

Hildegard of Bingen by Robin Morgan

This past semester I wrote a paper about Hildegard of Bingen for a seminar I participated in on Medieval Mystics. A mystic, by definition, is one who experiences union with God and writes/teaches other how to achieve this same experience. Though Hildegard cannot technically be classified as a mystic since she wrote to expound on the doctrines of the church, rather than to describe or teach of mystical union with God, nonetheless, her unique visions set her within the medieval mystical tradition.

Even if you don't really know anything about her, you've probably heard the name because she's become the darling of many groups in the 20th and 21st centuries. Gay and lesbian pride, herbal medicine, creation spirituality and feminism are all directions, which Hildegard has been carried in the endeavor to recapture the richness of her thought and work in our time.

What I found most useful in studying Hildegard was the way she was able to fulfill her calling as a leader and reformer in the church while staying true to orthodox teaching and even keeping within the strictures of the prescribed roles for women at the time. It always amazes me how God manages to work around and through our institutions to get God's work done.

Hildegard was born in 1098 into a wealthy aristocratic German family at Bermersheim bei Alzey where she was the tenth child of her parents. As was common at the time, when she was eight years old her parents dedicated her to God and sent her to stay with a sixteen-year-old anchoress [according to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, an anchoress is a person who withdraws from the world to live a solitary life of silence, prayer and mortification.], Jutta of Sponheim, who was to be Hildegard's

mentor until she was nearly forty years old. For the first few years of their pilgrimage together, they lived an unvowed religious life in the house of Lady Uda, widow of Goellheim. After the widow died, they moved to the monastery of St. Disibod and on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1112, they were enclosed as recluses and took their monastic vows.

Though Hildegard did not offer any public exposition of her visions until she was commanded to by God in her early forties, she was having such visions from the time she was a very young child. In an 1175 letter to Guibert of Gembloux who was to become her secretary during the last two years of her life, she explains what these visions were like:

*"From my infancy, when my bones and nerves and veins were as yet imperfect, I have always enjoyed the gift of this vision in my soul, up to the present time, when I am now more than seventy years old. Indeed my spirit, when God wills, ascends aloft to the heights of the firmament and to the changing aspects of different climes and spreads itself through diverse peoples though they are in far-off regions and places remote from me. And as I see things in this way I perceive them in the changing clouds and other creatures. And I do not hear them with my bodily ears, nor with the thoughts of my heart, nor do I perceive them through a combination of my five senses, but ever in my soul, with my external eyes open, so that I never suffer debilitating ecstasy. And I am continually constrained by illness and hedged about with heavy pains that threaten to be my undoing. But until now God has sustained me." [Sabina Flanagan, trans., *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*, Boston: Shambhala, 1996, 175.]*

Hildegard goes on to explain how she was able to write down what she saw and heard so that others could learn from her

experiences:

"I retain the memory of whatever I see or learn in such vision for a long time, so that whatever I once see or hear I remember. And I see and hear and know at one and the same time; and in a flash that which I learn, I know. And what I do not see, I do not know, since I am not learned. And the things which I write, I see and hear in that vision, and I do not put down any other words than those I hear, and I offer whatever I hear in the vision in unpolished Latin, since I have not been taught to write in the vision as philosophers write. And the words which I see and hear in the vision are not like the words that sound from the mouth of man, but like a sparkling flame and a cloud moved by the pure air. I cannot in any way ascertain the form of the light, just as I cannot properly discern the sphere of the sun." [Ibid, 176-177.]

The idea of "going public" with the knowledge she had gained from the visions God had given her, caused Hildegard to take to her sick bed and stay there for an extended period of time. Her own self perception as a weak vessel, "a poor little female," ran counter to what seemed to be the overwhelming task of speaking for God. Such illness was a recurring pattern in the lives of many medieval women who felt called to write or speak for God and yet who also believed in the inferiority of women, particularly within the hierarchy of the church.

Eventually it was only in the writing down of what she'd been called to speak that Hildegard was restored to health. Over the next almost forty years of her life as she wrote theology, fought heresy and called popes and kings to account, she clutched her untutored, female status to herself while driving home the word which God had given her to speak. As she revealed at the beginning of the *Scivias*, her first full scale work,

"I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me, 'O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not by a human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God. Explain these things in such a way that the hearer, receiving the words of his instructor, may expound them in those words, according to that will, vision and instruction. Thus therefore, O human, speak these things that you see and hear. And write them not by yourself or any other human being, but by the will of Him Who knows, sees and disposes all things in the secrets of His mysteries.'" [Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, trans., Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias, New York: Paulist Press, 1990, 59.]

While she was in the midst of dictating the Scivias to Volmar, her teacher, secretary, confessor and friend, Pope Eugene III who was presiding at a synod at Trier, sent two legates to St. Disibod to get a copy of her work. He was so impressed with her writing, especially in light of Bernard of Clairvaux's recommendation of her, that Eugene read part of her book out loud to the prelates assembled at Trier and sent her a letter, encouraging her to continue writing. Such high praise from the pope was to set Hildegard on the road to fame and the ongoing development of connections with other important people all over Europe.

Another result of Eugene's praise was that so many postulants began flocking to St. Disibod that the monastery couldn't hold them all. Hildegard petitioned to be allowed to leave the monastery with the women under her care and found her own

community, but the monks at St. Disibod were loath to lose their newfound source of prestige and funding. Hildegard had a vision of the property which she was to buy at Rupertsberg, which was opposite of Bingen. While the monks struggled with Hildegard about this move, she took "to her bed with a paralyzing sickness that she ascribed to her delay in fulfilling God will." [Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1987, 9.] When the abbot finally agreed, in light of this new medical development, to let her go, she was able to rise immediately from her bed and move her sisters to the new site.

Hildegard continued writing throughout her life. Besides the *Scivias*, she also wrote several major works including, *The Book of the Rewards of Life* and *The Book of Divine Works*. She wrote works on natural history and herbal medicine plus songs and plays. She corresponded with abbots and abbesses, laypeople, priests, monks, princes, popes and emperors. Though consistently plagued by poor health, her literary output was voluminous.

Hildegard reminds me that God walks into the middle of our lives and calls us to act on behalf of God's kingdom regardless of our own self perception of acceptability or worthiness for the task set before us. God spoke to Hildegard in terms she could understand because of her context and yet pulled her beyond that world in which she lived to see a greater vision of God's kingdom.

Book Two of the *Scivias* opens with her vision of the Redeemer. The first image in the vision is of humanity born as clods of mud, touched by the fire and light of God. In the midst of that light was a delicate flower, which the human was to pluck, but he refused and walked away from the light into the darkness. However, dawn approached even in the midst of such darkness and within the light of dawn was a "serene Man" who was driven back by the darkness, but finally prevailed at the price of his

blood. The person lying in darkness was brought back to life by the “strong blow” which the serene Man struck at the darkness.

God exhorted her to speak even though so many around her who had the education and the authoritative position refused to speak the truth given to them. “You are...touched by My light, which kindles in you an inner fire like a burning sun; cry out and relate and write these mysteries that you see and hear in mystical visions... .Therefore, O diffident mind, who are taught inwardly by mystical inspiration, though because of Eve’s transgression you are trodden on by the masculine sex, speak of that fiery work this sure vision has shown you.” [Hart and Bishop, 150]

None of us ever lives in a world that is perfectly set up, either externally or internally, for us to do our ministries without interference. But God consoles us in the face of fightings without and fears within, as Paul says, by bringing people like Hildegard into our lives. We can be encouraged to persevere knowing that we are part of a long line of people, those who have come before and those who will come after us, who speak as God calls them to speak. We are not alone.

If you’re interested in reading more about Hildegard, here is a partial list of her works and works about her that you can use as a starting point:

- Baird, Joseph and Radd K. Ehrman, trans., *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. 1, New York: Oxford Press, 1994.
- Flanagan, Sabina, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, London: Routledge, 1990.
- ., trans., *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*, Boston: Shambhala, 1996.
- Fox, Matthew, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen: Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1987.

- Hart, Mother Columba and Jane Bishop, trans., *Hildegard of Bingen*: Scivias, New York: Paulist Press, 1990.
- Hozeski, Bruce W., trans., *Hildegard of Bingen: The Book of Rewards of Life*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1994.
- Maddocks, Fiona, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*, New York: Doubleday, 2001.
- Mahoney, John L., ed., *Seeing into the Life of Thing: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, New York: Fordham Press, 1998.
- McGinn, Bernard, *The Growth of Mysticism*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994.
- Mooney, Catherine M. Mooney, ed., *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Philadelphia: U of Penn Press, 1999.
- Newman, Barbara, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1987.
- ., ed., *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1998.
- Silvas, Anna, Jutta and Hildegard: *The Biographical Sources*, University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1999.