



POPE JOHN PAUL II
APOSTOLIC LETTER
ISSUED *MOTU PROPRIO*

PROCLAIMING
SAINT BRIDGET OF SWEDEN
SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA AND
SAINT TERESA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS
CO-PATRONESSES OF EUROPE

HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
FOR PERPETUAL REMEMBRANCE

1. The hope of building a more just world, a world more worthy of the human person, stirred by the expectation of the impending Third Millennium, must be coupled with an awareness that human efforts are of no avail if not accompanied by divine grace: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain” (*Ps* 127:1). This must also be a consideration for those who in these years are seeking to give Europe a new configuration which would help the Continent to learn from the richness of her history and to eliminate the baneful inheritances of the past, so as to respond to the challenges of a changing world with an originality rooted in her best traditions.

There can be no doubt that, in Europe's complex history, Christianity has been a central and defining element, established on the firm foundation of the classical heritage and the multiple contributions of the various ethnic and cultural streams which have succeeded one another down the centuries. The Christian faith has shaped the culture of the Continent and is inextricably bound up with its history, to the extent that Europe's history would be incomprehensible without reference to the events of the first evangelization and then the long centuries when Christianity, despite the painful division between East and West, came to be the religion of the European peoples. Even in modern and contemporary times, when religious unity progressively disintegrated as a result both of further divisions between Christians and the gradual detachment of culture from the horizon of faith, the role played by faith has continued to be significant.

The path to the future cannot overlook this fact, and Christians are called to renew their awareness of it, in order to demonstrate faith's perennial potential. In the building up of Europe, Christians have a duty to make a specific contribution, one which will be all the more valid and effective to the extent that they themselves are renewed in the light of the Gospel. In this way they will carry forward that long history of holiness which has traversed the various regions of Europe in the course of these two millennia, in which the officially recognized Saints are but the towering peaks held up as a model for all. For through their upright and honest lives inspired by love of God and neighbour, countless Christians in a wide range of consecrated and lay vocations have attained a holiness both authentic and widespread, even if often hidden.

2. The Church has no doubt that this wealth of holiness is itself the secret of her past and the hope of her future. It is the finest expression of the gift of the Redemption, which ransoms man from sin and gives him the possibility of new life in Christ. The People of God making their pilgrim way through history have an incomparable support in this treasure of holiness, sensing as they do their profound union with the Church in glory, which sings in heaven the praises of the Lamb (*cf. Rev* 7:9-10) and intercedes for the community still on its earthly pilgrimage. Consequently, from very ancient times the Saints have been looked upon by the People of God as their protectors, and by a singular practice, certainly influenced by the Holy Spirit, sometimes as a request of the faithful accepted by the Bishops, and sometimes as an initiative of the Bishops themselves, individual Churches, regions and even Continents have been entrusted to the special patronage of particular Saints.

Accordingly, during the celebration of the Second Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops, on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, it has seemed to me that the Christians of Europe, as they join their fellow-citizens in celebrating this turning-point in time, so rich in hope and yet not without its concerns, could draw spiritual benefit from contemplating and invoking certain Saints who are in some way particularly representative of their history. Therefore, after appropriate consultation, and completing what I did on 31 December 1980 when I declared Co-Patrons of Europe, along with Saint Benedict, two Saints of the first millennium, the brothers Cyril and Methodius, pioneers of the evangelization of the East, I have decided to add to this group of heavenly patrons three figures equally emblematic of critical moments in the second millennium now drawing to its close: Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Theresa Benedicta of the Cross. Three great Saints, three women who at different times—two in the very heart of the Middle Ages and one in our own century—were outstanding for their fruitful love of Christ's Church and their witness to his Cross.

3. Naturally the vistas of holiness are so rich and varied that new heavenly patrons could also have been chosen from among the other worthy figures which every age and region can vaunt. Nevertheless I feel that the decision to choose this “feminine” model of holiness is particularly significant within the context of the providential tendency in the Church and society of our time to recognize ever more clearly the dignity and specific gifts of women.

The Church has not failed, from her very origins, to acknowledge the role and mission of women, even if at times she was conditioned by a culture which did not always show due consideration to women. But the Christian community has progressively matured also in this regard, and here the role of holiness has proved to be decisive. A constant impulse has come from the icon of Mary, the “ideal woman”, Mother of Christ and Mother of the Church. But also the courage of women martyrs who faced the cruellest torments with astounding fortitude, the witness of women exemplary for their radical commitment to the ascetic life, the daily dedication of countless wives and mothers in that “domestic Church” which is the family, and the charisms of the many women mystics who have also contributed to the growth of theological understanding, offering the Church invaluable guidance in grasping fully God's plan for women. This plan is already unmistakably expressed in certain pages of Scripture and, in particular, in Christ's own attitude as testified to by the Gospel. The decision to declare Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Co-Patronesses of Europe follows upon all of this.

The real reason then which led me to these three particular women can be found in their lives. Their holiness was demonstrated in historical circumstances and in geographical settings which make them especially significant for the Continent of Europe. Saint Bridget brings us to the extreme north of Europe, where the Continent in some way stretches out to unity with the other parts of the world; from there she

departed to make Rome her destination. Catherine of Siena is likewise well-known for the role which she played at a time when the Successor of Peter resided in Avignon; she brought to completion a spiritual work already initiated by Bridget by becoming the force behind the Pope's return to his own See at the tomb of the Prince of the Apostles. Finally, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, recently canonized, not only lived in various countries of Europe, but by her entire life as thinker, mystic and martyr, built a kind of bridge between her Jewish roots and her commitment to Christ, taking part in the dialogue with contemporary philosophical thought with sound intuition, and in the end forcefully proclaiming by her martyrdom the ways of God and man in the horrendous atrocity of the Shoah. She has thus become the symbol of a human, cultural and religious pilgrimage which embodies the deepest tragedy and the deepest hopes of Europe.

4. The first of these three great figures, Bridget, was born of an aristocratic family in 1303 at Finsta, in the Swedish region of Uppland. She is known above all as a mystic and the foundress of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour. Yet it must not be forgotten that the first part of her life was that of a lay woman happily married to a devout Christian man to whom she bore eight children. In naming her a Co-Patroness of Europe, I would hope that not only those who have received a vocation to the consecrated life but also those called to the ordinary occupations of the life of the laity in the world, and especially to the high and demanding vocation of forming a Christian family, will feel that she is close to them. Without abandoning the comfortable condition of her social status, she and her husband Ulf enjoyed a married life in which conjugal love was joined to intense prayer, the study of Sacred Scripture, mortification and charitable works. Together they founded a small hospital, where they often attended the sick. Bridget was in the habit of serving the poor personally. At the same time, she was appreciated for her gifts as a teacher, which she was able to use when she was required to serve at Court in Stockholm. This experience was the basis of the counsel which she would later give from time to time to princes and rulers concerning the proper fulfilment of their duties. But obviously the first to benefit from these counsels were her children, and it is not by chance that one of her daughters, Catherine, is venerated as a Saint.

But this period of family life was only a first step. The pilgrimage which she made with her husband Ulf to Santiago de Compostela in 1341 symbolically brought this time to a close and prepared her for the new life which began a few years later at the death of her husband. It was then that Bridget recognized the voice of Christ entrusting her with a new mission and guiding her step by step by a series of extraordinary mystical graces.

5. Leaving Sweden in 1349, Bridget settled in Rome, the See of the Successor of Peter. Her move to Italy was a decisive step in expanding her mind and heart not simply geographically and culturally, but above all spiritually. In her desire to venerate the relics of saints, she went on pilgrimage to many places in Italy. She visited Milan, Pavia, Assisi, Ortona, Bari, Benevento, Pozzuoli, Naples, Salerno, Amalfi and the Shrine of Saint Michael the Archangel on Mount Gargano. Her last pilgrimage, made between 1371

and 1372, took her across the Mediterranean to the Holy Land, enabling her to embrace spiritually not only the many holy places of Catholic Europe but also the wellsprings of Christianity in the places sanctified by the life and death of the Redeemer.

Even more than these devout pilgrimages, it was a profound sense of the mystery of Christ and the Church which led Bridget to take part in building up the ecclesial community at a quite critical period in the Church's history. Her profound union with Christ was accompanied by special gifts of revelation, which made her a point of reference for many people in the Church of her time. Bridget was recognized as having the power of prophecy, and at times her voice did seem to echo that of the great prophets of old. She spoke unabashedly to princes and pontiffs, declaring God's plan with regard to the events of history. She was not afraid to deliver stern admonitions about the moral reform of the Christian people and the clergy themselves (cf. *Revelations*, IV, 49; cf. also IV, 5). Understandably, some aspects of her remarkable mystical output raised questions at the time; the Church's discernment constantly referred these back to public revelation alone, which has its fullness in Christ and its normative expression in Sacred Scripture. Even the experiences of the great Saints are not free of those limitations which always accompany the human reception of God's voice.

Yet there is no doubt that the Church, which recognized Bridget's holiness without ever pronouncing on her individual revelations, has accepted the overall authenticity of her interior experience. She stands as an important witness to the place reserved in the Church for a charism lived in complete docility to the Spirit of God and in full accord with the demands of ecclesial communion. In a special way too, because the Scandinavian countries from which Bridget came were separated from full communion with the See of Rome during the tragic events of the sixteenth century, the figure of this Swedish Saint remains a precious ecumenical "bridge", strengthened by the ecumenical commitment of her Order.

6. Slightly later in time is another great woman, Saint Catherine of Siena, whose role in the unfolding history of the Church and also in the growing theological understanding of revelation has been recognized in significant ways, culminating in her proclamation as a Doctor of the Church.

Born in Siena in 1347, she was blessed from her early childhood with exceptional graces which enabled her to progress rapidly along the spiritual path traced by Saint Dominic on a journey of perfection which combined prayer, self-denial and works of charity. Catherine was twenty years old when Christ showed his special love for her through the mystical symbol of a wedding ring. This was the culmination of an intimacy which had matured in hiddenness and in contemplation, thanks to her constantly abiding, even outside the monastic walls, in that spiritual dwelling-place which she loved to call her "interior cell". She was quickly able to blend the silence of this cell, which rendered her completely docile to God's inspirations, with remarkable apostolic activity. Many people, including members of the clergy, gathered around her and became her disciples,

recognizing in her the gift of spiritual motherhood. Her letters circulated throughout Italy and Europe as a whole. Indeed, by the assurance of her bearing and the ardour of her words, the young woman of Siena entered into the thick of the ecclesiastical and social issues of her time.

Catherine was tireless in her commitment to resolving the many conflicts which afflicted the society of her time. Her efforts to bring peace reached the level of European rulers such as Charles V of France, Charles of Durazzo, Elizabeth of Hungary, Louis the Great of Hungary and Poland, and Giovanna of Naples. Her attempts to reconcile Florence with the Pope were also notable. Placing “Christ crucified and sweet Mary” before the parties involved, she made it clear that in a society inspired by Christian values there could never be grounds for conflict so serious that the reasons of force need prevail over the force of reason.

7. Yet Catherine was well aware that such a conclusion was unthinkable if souls had not first been moulded by the power of the Gospel. This was why she stressed the reform of morals to all, without exception. To monarchs she insisted that they could not govern as if the realm was their “property”: knowing that they must render to God an account of their exercise of power, they must instead uphold “holy and true justice” and become “fathers of the poor” (cf. *Letter 235 to the King of France*). The exercise of sovereignty was not to be separated from the exercise of charity, which is the soul both of one's personal life and one's political responsibility (cf. *Letter 357 to the King of Hungary*).

With the same vigour, Catherine addressed Churchmen of every rank, demanding of them the most exacting integrity in their personal lives and their pastoral ministry. The uninhibited, powerful and incisive tone in which she admonished priests, Bishops and Cardinals is quite striking. It is essential—she would say—to root out from the garden of the Church the rotten plants and to put in their place “new plants” which are fresh and fragrant. And strengthened by her intimacy with Christ, the Saint of Siena was not afraid to point out frankly even to the Pope, whom she loved dearly as her “sweet Christ on earth”, that the will of God demanded that he should abandon the hesitation born of earthly prudence and worldly interests, and return from Avignon to Rome, to the Tomb of Peter.

With similar energy Catherine then strove to overcome the divisions which arose in the papal election following the death of Gregory XI: in that situation too she once more appealed with passionate ardour to the uncompromising demands of ecclesial communion. That was the supreme ideal which inspired her whole life as she spent herself unstintingly for the sake of the Church. She herself declared this to her spiritual children on her death-bed: “Hold firm to this, my beloved—that I have given my life for the holy Church” (Blessed Raymond of Capua, *Life of Saint Catherine of Siena*, Book III, Chap. IV).

8. With Edith Stein—Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross—we enter a very different historical and cultural context. For she brings us to the heart of this tormented century,

pointing to the hopes which it has stirred, but also the contradictions and failures which have disfigured it. Unlike Bridget and Catherine, Edith was not from a Christian family. What we see in her is the anguish of the search and the struggle of an existential “pilgrimage”. Even after she found the truth in the peace of the contemplative life, she was to live to the full the mystery of the Cross.

Edith was born in 1891 to a Jewish family of Breslau, which was then in German territory. Her interest in philosophy, and her abandonment of the religious practice which she had been taught by her mother, might have presaged not a journey of holiness but a life lived by the principles of pure “rationalism”. Yet it was precisely along the byways of philosophical investigation that grace awaited her: having chosen to undertake the study of phenomenology, she became sensitive to an objective reality which, far from ultimately dissolving in the subject, both precedes the subject and becomes the measure of subjective knowledge, and thus needs to be examined with rigorous objectivity. This reality must be heeded and grasped above all in the human being, by virtue of that capacity for “empathy”—a word dear to her—which enables one in some way to appropriate the lived experience of the other (cf. Edith Stein, *The Problem of Empathy*).

It was with this listening attitude that she came face to face, on the one hand, with the testimony of Christian spiritual experience given by Teresa of Avila and the other great mystics of whom she became a disciple and an imitator, and, on the other hand, with the ancient tradition of Christian thought as consolidated in Thomistic philosophy. This path brought her first to Baptism and then to the choice of a contemplative life in the Carmelite Order. All this came about in the context of a rather turbulent personal journey, marked not only by inner searching but also by commitment to study and teaching, in which she engaged with admirable dedication. Particularly significant for her time was her struggle to promote the social status of women; and especially profound are the pages in which she explores the values of womanhood and woman's mission from the human and religious standpoint (cf. E. Stein, *Woman. Her Role According to Nature and Grace*).

9. Edith's encounter with Christianity did not lead her to reject her Jewish roots; rather it enabled her fully to rediscover them. But this did not mean that she was spared misunderstanding on the part of her family. It was especially her mother's disapproval which caused her profound pain. Her entire journey towards Christian perfection was marked not only by human solidarity with her native people but also by a true spiritual sharing in the vocation of the children of Abraham, marked by the mystery of God's call and his “irrevocable gifts” (cf. *Rom 11:29*).

In particular, Edith made her own the suffering of the Jewish people, even as this reached its apex in the barbarous Nazi persecution which remains, together with other terrible instances of totalitarianism, one of the darkest and most shameful stains on the Europe of our century. At the time, she felt that in the systematic extermination of the Jews the Cross of Christ was being laid on her people, and she herself took personal part

in it by her deportation and execution in the infamous camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Her voice merged with the cry of all the victims of that appalling tragedy, but at the same time was joined to the cry of Christ on the Cross which gives to human suffering a mysterious and enduring fruitfulness. The image of her holiness remains for ever linked to the tragedy of her violent death, alongside all those who with her suffered the same fate. And it remains as a proclamation of the Gospel of the Cross, with which she identified herself by the very choice of her name in religion.

Today we look upon Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and, in her witness as an innocent victim, we recognize an imitation of the Sacrificial Lamb and a protest against every violation of the fundamental rights of the person. We also recognize in it the pledge of a renewed encounter between Jews and Christians which, following the desire expressed by the Second Vatican Council, is now entering upon a time of promise marked by openness on both sides. Today's proclamation of Edith Stein as a Co-Patroness of Europe is intended to raise on this Continent a banner of respect, tolerance and acceptance which invites all men and women to understand and appreciate each other, transcending their ethnic, cultural and religious differences in order to form a truly fraternal society.

10. Thus may Europe grow! May it grow as a Europe of the spirit, in continuity with the best of its history, of which holiness is the highest expression. The unity of the Continent, which is gradually maturing in people's consciousness and receiving a more precise political definition, certainly embodies a great hope. Europeans are called to leave behind once and for all the rivalries of history which often turned the Continent into a theatre of devastating wars. At the same time they must work to create conditions for greater unity and cooperation between peoples. Before them lies the daunting challenge of building a culture and an ethic of unity, for in the absence of these any politics of unity is doomed sooner or later to failure.

In order to build the new Europe on solid foundations it is certainly not enough to appeal to economic interests alone; for these, while sometimes bringing people together, are at other times a cause of division. Rather there is a need to act on the basis of authentic values, which are founded on the universal moral law written on the heart of every person. A Europe which would exchange the values of tolerance and universal respect for ethical indifference and skepticism about essential values would be opening itself to immense risks and sooner or later would see the most fearful spectres of its past reappear in new forms.

To remove this threat, the role of Christianity—which tirelessly points to the horizon of ultimate truth—is once again seen to be vital. Also, in light of the many areas of agreement with other religions acknowledged by the Second Vatican Council (cf. Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*), it must be strongly emphasized that openness to the Transcendent is a vital dimension of human existence. It is essential, therefore, for all Christians who live in the different nations of the Continent to renew their commitment to bear witness to

their faith. Theirs is the task of nourishing the hope of full salvation by the proclamation which properly belongs to them: the proclamation of the Gospel, the “Good News” that God has drawn near to us and in his Son Jesus Christ has offered us redemption and fullness of divine life. In the power of the Spirit who has been given to us we can lift our eyes to God and call upon him with the tender name of “Abba”, Father! (cf. *Rom* 8:15: *Gal* 4:6).

11. It is precisely this proclamation of hope that I have wished to strengthen by calling for a renewed devotion, in a “European” context, to these three great women, who in different historical times made so significant a contribution to the growth of the Church and the development of society.

Through the Communion of Saints, which mysteriously unites the Church on earth with the Church in heaven, they take our cares upon themselves in their unceasing intercession before the throne of God. At the same time, a more fervent invocation of these Saints, and a more assiduous and careful attention to their words and example, will not fail to make us ever more aware of our common vocation to holiness and inspire in us the resolve to be ever more generous in our commitment.

Wherefore, after much consideration, in virtue of my Apostolic Authority I establish and declare Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross heavenly Co-Patronesses of all of Europe before God, and I hereby grant all the honours and liturgical privileges belonging by law to the principal patrons of places.

Glory be to the Holy Trinity, whose radiant splendour shines uniquely in their lives and in the lives of all the Saints. Peace to men and women of good will, in Europe and throughout the world.

*Given in Rome,
at Saint Peter's,
on the first day of October in the year 1999,
the twenty-first of my Pontificate.*

Joannes Paulus II