

Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

So Young a Queen: Jadwiga of Poland (by Lois Mills)

So Young a Queen is set in a time of castles, knights, banners, and jeweled crowns. So the modern reader comes to it almost expecting a storybook romance—battles won, enemies conquered, princess marrying the handsome prince and living happily ever after. Instead of this, we find our princess who must discard her beloved prince in favor of a political alliance with a much older and greatly feared ruler of a neighboring country.

Welcome to actual history.

This story of a teenage Polish monarch is one of a series of biographies presented by Bethlehem Books as “Portraits in Faith and Freedom”. There is faith in abundance in this book, which portrays a culture that took the truth, the goodness, the beauty and the necessity of the Catholic faith for granted. But what are we to make of what appears to us moderns as a sad lack of freedom in the personal life of Queen Jadwiga? Taking into consideration that the author uses some license in portraying the extent of Jadwiga’s emotional attachment to William, let us assume that her narrative overall is accurate.

To understand and appreciate Jadwiga’s choice—made after a night of prayer and, admittedly, after considerable outside pressure—we have to think about the meaning of freedom as well as what it meant to be a ruling European monarch in the Middle Ages.

Christian theology and tradition holds that freedom is a human right because we need to be free to pursue all that is good and right and the highest good of all: eternal blessed life with God in heaven. We are free for this high purpose, rather than free from all constraints to gratification of our selfish desires. True, having free will means we are able to choose evil, but such a choice leads to enslavement, not freedom.

The ideal of Christian kingship meant far more than a commitment to govern while surrounded by wealth and splendor. The rite of coronation was a consecration—almost a sacrament. Recall the details of Jadwiga’s clothing in the dalmatic, her vows, and anointing. In a way, she was “wed” to her people that day. She was brought into a relationship with them—a relationship she freely chose—that required profound love and sacrifice.

When it became clear that the welfare of her people was at stake, not to mention the conversion of the Lithuanian people to Christianity—Jadwiga spent a night in agonized prayer, just as her Savior once had in Gethsemane. Kneeling before the crucifix, she found the strength to give her life, exercising her queenly freedom to choose not simply the good, but the greatest good. Jadwiga’s choice to forego a romantic marriage had a ripple effect that blessed her people for centuries. The Polish-Lithuanian union made the nation a strong and prosperous center of

trade. The support that she and Jagiello gave to Krakow's budding academy led to Poland's place as an intellectual center as well. The Jagiellonian University nurtured the intellects of St. John Kanty, Nicholas Copernicus, and the early theologian of human rights Pawel Wlodkovic. The strength of the union also maintained for centuries Poland's reputation as a safe haven for Jews and others fleeing religious persecution.

Queen Jadwiga's goodness has long been recognized by her people, who venerated her as a saint from the time of her death in 1399. The Church caught up with the Polish people by canonizing her in 1997.