

Saint Lutgard of Aywieres

born 1182, Tongres, Belgium
died 1246, Couture-Saint-Germaine, Belgium

Lutgard's Benedictine convent was essentially a finishing school where girls of her class prepared for marriage. The tolerant nuns left Lutgard free to flirt with her many suitors until she experienced a vision of Christ in which he pointed to his bleeding heart and said: "*Behold here what you are to love, and how you are to love.*"

A confused Lutgard consulted her confessor, but he too was unfamiliar with the Sacred Heart. This was four hundred years before the visions of Margaret Mary Alacoque, the saint most closely associated with the devotion. Besides, Lutgard's priest wondered why Christ would appear to such a frivolous girl. Nevertheless, Lutgard was allowed to become a Benedictine nun and threw herself into every aspect of prayer and work. Blessed with healing powers, she drew many visitors who disrupted convent life, so she asked God to take back his gift. He asked what she would take instead, and Lutgard requested a clearer understanding of the psalms. This insight proved more than she could handle, and she asked God to take back that gift too. "*What would you have me give you, Lutgard?*" he asked. Lutgard asked for his heart. God replied "*It is I who want yours.*" "*Take it*", she said and they exchanged hearts. Four years later, Lutgard was elected prioress of the convent, but she craved seclusion. Christina the Astonishing recommended a move to the Cistercian convent at Aywieres, and there Lutgard devoted the rest of her life to contemplation and prayer. She undertook three seven-year fasts in reparation for spreading heresy, during which she lived on bread and beer (the standard drink of the Middle Ages). Blind in the last eleven years of her life, Lutgard regarded even that cross as a gift from God.

The Genius of Lutgard of Aywieres:

Lutgard's spiritual heroism made her a favourite of Thomas Merton, the twentieth-century mystic, who wrote that she "is intended in the plans of God to inspire us all, each in his own manner, to follow her example of self-sacrifice as best we can."

Reflection:

*"The eyes of the LORD are upon those who love him;
He is their mighty shield and strong support."*

Sirach 34.16