

# THE LIFE *of* HILDEGARD

I am more convinced than ever that [Hildegard] still remains to be appreciated, not only as an inspiration for the present age but also as one of the most complex, significant, and fascinating creators and transmitters of her own twelfth-century culture.

—Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*<sup>3</sup>

**B**ETWEEN THE SUMMER OF 1098 AND THE AUTUMN OF 1179, a remarkable German woman lived eighty-one years at a time when half that long was considered a full life. The Über-multitasking *Frau*, this Benedictine nun founded two convents; organized the first-ever public preaching tours conducted by a woman; authored nearly four hundred bold letters to popes, emperors, abbesses, abbots, monks, nuns, and laypeople; worked as healer, naturalist, botanist, dietary specialist, and exorcist; composed daring music; crafted poetry with staying power; wrote the first surviving sung morality play; and spent decades writing three compelling theological works. Meet the incomparable Hildegard of Bingen. Her long resume is impressive in any age, but it pales when compared with her life, which she considered her best divine offering.

A thorough knowledge of the way Hildegard lived is essential to understanding her other creations.

The woman long famous now as the “Sibyl of the Rhine” was born the youngest child of ten in a noble family in the then-anonymous village of Bermersheim, twelve miles southwest of Mainz. From the start, her destiny was inextricably linked with this beautiful middle Rhine River valley, the area of western Germany known as the *Rheinhessen*. Tourists visit each year to enjoy its gentle emerald hills, terraced vineyards, and medieval castles.

I was once one of these visitors. In the early 1980s, I left Heidelberg on the first morning train heading north to Bonn, following the Rhine River up. I was twenty-three and abroad for the first time as a Rotary Club International scholar. A professor at my undergraduate college had introduced me to Hildegard two years earlier, and it thrilled me to realize that Hildegard would have passed through this same gorgeous countryside more than eight centuries earlier. I was gawking out the window when my traveling companion poked me, promising, “*Später erzähle ich Dir die Sage von der Lorelei.*” This was Frau Sophie Buschbeck, my seventy-nine-year-old friend. Her explosive German syllables let me know that later, when we came on the right spot, she wanted to tell me the legend of the Lorelei, a sheer rock cliff famous for the hypnotic singing of its beautiful maiden.

En route, Mother Buschbeck explained that the Lorelei had long marked the narrowest bend in the Rhine River between the North Sea and Switzerland. This narrowness, plus a dangerously strong current and plenty of underwater rocks, once triggered many boat accidents. When we finally clickety-clacked past that gray-green rock rising 400 feet straight up out of the shimmering river into the azure sky, Mother Buschbeck began reciting the spine-tingling legend as penned by the nineteenth-century poet Heinrich Heine:

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The most beautiful woman is sitting on the Lorelei rock. She's amazing—look at her! Her golden jewelry sparkling as she combs her golden hair, she combs it with a golden comb, and—as she combs—she sings a unique melody that's simply overpowering!

I thought then and still think now how fitting it is that Hildegard's magnificent life and harmonious writings and compositions are connected with an area renowned for its stunning beauty and for the irresistible power of singing.

### *A Toddler's Visions, and a Human Tithe*

Hildegard's spiritual journey began early, with her first vision at three. Two years later, she looked at a pregnant cow and predicted the color markings of its future calf, scaring her nurse. Too young to understand these revelations, and most likely scared herself, Hildegard hid this gift for years. Her parents, however, noticed her spiritual strengths and supported her life's mission by giving their tenth child to the church as a tithe. They may have also decided to do this because of Hildegard's susceptibility to illness. They probably believed the monastic life would protect and strengthen their daughter's never-quite-robust health. At eight, then, Hildegard began her spiritual quest in earnest when she was willingly committed to the religious life by her devout parents.

Two of Hildegard's brothers and one of her sisters also dedicated themselves to the Church: Hugh became choirmaster of Mainz cathedral; Roric, a canon in Tholey; and Clementia, a nun at Hildegard's Rupertsberg. Drutwin was the oldest brother and first heir, and there were three other sisters, Odilia, Irmengard, and Jutta. That leaves two siblings unaccounted for. Perhaps they died in childhood.

Compared with the names given to her known brothers and sisters, Hildegard's own moniker seems most prophetic. When her parents

Hildegard and Mechthilde chose *Hildegard*, they were obviously giving their daughter a piece of their own names. All contain the Old Germanic word *hild*, for “battle” or “fight.” Hildegard’s father’s name means “battle fortress (*bert*),” while her mother’s translates “powerful or strong (*mecht*) in battle.” *Hildegard* literally signifies “a place (*gard*) of battle,” implying strength in fighting. In other words, *Hildegard* is just the name you would want to give your daughter if you wanted her to be a spiritual warrior. Hildegard’s younger friend, the mystic Elisabeth of Schönau (1129–65), recognized this eponymic significance and wrote her about it in a letter: “My lady Hildegard, how fitting it is that you are named *Hildegard*, because through you God protects his church in spiritual conflicts.”<sup>4</sup>

But very earthly “holy wars” plagued her day, just as they do our own. Hildegard was a baby when the first, “triumphant” crusade took place. Pope Urban II’s crusaders besieged Jerusalem for five bloody weeks before taking it in the summer of 1099, massacring its every citizen. Later, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) traveled through northern France, Flanders, and the Rhine area, speaking to enthusiastic crowds and drumming up support for a second crusade. Hildegard’s life and his crossed paths more than once as she sought papal approval for her preaching. The German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, whom Hildegard wrote when she felt he needed correction, distinguished himself in this second “doomed” crusade, but ten years after Hildegard’s death, Barbarossa joined the third crusade and drowned on June 10, 1190, as he attempted to cross the Saleph River in the Roman province of Cilicia, never making it to the Holy Land.

While the crusaders sought to conquer by the sword, Hildegard focused instead on God’s love. Her work shows how each of us can spiritually engage the battle within the soul, by finding the Benedictine balance of prayer and work, by recognizing God’s creativity in the

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physical and spiritual mysteries of each human, by accepting Christ's never-ending mercy, and by rejecting corruption within the Church and in secular politics.

When Hildegard was fourteen, she moved from her childhood home in Bermersheim, traveling some fourteen miles due west to the St. Disibod Abbey at Disibodenberg. On All Saints' Day, November 1, 1112, she was given over as an oblate into the care of Jutta of Spanheim, the daughter of Count Stephen of Spanheim, an aristocratic anchoress only six years Hildegard's elder. Jutta was also related to Marchioness Richardis of Stade, the mother of the Archbishop Hartwig of Bremen and of the Richardis who was intimate friends with Hildegard.

These upper-class connections remind us that Hildegard was no waif left on the convent stoop. Hildegard's aristocratic background prepared her to act boldly on the world stage. This future boldness was grounded, however, in the listening quiet of Hildegard's earliest Benedictine years.

Jutta and young Hildegard lived together in a cell attached to the monastery of St. Disibod. Jutta taught Hildegard to write; to read the collection of psalms used in the liturgy; and to chant the *Opus Dei* ("work of God"), the weekly sequential recitation of the Latin Psalter. She probably also taught Hildegard to play the zitherlike stringed instrument called the psaltery.

The vibrant Hildegard may have sewed or embroidered her way through these teenage years, devoting herself to the traditional "weaving" activities approved-by-males for female monastics. During this time of relative isolation, Hildegard ate a simple but nourishing diet of eggs, soup, cheese, bread, beans, and fruit. These were passed to the hermits through a window specifically designed for that purpose, and their wastes were passed out the same window. Jutta and

Hildegard were not allowed to come and go at leisure, and this confinement must have been difficult at times for this visionary young woman.

Hildegard's dedication to the Church was viewed as the most serious commitment. Part of the dedication ceremony included the last rites (today called the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and the Viaticum). The anchoress-to-be lay on a bier to receive extreme unction in case she became mortally ill in the future. Early in her life, then, Hildegard was seen as dying to this world with its mundane earthly concerns and living only for God.

### *Jutta's Bruising Asceticism*

Jutta herself may have added challenges to these early monastic years. She was a severe practitioner of asceticism, including penitential self-flagellation. She wore a chain under her clothes, prayed barefoot in the extreme cold of a German winter, and refused the allowed (and even encouraged) modifications to the Benedictine diet for those who were sick. As an adult, Hildegard would teach moderation. Perhaps her experiences as a wide-eyed youth watching her earliest companion and teacher suffer extreme penance made Hildegard embrace balance in this practice. When Jutta died in 1136 at forty-four, Hildegard did not react with passion to this loss, and we can wonder how close they really were, despite their intimate proximity over three decades.

But Hildegard clearly loved her other primary teacher, the St. Disibod monk Volmar. He acted as prior and father confessor for the nuns at Disibodenberg. As a teenager, Hildegard began to realize her visions were unique experiences, and she broke her painful silence by discussing them with Jutta, who told Volmar. Volmar, in turn, became the first person to validate Hildegard's visions. He also mentored her for a time. Volmar recognized Hildegard's rare spiritual

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talents and later became her secretary and good friend. Although both Jutta and Volmar were Hildegard's first confidants, Hildegard became especially close to this monk.

She needed mentors, for Hildegard was a great self-doubter. Her two biggest insecurities and concomitant strengths stem from the informal schooling of her childhood and from the way she kept her visions bottled up in herself. She constantly lamented her lack of formal education and spent years seeking confirmation from the Church for her divine visions. She also consciously referred to herself in her work as "*ego paupercula feminea forma*," meaning "I, in the inferior form of a woman." Even after allowing for the classic rhetoric of such "I-am-unworthy" pleas, and taking into consideration Hildegard's genuine need to gain papal approval for the ongoing success of her ministry in a male-dominated culture that regarded woman as a lower species, the twenty-first-century reader senses in this powerful German prophet a fascinating, deeply insecure awareness of self.

Hildegard's profound self-doubting was, however, the very root of her vibrancy, because it was matched with an equally acute certainty in God the merciful and the mysterious. The English Romantic poet John Keats called this tendency "Negative Capability," when a person "is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>5</sup> In other words, Hildegard had the soul of a poet in everything she did.

These unique frailties informed her greatest strengths, and Hildegard also used them rhetorically to great advantage. Although she was obviously well-read in the liturgy (and through it, the Scriptures), the *Benedictine Rule*, the writings of the early Church Fathers, and perhaps even some Classical texts, Hildegard always claimed to have been taught by an "*indocte mulier*" ("unlearned

woman”). She had not been through the formal, males-only training of the *artes liberales*. The core curriculum for the ancient liberal arts program included the medieval *trivium* of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, a course of study very similar to majoring in classical literature at a university today, and then the *quadrivium* of music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. But, all of this excluded the female student.

Hildegard accepted her pedagogical deficiency with the wisdom of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians: “He [Jesus] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”<sup>6</sup> With this paradoxical truth in mind, Hildegard reminded her audience repeatedly that her visions and her counsel had obviously originated in divine inspiration, precisely because she had no formal training in such. Who could argue with that logic? She added that God had chosen her, a woman and the weakest, to speak because the times were so “sissy” (literally “woman-ish”)! Hildegard was suggesting that men had made such a mess of things that God had to call a “weak woman” in to save the day. That reasoning is how Hildegard turned what she and others of her day perceived as an educational and gender-specific weakness into a huge spiritual asset.

Most important, this Benedictine nun’s forever-shifting analysis of herself was the “crack” that allowed in a solid, confident sense of God’s mystery. Her need drank God in. The result was Hildegard’s dynamic, creative mind and her powerfully visionary soul. These energize her writings and her every artistic and practical accomplishment.

The same logic applies to Hildegard’s untrained, unpolished Latin. She made a masculine Church speak her own tongue. She turned it (sometimes accidentally) into exactly what her original visions required—a unique language. Her style is as unsystematic and as

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organic as her theology. Hildegard liked piling clause on clause, and her grammar can be less-than-exact; but even her most inelegant sentences have a rough beauty that communicates the power of her otherworldly revelations and their multiple meanings. Both messy and fecund—the way of every creative process, whether a volcanic eruption or a baby’s birth—Hildegard’s Latin style creates memorable challenges for the English translator. Her plays on words give her writings another layer of meaning resisting translation.

But why did Hildegard choose to write in Latin? Why not German? A century earlier, across the water in Anglo-Saxon England, the Benedictine monk Ælfric (c. 955–c. 1010) decided to write most of his sermons in his native Old English. He even translated much of the Bible into this vernacular language. Hildegard’s writings would have been quite different, and possibly even more exciting, had she written them in the German of her day, with its rich capacity for passionate and philosophical expression. She chose Latin for entirely practical reasons. First, it gave her writings, and especially their *female* author, the Church authority they required; second, as the transmitted language of the time, Latin ensured that her works would be passed on to future generations; and finally, Hildegard’s target audience was the upper class, who read Latin.

### *Hildegard’s Coming of Age*

During Jutta and Hildegard’s days together, they attracted others who wanted to follow God. By the time Jutta died when Hildegard was in her late thirties, their anchoresses’ cell had morphed into a small Benedictine monastery. Jutta’s death opened the way for the nuns to elect Hildegard as her successor, and only five years after Jutta’s death, Hildegard received the prophetic call to write down her visions for the world to read. We can speculate much about the effect

that the death of Hildegard's earliest spiritual mentor had on her. It may have been the most crucial point in her life, because it seems to have allowed Hildegard's soul to stand up straight. If Hildegard's silence on this relationship with her first teacher is any indication, Jutta's strong influence was not always salutary, and if Jutta had lived on and on, we can wonder if her pupil would have been able to break out into her own psychic space as vigorously as she did.

Hildegard tells us that when she was aged forty-two God commanded her to write down and publish what she had seen and heard in her soul. That was in 1141. The book would much later become her first visionary work, *Scivias*. But Hildegard did not begin immediately. She hesitated, doubting her ability to serve as God's prophet. Medieval society judged women unworthy to write. Writing was manly. When Hildegard became sick from her self-doubt, she analyzed her illness as a sign that her disobedience had upset God, so she turned to her teacher and friend Volmar and told him everything. He encouraged her to obey the vision's bright commandment, "Write." Finally she began a ten-year writing effort that would bring her much contemporary recognition.

Today the divine authority of Hildegard's voice is universally recognized, but near the middle of the twelfth century, she had still not received the coveted papal seal of approval. In 1147, Hildegard wrote Bernard of Clairvaux in an attempt to get the Church to validate her visions. She describes herself to him in the usual manner as "worthless, and even more than worthless with the name of woman" but adds that—despite her weaknesses, sicknesses, fears, and uncertainties—she is certain her visions are good and divine.

Meanwhile, Volmar was campaigning on her behalf. He told Abbot Kuno of St. Disibod about his student's visions, the abbot told the archbishop of Mainz, and the archbishop mentioned Hildegard to Pope Eugenius III, who was at the 1147-48 synod in nearby Trier. A

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disciple of Bernard of Clairvaux, the pope sent representatives to St. Disibod to visit Hildegard. They came back with a copy of the unfinished *Scivias* manuscript, and the Pope himself read from this document to the synod's clergymen and dignitaries, who applauded.

Letters suggest that Pope Eugenius may have read from the first two stunning visions of *Scivias's* second book. The text he read so impressed the assembly (among whom was Bernard of Clairvaux) that the Pope wrote to Hildegard, commanding her to keep on writing. Papal approval jump-started Hildegard's career as a public intellectual and spiritual leader. Without it, she would probably have been censured eventually by some churchman for transgressing the prohibitions against public female expression, as written down in the fourteenth chapter of the New Testament epistle 1 Corinthians.<sup>7</sup> Even with the approval of His Holiness, it still took Hildegard ten more years to finish *Scivias*.

While she was working on the *Scivias* manuscript, Hildegard founded her first abbey. The Disibodenberg monks vehemently opposed this new foundation. They would lose much both spiritually and financially when Hildegard took her community and left. Even some of Hildegard's own nuns balked at abandoning Disibod for what they knew to be a desolate location and significant hardship.

But Hildegard was unstoppable when she felt her mandate was from God, and in 1150, with the support of the elder Richardis of Stade (who had contacted Archbishop Heinrich I of Mainz), Hildegard took some twenty nuns and went nineteen miles northeast to Rupertsberg ("Mt. Rupert"), overlooking Bingen at the juncture of the Rhine River and the River Nahe. She was determined to build a new community on the ruins there of a Carolingian monastery—her *Vita* explains that she was told to do so in a vision. It took Hildegard many more years of wrangling with Abbot Kuno and the

Disibodenberg monks before she successfully disentangled the finances of her new convent from those of St. Disibod. Her eventual success was linked to the fact that Hildegard was well-connected.

One year after relocating her community to Rupertsberg, and only a few years after the important 1147-48 synod, Hildegard finished dictating *Scivias* to Volmar, the prior of her new Rupertsberg community, and to the nun Richardis of Stade, her other close friend, whom she called her “daughter.” During this time, Hildegard was also supervising the construction of buildings for her new monastery. We can picture her walking through the noisy construction site that was Rupertsberg and perhaps contemplating a title for her first major visionary work.

The twenty-six intense visions that became Hildegard’s *Scivias* are illuminated by thirty-five equally bold miniatures. Hildegard knew the art of illumination and probably supervised the design and creation of these in her own scriptorium at the new abbey of Rupertsberg. The illuminated paintings are done in a fresh, naïf style, not unlike Hildegard’s own peculiar, intense, and grammatically loose Latin. What the miniatures lack in formal polish is more than compensated by their bold colors and designs.

### *The Daring Musician*

A multi-faceted artist, Hildegard was not only an author and a talented visual designer, but a musician of note. Her allegiance to God through her music is one of the strongest refrains in her life. She believed music was necessary for salvation, because it was the best representation of the state of humanity before the Fall. If a person wanted to know what it felt like to be alive before the Fall, Hildegard believed holy music could take you there, as she writes in her famous letter to the Prelates of Mainz:

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Music stirs our hearts and engages our souls in ways we can't describe. When this happens, we are taken beyond our earthly banishment back to the divine melody Adam knew when he sang with the angels, when he was whole in God, before his exile. In fact, before Adam refused God's fragrant flower of obedience, his voice was the best on earth, because he was made by God's green thumb, who is the Holy Spirit. And if Adam had never lost the harmony God first gave him, the mortal fragilities that we all possess today could never have survived hearing the booming resonance of that original voice.

By the late 1140s, when Hildegard was well into the writing of *Scivias*, she was already known for her original liturgical music celebrating God the Father, His Son, the Holy Spirit, Mary and her Son, the Church, heavenly music, and the saints, but this twelfth-century polymath never restricted herself to involvement in just one activity. Musician, abbess, writer—she also worked as a political consultant. She was the kind of woman who could be invited to the German Emperor's palace at Ingelheim, and would go and make a lasting good impression. This meeting took place soon after Frederick Barbarossa was crowned Emperor in 1155. While there, Hildegard must have been asked to prophesy for the Emperor, because he later wrote her about this meeting:

We write to notify you, holy lady, that your predictions came true, exactly as you said they would when we invited you to our court at Ingelheim. With all our might, we will work to honor our kingdom. Dear lady, we ask that you continue to pray for us, and the sisters, too, that we will know God's grace.

Not long after their encounter, Emperor Barbarossa granted Hildegard's Rupertsberg convent an edict of imperial protection in

perpetuity. From then on, whenever the Emperor ordered attacks on certain monasteries supporting the Roman pope, Hildegard's convent was always spared. This special protection did not, however, stop Abbess Hildegard from writing Frederick harsh letters of rebuke when he appointed anti-popes (including, on one occasion, calling him "a totally insane man"). Her first allegiance was always to her heavenly Emperor.

### *The Busy Sixty-Something Nun*

Throughout her life, Hildegard continued to find new artistic and spiritual ways of expression. In 1158, at the age of sixty, she began writing her second visionary work, *The Book of Life's Merits*. It took half as long to complete as *Scivias*, and was finished in 1163. Its central image is that of a giant man reaching from ocean to sky; he looks the world over and interprets what he sees and hears.

The penitential themes of *The Book of Life's Merits* may reflect Hildegard's frustration with the eighteen-year schism between the Church and the Emperor that began the same year that she started work on her second major theological manuscript, as well as the ugly human difficulties that she encountered with the Disibodenberg monks and with her own nuns when she moved her community to Rupertsberg. Meeting with adamant opposition on all sides, she may have found that this rupture focused her attention on humanity's grotesque vices and on God's remedy, repentance.

During this period, Hildegard also wrote an encyclopedia, the *Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures*. It includes herbal remedies, other medical and mineral lore, and a bestiary, in nine books: on plants, elements, trees, stones, fish, birds, animals, reptiles, and metals. Hildegard followed this compendium with a healer's handbook titled *Causes and Cures*. Like many monastics,

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Hildegard must have practiced medicine informally, on an as-needed basis. These two singularly nonvisionary works demonstrate Hildegard's inordinate interest in the natural world around her and her desire to learn all she could about God's creation in order to heal her fellow human beings and help them, and herself, live a healthy life.

Never one to merely sit and write, Hildegard turned to a new venture when she finished work on her natural history and medical works. Despite persistent ill health (such as exhaustion, fevers, and breathing difficulties), in 1158 she launched a series of unprecedented preaching tours. She traveled by ship, by horseback, and on foot, and, for someone not in the best of health, these long trips would have been arduous. The map at the beginning of this reader shows the rather impressive extent of her travels. The first tour took her down the Main River, from Mainz east to Bamberg, stopping at Wertheim, Würzburg, Kitzingen, and Ebrach, and preaching at many monastic communities.

On her second tour in 1160, Hildegard traveled west and south along the Rhine River from Trier to Metz, with a trip to the monastic community at Krauftal. At Trier she preached in public, a most unusual venue for a woman of her day, and she delivered her sermon on Pentecost, which was an especially appropriate ecclesiastical season for the fiery, light-filled visions of her sermon. Hildegard began it with her usual humble apology for being "a feeble little body lacking health, energy, a bold spirit, and learning," then added that "the mystical Light" had told her to chide the Trier prelates for shirking their duties and not blowing "the trumpet of justice," a negligence on their part that, she said, darkened earth's bright dawns and turned virtue's compassion into the coldest bitterness.<sup>8</sup> Hildegard's sermon would have been high drama for a medieval audience.

On her third tour, probably begun the next year, Hildegard traveled for a second time along the Rhine River, this time north. She went

from Boppard up to Werden, stopping at Andernach, Siegburg, and Cologne. At Cologne, as at Trier, she preached thundering apocalyptic sermons to both clergy and laypeople. Her preaching in monasteries, churches, and public venues such as village marketplaces was a first for a woman of the Christian church.

Not long after her third preaching tour, Hildegard began her third and last major theological work, *The Book of Divine Works*, in 1163. Like *Scivias*, it took her ten years to finish. As she was finishing *The Book of Divine Works*, grief entered Hildegard's life when Volmar, her friend, confidant, and secretary died in 1173. In the Acknowledgments section of this, her final work, Hildegard reveals that when he died, her world was shaken. They had known each other for over sixty years.

While working on *The Book of Divine Works*, Hildegard was not idle in other ways. She also composed more music and letters, like the one she wrote in 1164 to the German Emperor, telling him how much she disapproved of his appointment of Anti-pope Paschal III. She also wrote minor works, including the *Vita Sancti Disibodi* (*Life of Saint Disibod*) and the *Vita Sancti Ruperti* (*Life of St. Rupert*).

During this already productive period, Hildegard also founded her second convent, some fifteen years after starting her first Benedictine community. The thriving Rupertsberg convent had become full-to-overflowing with young women dedicating themselves to the Church; therefore, in 1165, Hildegard bought the former double monastery of Eibingen, high above the town of Rudesheim, east from Bingen, and across the river. Today on the site of this Eibingen convent stands St. Hildegard's Abbey, built between 1900 and 1904.

Hildegard would experience more precarious health from 1167–70, but nothing could keep her from her Benedictine mission. She began her fourth and final preaching tour in 1170, making her deepest journey south by traveling in Swabia, known today as Bavaria.

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She rode or walked from the cloister Alzey to Maulbronn, Hirsau, Kirchheim, and Zwiefalten. The travel must have been strenuous. That same year she performed an exorcism for the highborn Cologne woman Sigewize and then accepted her into her community.

### *The Migraine Sufferer?*

All of this activity would make anyone tired, especially a woman of the Middle Ages who lived before the era of MRI's, CT scans, and antibiotics. With all that Hildegard accomplished in her eight decades—the arduous preaching tours, the multiple well-received manuscripts, the founding of monasteries, the successful management of her communities, the personal care given to their more than one hundred monastic members, and her work as apothecary, dietician, naturalist, exorcist, musician, poet, letter-writer, and composer—it is hard to believe that she was so often sick. But Hildegard was frequently quite literally stuck in bed, unable to move.

Her symptoms suggest that she suffered from severe migraines. Most likely these were ocular in nature, producing auras that doctors today call “scintillating scotomas,” *scintillating* for “flashing sparks,” and *scotoma* meaning “an area of no-vision.” Such neurological disturbances often start with a shimmering spot of white light that spreads and becomes bright zigzags bordered by silver. Even in the twenty-first century, ocular migraines and migraines in general elude the best and brightest medical minds. We still know so little about how to treat these excruciatingly painful, mystifying maladies; how much more would such an illness have disturbed the psyche of an intelligent twelfth-century woman who had absolutely no real scientific point of reference for it?

Sometimes Hildegard's visions are simply explained as a by-product of this agonizing, hallucinatory, and often crippling medical condition.

Migraines may indeed have contributed to what Hildegard saw, but surely not every chronic migraine patient can be considered a prophet. Hildegard seems a master at turning her weaknesses into strengths. Although these migraines and their paralyzing after-effects must have slowed her down some, they never physically impeded her work for long, and she never wavered from her dedication to God's calling.

To have such stamina in the middle of illness, diverse responsibilities, and profound artistic accomplishment, Hildegard must have found a way to tap into the well of holy joy. She defines *joy* as an awareness of God's secrets. But how can we be "conscious" of divine secrets? Hildegard tackles this age-old question head-on: *Can we see God?*

Her answer is synonymous with Psalm 19, that we can see God's vigor in the world around us:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.

Hildegard called this vigor *viriditas*, the "green" energy of agape love pulsing through the entire universe. Over and over in her writings, she chooses *viriditas* to express God's vitality and the ways His goodness and love charge the whole world with life, beauty, and renewal—literally, with "greenness." Her unique, creative use of this Latin word makes it something of a neologism in her work.

In Hildegard's mind, *viriditas* was first found in the green of the garden of Eden, but it is also the green of whatever twig you or I

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happen to be looking at in this present moment, whoever we are, wherever we may be. She knew that the natural opposite of this “greening” energy was spiritual desiccation (including what we often call “depression”). But, like God’s mercy, His revitalizing *viriditas* has no limits. Wherever Hildegard looked, she saw that this “green” force animates every creature and plant on this planet with verdant divine love.

When I was a Senior Fulbright Lecturer in Seoul, winter seemed unending. I had no car and walked everywhere hunched-down and pulled-in for five long months of razor-sharp winds slicing icily through leafless trees in gray skies, until one day when I happened to look up, I was as shocked as I was thrilled to see that the dark, dust-covered bushes in front of Sogang University’s Xavier Hall had begun unfurling the tiniest curls of tender green in the suddenly warm sunshine. That was good news! After an indefinite-seeming frozen time, nothing can be more exciting than spring. Hildegard lived through countless dramatic German winters and knew this knowledge, too, in her very bones.

I watched *viriditas* resurrect the Sogang campus that spring. It began glowing with the purest white cherry tree blossoms against bright green leaves. After the bitterest winter, they felt like a gift. This was also Hildegard’s perspective. She saw flowers—literally the most beautiful reproductive form of natural plant growth—as the height of *viriditas*. To her, they symbolized in a mysterious way our obedience to God, and she saw God’s crucified, incarnate Son as the best example of the Flower. In *Scivias*, Hildegard takes this notion further, using the image of a rejected flower to describe the fall of humanity. Failing to accept God’s brilliant, sweet bloom, the first humans plunged humanity into a sterile darkness.

*Hildegard's Benedictine Center*

Another reason that Hildegard was able to persevere through her many potentially crippling difficulties was that balance was the most defining element of her life. Her ability to accomplish many things at once without losing calmness had its origination in the Benedictine center of her life. Before all else, Hildegard was a Benedictine abbess. As such, she was charged with teaching and taking care of her communities. Everything she did or said radiated from this Benedictine interior and its duties.

Hildegard's high regard for St. Benedict's *Rule* and its impact on her life are evident in her *Commentary* on it, a commentary that she included in a letter to a German monastic community that requested it. In it, Hildegard applauded St. Benedict's virtues, saying they made him shine "like the dawn," and she commended his *Rule* for being "neither too lax nor too strict."

As outlined in St. Benedict's *Rule*, Hildegard's structured monastic day included about eight hours for sleeping, some six hours each for working and meditative reading, and about four hours for the liturgical services. Her holistic creativity seems to have blossomed from her life's focus on the eight celebrations of the *Opus Dei* (*The Work of God*). The offices she regularly observed were Matins (at two AM in winter), followed by a short interval; Lauds; Prime (at sunrise); Terce, Sext, and None during the day; Vespers (at twilight); and Compline (at sunset). These were devoted to the repetition of the Psalter's 150 songs each week and to other prayers, reflecting the Benedictine principles of holy listening and humility.

Hildegard's life was an integration of prayer and work, just as St. Benedict teaches in his *Rule*, which opens with a call to listen and follow humble Christ: