

In his book “Hildegard of Bingen – A Saint for our Times” Matthew Fox writes:

Who is this woman who talked about an “original wisdom” that we are all born into, in the midst of a pessimistic theological tradition that had been preaching “original sin” for the previous 800 years? (2)

Who is this woman who called the serpent “the wisest of all creatures,” when the serpent is the ancient symbol of the goddess, whose story took an abusive direction when patriarchy destroyed the goddess civilizations? (2)

Who is this woman who celebrated eros and proposed that Adam’s fall was a failure of eros – a failure to take delight in the beauty and grace of creation, and that we can fall in the same way? (2)

Who is this woman who wrote the first opera of the West, 300 years before any other? (3)

Who is this woman who taught that the only sin is “drying up,” and wrote abbots and bishops telling them to abandon their dryness, get out of their buildings, and do whatever it took to get “wet and green and moist and juicy?” (3)

Who is this woman who called Rome “evil” 400 years before Luther and the Protestant Reformers? (4)

Who is this woman who puts justice as the deciding ethical norm in ecclesial and cultural life, instead of blind obedience? (5)

Who is this woman who took on the emperor..., comparing him to an infant and a madman, and threatened that God’s sword would smite him? (5)

Who is this woman who speaks to women everywhere – and to all men who are brave enough to explore both the Divine Feminine and the Sacred Masculine in themselves and society? (6)

This is Hildegard of Bingen. You could call her a “Renaissance Woman”yet she preceded the renaissance by two hundred years.

Born in the Rhine River valley in what is now Germany in 1098, she was the youngest of eight children. A sickly child, she thought it normal for one to experience visions, “the shade of the living light” as she called it. Only later did she find herself unique with this gift.

She was sent to live a Benedictine monastery as a young girl. She was put in the care of abbess Jutta von Sponhiem, a noblewoman who taught Hildegard to read and write. She did what most did in monasteries; she prayed, she helped nurse the sick, she tended to the grounds and gardens. She also learned to play the psaltery, a small Greek harp-like instrument.

Upon Jutta’s death in 1136, Hildegard was selected to be the magistra of community by her sister nuns. But rather than be magistra under the supervision of the monastery’s male abbot, she asked permission to for the nuns to form their own monastery. When the abbot predictably denied her request, she went over his head and made her case to the Archbishop. Her request was granted. At age 52 she started her own monasteries in Rupertsberg and then one later in Eibingen.

But prior to this, while back at her old monastery, Hildegard was already famous. She was known to monarchs, popes and kings.

After years of keeping her visions to herself, she began writing them down in illustrated manuscripts – framing the works in a theological context. In all she authored three works of illustrated, visionary theology.

Although she also incorporated her musical compositions in these works, her other musical works stood on their own. In addition to over 65 full musical compositions, her “Ordo Virtutum” is thought to be the oldest (by one hundred years) operatic morality play. The musical drama, which dealt the struggle for virtue amongst the temptations of the devil, was likely performed by the nuns of her monastery.

At a time when even famous religious women were not permitted to be socially active or to preach, Hildegard did both. She was fearless in her admonitions of kings and popes. She traveled and preached. Her sermons agitated those in power

as she exposed ecclesial corruption and clerical incompetence. She demanded reform (this is four hundred years before Martin Luther).

But she didn't stop there. She also authored two books on science and medicine. She also became somewhat famous for her healing powers. Such powers were not due to any supernatural influence but due to her knowledge of natural herbology and plant extracts. Hildegard's theology revolved around the incarnation of God in the natural world and in all things, including humanity. As a consequence, remedies for our illnesses are found nearby in nature.

From a health and medicine standpoint, one of Hildegard's big ideas was to boil water to prevent illness.

Although not fully developed or implemented, Hildegard invented her own alphabet and language, Lingua Ignota (unknown language). It was thought to be a secret language to be used amongst the nuns.

Those who sought to canonize her as a saint failed four times. Eventually, a most unlikely pope, Pope Benedict XVI, on May 10, 2012 extended "equivalent canonization" and on October 7, 2012 named her a Doctor of the Church, the fourth woman of only thirty five saints to be given that distinction.

(Hildegard Knocks on Sanctuary door and enters)

Note: Direct quotes are taken from the book "Hildegard of Bingen – A Saint for our Times" by Matthew Fox are referenced by page numbers in parentheses.

Dave: Can I help you?

Hildegard: I noticed my name on the roadside pulpit outside so I thought I'd stop in.

Dave: Oh, ahhh...Hildegard of Bingen! Oh, what good fortune! C'mon in!

(Hildegard comes in.)

Dave: Welcome to the 21st century!

Hildegard: It's wonderful to be here. The 12th century sends its greetings. Many blessings to you!

Dave: And to you!.... Why are you here?

Hildegard: More than anything else, I have come to see what you have done with God's creation.

Dave: Oh, really?

Hildegard: Yes. All creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation; and humankind is called to assist God and called to co-create. (66,93)

Dave: What do mean co-create?

Hildegard: Humankind is full of creative possibility. Humankind is God's work. We can set into creation all that is necessary and life-sustaining. (93)

Dave: You mean that creation is not something fixed? Creation is not something that God did many, many years ago as explained in the Bible... and that we participate in co-creation?

Hildegard: Correct. Creation is not fixed. Your very own Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams said, “[God’s] revelation is continuous in word, in deed, and in nature, that it is not sealed, and that it points always beyond itself.” I couldn’t agree more. God is the living and true witness of truth...and a not-being-silent God. (9)

Dave: So God is a not-being-silent God and we participate in creation?

Hildegard: Yes, we participate in this creation – this incarnation. I argued with many bishops and popes about this. (They are so daft!) To them, the incarnation only meant God made flesh in Jesus. But it’s much, much more than that. It is also God incarnate in us all, in the natural world, in all things – that great and fiery force, sparkling in everything that lives! (Hymn 27)

Dave: In the shining of the river’s course, in greening grass that glory gives! (Hymn 27)

Hildegard: Yes! Precisely!!! The Word of God is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity.... I compare the great love of the Creator and creation to the same love and fidelity with which God binds a pair of lovers. Limitless love, from the depths to the stars, flooding all. It is the royal kiss of peace. (12, 39)

Dave: I shine in glitter on the seas, in burning sun, moon and stars. (Hymn 27)

Hildegard: In unseen wind, in verdant trees, I breathe within both near and far.
(Hymn 27)

Dave: In the 12th century, how did you come to feel that it was your place, as a woman, to confront Popes?

Hildegard: When I was younger I had a vision of a young woman and I heard a voice speaking to me, it said “ the young woman whom you see is Love. She has her tent in eternity.... It was love which was the source of creation in the beginning.... She made everything.... God made the form of woman to be the mirror of all his beauty, the embrace of his whole creation. (111)

Dave: A Divine Feminine balanced with a Sacred Masculine.

Hildegard: Yes, exactly. The Divine Feminine is part of the sacred balance. Sadly, over the course of human history, as power became more and more concentrated in patriarchal structures, the role Divine Feminine in church and political life became a threat and was discarded.

Dave: Although the present Pope seems to be more progressive, recent Popes have accused many Sisters of your order of radical feminism.

Hildegard: I would accuse those Popes of radical patriarchy.

Dave: Yes. It can be all about how you frame the narrative..... Back to the idea of us being co-creators of the cosmos.... That's a lot of responsibility!

Hildegard: Most certainly. The high, the low, all of creation God gives to humankind to use. But if this privilege is misused, God's justice permits creation to punish humanity. (42)

Dave: Well, based upon what you've seen of the 21st century thus far, do you think we've misused this privilege?

Hildegard: In the 12th century I had a vision that the greening power of the virtues faded away, and all justice entered upon a period of decline. As a result, the greening power of life on earth was reduced in every seed because the upper region of the atmosphere was altered in a way contrary to its first destiny. Summer now became subject to a contradictory chill, while winter often experienced paradoxical warmth. There occurred on earth times of drought and dampness.... Let me ask you, do you feel this has come to pass? (41)

Dave: Well, sadly yes. In pursuit of worldly riches, we have altered our atmosphere in a way contrary to its first destiny. Not only that, we have also altered our water and land in ways contrary to its first destiny.

Hildegard: When the greedy do not get what they want, they fall into a depression from which they are not lightly lifted. The day hurries quickly by, they say, "it is always night." If happiness should stand outside, just beyond their door, they say, "I am accursed." Should it go well with all they undertake, still they would say, "it goes badly!" They are snakes that dare to live without the verdancy of God's grace.

Dave: What is the cause of this behavior?

Hildegard: Hard-heartedness is the worst sin since it shows no mercy. Neither does it think that charity is necessary nor does it do any good works. (101)

Dave: How can we do better?

Hildegard: A person cannot be fruitful without the greening power of faith. The soul that is full of wisdom is saturated with the spray of a bubbling fountain, God himself. (94)

Dave: And how do we get this greening power of faith?

Hildegard: Through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is an unquenchable fire. It bestows all excellence, sparks all worth, awakes all goodness, ignites speech, enflames humankind. Yet in this radiance is a restorative stillness.

Dave: The Holy Spirit, the breath of life?

Hildegard: Precisely! And where I breathe there is no death and meadows glow with beauties rife. (Hymn 27)

Dave: And God is life to the fullest?

Hildegard: To the fullest.... I am in all, the spirit's breath, the thundered word, for I am life. (*Hymn 27*)

Dave: I think I understand. Thank you!

Hildegard: You are most welcome. May you ascend by means of many blessings; from blessing to blessing.

Dave: And may you be blessed as well. Thank you for joining us today. Safe travels to you.

Hildegard: I'd like to chill here for the rest of the service if you don't mind.

Dave: Very well, be my guest. (*To congregation.*) Give it up for Hildegard of Bingen!