

St. Hedwig



On every limb of the tangled branches of Saint Hedwig's family tree sits a duke, landgrave, prince, king, queen, and count. The roots of Hedwig's aristocratic tree likewise spread up and down the hills and valleys of Europe's heartland. Her uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews occupied duchies, governed dioceses, sat on thrones, ran monasteries, and reigned over realms large and small in the medieval core of Christendom. Hedwig was born in a castle to a duke. At the age of twelve, she married a duke, Henry the Bearded of Silesia, a region straddling present day Poland, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Hedwig lived when the mortar in the walls of Europe's castles was still wet, and their moats still freshly dug. She and her kind, the early nobility of Europe, correctly understood that culture and Catholicism were synonymous. To bring the Church to a people just stepping out of the darkness of paganism was to bring hospitals, monogamy, the Mass, literacy, knowledge, schools, law, monasteries, farms, care for the poor and widows, and the hope of the Gospel. Hedwig understood this perfectly. She unapologetically promoted the faith of Jesus Christ because it was as good for the people as it was for God.

Hedwig bore her husband seven children. She and Henry were a generous couple who personally cared for the sick, founded and patronized hospitals, and who promoted Catholicism through the establishment and endowment of religious houses. They established Cistercian, Augustinian, Premonstratensian, Dominican, and even very early Franciscan foundations. After their last child was born, Duke Henry and Hedwig took a mutual vow of chastity before their bishop and lived mostly apart. Henry received the tonsure and let his beard grow long. Hedwig moved close to the convent of Trebnitz, in present day Wrocław, Poland, which she and Henry had previously founded. It was the first women's religious house in Silesia and part of Henry and Hedwig's broader effort to develop Christian life and German culture throughout Central Europe.

After Henry died in 1238, the widow Hedwig took the grey habit of the Cistercian nuns at Trebnitz Abbey, where her daughter Gertrude was abbess. It was likely not easy for Hedwig, the mother, to live in obedience to her very own daughter. Hedwig did not, however, take formal religious vows, because her wealth was still needed to support the monastery. But Hedwig otherwise lived the austere life of

prayer, mortification, fasting, and poverty, which the monastic community itself lived. Early biographies relate that Hedwig also performed miracles, saw into the future, and had the gift of prophecy, even foretelling her own date of death.

Saint Hedwig did not kiss the chains of her captivity, bleed to death as a martyr in the arena, or boycott her womb as a vowed and perpetual virgin. She was the wife of a powerful man and the mother of a large family. She walked the wide and well-traveled road of marriage and family domesticity. And it was along that path that she found holiness, carried the burdens of the Church's mission on her shoulders, and left a legacy of church building normally associated with an indefatigable bishop. This wife and mother was canonized in 1267 and is buried near her husband in the abbey church at Trebnitz, where she last closed her eyes in 1243.

Saint Hedwig, your missionary fervor helped build the church in your native land. May your tireless work be an example to all the faithful to use whatever station in life they occupy as a platform to better know love, and serve God and His Church.