

St. Hildegard of Bingen

The Genius of a Woman

By: Cat Clark

ISSUE: Who was Hildegard of Bingen? Was she a saint?

RESPONSE: Hildegard of Bingen was a Benedictine prioress of 12th Century Germany. During her life, she was highly influential and well respected. She is a saint. The Latin Church celebrates her feast on September 17th.

DISCUSSION: With the renewed interest in chant, many people today know Hildegard of Bingen primarily for the beautiful chants she composed. This is unfortunate. Hildegard is not only a woman who wrote chant, but a saint of the Catholic Church and a prominent figure in her day.

St. Hildegard of Bingen was born in Böckelheim, Germany, in 1098 and died in St. Rupertsberg near Bingen in 1179.¹ Although she was a medieval woman, she had all the intellectual and artistic qualities commonly attributed to “a Renaissance man.” She was well educated and traveled widely. She developed her many talents to become a Benedictine prioress, a nurse and physician, a composer and lyricist, an author and playwright, a scientist, a linguist, a philosopher, a psychologist, and a mystic. In a time that many anti-Catholics like to consider “oppressively male-dominated,” Hildegard was highly influential and respected. It is especially noteworthy that Hildegard is considered “the first philosopher to articulate a complete theory of sex complementarity,”² paving the way for modern Catholic philosophers like St. Edith Stein and Pope John Paul II.

Life

Little is known about the family of St. Hildegard. She was dedicated to the Church at birth, probably because she was a tenth child (a “tithe”), and given to the care of an anchoress named Jutta at the age of eight. Jutta lived in a cottage attached to the church of the St. Disibod abbey. There, Hildegard was taught to read and sing Latin. Her early education may have been somewhat hindered by poor health, which lasted her whole life. Though her later writings show brilliant creativity and a familiarity with great philosophers and theologians, she considered her education inadequate.

Many were attracted to Jutta’s cottage over time, and the hermitage eventually became a Benedictine community. Thus, St. Disibod’s was, for a time, a double monastery where the men and women religious lived side by side. Hildegard made her own religious profession at the age of fifteen, and became abbess after Jutta’s death around 1126.

When she was 42, Hildegard experienced an overwhelming divine illumination. She had been receiving revelations and visions since childhood, but she had always kept them between her spiritual directors and herself. The powerful new illumination, however, gave her an increased understanding of religious and philosophical texts she had read. At first, she was very reticent to tell anyone or write about her experience, though she believed God was calling her to do so. She feared that her poor Latin might cause others to scoff at God’s revelation. Pressured by her conscience, Hildegard told her confessor, who referred her to the abbot. The abbot ordered her to record the revelations. These were submitted to the Archbishop of Mainz, and scrutinized by his theologians. The revelations were approved, and a monk was appointed Hildegard’s secretary.

Scivias (Know the Way of the Lord), a collection of 26 visions concerning the relations between God and men, was completed ten years later. The Archbishop of Mainz submitted both Hildegard and *Scivias* to the examination of Pope Eugenius III, whose theological commission and personal advisors³ supported the genuineness of the revelations. Satisfied, Pope Eugenius authorized Hildegard to publish whatever the Holy Spirit enjoined her to write.

Around the time *Scivias* was completed, Hildegard moved her religious community to St. Rupertsberg, just above Bingen. St. Rupert's was a large monastery, with water piped to all the offices. This monastery remained her home for the rest of her life, and it was there that the majority of her works were composed. Fifteen to twenty years after settling into St. Rupert's, she founded a second community at Eibingen.

Many people—including popes, cardinals, bishops, abbots, kings and other government officials, monks, nuns, and lay people—sought Hildegard's advice, help, and companionship in person or letters. St. Elizabeth of Schönau was a close friend, and Hildegard corresponded with St. Bernard of Clairvaux. She traveled throughout Germany to visit various religious communities, the emperor, and to attend to various other matters. She is survived by at least five books, a morality play, numerous hymns and canticles, fifty allegorical homilies, hundreds of letters, and her own alphabet and language which she created for fun.

Thought

The extensive writings of St. Hildegard of Bingen express a wide range of knowledge and creative thought. In addition to knowing the Bible, she showed familiarity with the writings of Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, Aristotle, Isidore, Hugh St. Victor, and other philosophers and theologians. She combined the philosophical and theological ideas of the Church Fathers and saints with her own experiences as a physician to develop a comprehensive world view. For example, the companion volumes *Physica (Natural Arts)* and *Causae et Curae (Healing Arts)* not only provide natural history and a classification of the medicinal properties of minerals, plants, and animal products, they are also one of the earliest western writings on the psychology of personality.

One of the most outstanding features of St. Hildegard's life and writings is the way she consistently “balance[d] the equality and significant differentiation of woman and man,”⁴ considering women and men “inextricably linked.” Sr. Prudence Allen notes, for example:

To be happy without contact with members of the opposite sex seemed to point to a lack of personal development for Hildegard. Only those women and men [married or celibate] who responded to one another in a whole and balanced way were considered examples of ideal women and men.... [T]heir happiness in some way depended of the development of such complementarity bonds.⁵

Because of their complementarity, St. Hildegard believed that men should not be left alone in the public sphere, nor women relegated to the private sphere, in society. Both needed to contribute significantly to both spheres for a truly human (not to mention biblical and Catholic) society to be achieved.⁶

In these beliefs, St. Hildegard looked forward to the teaching of Pope John Paul II:

[F]rom the very first pages of the Bible God's plan is marvelously expressed: He willed that there should be a relationship of profound communion between man and woman, in a perfect reciprocity of knowledge and the giving of self. In woman, man finds a partner with whom he can dialogue in complete equality. This desire for dialogue, which was not satisfied by any other living creature, explains the man's spontaneous cry of wonder when the woman... was created [Gen. 2:23]. This was the first cry of love to resound on the earth!We need to return to this plan [God's original plan for man and woman]....⁷

Without the contribution of women, society is less alive, culture impoverished, and peace less stable. Situations where women are prevented from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts should therefore be considered profoundly unjust... to society as a whole.... [I]t is necessary to strive... to ensure that the widest possible space is open to women in all areas of culture, economics, politics, and ecclesial life itself, so that all human society is increasingly enriched by the gifts proper to masculinity and femininity.⁸

Though the monumental thought of St. Hildegard was, not long after her lifetime, eclipsed by the “Aristotelian revolution” at Paris, the time seems ripe for rediscovery and development.

Difficulties

Interestingly, some question whether or not St. Hildegard of Bingen *is* a canonized saint. The process of canonization was entirely reserved to the Holy See by Pope Alexander III in 1160, nineteen years before her death. Until that time it was still somewhat common for bishops to establish a formal *cultus*, at least within their own sees. According to canon law, Pope Alexander's decree had to be promulgated before it became effective. If Alexander's decree had not yet been promulgated in the Rhineland, which is not improbable in light of geographical barriers⁹ and the extreme political turmoil of the time,¹⁰ then total reservation to the Holy See was not yet in effect there and her *cultus* was legally established. We do not know with certainty.

The cause for Hildegard's universal canonization has been opened at least twice since her death, but with no results. However, she *is* listed in the Roman Martyrology as a saint, complete with a hagiography and a feast day (September 17th). It is entirely possible that nothing has come of the causes for her canonization precisely because she is already in the Roman Martyrology and considered a saint.¹¹ Pope John XXII, in 1324, granted an indulgence to people who celebrated certain feast days, including St. Hildegard's.¹² There is no question that her feast is formally recognized by Catholics in her homeland and by the See of Rome. Furthermore, the Benedictine abbey at Eibingen is named "Saint Hildegard." It is not inappropriate, therefore, to call her "Saint Hildegard."

Unfortunately, extreme caution should be used when reading modern biographies of St. Hildegard or collections of St. Hildegard's writings which include modern commentary. Although St. Hildegard was a faithful Catholic herself, many heterodox Catholics and people involved with the New Age movement are unfairly trying to use her works to their own ends. Thus, while writers like Ronda Chervin and Sr. Prudence Allen are reliable, writers like Matthew Fox should be avoided. It is better, whenever possible, to read St. Hildegard's own words or listen to performances of her music than to read a questionable commentary.

The genius of this woman widely influenced the Church of her day. Given the current Pope's frequent statements on the importance and equality of women in society, the works and example of St. Hildegard may also facilitate understanding of the role of women today. Let us enjoy the chant of her life!

¹ The information in this FAITH FACT is primarily derived from Butler's *Lives of the Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers; 1985) and Sr. Prudence Allen's *The Concept of Woman: the Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C.—A.D. 1250* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans; 1985). Because of biographical variations, some dates are approximate.

² *The Concept of Woman*, 292. Here "complete" means "thorough" or "consistent." "Sex complementarity" means that men and women have equal value and dignity as human persons but they are, at the same time, different from each other.

³ St. Bernard of Clairvaux was among the pope's personal advisors at the time.

⁴ *The Concept of Woman*, 293.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 312-315.

⁷ "World Day of Peace Message," January 1, 1995, no. 3. Published in *The Genius of Women* (United States Catholic Conference; 1997).

⁸ *Angelus* reflection of June 23, 1995, no. 1. Published in *The Genius of Women*.

⁹ As late as the sixteenth century, after the invention of the printing press, promulgation of papal decrees was expected to go into effect later in dioceses "beyond the Alps." For example, the reform decree *Tametsi* of the Council of Trent was *never* promulgated in England, Wales, Scotland, and other parts of the world, including the Americas.

¹⁰ The political situation of Europe was so bad during this time that Alexander III excommunicated the Emperor for nearly 17 years. Rampant European infighting actually provoked Alexander's decree reserving canonization to the Holy See, because many people sought to canonize people merely for political reasons. C.f. "Pope Alexander III" and "Beatification and Canonization" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Encyclopedia Press; 1913).

¹¹ This is certainly why she has been listed, on September 17th, as "St. Hildegard" in Butler's *Lives of the Saints*.

¹² Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books), 13.

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