

## Begine Sr. Brita Lieb

“Beguines are carried by beauty and creation” is a quote from Sr. Laura Swan. We found your book “*The Wisdom of Beguines*” to be so well researched, informative and not difficult to read, that we translated it into German with three volunteer Beguines. – This is how we at the DV=umbrella organization came across the international Beguine works and so I would like to point out to you a second book which we are currently translating:

Dr. TANYA Stabler Miller from Ignatius Loyola University in Chicago wrote her doctoral thesis on the “Beguines of Medieval Paris”. This is actually possible in today's media-connected world!

Paul Marchal once led teachers from France to Flanders, who were pleasantly surprised by the beguines. They had no idea that there had ever been beguines in France. So it is now very important that many in the USA and Europe learn about the incredible story of the Parisian Beguines:

### In short:

Louis IX, KING of France, later better known as Louis the Pious, returned to Paris in 1254, traumatized, shaken and feeling guilty for the failure of this crusade, where his sister Isabella, praying and living in seclusion despite all the ridicule about it, she had represented him at court for six years.

She was only able to do this because she had refused marriage to the son of Emperor Frederick II, despite the Pope's wishes, and also other attempts of well-known gentlemen. She encouraged him to be and get socially and spiritually involved!

Shortly after his return, King Louis IX had to go to Flanders to reconcile the sons of Countess Margaret of Constantinople and Brabant, Flanders and Hainaut.

There he saw the large St. Elisabeth beguinage in Ghent and was fascinated by the life of the beguines there.

Returning to Paris, he chose a large area which was not subject to secular or ecclesiastical authority and founded a “Great Beguinage”, selected the residents himself and asked a first experienced mistress, Agnes von Orchies from Douai, to be there to help shape the (beginnings) start-up. He generously equipped his “royal beguinage”, and the residents of some daughters or widows of impoverished nobles received pensions or maintenance from him also. - In addition, the Beguines received the silk privilege!

Since the women were not allowed to study or preach, with the exception of the mistress, they brought the best preachers and professors to the court in order to expand women's education and ensure pastoral care.

One of them was Robert de Sorbon (+1274), who founded an institute (a college) for secular clerics, who until then were only semi-skilled and often did not understand the Latin of their liturgies!

In addition, most of them were married and had children. At that time, only bishops, abbots and specially commissioned clergy were allowed to preach. That was to be changed. –

In 1257, with royal support, the still existing Sorbonne University was named after Robert de Sorbon. - The community life and the ideal of the Beguines were a model for Robert and also a model for his educational institution. He said and wrote: “Look at these beguines. Just as

they live and work for people with all their hearts and minds, working to the width, you must do the same, dear secular priests! Literally: “Beguine is love, love is beguine”! >>>

>>> (That beguines were recommended as models for secular priests as early as the middle of the 13th century we really didn't know until this year and the translation of this book. - We German beguines couldn't even think of this). -

#### Further:

The king had called in Robert de Sorbon, the “Secular Priest and Magister,” as advisor and secretary because he (the king) himself wanted to live like a lay brother and of course faced strong resistance. You may know the enchanting Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, which Louis then had built to say: God designed creation and beauty and He alone deserves the glory!

In his will, King Louis IX obliged also all his successors to continue to view the beguinage as an object of prestige for the royal family and so the Paris beguines were protected even after the Council of Vienna in France, which tried to ban the beguines.

There were many students, priests and masters who valued the exchange with the Beguines, they preached in the Beguinage and even cited the sermons of the Mistresses as good examples in their many collections of sermons for secular priests. For the first time it was propagated that it was not theo-logy, i.e. teaching from the head, that was the most important thing, but rather doing things for others, being like the Beguines with “both feet on earth and one hand in heaven”!

In the Latin version “Bono igne ignitae” = “Women who burn for good”.

In French: “beguine comme bon feu” the meaning of this title was clearly and positively highlighted.

- Or literally written down by another: “Love is goodness and indeed, love is being a beguine”. Or vice versa: Being a Beguine means living love! –
- In a devotional book at the end of the 13th century, a “rule of true lovers” was noted to describe the Beguines and that they were directly under God!
- All the characteristics of the Beguines mentioned can be found in this book. It is clear that the Beguines were at the height of their time back then and were recognized as great lovers!

>>> This standard hit me deeply, even though I am aware that the deep roots of history can still create values today! –

I would like to introduce you to an example of a beguine who appears several times in the Paris tax books and her last will is still preserved: Jeanne du Faut. As a wealthy patrician, Jeanne had a house in the royal beguinage and probably learned the silk craft there. In any case, she left the beguinage to set up a home workshop in a silk district of Paris with many other beguines who made the silk fabrics that she then sold as a silk merchant. She had a large network of other traders, Jews, Italians who supplied the raw material, nobles, patricians and customers traveling internationally...

In Paris there were 3 female guilds in the silk industry. Jeanne is specifically mentioned in one. Of course, Jeanne also trained other women or beguines. The training could last up to 10 years (like the priesthood training at the Sorbonne University). This was also important for

women who came to Paris from the countryside and learned something about the silk craft which secured their stay and their livelihood. This is how Jeanne became rich with her extensive network of relationships and bequeathed her inheritance to her best employee and friend.

It was and remained important to her to combine these practical activities with the spirituality of the Beguines and in “praying and working” to remain a religious Beguine despite all her success!

She bequeathed to her best employee the house in which she lived for the last years of her life, then the house with the workshop, of which she (the friend) was to be the director, and the house in the beguinage, which proves that this heiress and nominal executor was a beguine, because otherwise she would not have been able to live in the royal beguinage.

In the spirit of the Beguines, Jeanne also gave generously to several monasteries, her chaplain and a choirmaster friend, as well as to all the employees and godchildren, and she gave a generous donation to each of her male relatives, so that, as it was said, they would not contest her will, as the Paris customary-laws would have permitted. But her spiritual friends were more important to her than her relatives!

As this “dearest” successor of Beatrice also died, the executors of Jeanne's will wanted to sell Jeanne's house in the beguinage, but the beguine mistress resisted and sued: the beguinage's law was stronger and it was argued that only a living beguine could dispose of her house in the beguinage, in which she passed it on to another Beguine. So the executors had no chance.

>>> (A comment from me for today: We beguines of today are not yet again at this point, but it would really be an advantage for the duration of our beguinages to only pass on a right of residence to one beguine and thus providing for "new" beguines.

Like Jeanne's home workshop, there were many silk makers in the city of Paris with rich networks owned by the beguines outside the royal beguinage, which existed for about 300 years and many generations of beguines.

Now to another important point: An essential motive for entry to become a Beguine was following Christ or living like the apostles, but also education was needed. The beguinages were places of learning, there were “scholas” where arithmetic, writing and reading were taught, as well as the music and Latin of the liturgies! Also known and interesting was the practical work for the people who needed it most: the poor, the old, the sick, the dying, widows and orphans, street children, etc. which determined their type of discipleship, at that time it was called doing “works of mercy”.

The Beguines valued not so much the triumphant divinity of Jesus, which had predominated in the Romanesque period, but rather his humanity, his role model and his teaching, his tenderness in healing, encouraging, consoling, his loving interaction with people, his way of forgiving and his resurrection - and they spoke about it to other needy and uneducated people. Of course, they also prayed during the care, the terminal care, for the dead and their surviving relatives and the people who confided in them.

Robert de Sorbon therefore recommended that the secular candidates for the priesthood in his institute should observe the beguines and earnestly take their way of being with people for their own pastoral tasks. So they preached in the Beguinage Chapel and answered the questions of the critical, alert and theologically educated Beguines. They even submitted

themselves to the judgment of the Beguines!

It is almost a miracle that so many collections of sermons from the 13th century have been preserved in the library of the Sorbonne, which contain the sermons of the students or magister at the Beguinage or their notes, specifically the sermons of the mistress, the "Magistras". They were respected as important examples for future preachers.

Whenever the priests called for physical penance, confession and remorse, for withdrawal and exclusive love for their "soul bridegroom" Jesus, the mistress preached, for example, that without real repentance there is no point in confessing and that in practical actions for the poorest of the poor they could just as easily meet their "soul bridegroom". The equivalence of social activities with liturgy became very clear.

>>> So as we say today: "not either or", but "both and".

Marguerite Porète, for example, a clerically educated Beguine, made "Jeux dramatique" (drama games in dialogue form) as an encouragement in public squares to reach and encourage ordinary people to change their lives and believe in God's great love for them. This made a difference to their diverse dependencies and needs, including emotional needs.

I want to come to an end:

The flexibility and dynamism of beguine life are as attractive in 1250 as they are today. The independence, education and self-determination of women cannot yet be taken for granted; their independence, even for socially meaningful assignments of their choice, is still a model for the future in the 21st century - all of our efforts to create contemporary Beguine identities are rooted in knowledge of Beguine history, which is not that easy to revive.

May God bless it, as Beguine Maria van Hout always said!

Now you have got an impression of the quality of "our" new book about the Parisian Beguines. I'm not sure if we can either get the book published due to lack of financial resources or invite the author Dr. Tanya Stabler Miller from Chicago to the 3rd International Conference in 2025. Nevertheless, we the 'Umbrella Association of Beguines e.V.' will do everything to pass on knowledge about the historical Beguines in a qualified manner.

Especially, when we find ourselves today in different contexts and make decisions according to our time, we Beguines should know why and for what purpose we do so. Because, of course, there is no going back to the middleages, the merits and achievements of the early Beguines can still inspire and encourage us.

>>> "Tradition is not about keeping the ashes, but the passing on of fire!"  
Such a popular word in today's Beguine circles.

Thank you and I hope you enjoy your meal!

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