

**St. Mary Elizabeth Hesselblad  
(Sweden/USA/Italy) 1870-1957**

*Studied nursing at Roosevelt Hospital in Manhattan, New York.  
Worked as a nurse and provided home care for the sick and aged.*

*Converted to Catholicism*

*Joined Carmelites, House of St. Bridget of Sweden.<sup>1</sup>*

*Re-established the ancient Brigittine Order.<sup>3</sup>*



**Mary Elizabeth Hesselblad** was born on June 4, 1870, at Faglavik, Alvsborg province, Sweden. She was the fifth of fifteen children born to Augusto Roberto Hesselblad and Cajsa Pettesdotter Dag. In July 1870 she was baptized into the Reformed Church of Sweden (Lutheran) in her parish in Hundene. Due to economic hard times, the family moved regularly. She emigrated to New York at the age of 18 to seek work to support her family back in Sweden.

Mary studied nursing at Manhattan's Roosevelt Hospital where she worked as a nurse from 1888 and did home care for the sick and aged. Her work took her into the large Catholic population of New York; her interest in Church grew, and she came to see it as the place closest to Christ. She converted to Catholicism, received conditional baptism on August 15, 1902, by the Jesuit priest Giovanni Hagen at the Convent of the

Visitation in Washington, District of Columbia (D.C.). In late 1902 she received the Sacrament of Confirmation in Rome while on pilgrimage. There she clearly dedicated herself to the unity of Christians. For the first time, she visited the church and house of Saint Bridget of Sweden. She returned briefly to New York but then sailed back to Rome and settled in the Casa di Santa Brigida on March 25, 1904, the Solemnity of the Annunciation, where she lived with the Carmelite nuns.

In 1906, she received permission from Pope Pius X to take the habit of the Brigittines (Order of the Most Holy Savior of Saint Bridget). In 1911, she was joined by three young English postulants whose particular mission was to pray and work, especially for the unity of the Scandinavian Christians and the Catholic Church. She was ecumenically minded, desiring to unite Sweden with the Church, "one fold under one shepherd."

In 1923, St. Maria Elizabeth Hesselblad returned to her homeland, ministered to the poor and tried to revitalize the Brigittine movement there. She established a house in Djursholm, Stockholm, Sweden in 1923. The first monastery and Mother house of the Order that St. Bridget of Sweden founded, in 1369, was situated on Lake Vattern in Vadstena, Sweden. As a result of the Reformation, then the Thirty Year's War and the French Revolution, and general secularism, most of the old institutions in time ceased to exist. The nuns of the Mother house in Vadstena had fled Sweden in 1595 after the Reformation law was passed forbidding Catholicism in all its forms under pain of death. They fled to Gdansk [Danzig].

St. Maria Elisabeth Hesselblad established a foundation in Switzerland in 1924. She received control of the original Rome's Brigittine house and church in 1931 and also established a foundation in England that same year. Finally after 350 years, she established a foundation in

Vadstena, Sweden in 1935, the home of the Brigittines (originally founded by St. Bridget of Sweden, Mystic [1303-1373]). Between 1935 and 1963, St. Maria Elizabeth Hesselblad founded a rest home and guest house in Vadstena and in 1968 a convent in Falun, Sweden. In 1963, nuns from the “old order” from Uden, The Netherlands, returned to Vadstena and lived in an independent Abbey, in a convent opposite the original Abbey Church, which is now Lutheran and still contains the mortal remains of St. Bridget.<sup>4</sup>

In 1937, St. Maria Elizabeth Hesselblad established a Brigittine foundation in India in 1937. During World War II, she saved Jews and others persecuted by the Nazis by giving them refuge in Rome. In 2004, she was recognized by Yad Vashem as one of the *Righteous Among Nations* for this work.

She died on April 24, 1957, in Rome, Italy, of natural causes. She was declared venerable by the decree of heroic virtue on March 26, 1999, and beatified on April 9, 2000, both by Pope St. John Paul II. She was canonized by Pope Francis on June 5, 2016.<sup>4</sup> (Memorial - June 4).

*We must nourish a great love for God and our neighbors;  
a strong love, an ardent love, a love that burns away imperfections,  
a love that gently bears an act of impatience, or a bitter word,  
a love that lets an inadvertence or act of neglect pass without comment,  
a love that lends itself readily to act of charity.<sup>1</sup>*

*Pray constantly that there be only one flock and one shepherd.  
This is the prime goal of our vocation.*

Miracle for canonization: The miracle worked by God through the intercession of Blessed Maria Elizabeth Hesselblad was the miraculous healing of a two year old child from a cerebellar desmoplastic (or nodular) medulloblastoma causing extrinsic compression complicating removal by neurosurgery.<sup>2</sup>

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#### References:

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- 2) Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Accessed 31 May 2022. <http://www.causesanti.va/it/santi-e-beati/maria-elisabeth-hesselblad.html>
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- 4) The Brigittine Order, United Kingdom. St. Bridget of Sweden. Accessed 31 May 2022. <https://www.bridgettine.org/st-bridget-of-sweden.html>
- 5) Hagiography Circle. 1957. Maria Elisabeth [Maria Elisabetta] Hesselblad. <http://newsaints.faithweb.com/year/1957.htm>
- 6) Marguerite Tjader. (1987). *The Most Extraordinary Woman in Rome*. Vatican Polyglot Press: Rome.
- 7) Vatican News Service. Maria Elisabetta Hesselblad (1870-1957). [https://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/saints/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_20000409\\_beat-Hesselblad\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20000409_beat-Hesselblad_en.html). Accessed 31 May 2022.

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](http://www.ciciams.org) / [www.nacn-usa.org](http://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](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/Ruzicka)