

St. Bertille (France) (d. 703)

Infirmarian¹

Benedictine nun

*Her prudence and virtue appeared consummate,
and the care of entertaining strangers, of the sick and
of the children that were educated in the monastery,
was successively committed to her
Prioress of the Abbey at Chelles*



St. Bertille was a Benedictine nun at the convent in Jouarre, Brie, France. Born of one of the most illustrious families in the territory of Soissons (modern day France), she served as the infirmarian (nurse) and convent school headmistress. She was the first Prioress of the Abbey at Chelles after St. Bathildis, the wife of King Clovis II (Reigned 638-656). She refounded the convent-abbey around 646 AD. Several Merovingian princesses and many Anglo-Saxon noble women entered the convent including: St. Bathildis and Queen Hereswith,² the widow of the king of the East Angles. (Memorial November 5)

St. Bertille, Abbess of Chelles (November 5), from the *original* Rev. Alban Butler's (1883) *Lives of Saints*:

St. Bertille was born of one of the most illustrious families in the territory of Soissons, in the reign of Dagobert I, and by her piety acquired the true nobility of the children of God. From her infancy she preferred the love of God to that of creatures, shunned as much as possible the company and amusements of the world, and employed her time in serious duties, and chiefly in holy prayer. As she grew up, by relishing daily more and more the sweetness of conversing with God, she learned perfectly to despise the world, and earnestly desired to renounce it. Not daring to discover this inclination to her parents, she first opened herself to St. Ouen, by whom she was encouraged in her resolution; but they both took some time to pray to the Father of lights, that He would guide her according to his holy will, and manifest by what spirit she was directed; knowing that every impulse is not from the Holy Ghost. Self-love early disguises itself in every shape, and the devil often transforms himself into an angel of light. Not to be deceived through precipitation and rashness, in so important a choice as that of a state of life, impartial advice, prayer, careful self-examination and mature deliberation are necessary. These means having been employed, the saint's parents were made acquainted with her desire, which God inclined them not to oppose. They conducted her to Jouarre, a great monastery in Brie, four leagues from Meaux, founded not long before, about the year 630, by Ado, the elder brother of St. Ouen, who took the monastic habit there with many other young noblemen, and established a nunnery in the neighborhood, which became the principal house. St. Thelchilde, a virgin of noble descent, who seems to have been educated or first professed in the monastery of Faremoutier, was the First abbess of Jouarre, and governed that house till about the year 660. By her and her religious community St. Bertille was received with great joy and trained up in the strictest practice of monastic perfection. Our saint looking upon this solitude as a secure harbor, never ceased to return thanks to God for his infinite mercy in having drawn her out of the tempestuous ocean of the world; but was persuaded she could never deserve to become the spouse of Jesus Christ, unless she endeavored to follow him in the path of humiliation and self-denial. By her perfect submission to all her sisters she seemed everyone's servant and in her whole conduct was a model of humility, obedience, regularity and devotion. Though she was yet young, her prudence and virtue appeared consummate, and the care of entertaining strangers, of the sick, and of the children that were educated in the monastery, was successively committed to her. In all these employments she had

acquitted herself with great charity and edification when she was chosen prioress to assist the abbess in her administration. In this office her tender devotion, her habitual sense of the divine presence, and her other virtues shone forth with new luster, and had a wonderful influence in the direction of the whole community. Everyone, by her example, was ashamed to fail in any part of the practice of the like devotion, or in the most punctual and scrupulous observance of the least rule of monastic discipline.

When St. Bathildes, wife of Clovis II, munificently re-founded the abbey of Chelles, which St. Clotildis had instituted near the Marne, four leagues from Paris, she desired St. Thelchildes to furnish this new community with a small colony of the most experienced and virtuous nuns of Jouarre, who might direct the novices in the rule of monastic perfection. Bertille was sent as the head of this holy company and was appointed first abbess of Chelles, in 646, or thereabouts. The reputation of the sanctity and prudence of our saint, and the excellent discipline which she established in this house, drew several foreign princesses thither. Among others Bede mentions Hereswith, queen of the East-Angles. She was daughter of Hereic, brother, or brother-in-law to St. Edwin, king of Northumberland, and married the religious king Annas, with whose consent she renounced the world, and passing into France in 646, became a nun at Chelles, and there happily finished her earthly pilgrimage. In Wilson's English martyrology she is placed among the saints on the 20th of September. Queen Bathildes, after the death of her husband, in 655, was left regent of the kingdom during the minority of her son Clotaire III, but as soon as he was of age to govern, in 665, she retired hither, took the religious habit from the hands of St. Bertille, obeyed her as if she had been the last sister in the house, and passed to the glory of the angels in 680. In this numerous family of holy queens, princesses, and virgins, no contests arose but those of humility and charity; no strife was ever known but who should first submit, or humble herself lowest, and who should outdo the rest in meekness, devotion, penance, and in all the exercises of monastic discipline. The holy abbess, who saw two great queens every day at her feet, seemed the most humble and the most fervent among her sisters, and showed by her conduct that no one commands well or with safety who has not first learned, and is not always ready, to obey well. This humble disposition of soul extinguishes pride, and removes the fatal pleasure of power which that vice inspires, and which is the seed of tyranny, the worst corruption of the human heart. This virtue alone makes command sweet and amiable in its very severity, and renders us patient and firm in every observance and duty. St. Bertille governed this great monastery for the space of forty-six years with equal vigor and discretion. In her old age, far from abating her fervor, she strove daily to redouble it both in her penances and in her devotions; as the courser exerts himself with fresh vigor when he sees himself almost touching the goal, or as the laborer makes the strongest efforts in his last strokes to finish well his task. In these holy dispositions of fervor the saint closed her penitential life in 695.

One who has truly in spirit renounced the world, sees its figure pass before his eyes **contemns** the smoke of its enjoyments, shudders at the tragical scenes of its ambition, dreads its snares, and abhors its cheating promises, magnificent impostures, and poisonous pleasures by which it ceases not to enchant many unhappy souls. With the security and tranquility of a man who is in the harbor, he beholds the boisterous raging and the violent tosses of this tempestuous sea, in the midst of which the unhappy Egyptians struggle against the fury of the waves, and after toiling for some time sink on a sudden wave one after another, and are buried in the abyss. Those only escape this ruin whose souls soar above it, so that their affections are no way entangled or engaged^{3 4}.

References:

1) "Saint Bertille". CatholicSaints.Info. 6 November 2021. Web. 10 December 2021.
<<https://catholicsaints.info/saint-bertille/>>

2) EWTN Library. St. Bertille. (Accessed 17 Oct 2021) <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/saints/bertille-499>

3) Reverend Alban Butler (1883). *The Lives of the Saints* as republished by Loreto Publications: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 2020. Book Six, Vol. X & XI, 635-638.

4) St Bertille, Abbess of Chelles. *e-Catholic 2000*. (Accessed 12/14/2021)
<https://www.ecatholic2000.com/butler/vol11/november23.shtml>

Note: This biography is for all desiring to grow in holiness and follow His Holiness Pope Pius XI address to 2000 nurses assembled at Castel Gondolfo on August 27, 1935 for the II World Congress of Catholic Nurses (www.ciciams.org / www.nacn-usa.org): *to first and foremost bring the Christian supernatural, Christ to our patients, bring salvation to souls*. May it also help nursing students with your Nursing History course. Source: Diana L. Ruzicka (2022). *The Book of Nurse Saints*. Available at www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka