

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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HILDEGARD OF BINGEN Medieval Visionary and Prophet

In the year 1141, the word of God came to Hildegard, a Benedictine nun at the Abbey of St. Disibod in the Rhineland region of Germany. In a style reminiscent of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, Hildegard wrote of her call:

As I was gazing with great fear and trembling attention at a heavenly vision, I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me ... "O fragile human . . . say and write what you see and hear.... And write them not by yourself or any other human being, but by the will of the one who knows, sees and disposes all things in the secrets of divine mysteries." (Scivias: Prologue).

Hildegard understood this experience in a twofold sense: that she should set to writing the visions she had known since childhood; and that she should preach their content as God's word of warning and condemnation to a lax and wayward church. Initially Hildegard hesitated to answer this call. But she immediately fell ill and came to believe that only by resolving to respond positively was her recovery possible. Thus began the brilliant religious career of one of the most fascinating women of the High Middle Ages.

Monastic Life

Born in 1098, Hildegard was the tenth child of Hildebert and Mechthild, members of the lower German nobility. When Hildegard was eight years old, her parents dedicated her to God by entrusting her to the care of the anchoress Jutta, who had recently entered a hermitage

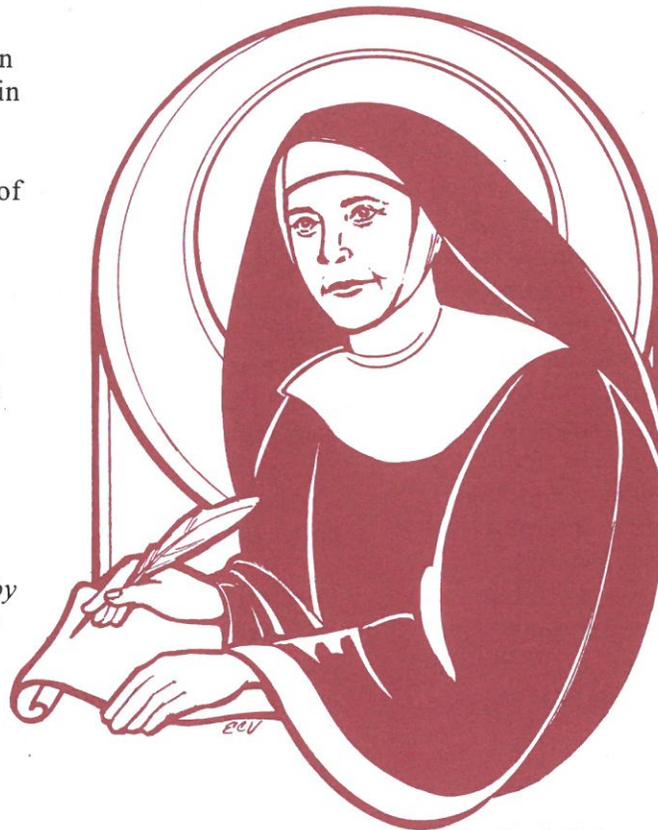
attached to the Benedictine monastery of St. Disibod. Under Jutta's tutelage, Hildegard learned to read from the Latin Bible, and to pray and sing by chanting the divine office.

Hildegard also had as her tutor the monk Volmar, who introduced her to standard Benedictine

learning which was based primarily on the writings of the church fathers. Jutta's reputation for holiness attracted other women who joined the two in their hermitage. Eventually their dwelling expanded into a full-fledged Benedictine nunnery, under the authority of a companion monastery of monks. Hildegard made her religious profession while still a teenager. We know nothing more of her life until 1136, when upon the death of Jutta, Hildegard was elected abbess of the woman's monastery at St. Disibod. Five years later, she received her prophetic call.

Sometime around 1147, Hildegard became convinced that God was calling her to leave St. Disibod to form her own foundation in a ruined monastery at Bingen. She

encountered many objections: from her abbot and the monks, who were loath to lose the prestige her presence brought to their monastery, and from her own nuns who were not inclined to leave their comfortable dwelling for one that needed substantial rebuilding. But Hildegard could be indomitable when her mind was set on a goal. She longed for the freedom an independent monastery would provide for her and her sisters, and she was convinced that this was God's will for them. She used her family connections to secure the property, and when the abbot stubbornly refused to let them go, she took to her bed with an illness that rendered her paralyzed. Suspicious, the abbot attempted to raise her up, but she was immovable. Convinced that the illness was sent by God, he agreed to let the nuns go. Hildegard recovered, and the Benedictine nunnery of St. Rupert outside Bingen was consecrated in 1152.



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Visions

When Hildegard experienced her call in 1141, she was no stranger to visions. From earliest childhood, visionary experience, accompanied by chronic ill health, was a fact of her peculiar psychological temperament. Her visual field was almost constantly filled with a strange brilliance which she called “the reflection of the Living Light.” In this light, from time to time, she would see all sorts of shapes, sometimes moving, sometimes static, ranging from human forms to elaborate architectural structures. Accompanying the vision, a “voice from heaven” (experienced not audibly but intuitively within her consciousness) would interpret the meaning of the various figures within it. Occasionally, she would see a deeper brilliance which she understood to be “the Living Light” itself. As a young child, Hildegard did not think her visions strange, but as she grew older she realized that others had no such experiences. She became extremely reticent about them, confiding them only to Jutta, who in turn informed Volmar.

Scholars have suggested a physiological basis to Hildegard’s visions, interpreting them as examples of the “scintillating scotoma” of certain types of migraine. Hildegard herself claims that they were not dreams, nor were they produced by seizures, nor were they experienced in mystical ecstasy or trance, as was often the case for other visionaries. They were simply a given of her psychological makeup. Only as she grew in her religious sensibilities, did she begin to interpret them as vehicles of divine relation. The conclusion that her visions had some psychosomatic cause need not mean that Hildegard was incorrect in interpreting them as God’s word to her. After all, God can, and does, use the ordinary things of this world, including illness, as avenues of grace and revelation.

Writings

The fact that Hildegard was chronically ill throughout her life makes her prodigious achievements even more remarkable. Hildegard’s first book was written directly in answer to her prophetic call over a ten year period from 1141 to 1151. Entitled *Scivias* (a derivation of *Scito vias*, or *Know the Ways [of God]*), it is divided into three parts, covering the doctrines of creation, redemption and sanctification respectively. Each part is further organized into specific visions, graphically detailed, ending with the formula “And I heard a voice from heaven, saying . . .” Then Hildegard proceeds to elucidate the vision and the heavenly proclamation detail by detail, clarifying their doctrinal and moral points. Midway through writing *Scivias*, Hildegard sought official endorsement for it, from Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius III, each of whom gave it enthusiastic approval. This bolstered Hildegard’s confidence and gave her teaching credibility.

One of the notable themes running through *Scivias* is an elucidation of the virtues of the spiritual life. In her second theological work, the *Liber vitae meritorum* (*The Book of Life’s Merits*), written between 1158 and 1163, Hildegard explores this theme more deeply, describing 35 specific vices with their remedies and punishments. Her final visionary work, the *Liber divinorum operum* (*Book of Divine Works*), was inspired by a magnificent vision she experienced of Divine Love, the Cosmic Christ situated at the center of salvation history. Composed between 1163 and 1174, it recapitulates and develops some of the themes of *Scivias*, notably those on cosmology and eschatology. While their visionary origin gives them a decidedly different tone, these three works together comprise an overview of theology on par with the great theological compendia for which the Middle Ages are famous.

The production of these visionary manuscripts, although based on Hildegard’s unique and personal experience, was something of a communal effort. Since Hildegard’s Latin was modest, she depended on the monk Volmar to transcribe her text into readable form. In addition, the visions in *Scivias* and the *Liber divinorum operum* were reproduced graphically by an unknown artist (or artists) as an essential component of the manuscripts of the texts. They were lovingly rendered at great expense, in gold and silver leaf as well as colors, and are unique in the history of medieval art. More than mere illustrations, they possess a kind of iconic power that draws the viewer into Hildegard’s visionary experience.

In addition to her theological trilogy, Hildegard authored other works for which she claimed no divine origin. Two of these are particularly interesting as examples of medieval science and medicine. *Physica* (*Natural History* or *The Book of Simple Medicine*) is an encyclopedia summarizing the natural science of the age. *Causa et curae* (*Causes and Cures* or *The Book of Composite Medicine*) relates various human maladies to the four primary elements: earth, air, fire and water, and suggests cures for them. It is also notable for the special attention Hildegard gives to the medical problems of women. These two works, although long, rambling and often inconsistent, have attracted attention today among those interested in modern homeopathic medicine.

Music and Liturgy

Hildegard’s spirituality was quintessentially Benedictine. The liturgical prayer of the Mass and the chanting of the divine office formed the heart and soul of life at Hildegard’s monastery. To enhance the richness of her monastery’s liturgical life, Hildegard composed over seventy antiphons, responsories, hymns and sequences. Like Gregorian chant, these consist of a single melodic line without harmony and are not

characterized by regular rhythm. Yet there is a uniqueness to Hildegard's chants that, thankfully, can be appreciated today, due to the substantial discography of her music published in recent years. Hildegard also authored what is thought to be the world's first morality play, the *Ordo virtutum* (*The Play of Virtues*), a drama, set to music, of the fight between the devil and the virtues for domination over *Anima* (the human soul). One striking effect of this sung drama is the stark contrast between the lovely harmonies of the personified virtues and the dissonant shouts of Satan, who cannot sing, since he is the antithesis of harmony.

Shortly before her death, Hildegard had to endure one of the most difficult experiences of her life. Her community was placed under interdict for six months,

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which meant the nuns were deprived of Mass and the sacraments, and were forbidden to chant the divine office. Hildegard had allowed a nobleman who had been excommunicated to be buried in her monastery's churchyard. When the prelates of Mainz demanded that the man's body be exhumed and removed from the cemetery, Hildegard refused, claiming he had been reconciled with the church before his death. In response, the prelates imposed the interdict. In order to have it lifted, Hildegard wrote to the prelates about a vision in which the Living Light exonerated her actions and warned the prelates of the danger of being a tool of the devil. The prelates remained unmoved by Hildegard's argument, and the dispute was settled legally. However, the letter is famous because in it Hildegard develops her theory of music and singing as a way of recapturing the original joy and beauty of paradise. Her words to the prelates reflect what might be called her "theology of music":

You and all prelates must exercise the greatest vigilance to clear the air by full and thorough discussion of the justification for such actions before your verdict closes the mouth of any church singing praises to God. . . And you must always be on your guard not to be

circumvented in your decisions by Satan, who drove [humanity] from celestial harmony and the delights of paradise (Letter 23).

Music, for Hildegard, was one of the surest ways to thwart the temptations of the devil. It was both a return to the original innocence of paradise and a participation in the angelic harmonies of heaven.

Prophecy

Scholars generally regard the twelfth century as an era of renaissance and spiritual renewal. However, Hildegard saw it as a time when scripture was being neglected, Christian people were ill-informed, and the clergy were "lukewarm and sluggish." She understood her mission as a prophetic one, in which she, a weak woman, was called to bring justice to a "womanish" age in place of priests who were failing in their responsibilities. Hildegard penned one of the highest praises of women to emerge from the Middle Ages: "O, woman, what a splendid being you are! For you have set your foundation in the sun, and have conquered the world." Because women have been created so splendidly by God, they ought to adorn this splendor when they come to worship the Creator. Hildegard claims that these ideas were not her own, but came from the "Voice of the Living Light."

Between 1158 and 1163, Hildegard journeyed throughout Germany on three major preaching tours. Such unusual activity for a medieval woman points to the prestige Hildegard had gained by this time as a visionary, seer and healer. While it is difficult to reconstruct the exact themes of her preaching, we can suppose that some of them are reproduced in her visionary trilogy, and in her voluminous correspondence of some 300 letters. Of particular concern to Hildegard were abuses of clerical celibacy, the inability of the official church to wipe out the Cathar heresy, and corrupt practices connected with the investiture controversy (the appointment of ecclesial offices by the secular authority). In succeeding centuries, Hildegard gained some notoriety as an apocalyptic preacher, who predicted the coming of the Antichrist. She was genuinely dismayed by what she viewed as the corruption of her own time, and considered it her vocation to call this to the attention of others. In her letter to the prelates of Mainz, Hildegard summed up her prophetic vocation by repeating what is stated many times over in her writings: "This time is a womanish time, because the dispensation of God's justice is weak. But the strength of God's justice is exerting itself, a female warrior battling against injustice, so that it might fall defeated" (Letter 23). Hildegard doubtless understood herself as this female warrior, the personification of God's justice. She was a woman of incredible strength, courage and brilliance in whom injustice met a most formidable enemy.



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Acknowledgment: A good portion of the material in this essay is based upon the Introduction to *Scivias* by Barbara Newman (New York: Paulist Press, 1990)

The feast day for Hildegard of Bingen is celebrated on September 17. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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Discography:

The early music ensemble Sequentia has recorded the complete musical works of Hildegard in eight CDs, produced by Deutsche Harmonia Mundi (DHM).

Hildegard von Bingen: Symphoniae (Geistliche Gesänge). DHM 77020 (1985).

Hildegard von Bingen: Canticles of Ecstasy. DHM 77320 (1994).

Hildegard von Bingen: Voice of the Blood. DHM 77346 (1995).

Hildegard von Bingen: O Jerusalem. BMG/DHM 05472 - 77353 - 2 (1997).

Hildegard von Bingen: Saints. DHM 77378 (2 CDs) (1996).

Hildegard von Bingen: Ordo virtutum. DHM 05472 77394 2 (2 CDs) (1997).

All eight discs are available in a boxed set: *Hildegard of Bingen: 900 Years*. DHM 77505 (1998).

In addition, two excellent recordings are:

11,000 Virgins: Chants for the Feast of St. Ursula. Anonymous 4, Harmonia Mundi 907200 (1997).

A Feather on the Breath of God: Sequences & Hymns by Abbess Hildegard of Bingen. Gothic Voices, Hyperion CDA 66039 (1981).

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Prayer Service Honoring Hildegard of Bingen

Celebrate Hildegard's feast day on September 17 or at any other appropriate time.

Opening Song: *Come Back to Me* (© 1972, 1980 Gregory Norbet, the Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc. #282 in *Gather*)

Reading I: “The soul is like a wind that waves over herbs, is like the dew that moistens the grass, is like the rain soaked air that lets things grow. In the same way you should radiate kindness to all who are filled with longing. Be a wind, helping those in need. Be a dew, consoling the abandoned. Be the rain soaked air, giving heart to the weary...Filling their hunger with instruction by giving of your soul.” (Heilkunde, 306 in *Hildegard: Prophet of the Cosmic Christ* by Renate Craine, Crossroad, 1997 p. 83)

Refrain: *Come back to me, with all your heart. Don't let fear keep us apart. Long have I waited for your coming, home to me and living, deeply our new life.*

Reading II: “Only the way of the heart, leads us home to God, Hildegard tells us...but it must be traveled with others and with all of creation...[Hildegard scholar] Caecilia Bonn, OSB...has pointed out three steps on the journey home to God. The first step is a profound remembering of who we truly are. ...Like the prodigal son “when he came to himself” remembered that his home was with the Father, we need to remember and to “come to ourselves.” We need to remember the deepest and often unconscious desires of our heart. We have to relearn how to see with the eyes of the heart in order to become aware of the invisible reality of God's Love that is actively present in and among us. The exile of forgetfulness of God – the land of alienation, isolation, and imprisonment in self-centered concerns – has many faces. They become visible and conscious when we dare to live in the polarity of tensions, when we “come to ourselves.” Coming home to God and to ourselves entails a willingness to live consciously in the tension between the alienations and conditionings that hide our own true identity so effectively and the fiery light of God's Love which pursues us passionately to bring us into its presense...” (*Hildegard: Prophet of the Cosmic Christ* by Renate Craine, Crossroad, 1997 p. 99)

Refrain: *Come back to me, with all your heart. Don't let fear keep us apart. Long have I waited for your coming, home to me and living, deeply our new life.*

Gospel: *John 15: 1-5* “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. You are pruned already, by means of the word that I have spoken to you. Make your home in me, as I make mine in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in the them, bears fruit in plenty.”

Gospel Acclamation: “*Sing a new song unto our God, let your song be sung from mountains high. Sing a new song unto our God, singing alleluia (repeat) singing alleluia.* (as adapted from *Sing a New Song* © 1972 Dan Schutte, OCP Publications #616 *Today's Missal Music Issue*)

Homily: *A preached reflection may be given at this time highlighting Hildegard's vision of “veriditas” ...God's creative “greening” “true vine” energy in Christ. You may also wish to involve participants in the reflection by incorporating Hildegard's music and some of the themes listed below. This part of the service may be particularly helpful for high school and college age girls who are so often insecure in their self-image because of unhealthy messages from popular culture.*

Reflections from the Music of Hildegard: *While there are many ways of honoring Hildegard, perhaps one of the best is to explore her music and her vision of the place Mary the mother of Jesus held in creation. This segment should not be understood as extolling physical virginity so much as the understanding that we are each of us made whole and beautiful by God with our own inner integrity. Who we are and what we do with our lives will hopefully spring from that “virginal” place where we are most truly ourselves...self-sufficient and having “all we need” because God created and cares for us. Therefore we respect and honor ourselves... whatever is wholly and uniquely “us,” first of all. We need not be unduly dependent upon another's opinions or ideas of beauty, to be beautiful, whole and acceptable. Whether we are women or men, we have an inner integrity by virtue of being*

God's precious "chalice" as described in the first hymn below. Insofar as we live from that place of inner integrity or oneness with God, to that extent we re-open "the door the serpent slammed on a woman." To that extent we, like Mary, give birth to Christ...that "Charity abounding toward all," and contribute to the flowering and greening of all creation about which Hildegard dreamed.

This is the best experienced by playing Hildegard's music found on the popular CD *Vision* (© 1994 Angel Records. Composed arranged and interpreted by Richard Souther). After each musical interlude, stop and invite reflection from participants about what meaning the music and poetry has for them.

12. O Vas Nobile

O vas nobile, quod non est pollutum
nec devoratum in saltatione antique
spelunce et quod no est maceratum
in vulneribus antiqui perditoris.

13. Karitas Habundat

Karitas habundat in omnia
de imis excellentissima super sidera
in omnia, quia summo regi osculum
pacis dedit.

14. Hodie Aperuit

Hodie aperuit nobis clausa porta
quod serpens in muliere suffocavit
unde lucet in aurora
flos de Virginie Maria

12. The Chalice

Your body's a chalice, its wine never drained
in the ancient cave dance. The ancient foe
could not ravish or scar your flesh.

13. Divine Love

Charity abounds toward all
most exalted from the depths above the stars,
and most loving towards all, for she has given
the supreme King the kiss of peace.

14. The Flower Gleams

Today a closed gate has opened to us the door
the serpent slammed on a woman:
the flower of the maiden Mary
gleams in the dawn.

Prayers of Intercession:

- R. God, Hildegard von Bingen saw a unique vision of you that went unseen by others, but she trusted her experience and was able to lead many to know you better.
- L. Help us to trust our inner understanding so that the unique message and mission that you have given each of us, may bear fruit in our world.
- R. God, Hildegard found her way to you by confronting those things in herself and her society that did not reflect your goodness and love.
- L. Help us to recognize when we are alienated from our deepest self and let us not be afraid to turn to you for help. Give us the courage to resist and transform those things in our society that are death dealing rather than life giving.
- R. God, Hildegard was not afraid to defend the poor and those who were condemned by religious authorities.
- L. Help us also to be Christ's charity "abounding towards all" and "open doors slammed by the serpent" so that all of God's People find their way to you.

For what else shall we pray? (Response: "O God, you welcome the lost, give us all we need")

Closing Blessing: (*Participants are invited to extend their hands in blessing while reciting the following:*) God, as we go forth let us, like Hildgard, "radiate kindness to all who are filled with longing. Be a wind, helping those in need. Be a dew, consoling the abandoned. Be the rain-soaked air, giving heart to the weary...and may we fill the hunger of our world by giving of our souls." Amen.

Closing Song: *How Can I Keep From Singing* (#460 in *Today's Missal Music Issue*).

This prayer service was created by Christine Schenk csj who has a Master's degrees in Midwifery and Theology and is the Executive Director of FutureChurch.