

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY
OF
HILDEGARD OF
BINGEN

1098 – 1179

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TOGETHER WITH
A SELECTION OF QUOTATIONS
FROM HER WRITINGS

Hildegard of Bingen was born at Böckelheim on the Nahe, 1098; she died on the Rupertsberg near Bingen, 1179. The family name is unknown of this great seeress and prophetess, called the Sibyl of the Rhine. The early biographers give the first names of her parents as Hildebert and Mechtildis (or Mathilda), speak of their nobility and riches, but give no details of their lives. Later writers call the saint Hildegard of Böckelheim, of Rupertsberg, or of Bingen. Legends would make her a Countess of Spanheim. She probably belonged to the illustrious family of Stein, whose descendants are the present Princes of Salm. Her father was a soldier in the service of Meginhard, Count of Spanheim. Hildegard was a weak and sickly child, and so received but little education at home. Her parents, though much engaged in worldly pursuits, had a religious disposition and had promised the child to the service of God. At the age of eight she was placed under the care of Jutta, sister of Count Meginhard, who lived as a recluse on the Disenberg (or Disibodenberg, Mount of St. Disibod) in the Diocese of Speyer. Here also Hildegard was given but little instruction since she was much afflicted with sickness, being frequently scarcely able to walk and often deprived even of the use of her eyes. She was taught to read and sing the Latin psalms, sufficient for the chanting of the Divine Office, but never learned to write. Eventually she was invested with the habit of St. Benedict and made her religious profession. Jutta died in 1136, and Hildegard was appointed superior. Numbers of aspirants flocked to the community and she decided to go to another locality, impelled also, as she says, by a Divine command. She chose Rupertsberg near Bingen on the left bank of the Rhine, about fifteen miles from Disenberg. After overcoming many difficulties and obtaining the permission of the lord of the place, Count Bernard of Hildesheim, she settled in her new home with eighteen sisters in 1147 or 1148 (1149 or 1150 according to Delehaye). Probably in 1165 she founded another convent at Eibingen on the right side of the Rhine, where a community had already been established in 1148, which, however, had no success.

The life of Hildegard as child, religious, and superior was an extraordinary one. Left much to herself on account of her ill health, she led an interior life, trying to make use of everything for her own sanctification. From her earliest years she was favoured with visions. She says of herself:

Up to my fifteenth year I saw much, and related some of the things seen to others, who would inquire with astonishment, whence such things might come. I also wondered and during my sickness I asked one of my nurses whether she also saw similar things. When she answered no, a great fear befell me. Frequently, in my conversation, I would relate future things, which I saw as if present, but, noting the amazement of my listeners, I became more reticent.

This condition continued to the end of her life. Jutta had noticed her gifts and made them known to a monk of the neighbouring abbey, but, it seems, nothing was done at the time. When about forty years of age Hildegard received a command to publish to the world what she saw and heard. She hesitated, dreading what people might think or say, though she herself was fully convinced of the Divine character of the revelations. But, continually urged, rebuked, and threatened by the inner voice, she disclosed all to her spiritual director, and through him to the abbot under whose jurisdiction her community was placed. Then a monk was ordered to put in writing whatever she related; some of her nuns also frequently assisted her. The writings were submitted to the bishop (Henry, 1145-53) and clergy of Mainz, who pronounced them as coming from God. The matter was also brought to the notice of Eugene III (1145-53) who was at Trier in 1147. Albero of Cluny, Bishop of Verdun, was commissioned to investigate and made a favourable report. Hildegard continued her writings. Crowds of people flocked to her from the neighbourhood and from all parts of Germany and Gaul, to hear words of wisdom, and to receive advice and help in corporal and spiritual ailments. These were not only from the common people, but men and women of note in Church and State were drawn by the report of her wisdom and sanctity. Thus we read that Archbishop Heinrich of Mainz, Archbishop Eberhard of Salzburg and Abbot Ludwig of St. Eucharius at Trier, paid her visits. St. Elizabeth of Schönau was an intimate friend and frequent visitor. Trithemius in his "Chronicle" speaks of a visit of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, but this probably

was not correct. Not only at home did she give counsel, but also abroad. Many persons of all stations of life wrote to her and received answers, so that her correspondence is quite extensive. Her great love for the Church and its interests caused her to make many journeys; she visited at intervals the houses of Disenberg and Eibingen; on invitation she came to Ingelheim to see Emperor Frederick; she travelled to Würzburg, Bamberg, and the vicinity of Ulm, Cologne, Werden, Trier, and Metz. It is not true, however, that she saw Paris or the grave of St. Martin at Tours.

In the last year of her life Hildegard had to undergo a very severe trial. In the cemetery adjoining her convent a young man was buried who had once been under excommunication. The ecclesiastical authorities of Mainz demanded that she have the body removed. She did not consider herself bound to obey since the young man had received the last sacraments and was therefore supposed to have been reconciled to the Church. Sentence of interdict was placed on her convent by the chapter of Mainz, and the sentence was confirmed by the bishop, Christian (V) Buch, then in Italy. After much worry and correspondence she succeeded in having the interdict removed. She died a holy death and was buried in the church of Rupertsberg.

Hildegard was greatly venerated in life and after death. Her biographer, Theodoric, calls her saint, and many miracles are said to have been wrought through her intercession. Gregory IX (1227-41) and Innocent IV (1243-54) ordered a process of information which was repeated by Clement V (1305-14) and John XXII (1316-34). No formal canonization took place, but her name is in the Roman Martyrology and her feast is celebrated in the Dioceses of Speyer, Mainz, Trier, and Limburg, also in the Abbey of Solesmes, where a proper office is said (Brev. Monast. Tornac., 18 Sept.). When the convent on the Rupertsberg was destroyed in 1632 the relics of the saint were brought to Cologne and then to Eibingen. At the secularization of this convent they were placed in the parish church. In 1857 an official recognition was made by the Bishop of Limburg and the relics were placed on an altar specially built. At this occasion the town of Eibingen chose her as patron. On 2 July, 1900, the cornerstone was here laid for a new convent of St. Hildegard. The work was begun and completed through the munificence of Prince Karl of Löwenstein and Benedictine nuns from St. Gabriel's at Prague entered the new home (17 Sept., 1904).

All the manuscripts found in the convent at Eibingen were in 1814 transferred to the state library at Wiesbaden. Of this collection the first and greatest work of St. Hildegard is called "Scivias" (Scire or vias Domini, or vias lucis), parts of which had been shown to the Archbishop of Mainz. She began it in 1141 and worked at it for ten years. It is an extraordinary production and hard to understand, prophetic throughout and admonitory after the manner of Ezechiel and the Apocalypse. In the introduction she speaks of herself and describes the nature of her visions. Then follow three books, the first containing six visions, the second giving seven visions, and about double the size of the first; the third, equal in size to both the others, has thirteen visions. The "Scivias" represents God on His Holy Mountain with mankind at its base; tells of the original condition of man, his fall and redemption, the human soul and its struggles, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the times to come, the son of perdition and the end of the world. The visions are interspersed with salutary admonitions to live in the fear of the Lord. Manuscripts of the "Scivias" are also at Cues and Oxford. It was printed for the first time at Paris (1513) in a book which contains also the writings of several other persons. It was again printed at Cologne in 1628. The "Liber vitae meritorum" written between 1158 and 1163, is a picturesque description of a Christian's life of virtue and its opposite. It was printed for the first time in Pitra, "Analecta Sacra", VIII. The "Liber divinorum operum" (1163-70) is a contemplation of all nature in the light of faith. Sun, moon, and stars, the planets, the winds, animals, and man, are in her visions expressive of something supernatural and spiritual, and as they come from God should lead back to Him. Her "Letter to the Prelates of Mainz" in regard to the interdict placed upon her convent is placed here among her works by the Wiesbaden manuscript; in others it is bound among her letters. To it the Wiesbaden manuscript annexes nine small essays: on the Creation and fall of man; God's treatment of the renegade; on the priesthood and the Holy Eucharist; on the covenant between Christ and the Church; on the Creation and Redemption; on the duties of secular judges; on the praises of God with intermingled prayers. "Liber Epistolarum et Orationum"; the Wiesbaden manuscript contains letters to and from Eugene III, Anastasius IV, Adrian IV, and Alexander III, King Conrad III, Emperor Frederick, St. Bernard, ten archbishops, nine bishops, forty-nine abbots and provosts of monasteries or chapters, twenty-three

abbesses, many priests, teachers, monks, nuns, and religious communities.

"Vita S. Disibodi" and "Vita S. Ruperti"; these "Vitae", which Hildegard claims also to be revelations, were probably made up from local traditions and, especially for St. Rupert, the sources being very meagre, have only legendary value. "Expositio Evangeliorum" fifty homilies in allegory. "Lingua Ignota", the manuscript, in eleven folios was a list of nine hundred words of an unknown language, mostly nouns and only a few adjectives, a Latin, and in a few cases a German, explanation, together with an unknown alphabet of twenty-three letters printed in Pitra. A collection of seventy hymns and their melodies.

Not only in this work, but elsewhere Hildegard exhibits high poetic gifts, transfigured by her intimate persuasion of a Divine mission. "Liber Simplicis Medicinae" and "Liber Compositae Medicinae"; the first was edited in 1533 by Schott at Strasburg as "Physica S Hildegardis", Dr. Jessen (1858) found a manuscript of it in the library of Wolfenbuttel. It consists of nine books treating of plants, elements, trees, stones, fishes, birds, quadrupeds, reptiles, metals, printed in Migne as "Subtilitatum Diversarum Naturarum Libri Novem". In 1859, Jessen succeeded in obtaining from Copenhagen a manuscript entitled "Hildegardis Curae et Causae", and on examination felt satisfied that it was the second medical work of the saint. It is in five books and treats of the general divisions of created things, of the human body and its ailments, of the causes, symptoms, and treatment of diseases. "38 Solutiones Quaestionum" are answers to questions proposed by the monks of Villars through Gilbert of Gembloux on several texts of Scripture. "Explanatio Regulae S. Benedicti", also called a revelation, exhibits the rule as understood and applied in those days by an intelligent and mild superior. "Explanatio Symboli S. Athanasii", an exhortation addressed to her sisters in religion. The "Speculum futurorum temporum" is a free adaptation of texts culled from her writings by Gebeno, prior of Eberbach (Pentachronicon, 1220). Some would question the genuineness of her writings. Her correspondence is to be read with caution; three letters from popes have been proved spurious.

The first biography of St. Hildegard was written by the contemporary monks Gottfried and Theodoric. Guibert of Gembloux began another.

The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. This Word manifests itself in every creature.

God is the good
and all things which proceed from him
are good.

Holy persons draw to themselves all that is earthly. . . .

The earth is at the same time mother,
She is mother of all that is natural,
mother of all that is human.

She is the mother of all,
for contained in her
are the seeds of all.

The truly holy person welcomes all that is earthly.

Glance at the sun. See the moon and the stars.

Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings.

Now, think.

What delight God gives to humankind
with all these things. . . .

All nature is at the disposal of humankind.

We are to work with it. For
without we cannot survive.

The fire has its flame and praises God.

The wind blows the flame and praises God.

In the voice we hear the word which praises God.

And the word, when heard, praises God.
So all of creation is a song of praise to God.

Trust shows the way.

God hugs you.
You are encircled by the arms
of the mystery of God.

Good People,
most royal greening verdancy,
rooted in the sun,
you shine with radiant light.

I welcome all the creatures of the world with grace.

Now in the people that were meant to be green there is no more life of any kind. There is only shriveled barrenness. The winds are burdened by the utterly awful stink of evil, selfish goings-on. Thunderstorms menace. The air belches out the filthy uncleanness of the peoples. The earth should not be injured! The earth must not be destroyed!

Divinity is aimed at humanity.

"With my mouth," God says, "I kiss my own chosen creation. I uniquely, lovingly, embrace every image I have made out of the earth's clay. With a fiery spirit I transform it into a body to serve all the world."

Mary, ground of all being, Greetings!
Greetings to you, lovely and loving Mother!

Humankind, full of all creative possibilities, is God's work. Humankind alone is called to assist God. Humankind is called to co-create. With nature's help, humankind can set into creation all that is necessary and life-sustaining.

God has arranged all things in the world in consideration of everything else.

All of creation God gives to humankind to use. If this privilege is misused, God's justice permits creation to punish humanity.

O Holy Wisdom, Soaring Power, encompass us with wings unfurled, and carry us, encircling all, above, below, and through the world.

--O Holy Spirit, Root of Life

Every element has a sound, an original sound from the order of God; all those sounds unite like the harmony from harps and zithers.

I, the fiery life of divine wisdom, I ignite the beauty of the plains, I sparkle the waters, I burn in the sun, and the moon, and the stars.

The earth which sustains humanity must not be injured, it must not be destroyed.

The soul is a breath of living spirit, that with excellent sensitivity, permeates the entire body to give it life. Just so, the breath of the air makes the earth fruitful. Thus the air is the soul of the earth, moistening it, greening it.

There is the Music of Heaven in all things and we have forgotten how to hear it until we sing.

Underneath all the texts, all the sacred psalms and canticles, these watery varieties of sounds and silences, terrifying, mysterious, whirling and sometimes gestating and gentle must somehow be felt in the pulse, ebb, and flow of the music that sings in me. My new song must float like a feather on the breath of God.

When the words come, they are merely empty shells without the music. They live as they are sung, for the words are the body and the music the spirit.

Angels, living light most glorious!

Beneath the Godhead in burning desire
in the darkness and mystery of creation
you look on the eye of your God

never taking your fill:

What glorious pleasures take shape within you!

"O gloriosissimi"

Love, which, in concert with Abstinence, established Faith, and which, along with Patience, builds up Chastity, is like the columns that sustain the four corners of a house. For it was that same Love which planted a glorious garden redolent with precious herbs and noble flowers--roses and lilies--which breathed forth a wondrous fragrance, that garden on which the true Solomon was accustomed to feast his eyes.

letter to the Monk Guibert, 1176

A human being is a vessel that God has built for himself and filled with his inspiration so that his works are perfected in it.

letter to Elisabeth of Schönau, c. 1152

Just as a mirror, which reflects all things, is set in its own container, so too the rational soul is placed in the fragile container of the body. In this way, the body is governed in its earthly life by the soul, and the soul contemplates heavenly things through faith.

letter to the Monk Guibert, 1175

O Eternal God, now may it please you
to burn in love
so that we become the limbs
fashioned in the love you felt
when you begot your Son
at the first dawn
before all creation.

And consider this need which falls upon us,
take it from us for the sake of your Son,
and lead us to the joy of your salvation.

"O eterne deus"

Like hairs on the head, mortal man is joined to Jesus Christ, the head of all, but they are full of transgressions and sins because of man's delight in the flesh. But the Church regenerates and purifies these from the unclean stench and filth of sin by penitence and confession, just as hair is cleansed from dew and drops, and as dust is shaken out and cleansed from wool.

letter to the Abbot, c. 1166

May the Holy Spirit enkindle you with the fire of His Love so that you may persevere, unflinching, in the love of His service. Thus you may merit to become, at last, a living stone in the celestial Jerusalem.

letter to the Monk Guibert, 1176

Because a woman brought death
a bright Maiden overcame it,
and so the highest blessing
in all of creation
lies in the form of a woman,
since God has become man

in a sweet and blessed Virgin.

"Quia ergo femina"

The soul is kissed by God in its innermost regions.

With interior yearning, grace and blessing are bestowed.

It is a yearning to take on God's gentle yoke,

It is a yearning to give one's self to God's Way.

Soul Weavings

Now, O son of God, set in the valley of true humility, walk in peace without pride of spirit, which, like a precipitous mountain, offers a difficult, or near-impossible, ascent or descent to those who attempt to scale it, and on its summit no building can be built. For a person who tries to climb higher than he can achieve possesses the name of sanctity without substance, because, in name alone without a structure of good works, he glories in a kind of vain joy of the mind.

letter to the Monk Guibert, 1176

The marvels of God are not brought forth from one's self.

Rather, it is more like a chord, a sound that is played.

The tone does not come out of the chord itself, but rather, through the touch of the Musician.

I am, of course, the lyre and harp of God's kindness.

For when God gave great knowledge to the human being, the human being elevated himself in his soul and turned away from God. God so regarded the human being that he would perfect all his works in him. But the old deceiver tricked human beings and infected them with the crime of disobedience, by the delight of an unseasonable wind, so that they sought for more than they should have.

letter to Elisabeth of Schönau, c. 1152

Love abounds in all things,
excels from the depths to beyond the stars,
is lovingly disposed to all things.

She has given the king on high
the kiss of peace.

"Caritas abundat"

The devil keeps man from good with a thousand machinations spewed from his belly, so that when a person sighs to do good, he pierces him with his shafts; and when he desires to embrace God with his whole heart in love, he subjects him to poisonous tribulations, seeking to pervert good work before God. And when a person seeks the viridity of virtue, the devil tells him that he does not know what he is doing, and he teaches him that he can set his own law for himself.

letter to the Abbot, c. 1166

O Beloved,
your way of knowing is amazing!
The way you recognize every creature
even before it appears.
The way you gaze into the face
of every human being
and see all your works gazing back at you.
O what a miracle
to be awake inside your breathing.

O Highest Wisdom,
who circles the great circle,
who envisions the whole world
as one living path,

you have three wings.

One soars above the sky,
another moistens the ground with sweat,
while a third flies
everywhere at once.

O Wisdom, we sing your praise.

by Hildegard of Bingen

All living creatures are sparks from the radiation of God's brilliance, and these sparks emerge from God like the rays of the sun. If God did not give off these sparks, how would the divine flame become fully visible?

Next I saw the most lucid air, in which I heard . . . in a marvelous way many kinds of musicians praising the joys of the heavenly citizens . . . And their sound was like the voice of a multitude, making music in harmony.

The soul is not in the body;
the body is in the soul.

Hildegard von Bingen

Next I saw the most lucid air, in which I heard in a marvelous way many kinds of musicians praising the joys of the heavenly citizens. ... And their sound was like the voice of a multitude, making music in harmony.

The earth is at the same time mother,
she is mother of all that is natural,
mother of all that is human.

She is the mother of all,
for contained in her are the seeds of all.

The earth of humankind contains all moisture,

all verdancy, all germinating power.

It is in so many ways fruitful.

All creation comes from it.

Yet it forms not only the basic raw materials
for humankind, but also
the substance of Incarnation.

You are the living light in every respect.

From You all light shines.

Like billowing clouds,
like the incessant gurgle of the brook,
the longing of the soul can never be stilled.

O, You who are ever
giving life to all life,
moving all creatures,
root of all things,
washing them clean,
wiping out their mistakes,
healing their wounds,
You are our true life,
luminous, wonderful,
awakening the heart
from its ancient sleep.