

Hildegard of Bingen: Doctor of the Church and Mother to All



Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

May 12, 2024

I dedicated my sermon last Sunday to Ray Wilson, who won it at the auction. I dedicate this morning's sermon to my colleague, Dr. Justin Murphy-Mancini, who didn't buy a thing, but with whom I have had the pleasure to work over the last five years.

Justin and I share a love of Hildegard of Bingen among many things. I am delighted that we are able to do this service together before he leaves.

And I dedicate this sermon to women everywhere, and to the people who love and respect them.

What do you call a person who understands how things work together across different disciplines; a person who is knowledgeable about a remarkable number of different subjects such as math, writing, music, poetry, public speaking, environmentalism, and medicine? (look out to congregation)

A polymath? Correct!

Polymaths are people who have significant knowledge in a vast number of subjects, and who understand the interconnectedness of these disciplines and use that to understand the world. Polymaths are deep thinkers, and often inventors and reformers.

The word polymath stems from the Greek word *polumathēs* which means "having learned much." In Latin it stems from the words *homo universalis* which means "universal human."

Hildegard of Bingen was a polymath. Two other examples of polymaths are Benjamin Franklin and Rabindranath Tagore. Though from different centuries, the three influenced similar topics.

Starting with the most contemporary polymath: Rabindranath Tagore was a Bengali poet, writer, composer, social reformer, and painter who lived during the later 19th century and early 20th century. Benjamin Franklin was a printer, publisher, inventor, poet, writer, and diplomat of the 18th century.

Hildegard of Bingen lived in the 11th century. She was a polymath known for her wisdom

of music, poetry, religion, herbs, medicine, environmentalism, and activism. I use the term wisdom rather than knowledge, because most of what she knew came from her experiences and inner knowing; what she called her connection to God, rather than book knowledge.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098. She was the tenth child of a noble family in the Rhineland of Germany. It was common at the time of her birth for families to contribute or offer a child to the church. As the tenth child, it was unlikely that she was going to inherit anything, so when she was 8 years old, her parents offered her to a Benedictine monastery in Disibodenberg, Germany.

Hildegard lived most of her life in Benedictine monasteries. She was deeply religious. She also experienced God in nature and had much to say about those beliefs. She also had visions, which I will discuss later in the sermon.

Hildegard was known as a saint in her time: Saint Hildegard. She was canonized "Doctor of the Church" 900 years after her death in 2012 by Pope Benedict in recognition of "her holiness of life and the originality of her teaching."¹ Pope John Paul called her "light for her people and her time."² Contemporary scholars and theologians recognize her as a light not only for the 11th century, but for the 21st century as well. There are only three other female Doctors of the Church: Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.

Hildegard is best known today for her music, as one of the first named woman composers

1 Benedict XVI, "Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church," Apostolic Letters, *The Holy See*, 2012.

https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html

2 Benedict XVI, "Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen."

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and one of the best-known composers of sacred monophony. Monophony is a single line of music written to be unaccompanied by instrument or voices. Hildegard is also the most recorded woman composer in modern history. Her music is popular today among those who appreciate sacred and classical music. Though most people today listen to her music for the sense of peace it evokes, she wrote much of it for the purpose of praise and adoration. We will hear some of her music today, sung by members of the choir.

I encourage you to listen to recordings of her music which are easily found on YouTube. They are powerful in their simplicity and grounding effect. For an even deeper experience, try listening to some of her music while walking outside. Nature will come alive! (Or, to put it more accurately, you will experience the aliveness of nature!)

Hildegard understood the interconnectedness of the world long before scientists knew what they know today. She promoted balance in all we do. She understood that the body, mind, and spirit are deeply interconnected. She is regarded as the founder of scientific natural history in Germany. She experienced the animated life force in nature and reflected that in her illustrations, writing, theology, and music. For her, the divine was manifest in every blade of grass and every living thing.

Hildegard lived at the Benedictine monastery in Disibodenberg, Germany and was raised by an anchoress named Jutta. As the only females in the monastery, Jutta and Hildegard lived as anchoresses in a cell. Jutta taught Hildegard how to read and write, how to care for the sick using herbs, and what to do when she had visions. Jutta died in 1136 and Hildegard became the magistra, or leader, of the monastery.

Hildegard started having visions at the age of three. Like everything about Hildegard, her visions need to be understood in the context of the times in which she lived. Having visions was not considered to be odd or concerning in the 11th century. On the contrary, experiencing visions made a person into more like a celebrity.

Hildegard's visions inspired and informed her theology, her writings and illustrations, her music, and even led her to write an alternative language.

She was prolific, writing many books and nearly 400 letters, the largest body of letters to survive from the Middle Ages. Her letters were written to popes, abbots, and emperors. She also wrote three great books of theology. Her first book, which took her ten years to write, was entitled *Scivias*, which means "Know the Ways." It contains beautiful illustrations including images of nature, the church, and God with feminine depictions. Hildegard depicted God as a circle that was eternal, and the universe as a wheel and an egg.

Pope Eugenius read her writings in 1147 and declared them to be divinely inspired. This declaration made her well respected and quite famous. (In *Tasting History*, Max Miller compares it to someone today being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey.³)

Hildegard's influence grew even more quickly after the pope's declaration. Families chose to offer their daughters to her monastery and with their daughters came robust dowries.

In 1150, she and her sisters (fellow nuns) left Disibodenberg to found a monastery in Rupertsberg. Fifteen years later, Hildegard founded another monastery in Eibingen, where she eventually died at the age of 81. The name of that monastery, Eibingen, is the reason that she is known as Hildegard of Bingen. The young women and their dowries followed her wherever she went, and the money was still given to the Church.

Although unusual, the church respected her and allowed her to travel the lands and preach. Hildegard approached her preaching with subversive tactics, speaking humbly and meekly, bordering on being self-deprecating. She would often begin her sermons with "Who am I, but a lowly little woman?" Then, after this humble

3 Max Miller, "Eat Like a Medieval Nun – Hildegard of Bingen's Cookies of Joy," *Tasting History with Max Miller*, YouTube. <https://youtu.be/aa-1r9O0-PEE?si=ls3-mx5UbbMRjdbp>

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introduction, she would tear into the church and government and challenge them for their abuses of power.

She wrote popes and told them that they “silently tolerated corrupt men” and in so doing put “the whole world in confusion.”⁴ Hildegard even wrote King Konrad III and told him to “get hold of himself” and put justice first.⁵

There is so much more I could say about Hildegard. We didn’t get deep into her music or explore her herbology or medical prescriptions. I did learn about her prescription for “joy cookies” and violet wine, both of which were promised to ward off negativity and grim thoughts. The cookies were a concoction of cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg, ground together and mixed with whole wheat flour and water. We thought of making those but have ginger snaps for coffee hour instead.

It is clear even from what I have shared that had Hildegard been a man, she would have been seen as one of the major intellectuals of her day. Instead, she was recognized only for her visions and connection to God, rather than for that *and* her intellect and knowledge.

Hildegard saw the world as alive and interconnected, an awareness we very much need today. She understood and experienced God as an animating energy that infuses everything—every blade of grass, every river, and every person.

She had a holistic understanding of the world and trusted her intuition while she employed her keen intellect. Lyn Holley Doucet writes, “Her cosmology conveys a sense of great mystery and intertwining of all of creation from the visible to the invisible.”⁶

Matthew Fox writes, “Hildegard recognized that when women come into their own, there will be an end to the power-over dynamics that have blighted the planet. Instead of the reigning powers of Patriarchy, only the integration of a healthy Sacred Masculine and a resurrected

4 Matthew Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times* (Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, 2019), 4.

5 Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 5.

6 Audiobook.

Divine Feminine can save us from our destructive ways.”⁷ “...come and bring some of your feminist dynamism alive again in our tired, cynical, military-ridden, self-pitying world—a world that patriarchy built.”⁸

Let me say that again: “...come and bring some of your feminist dynamism alive again in our tired, cynical, military-ridden, self-pitying world—a world that patriarchy built.”⁹

My friends, it is not the woman Hildegard that we long for; it is her teachings: that the world is alive and interconnected. The holy is in everything, and we heal by living in peace with all of creation.

Hildegard challenged systems that allowed people to use their power to hurt others.

She called for a world built on reverence, balance, and mutual respect.

She spoke with intellect and experience.

She spoke truth, and wisdom.

May we hear her call.

Amen and Happy Mother’s Day!

(After sermon) Please remain seated and join in singing our closing hymn, #1048 Ubi Caritas, in your teal hymnal, after which we will join saying our unison benediction as Stephen-Wolf Foster extinguishes the chalice.

7 Matthew Fox, “Hildegard of Bingen’s Vision of the Divine Feminine,” *Daily Meditations with Matthew Fox*, May 15, 2019.

<https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2019/05/15/hildegard-of-bingens-vision-of-the-divine-feminine/>

8 Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen*, xx.

9 Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen*, xx.