

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: A MODERNLY MEDIEVAL MYSTIC

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An illustration from the thirteenth-century edition of Hildegard of Bingen's Liber divinatorum operum showing Hildegard receiving a divine vision in the presence of her secretary Volmar and her companion, the nun Richardis von Stade.

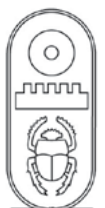
Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), the Benedictine Abbess and polymath, is unique in the breadth of her talents and contributions to humanity. She lived to the age of 81, a considerable lifespan for the Middle Ages; yet the oeuvre for which she is famous was created during the second half of her life. Theologian Barbara Newman frames Hildegard's influence by giving us a few of the “firsts and onlies” to her credit:

The only woman of her age accepted as an authoritative voice on Christian doctrine; the first woman who received express papal permission to write theological books; the only medieval woman who preached openly, before mixed audiences of clergy and laity with full approval of the church

authorities; the author of the first known morality play and the only twelfth-century playwright who is not anonymous; the only composer of her era (not to mention the only medieval woman) known both by name and by a large corpus of surviving music; the first scientific writer to discuss sexuality and gynecology from a female perspective.¹

She was formally canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in May 2012, and that October, declared a Doctor of the Universal Church. This article looks at her extraordinary life and why she is so relevant today.

Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bermersheim near Alzey, Germany, in the diocese of Mainz, the tenth child of



an aristocratic family. She was received as an oblate at age eight and entered the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg, where she joined the noblewoman Jutta of Sponheim. Jutta, the *magistra*, taught Hildegard the Psalter and singing; the monk Volmar supplemented her instruction and would become her lifelong secretary, editor, and friend. As more women joined, the hermitage grew into a Benedictine community within the men's monastery, and when Jutta died in 1136, the sisters elected Hildegard as the next *magistra*.

A common theme in Hildegard's writings is her insistence on her ignorance due to her lack of formal education, a perceived deficit that, paradoxically, became one of her strongest claims to authority.² She had experienced visions as a child and they continued throughout adulthood, but she only confided these to Jutta and Volmar. All this changed, however, when her visions began to give

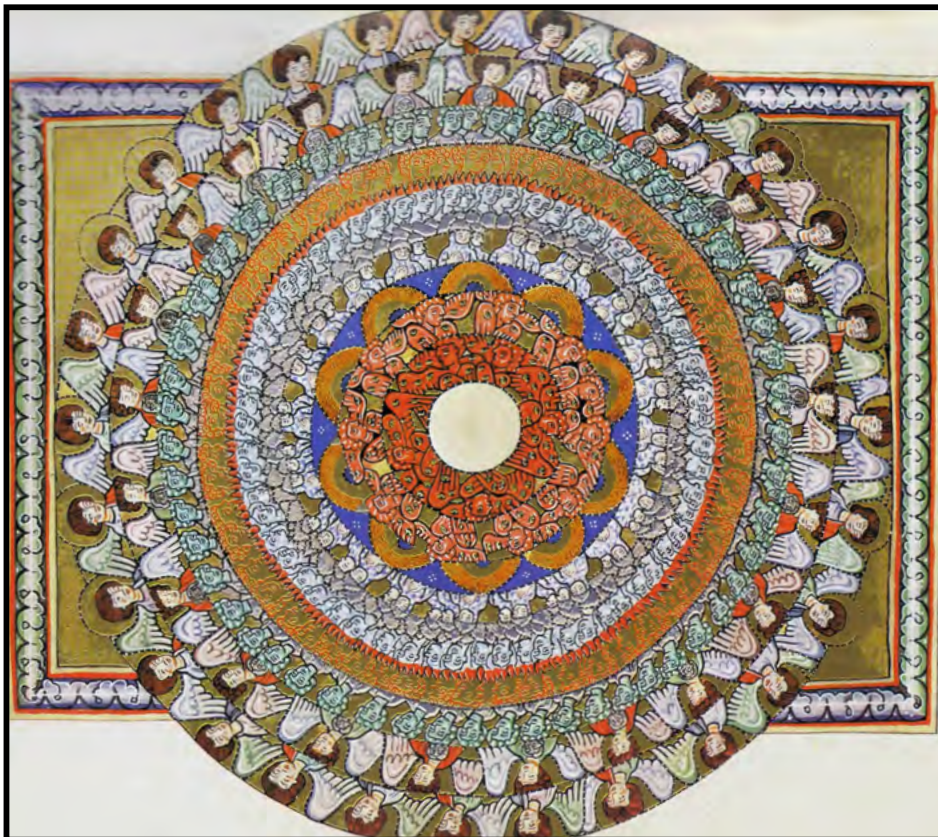
her a different type of education and reveal the deeper mysteries of scripture.

In 1141, at the age of forty-two, Hildegard experienced an extraordinary event that would initiate her into her life's work:

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.”

When I was forty-two years and seven months old, Heaven was opened, and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart, and my whole breast, not like a burning, but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning



Hildegard von Bingen, Scivias I.6: The Choirs of Angels, 1150.



Benedictine Abbey St. Hildegard in Eibingen, founded in 1165 by Hildegard of Bingen.

of the exposition of the scriptures, namely, the Psalter, the Gospel, and the other Catholic volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments, though I did not have the interpretation of the words of their texts.³

With this divine command, Hildegard the seer became Hildegard the prophet!⁴

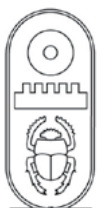
Acting on this divine command was daunting, and she commented that her hesitation brought on one of her painful illnesses. Hildegard had to overcome three inadequacies to write her experiences: she considered herself uneducated; she had no authorization from any human superior to write theology; and she was a woman, in an age when women were generally considered as mentally weak. She turned each obstacle into an asset, insisting that her very lack of education proved her wisdom was of divine origin, since the Divine had long chosen the weak as Its messengers.⁵

Encouraged by Volmar and given approval by her abbot, Hildegard began her first volume, *Scivias*, (*Know the Ways*). In 1147-48, she received confirmation of her prophetic call from Bernard of Clairvaux, and Pope Eugenius III read excerpts from her unfinished *Scivias* at the Synod of Trier and sent her a letter granting apostolic approval to continue recording her visions.⁶

In 1148, Hildegard received a vision instructing her to establish an independent abbey at Rupertsberg, near Bingen. By the mid-1160s, the monastery had grown so prosperous that Hildegard founded a second abbey at Eibingen across the Rhine, of which she was also abbess.⁷

In creating an independent location for herself and her sisters, Hildegard's creativity could now thrive. From her visions and direct knowledge of nature flowed a remarkable body of work. *Scivias* is a guide to Christian doctrine in twenty-six visions across three books, ranging over the Trinity, Creation, the Fall, salvation history, the Church, and the Last Judgment. Her *Book of Life's Merits* (1158–1163) gave form and voice to Vices and Virtues and reflected her engagement with the moral struggle of cloistered life. The *Book of Divine Works* (1163–1173) presented a dynamic cosmos superimposed on the human form, its overarching theme the active presence of the Divine throughout creation. Her two great scientific works of the mid-1150s, *Physica* and *Causes and Cures*, understood the body, plants, stones, food, and other objects of nature as microcosms of the larger balanced cosmic order.⁸

Newman and author Nancy Fierro observe that Hildegard was perhaps the first major medieval thinker to articulate the



Divine in feminine archetypes, and to sense that women were at a spiritual disadvantage because they lacked an image of the Divine in their spirituality.⁹ The visions opened new realities of the divine feminine underpinnings of creation. Sapientia, Lady Wisdom, appears in the *Scivias* as a powerful creative force encircling the cosmos with three wings, one in heaven, one sweeping Earth, and one across the horizon, quickening everything she touches; together with Mother Earth, she continually assists in the creation, survival, and maturation of life. In another vision, Sapientia wears a brilliant gold tunic adorned with green, white, red, and sky-blue precious gems. Ecclesia, the Church, personifies the bride of the Divine.¹⁰ Caritas opens the *Book of Divine Works* as an enormous flaming winged figure who declares:

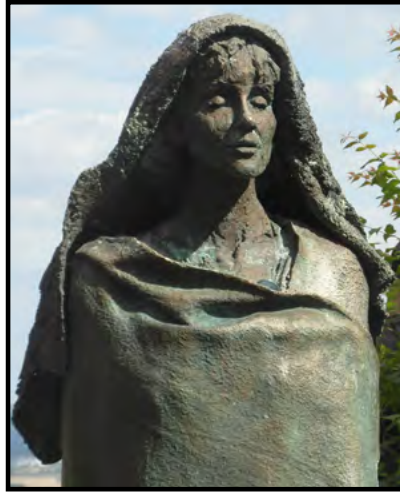
I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every spark of life, and I emit nothing that is deadly. I decide on all reality. . . . with wisdom I have rightly put the universe in order. . . . I burn in the sun, moon, and the stars. I awaken everything to life. The air lives by turning green and being in bloom. And thus I remain hidden in every kind of reality as a fiery power, everything burns because of me . . . For I am Life.¹¹

Hildegard developed two related concepts that are woven into her vision of cosmic life: *symphonia* and *viriditas*. *Symphonia*, or harmony, is the natural state of being in tune with the Divine, others, and creation, and we see an example of this

in Lady Wisdom. *Viriditas*, the “greening” life-force, is the nurturing vitality behind nature, fertility, creativity, and motherhood. It is the immanent feminine life-force of the Divine in the cosmos that is displayed in Caritas. These work together to create a harmonious universe that is continually and vitally alive.

Symphonia also feeds and balances the soul through music. In Hildegard’s theology, Adam before the Fall possessed a voice ringing with every harmony, and music attempts to recover that lost celestial sound. This conviction took shape in her great song-cycle, the *Symphonia of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*, a complete liturgical cycle of antiphons, responsories, hymns, and sequences, arranged hierarchically from the Divine and Mary, through angels and saints,

to Ecclesia. Newman characterizes her style as “gregorianizing but not Gregorian,” identifying distinctive features. First, extreme melismatic richness: the antiphon “O vos angeli” averages more than six notes per syllable, closing with a melisma of some eighty notes on a single word. Second, a wide vocal range sometimes spanning over two octaves, far beyond ordinary chant. In “O gloriosissimi lux vivens angeli,” on the words *qui volare voluit* (who wished to fly), the melody rises, hovers, then sharply plummets, painting Satan’s ascent and fall. She also favors melodic lines marked by ascending and descending fifths.¹² In *Ordo Virtutum* (Play of the Virtues), the oldest surviving morality play, the female Virtues are given sung voices as a penitent soul resists the devil, who being outside the world of harmony, is denied song.



Sculpture of Hildegard of Bingen by Karlheinz Oswald, 1998, in front of Eibingen Abbey.

Beginning in 1158 at the age of sixty, while battling two three-year illnesses, Hildegard undertook four preaching tours throughout Germany. Preaching in twenty-one cities, she confronted the corruption destroying the Church: the buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices, clergy who served as wealthy feudal lords backing Frederick Barbarossa's antipopes, clergy who took concubines, and the clerical negligence that allowed heterodox movements to get a foothold in the Rhineland. On a more intimate level, her correspondence spanned three decades and reached every sector of society, from popes, royalty, emperors, to harried abbots and abbesses dreaming of laying down the burdens of office, to laypeople asking whether their kin suffered in purgatory.¹³

Fierro believes that Hildegard remains so accessible across the centuries because of the human contradiction at the center of her brilliance. Coming from nobility, she never questioned the rigid class hierarchy of her time. The community at the Rupertsberg accepted only girls of noble birth, and when she was challenged on it, she defended the policy without



Wilhelm Fassbinder, Hildegard von Bingen
Contemplates a Flower, 1898.

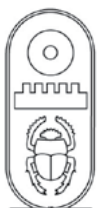
apology. As abbess, she ran her community with a firm hand, governing the women under her care almost autocratically and, when necessary, used her chronic illness to gain political advantage and sometimes bend situations toward her will. She was prone to bouts of depression, and was emotionally tenacious, as she struggled to release her attachments to those she loved, such as the nun Richardis and the monk Volmar.¹⁴

Hildegard went through transition at the age of 81. In her *Vita*, her biographers described the scene of her transition:

At early twilight on that Sunday, two very bright arcs of various colors appeared in the heavens directly over the chamber in which the holy virgin returned her happy soul to the Divine. These rainbows extended over a wide stretch of sky out to the four corners of the earth, one from north to south, the other from east to west. In the vertex where the two arcs crossed, a bright moon-shaped light radiated. It spread its light near and far and seemed to expel the nightly darkness from the death chamber. In this light, a glittering red cross could be seen that at first was small, but then grew to huge size. This cross was surrounded by innumerable varicolored circles in which individual crosses were formed, each with its own circle. . . . When they had spread out in the firmament, they expanded to the East and seemed to lean toward earth toward the house in which the holy virgin had gone home, and they enveloped the entire mount in brilliant light.¹⁵

As she departed, she gave her community the visionary experience she had always known.

On the eight-hundredth anniversary of Hildegard's death, Pope John Paul II called her "a light for her people and her time."



Pope Benedict XVI, on the appointment of Hildegard as a Doctor of the Universal Church, tells us “The teaching of the holy Benedictine nun stands as a beacon. . . . Her message appears extraordinarily timely in today’s world, which is especially sensitive to the values that she proposed and lived.”¹⁶ Regardless of one’s spiritual belief system, gender, or station in life, there is something in Hildegard’s life for all of us. She used all her qualities to break through many of the confines of women in the twelfth century. In bringing her extraordinary mind, talents, and resources together in service of the Divine, she made accessible a new, inspiring view into the love of the cosmos and creation; and she gives us a model for courageous action in our lives and society today. In gifting the world with her “sense of universal life, of a world aflame with vitality,”¹⁷ Hildegard continues to move humanity forward.

Endnotes

¹ Barbara Newman, “Sibyl of the Rhine: Hildegard’s Life and Times,” in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Barbara Newman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

² Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), e-book, 5–6.

³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), “Declaration,” 59.

⁴ Gottfried of Disibodenberg and Theoderic of Echternach, *The Life of the Holy Hildegard*, trans. James McGrath (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), introduction, 6.

⁵ Nancy Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen and Her Vision of the Feminine* (New York: Macmillan Audio, 2016), audio program.

⁶ Newman, “Sibyl of the Rhine,” 11–12.

⁷ Newman, “Sibyl of the Rhine,” 12–14.

⁸ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 16–20, 142, 162.



The altarpiece of the Chapel of St. Roch in Bingen depicting Hildegard of Bingen.

⁹ Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen and Her Vision of the Feminine*, paraphrasing Newman.

¹⁰ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 16, 41; Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen and Her Vision of the Feminine*.

¹¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works*, ed. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1987), “Vision One: 2,” 9–10.

¹² Barbara Newman, introduction to *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 28.

¹³ Newman, “Sibyl of the Rhine,” 19–20; Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen and Her Vision of the Feminine*.

¹⁴ Fierro, *Hildegard of Bingen and Her Vision of the Feminine*.

¹⁵ Gottfried of Disibodenberg and Theoderic of Echternach, *The Life of the Holy Hildegard*, introduction, 99–100.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Letter Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen a Doctor of the Universal Church*, October 7, 2012, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html.

¹⁷ Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 67.