

Saint Gertrude of Nivelles

Born: 626, Landen, Belgium

Died: 17 March 659, Nivelles, Belgium

Gertrude is a patron of cats and gardens and a guardian against mice and rats. In the middle ages, artists represented her with mice running up her cloak or staff. They symbolized the suffering souls in purgatory who were under her protection.

Gertrude's father, Pepin, had advised three generations of kings. After his death, her mother, Itta, erected a double monastery at Nivelles and put Gertrude in charge. They welcomed many pilgrims, and Gertrude even gave the saintly Irish brothers Foilland Ultan land upon which to build their own monastery at Fosses. Foillan commuted to Nivelles to celebrate Mass and instruct the monks and nuns in chants and Scripture. Gertrude herself knew the Bible by heart. After the death of her mother, she delegated practical management to a small committee of nuns and monks while she concentrated on spiritual matters. Her health was failing, and at thirty-two she stepped down, allowing her twenty-year-old niece, Wilfetrude to succeed her as abbess. When a pilgrim at Fosse learned that Gertrude was dying, he sent word that she should fear nothing, for Saint Patrick was already with God and waiting to welcome her in glory. Gertrude died on Patrick's feast day.

The Genius of Gertrude of Nivelles:

Gertrude lived with her mother in perfect harmony -- something many contemporary mothers and daughters might pray for.

Reflection:

*"Wisdom has built her house...she calls
from the heights out over the city:
Let whoever is simple turn in here;
to him who lacks understanding, I say,
Come, eat of my food,
and drink of the wine I have mixed!
Forsake foolishness that you might live;
advance in the ways of understanding...
For by me your days will be multiplied
and the years of your life increased."*

Proverbs 9.1, 3-6, 11

Gallick, Sarah: The Big Book of Women Saints, p. 87