearing the faithful voice the angelic salutation sparked a joyous response in the Virgin, see Rachel Fulton Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018) 63.

came to Gertrude in which the Lord seemed to her to remember the love with which he entered his mother's womb. Liquefied by love at this recollection, Christ fixed his sight on Mary, causing her to shudder; he kissed her, provoking in her a renewal of the joy of conception; and then Gertrude saw that Mary's uterus, transparent as crystal, became wholly filled with the divinity.<sup>28</sup> In this account, the sisters' ability to affect Mary was reliant on Christ's receptive response to their devotions. Christ was susceptible to the nuns' song, which prompted a reminiscence that impelled a series of events, all of which had direct bearing on Mary's contemporaneous experience in heaven.

The Helfta writings make clear that there is no shortage of additional ways – through their prayer life and other daily devotions as well as more extravagant expressions of piety – by which the nuns routinely brought happiness to Mary and the saints. As John the Evangelist related to Mechtild, he would make an offering to all the saints of the prayers he accepted from one of Mechtild's sisters, sure that the heavenly inhabitants would feast on the prayers as if at a banquet. In this instance, John's intercession facilitates one woman's ability to give pleasure to the Evangelist's celestial companions.<sup>29</sup>

The Helfta writings underscore that devotion to Christ brought great happiness to his mother. Thus, for example, at matins on the Feast of the Nativity, Gertrude saw Mary press her Baby to the soul of each of Gertrude's sister in turn, each of whom cradled the Infant in the arms of her soul. Sisters reading this account in the *Herald* might have found in it cause for self-satisfaction to mingle with the gratitude for Mary's mediation, which, it is clear, this revelation sought to elicit in them. They might have considered that their devotion to Christ (aided by Mary) profited not only themselves but also Mary, whose pleasure with the nuns' solicitude to her Son the *Herald* notes. In this context, it is not surprising to find in the *Herald* the assertion that Gertrude's experiences of union with Christ increased the

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<sup>28</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:3:3-4, 50-52. For the gifts that Christ promises those who remind him of *his* joys, see, for example, *Liber*, 1:19, 65.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:6, 22.

joy of all the saints.<sup>30</sup> On one occasion, so one reads, 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 [liquor], flowing into those [in heaven] ..., increased their joy; some of which, ... flowing into purgatory, mitigated the punishments of those there; some of which ... flowing onto the earth, augmented the sweetness of the grace of the just and the bitterness of penitence of the sinners.<sup>31</sup>

Gertrude's assimilation to Christ and her plea that he share the benefits of her union with him have as a consequence that Christ's humanity and divinity washed over souls, living and dead, an expression of solidarity. The nuns knew, of course, that Christ was responsible for the expansion of the saint's joy just as it was he who eased the punishment of purgatory's inhabitants and was responsible for increases in grace and in contrition among the living. The passage highlights, however, Gertrude's union with Christ and her solicitude for the living and the dead as yoking her in a cooperative endeavor with him.

The nuns' confidence in their ability to influence for the better souls' experience of heaven is predicated on a number of assumptions. First, the nuns believed that in heaven, the soul's joy will continue to grow for all eternity. To the women of Helfta, its ceaseless increase was constitutive of the very nature of celestial joy, and, indeed, the joy of heaven consisted in part in the saints' *knowing* that their happiness would never level off

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<sup>30</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:3:8, 56.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, SC 143, 3:18:6, 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."



but forever climb.<sup>32</sup> The nuns even charged themselves with recalling this reality to the saints!<sup>33</sup>

While the majority of theologians in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries emphasized heaven as stasis, edging out the older view of the saved soul's eternally expanding joy, Cistercian nuns of Helfta were influenced by the thought of Bernard of Clairvaux and may well have been familiar with those of his sermons and treatises that treat of the soul's experience of heaven, in which the soul will be met with wave after wave of ever-increasing satisfaction (It is not known with certainty which of Bernard's works they read).

There is a significant difference between the nuns' thought and Bernard's, however. In the nuns' vision of the glory of eternity, in contrast with Bernard's, what looms large is not the unfettered and always-fulfilled desire of the saved soul. Instead, it is the sisters' own role in the increase of the happiness of the saints that commands their unwavering fascination.<sup>34</sup> As depicted in the Helfta writings, the state of saved souls in heaven was characterized by jumps in joy and a variety of experiences that, from the perspective of the sisters, did not depend exclusively on God, who did not demand the undivided attention of the holy dead. The heavenly experience was one on which the sisters were sure they, in cooperation with Christ, had direct and substantive bearing. Their writings sought to steel and steady contemporary sisters and future generations at Helfta in their monastic commitments by documenting their efficacy, insisting on their immediate consequences – entirely pleasing – for Mary and the saints.

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<sup>32</sup> *Liber*, 1:34, 114-15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Bernard's own writings do not draw attention to the notion that the living can augment the joy of the holy dead. In the well-known sermon on the Song of Songs whose focus is on the death of Bernard's brother Gerard, Bernard bemoans the inability of his sorrow to move Gerard; Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 26, in *Sermons sur le Cantique*, Sources Chrétiennes, 414, Œuvres complètes de Bernard de Clairvaux, vol. 1 (Paris, Cerf, 1996), and "Jesus Wept": Mourning as Imitation of Christ in Bernard's Sermon Twenty-Six on the Song of Songs," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, 48:4 (2013), 433-67. The nuns, on the other hand, are confident in the power of their tears to bring happiness to their deceased Abess; *Le Héraut*, SC 331, 5:1:1:28, 52.

It may help to make further sense of the Helfta piety to locate the nuns' thought within the context of the widespread medieval conviction that Mary and the saints rejoice in one another's presence, a belief that found clear and clamorous expression in the Helfta literature.<sup>35</sup> A central feature of heaven, as the nuns conceived of it, is that it abounded in what Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang have called "social joys,"<sup>36</sup> joys experienced by this or that saint or by a whole group of saints whose source is in another saint's earthly accomplishments on behalf of the church or the divine delights another saint enjoyed. The very presence in heaven of each saint brought joy to every other saint, and as the Helfta works depicted it, the saints were, therefore, eager for new membership in their society, the arrival of souls in heaven cause for welcoming jubilation on the part of those who preceded them.<sup>37</sup>

The saints were aware of who each each of them was when she or he was on earth, and such knowledge gave pleasure. Mechthild beheld the monastery's founder, Count Burchard (d. 1229), surrounded by his heirs and deceased members of the monastic household, each of whom recited a poem narrating all the good she or he had accomplished during her or his lifetime. As the count listened to their recitations, his heart filled with happiness.<sup>38</sup> Past and present experiences converge in heaven so that the joy belonging at any time to one person comes to belong always to all, and this shared joy is a participation in God's joy, whose joy in each saint is as if God's sole joy, and which is (sometimes) ignited by acts, attitudes, or emotions of the living.

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<sup>35</sup> One of Mary's titles is "Joy of All the Saints" (*Gaudium Omnium Sanctorum*); *Liber*, 1:38, 122; the saints give joy to one another: *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:10, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 92. For medieval theologians' notions about the role of the company of the saints in relation to the bliss of heaven, see B. Forshaw, "Heaven (Theology of)," vol. 6 of *The New Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Berard L. Marthaler, Gregory F. LaNave, Jonathan Y. Tan, Richard E. McCarron, Denis J. Obermeyer, David J. McGonagle (Detroit: Gale, 2003) 686.

<sup>37</sup> *Liber*, 6:9, 389.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:10, 334-36.

For example, in the court of heaven, Gregory shared in the pleasure God received every time one of the pope's writings pricked with compunction, prompted to devotion, or fired with love anyone reading or hearing them.<sup>39</sup> When Mechtild asked Christ how she should glorify the saints, he responded, providing the most concise statement anywhere in the Helfta literature that the saints participate fully in one another's joy:

Praise my goodness in the saints, whom I have given bliss so great that not only do they in themselves abound in all good things as individuals. But truly the joy of anyone of the saints is augmented from the other saints to such an extent that any one of the saints rejoices from the goods of another saint more than any mother ever could exult in the exaltation of her only child or a father in the glorious triumph of his son.<sup>40</sup>

Home to a ceaseless series of reciprocal exchanges of joy of among the saints, heaven in the Helfta writings is relationality. Unending rounds of gift-giving characteristic of celestial existence meant that the joy the saints conferred to one another via a shared source in God continuously grew anew.<sup>41</sup> The inner life of God in which the saints share *is* a serial gift-giving among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup> Thus when the nuns observed that in heaven God becomes the eye by which the soul sees, the light by which she sees, the beauty that she sees,<sup>43</sup> “the soul's life and the movement of all its limbs, so that everything the soul does, God himself seems to do [within her],”<sup>44</sup> they also noticed that “in this way, it is truly fulfilled in the saints that ‘God shall be all

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<sup>39</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 255, 4:10:3, 124.

<sup>40</sup> *Liber*, 1:34, 113: “‘Lauda meam bonitatem in Sanctis, quos tanta beatitudine donavi, ut non solum in seipsis omnibus abundant bonis, verum etiam cujuslibet gaudium ex alio in tantum augmentatur, ut quilibet de bonis alterius plus gaudeat quam unquam mater aliqua in exaltatione unici sui, aut pater in triumpho et Gloria sui potuit exultare filii. Sicque singulorum merita quilibet tamquam propria in jucundissima possidet charitate.’”

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:34, 114-15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:20, 72-73.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:21, 352.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: “Vita animae, et motus omnium membrorum ejus, ut omnes quod anima agit, ipse Deus in ea agere videatur.

in all' (1 Cor 15:28)."<sup>45</sup> This is why the women could write that when the soul enters heaven, "in a wonderous and joyous way, God beholds himself, the soul, and all the saints in and with the soul."<sup>46</sup> The flooding of the self with God that characterizes the heavenly experience was, to the nuns, simultaneously a breaking down of barriers between individual saints, implying the openness of self to other, a boundless reverberation of bliss throughout eternity for the saved selves.

An important third basis for the nuns' assuredness in their ability to affect the society of the saints was the women's supposition that they were themselves in some sense already incorporated into this society.<sup>47</sup> "There is no difference between the way in which the saints enjoy God and my soul's union with him," Mechtild confided in a friend,<sup>48</sup> the Helfta literature emphasizing in this regard as in others that which the nuns and the saints had in common, not that which differentiated one group from the other. So intimate was her affiliation with the saints that Mechtild encountered them in her heart. She entered this as if it were a beautiful vineyard and found them there, beside a fountain that sprinkled them with waters flowing from Christ's heart. Then she entered Christ's heart, and at his command, she offered the saints everything that was hers, all his heart contained, heaven and earth.<sup>49</sup>

Elsewhere one reads that when angels carried Gertrude up into a heavenly Mass, she saw Christ withdraw his heart from his body, and it assumed the shape of an altar, on which he placed a chalice into which the angels poured a lifetime of Gertrude's trials and tribulations. Then, "the Lord immediately blessed this

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: "Ut illud vere in Sanctis impleatur: 'Erit eis Deus omnia in omnibus.'"

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, "Ut miro et jucundissimo modo Deus in anima et cum anima seipsum, et animam et omnes Sanctos speculetur."

<sup>47</sup> See, for example: Ann Marie Caron, "Invitations of the Divine Heart: The Mystical Writings of Mechthild of Hackeborn," *American Benedictine Review* 45:2 (1994) 335; Barbara Kline, "The Discourse of Heaven in Mechtild of Hackeborn's *Booke of Gostlye Grace*" in *Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Jan S. Emerson and Hugh Feiss (Milton Park: Taylor and Francis, 2000) 83-99.

<sup>48</sup> *Liber*, 2:26, 170: "Nullaque differentia est inter illam, qua Sancti jam Deo fruuntur et animae mea unione."

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:22, 79-81.

chalice with the sign of the holy cross, in the manner of a priest consecrating the host.”<sup>50</sup> The saints raised their own hearts, which took on the form of straws, and inserted these into the chalice. Here the stuff of Gertrude’s life, transformed into Christ by Christ, became incorporated into the saints. Gertrude was already in heaven, and through Gertrude’s person, a convergence of sorts took place between the communities of the living and the dead. When, even before she arrives in heaven, God folded Mechtild into his embrace, pressing her heart to him, this encounter was not just a joining of Mechtild with God but also concurrently a sharing of the joys associated with that encounter with all saints:

... it seemed as though all of her members flowed like streams into all the saints, suffusing them with a new and special joy, holding their hearts in their hands like shining lamps, filled with that gift that God infused into the soul, and giving thanks to the Lord for that soul with great gratitude and happiness.<sup>51</sup>

In their ability to affect the saints, the nuns regarded themselves as remarkably *like* the saints. When the *Herald* and the *Book of Special Grace* voiced the nuns’ successful efforts to add to the fund of the saints’ happiness, it must have seemed to their cloistered readers that, however partially and however provisionally, they had even now secured membership in this celestial community.

Another context that feeds the nuns’ notion that they affected for the better Mary’s and the saint’s experience of eternity is their staunch confidence in the pleasure they (Gertrude, Mechtild, and their sisters) gave to Christ. The Christ of the Helfta writings elicited the nuns’ love for him exactly on account of the love with which he showered them, a love in

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<sup>50</sup> “Quem calicem Dominus statim signo sanctae crucis benedixit more sacerdotis hostiam consecrantis”; *Le Héraut*, SC 331, *Missa*, 9.22-24, 298.

<sup>51</sup> *Liber*, 2:17, 151: “Ut sibi videretur de omnibus membris suis tamquam rivulus effluere in omnes Sanctos, ita ut omnes novo et speciali gaudio perfusi, corda sua velut lampades perlucidas in minibus tenerent, repletas dono illo, quod Deus animae infuderat, et cum magna gratitudine et Laetitia Domino pro anima illa gratias referebant.”

which his longing assumed central place and which acknowledged his need for a return, for reciprocal love. Mechtild was his chosen one, his dove, his field of flowers.<sup>52</sup> “You are my reward,” he confessed.<sup>53</sup>

For his delight, Mechtild once offered him her heart in the form of a rose, and in the form of a goblet from which Christ might drink her, and in the form of a pomegranate, so that Christ might eat her up.<sup>54</sup> In a vision thick with sensuality and commitment, Christ asserts that he welcomes Gertrude’s embrace with all his strength; the heat of her heart melts him. On another occasion, Christ pulls his right arm from the cross, clasps Gertrude, and putting his rosy mouth to her ear, repeats that her love is his greatest pleasure.<sup>55</sup> “Oh, please me, now, my Lady Queen” Christ implored Gertrude, “as I have so often pleased you.”<sup>56</sup> Gertrude was to him like Christ’s very breath, without which he could not live.<sup>57</sup>

The Helfta writings insist that Gertrude and Mechtild, indeed all the sisters, are necessary to God’s happiness. The nuns could not conceive of a relationship with Christ that did not entail give-and-take, an exchange of pleasure. A loving relationship requires both parties to honor and affect each other, and to be vulnerable to one another’s presence, to want and to expect a ceaseless flow of mutual love. If God himself takes such delight in the nuns, what reason had they to suppose that Mary and the saints would not derive pleasure from them also? Indeed, the joy that Mechtild, Gertrude, or one of their sisters gave to Christ filled Mary and the saints with pleasure. Thus, one reads that, at a feast at which all of heaven’s inhabitants were in attendance, Mechtild:

Holding her lover, Christ, in a tight embrace of intimate love, led him to the banquet table. And she saw

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 7:2, 392.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:8, 143: “Tu es praemium meum.”

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:17, 217-18.

<sup>55</sup> *Le Héraut*, SC 143, 3:45:2, 204.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, SC 255, 4:14:6, 160: “Eia, domina regina, blandire mihi nunc, sicut ego saepius sum.”

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, SC 143, 3:26:3. 124-25.

indescribable brightness and wondrous splendor going out from the Lord's face, which lit up the entire celestial hall and which filled up all the cups that were on that royal table. In this way, the brightness of his loveable face became ... [the guests'] fulfillment, filled them with joy and delight without satiating them, gave them happiness without end, and made them exult in him.<sup>58</sup>

As the *Book of Special Grace* elsewhere make clear, the joy that Mechtild gives Christ becomes the joy of the saints because all who are (or will be) saved in some sense really *are* Christ. He is the head; they are the members, the authors of the Helfa literature, echoing I Corinthians, remind their readers.<sup>59</sup> Thus, seeing Christ's body in a vision, Mechtild saw that it contained all souls then in heaven:

as well as all those who would be present in the future. ... Even those ... currently in a state of sin appeared [in the body] in the way in which they would in the future be in heaven. ... Loving souls and souls who suffered patiently for Christ glowed in his heart with special splendor, while the rest shimmered in other parts of his body.<sup>60</sup>

The sisters' understanding of their contribution to the society of saints does not attest to dependency on part of the saints, who were already redeemed, already wholly joyful. Yet the nuns were unequivocal and forceful in asserting that they were of unyielding significance to Christ's mother and his saints.

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<sup>58</sup> *Liber*, 1:19, 69-70: "Anima vero Christum amatorum suum amplexibus stringens intimae charitatis, ante mensam convivantium ipsum ducebat. Et vidit claritatem inenarrabilem, et mirificum splendorem a facie Domini pocedere, qui totam coelestem aulam perlustrabat, et omne scyphos qui in illa mensa regali errant replebat. Sic ergo claritas suae amabilis faciei facta est ipsorum satiety, gaudium et amoenitas satiat sine fastidio, laetificat sine termino, et exultare facit in seipso."

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 1:20, 76.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:20, 72-73: "tam praesentium quae secum ascenderant, quam omnium illuc futurorum, singulorum opera, passiones et merita; ita ut hi qui modo sunt in statu peccati, tali forma in ipso apparerent, quales futuri sunt in coelo. Animae vero amantes, et qui pro Christi multa patienter tolerant, in Corde ejus speciali decore fulgebant, reliquae autem in caeteris membris ejus elucebant."

Flush with traces of the nuns' heady self-importance, the Helfta writings, although they again and again praised God as source of all rewards and all joys, never compromise the importance of the nuns' contribution to a joint endeavor with God. The *Book of Special Grace* instructed readers that there is no action, however small, that if performed on earth in God's praise does not increase the joy of all the saints.<sup>61</sup>

While the notion that the saints rejoice in right actions of the living is widespread in the Middle Ages,<sup>62</sup> the religiosity of the nuns stands apart for the *unabashed enthusiasm* with which they projected themselves onto the particulars of Mary's and the saints' experience of heaven. We can attribute this fervor in part to the nuns' notion that heaven is an unending increase in bliss, that Mary and the saints perpetually share in one another's joys, that the nuns were themselves already integrated into the celestial society, and that Christ exulted in the pleasure the nuns gave to him. Joined to an unremitting sense of that all who are or will be saved in some sense really *are* Christ, the Helfta authors elaborated on the joy with which their community streaked the heavens.



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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:31, 106.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:19, 79.



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