

A saint for hard times: Saint Hedwig

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

I've been wondering who would be a good patron saint for the deepening recession in which we find ourselves. The obvious candidates are those paragons of frugality who learned to live without a steady income or the comfort of regular meals. St. Francis, who threw off his clothes and took to the streets, alms bowl in hand, comes to mind. So does St. Clare. She had hoped to follow Francis into the mendicant life, but ended up in a monastery for which she wrote a rule so austere that the pope wouldn't let her live by it.

These saints teach us about the freedom to love and serve that opens all around us when we divest ourselves of extraneous goods, a lesson we need to learn in both good times and bad. But as I've listened to Republicans express their aversion to spending in the debate over the stimulus package and the budget, I think what we need in these lean and uncertain days is a saint who was a big spender—not a profligate spendthrift willing to spend others' money in order to enrich herself, but a big spender intent on creating and sustaining the communities she believed the world could not do without. For the patron saint of this recession, I nominate St. Hedwig.

You may be thinking—wow, how great! They've canonized Harry Potter's owl! She did, after all, lay down her life for her friends in that last book in the series. No, not *that* Hedwig, although J. K. Rowling knows her hagiography and no doubt named Harry's snowy owl for St. Hedwig, who is often remembered as the patron saint of orphans.

Hedwig's story reaches us like a whisper from the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Her biographers claim she was given in marriage at the age of 12 to Henry I of Silesia, in order to strengthen political alliances with Germany. She bore Henry seven children, and her story might have ended there, as it did for many women of her time who married young and spent years bearing and caring for children.

But Hedwig was strong, and she had a clear idea about what she wanted to do with her access to power and resources: she wanted to create and sustain communities

centered on prayer, learning and service. She urged Henry to provide land on which monasteries and hospitals could be built, and to create endowments which could sustain them. Henry did. Together they brought Augustinians, Cistercians, Dominicans, Premonstratensians—monks and nuns of all kinds—to Germany and Silesia. Together they built hospitals for lepers in Breslau and Neumarkt.

These were not simply the charity projects of a Lady Bountiful. Hedwig participated in these communities as well as supporting them with land and money. She worked in the hospitals she and her husband founded, and when he died she didn't waste a moment before moving in with the Cistercian nuns. (She had convinced Henry to join her in the monastic vow of chastity after their seventh child was born.)

Something in these communities—something in their vision of how life could be lived—answered a question deep within Hedwig. What was that question? I'd guess it was something like: How can I live my life close to God and the needs of others? Married at 12, constantly pregnant, for years she kept alive a vision of community in which even women have time for prayer and study; a vision in which work is shared so that leisure can also be shared; a vision in which everyone receives the attention and care he or she needs.

Hedwig left behind no written texts for us to study. She left only the work of her hands, the fruits of her powers of persuasion, and her vision of what community can be when we pray together and turn to one another in love. In that way, I think, she is a bit like Harry Potter's owl. I imagine her sailing in through the windows of our churches with her wings outstretched. I imagine her landing on our communion tables and altars, our pulpits and pews. I imagine that she has a letter in her beak, and it is addressed to us.

Even if our country does come together to mend our broken health care system and improve our struggling schools, many of the institutions we cherish will remain deeply vulnerable. There is no bailout coming for institutions devoted to prayer, learning and service. There is no rescue program for the seminaries where future ministers study, no check in the mail for the churches, shelters and prison chaplaincies that minister to the bodies and souls of those whom society has rendered invisible. Hedwig has a message for us: if we long for communities devoted to prayer and study, communities in which needs are met with compassionate attention, we are going to have to build and sustain those communities ourselves.