The Spirituality of St. Hildegard of Bingen

Brandon Otto
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St. Hildegard of Bingen—lauded by her contemporaries as "the seat of eternal wisdom, to whom God revealed such a great treasure of interior knowledge"—is a recent Doctor of the Church, declared to be such only in the past few years.[1] Though she lived in the 12th century and was recognized as a prophet in the Middle Ages, study of her—especially her writings, musical compositions, and scientific works—did not become prominent until the 20th century.[2] Now, though, she is frequently studied, and this paper adds to the examination of her life and thought by exploring her spirituality. After discussing her life, various major aspects of her spirituality will be investigated before a final synthesis is made.

St. Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bermersheim, in what is now Germany, as the tenth child of her noble parents, Hildebert, a knight in the service of the count of Sponheim, and Mechtild.[3] According to her own account, from infancy she began to have a special perception of things, a continuous vision throughout her entire life which she calls "the shadow of the Living Light," a type of vision seen only in the spirit, without affecting her senses or without her being in ecstasy; at times, she saw more specific visions from the Lord as well, which she termed "the Living Light."[4] In 1106, at the age of seven, she was tithed to the religious life, and she joined Jutta, daughter of the count of Sponheim, at the latter's castle for education and

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[1] Gottfried of Disibodenberg and Theodoric of Echternach, *The Life of the Saintly Hildegard* [henceforth *Vita*], trans. Hugh Feiss, Peregrina Translations Series (Toronto, Ontario: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1999), II.XVII, 69.

[2] Barbara Newman, "Preface" in Saint Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the* Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum *[Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations]*, trans. Barbara Newman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), xi.

[3] Barbara Newman, "Introduction" in Hildegard, *Symphonia*, 1; Bruce W. Hozeski, "Introduction," in Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of the Rewards of Life (Liber Vitae Meritorum),* trans. Bruce W. Hozeski (New York: NY, Oxford University Press, 1994) , xi.

[4] Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen,* trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994-2004), *Letter*103r, 1:23.

preparation for a monastic life.[5] The elder noble lady "clothed [Hildegard] with the garments of humility and innocence, taught her the psalms of David, and showed her how to make joyful sound on the ten-stringed psaltery."[6] After their time of study and preparation, the two jointed the recently-founded Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg on November 1, 1112, with Hildegard taking her vows sometime between 1112 and 1115.[7] Following Jutta's death in 1136, Hildegard was elected *magistra*, or superior of the women's community, at Disibodenberg, though she was under the authority of the abbot of the men's community.[8] While *magistra* at Disibodenberg, in 1141, she received a command from God to write a book of her visions, which became the *Scivias*; when she hesitated, she was afflicted with great illness until she finally agreed to write, finishing the book in 1151.[9] Her work was spread abroad and was well received; her *Vita* tells the story that Pope Eugenius III read a copy to the bishops gathered in a synod at Trier, and they acclaimed the work, with St. Bernard of Clairvaux urging the pope that "a brilliant light should not be allowed to be covered in silence."[10] Her fame became great, and her copious epistolary production—to four popes and two Holy Roman Emperors, among many others—attest to this.[11] By this time, she had also begun her work of composing songs, with a letter written in 1148 or 1149 mentioning "the melody of a new song" which comes from her visions.[12] While she was finishing the *Scivias*, in accordance with a vision, she began a new community of nuns at Rupertsberg; the move to this new community occurred around 1151,

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[5] Newman, "Introduction," 1; Margret Berger, "Introduction," in Hildegard of Bingen, *On Natural Philosophy and Medicine: Selections from* Cause et cure [henceforth *Cause et cure*], trans. Margret Berger (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 1-2.
[6] Gottfried and Theodoric, *Vita* I.I, 26.
[7] Berger, "Introduction," 2-3.
[8] Hugh Feiss, "Introduction," in *Vita*, 17; Berger, "Introduction," 3.
[9] Feiss, 17; Gottfried and Theodoric, *Vita*, I.III, 28; Newman, "Introduction," 6; Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), "Declaration," 59.
[10] Gottfried and Theodoric, *Vita*, I.IV, 29; Newman, "Introduction," 4.
[11] See Hildegard *Letters* 2-10, 311r, 315-316, 1:32-46, 3:110-111, 114-116.
[12] Hildegard, *Letter* 40, 1:110.

though conflicts about property rights with her former monastery were not resolved until 1158.[13] Around the time of this move and the finishing of the *Scivias*, Hildegard had a bitter conflict regarding the departure of her favorite nun, Richardis von Stade, from her community; the conflict ended upon Richardis' death in October 1152.[14] As abbess at Rupertsberg, Hildegard made a number of preaching tours—three between 1158 and 1163, and a fourth in 1170 or 1171—while continuing to write: after finishing her work on natural philosophy and medicine (*Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturam*, now divided into the *Physica* and the *Cause et Cure*) and her liturgical drama *Ordo virtutum* in the 1150s, she worked on her second book of visions, *Liber vitae meritorum*, during her first preaching tour, and she began her third book of visions, *Liber divinorum operum*, in 1163, finishing ten years later.[15] (Hildegard also appears to have completed the majority of her musical output—collected in the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*—by 1158, though additional pieces may have been composed throughout the remainder of her life.)[16] After this flurry of preaching and writing, Hildegard neared death, though this did not come without a fierce battle with her local ecclesiastical hierarchy. In 1178, her community buried a nobleman who had been excommunicated on the monastery's property, though Hildegard and her sisters asserted he had been pardoned and reunited with the Church before his death. When the community refused to exhume the man at the command of local ecclesiastical authorities, they were placed under an interdict which prohibited the singing of the liturgy, Baptism, the Eucharist, confession, and burial in sacred ground from occurring at the monastery; after an impassioned appeal by Hildegard, the interdict

[13] Berger, "Introduction," 3; Newman, "Introduction," 5.
[14] Feiss, 18. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, "Introduction," in Hildegard, *Letters*, 1:18, give a list of the various letters—scattered throughout Hildegard's epistolatory collection—which are related to this conflict.
[15] Feiss, 18-9; Margret Berger, "Preface" in *Cause et Cure*, ix; Margret Berger, "Chronological Sketch," in *Cause et Cure*, xvi; Berger, "Introduction," 6. Berger, "Introduction," 4, gives details about the paths of Hildegard's preaching tours.
[16] Newman, "Introduction," 8.

was lifted.[17] Six months after the lifting of this interdict, at the age of 82, St. Hildegard died on September 17, 1179, and was buried at her convent church until 1632, when her relics were moved to a church at a monastery at Eibingen, which she had founded in 1165.[18]

Hildegard was thus a widely-known figure and something of a polymath, considering that she wrote theology, music, drama, and medicine, besides her copious letters. Some of her works not mentioned above include homilies on the Gospels given to her sisters, solutions to thirty-eight assorted theological questions sent by a friend, and lives of the patron saints of her two monasteries, St. Disibod and St. Rupert. From looking at elements of all of these works, along with what her contemporary *Vita* says about her, St. Hildegard's spirituality can be distilled. Eight key elements of her spirituality will be discussed here (though many more could be mentioned): visions, the nature of man and spirituality, the use of creation, the narrative of salvation history, discipline and penance, vocation, Mary, and the Sacraments.

As mentioned above, Hildegard reported constant visions (the "shadow of the Living Light") from infancy, and these inspired all of her writing and teaching. Besides the three book of visions mentioned above, many of her letters describe a vision or are written in the voice of the Living Light (for instance, one begins, "I say this to you according to a mystic vision" and another "I…say these things not from myself, but from the Serene Light"); she even states her medicinal books and her hymns were shown by visions.[19] These visions were not of her own choice: rather, she was compelled to see what the Lord wanted her to see: "Indeed, things are

[17] Berger, "Introduction," 5. Hildegard's appeal is found in a famous letter to the prelates of Mainz: Hildegard, *Letter* 23, 1:76-79.
[18] Berger, "Introduction," 5; Hozeski, xii; Feiss, 19.
[19] Hildegard, *Letter* 150r, 2:95; *Letter* 201r, 2:180; see Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, I.1, 9. Her lives of Sts. Rupert and Disibod also are of visionary origin: see Hildegard of Bingen, *Vita sancti Rupperti confessoris* in Hildegard of Bingen, *Two Hagiographies*: Vita sancti Rupperti confessoris, Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi, trans. Hugh Feiss, ed. Christopher P. Evans, Dallas Medieval Texts and Translations 11 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2010), §1, 45, and Hildegard of Bingen, *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi*, in Hildegard of Bingen, *Two Hagiographies*, §1, 87.

shown to me there which my mind does not desire and which my will does not seek, but often I see them under compulsion."[20] These visionary assertions lend additional authority to her teaching; some commentators view this supernatural origin of her teachings as the key reason as to why Hildegard, as a woman, was allowed to teach or write theology at all.[21] While the visionary quality lends support to the truth of her teachings, it might seem that her spirituality would be disconnected from the rest of the faithful, who do not have constant visions. Yet even a contemporary affirms that the visions are fruitful even to non-visionaries: "Who indeed reads those visions, or even the exposition of them, without being delighted as in great riches?"[22] In addition, others can receive prophetic visions while asleep if it is without sin.[23] In interpreting Mt 2:2-12, Hildegard refers to the Magi's vision in sleep as "the shadow of prophecy."[24] So, while Hildegard's visionary gifts were unique and lend a powerful support to her teachings, she also sees all believers as being capable of receiving visions from the Lord.

The issue of man's nature is a frequent one in Hildegard's writings, and anthropology affects spirituality, so it is useful to explore this topic. Man was made good, but he fell; he is a rebel among God's creatures.[25] While creation follows the Creator's bidding, man rejects God's law and follows his own will instead.[26] This fall affected the world so much that even "all the elements fell with him," yet some light remains.[27] This is due to that original goodness and thirst for God that man was endowed with: "when God created man, he made him like a wheel in the

[20] Hildegard, *Letter* 20r, 1:72.
[21] See Berger, "Introduction," 8-9.
[22] Guibert of Gembloux, in Hildegard, *Letter* 102, 2:17.
[23] Hildegard, *Cause et cure*, 41, 66.
[24] Hildegard of Bingen, *Sermon* 12, qtd. in Regina Christianson, "The Crown and the Veil: The Use and Meaning of the Symbol Virginity in Three Sermons by Hildegard of Bingen" (M.Div. thesis, Episcopal Divinity School, 2006), 13.
[25] See Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, II.93, 114-115; III.3, 125.
[26] See Hildegard, *Scivias* I.3.28, 104.
[27] Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, IV.67, 205.

spirit of life so that he rolls back to God."[28] Man's nature is such that he cannot refrain from sin, and yet he can strive towards holiness and towards God.[29] A key aspect of Hildegard's anthropology is rooted in the concept of "the knowledge of good and evil" referenced in Genesis. She frequently affirms that man, as rational, has the power to choose between good and evil, though our choice is assisted: if we choose good, the Holy Spirit assist us, but if we choose evil, the devil assists us.[30] Using his reason, "the loud sound of the soul, which makes known every work of God or Man," man should cultivate knowledge of the good and choose the good, of course, since the good is of God.[31] What is interesting in Hildegard's thought, though, is the usefulness of *evil* knowledge. The knowledge of good and evil are like the two wings of man (the right and the left wings, respectively).[32] Yet the good man uses *both* of these "wings of rationality": "Evil knowledge serves the good, and good knowledge is kept in check by the evil, and is even made more discerning by it. Indeed the good is made wise in all things through the evil."[33] In another place she calls evil knowledge "the maidservant of good knowledge."[34] The reason is because knowing what evil is helps us to avoid the evil and choose the good (and also, paradoxically, "through knowledge of evil [one] knows the good"), which can only be done with "full knowledge."[35] This knowledge, though given by God, is part of man's nature, and, if one strives towards full knowledge and fights against temptation, he, by his own merits, can war

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[28] Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, II.42, 89. Wheels are a key image for Hildegard, usually used to discuss God; the image appears to be drawn from the vision in Ezekiel 1:15-21 (see Newman, "Commentary," in Hildegard, *Symphonia,* 284-285, 317-318).
[29] Hildegard, *Letter* 103r, 2:24.
[30] See Hildegard, *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi*, §38, 133-135; Hildegard of Bingen, *Solutions to Thirty-Eight Questions*, trans. Beverly Mayne Kienzle with Jenny C. Bledsoe and Stephen H. Behnke, Cistercian Studies 253 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2014), §25, 74; Hildegard, *Scivias* I.4.22, 122.
[31] Hildegard, *Scivias* I.4.23, 122.
[32] See Hildegard *Letter* 70r, 1:154. Another image is the "sword of good knowledge and the club of evil knowledge" (Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, IV.12, 180).
[33] Hildegard, *Letter* 103r, 2:24.
[34] Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, III.17, 131.
[35] Hildegard, *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi*, §40, 137.

against the devil "even to the point of vanquishing him and taking possession of the place that he lost."[36] Hildegard places a high value on good works and continually exhorts her readers and listeners to do good, for good works "bring one to heaven," and they are "the seeds…by which [man] grasps the fruit of holiness. God created man in such a way that he might earn heaven by doing earthly things."[37] Good work is a "martyrdom," and even a modicum of them at the end of life can save a soul from Hell.[38] As seen above, though, Hildegard recognizes that man cannot avoid sin, and thus he cannot truly save himself without the help of God. One way that she describes this synergy in which "God does not cease to work with the human" is through the architectural image of the living stones in the New Jerusalem: as one commentator describes it, "Every saint is both a builder of the Church and a living stone set into the building."[39] Thus she affirms: "Grace and salvation is obtained not through man, but through God."[40] The Holy Spirit—which she frequently describes as fire—is a key assistant for man, for He works miracles in the holy ones, "makes new things in the saints," inspires man with the virtues, brings the soul strength, "gives out all good things, kindles all good things, stirs up all good things, teaches all good things, and assigns speech to man with his flames."[41] He is the One Who cuts off sin's putrid fruits from man, bears up reason through trials, raises and renews those who repent, directs all in the ways of righteousness, gives life to all, anoints and cleanses all, guards all, gathers and reconciles all, instructs the wise, and rewards the righteous.[42] Thus it is clear that,

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[36] Hildegard, *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi*, §40, 137.
[37] Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, II.34, 84; VI.24, 273.
[38] Hildegard, *Letter* 110r, 2:51; see *Letter* 320, 3:118, and *Letter* 356, 3:149.
[39] Hildegard, *Solutions* §32, 82; Newman, "Commentary," 293.
[40] Hildegard, *Letter* 117r, 2:63.
[41] Hildegard, *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi*, §39, 135; Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, VI.21, 271; see Hildegard, *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi,* §25, 115-117; Hildegard, *Solutions* §28, 77, and Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, V.31, 231-232.
[42] Hildegard, *Symphonia* no. 27 (*O ignee Spiritus*) and no. 28 (*O ignis Spiritus Paracliti*), 142-151.

though Hildegard holds to an anthropology that leaves great ability for man to work righteous deeds, he cannot save himself without the work of God.

Next to be examined is Hildegard's view on creation, that arena in which man's good works are performed. Modern interest in Hildegard frequently sees her as a herald of the modern ecological movement, and it is certainly true that she sees creation positively. Creation and nature also provide her with many well-used images, such the image of a garden or her concept of *viriditas* (literally "viridity," although it is often translated "verdure" or "greenness").[43] Her theology of creation, though, does not exalt nature for its own glory; instead, it is deeply focused on man. For one, men are microcosms, because "the entire creation is within them," a key theme in her writings on medicine and natural philosophy.[44] As an example, just as man has knowledge of good and evil, so there are good and evil herbs, which were created for him.[45] This leads into another key concept, that creation was made for man: "man makes use of all creation for his own benefit," and, even after the Fall, it provides him with everything necessary for him.[46] Creation is also deeply tied to man's actions. As seen above, the elements fell along with man's Fall, and this is because "God established that the elements should work according to humans' deeds. For when human beings act with and in them, the elements are touched by these deeds."[47] Yet creation does not merely react to man's deeds: it is not *simply* a tool. First, it is a task for man:

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[43] For an example of God's garden, see Hildegard, *Letter* 379, 3:169; for an example of the interior garden of virtues, see Hildegard, *Letter* 94r, 2:10. For a discussion of *viriditas*, see Baird and Ehrman, 1:7-8.

[44] Hildegard, *Cause et Cure*, 36; see also Hildegard, *Scivias* II.1.2, 151, "Man contains in himself the likeness of heaven and earth."

[45] See Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegard von Bingen's Physica: The Complete English Translation of Her Classic Work on Health and Healing*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1998), 30. Another connection between man and creation is seen in a cure for anxiety, where a person places a mandrake next to him in bed and says, "God, you made the human being from the mud of the earth, without pain; now I place next to me this earth, which has never been stepped on, so even my earth may feel that peace, just as you created it" (Hildegard, *Physica*, 34).

[46] Hildegard, *Letter* 381, 3:170; see *Letter* 385, 3:179.

[47] Hildegard, *Cause et Cure*, 38; see Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, IV.67, 205.

the elements, "sensing that man was alive…busied themselves in aiding his life in every way. And man in turn occupied himself with them."[48] Second, the obedient creation, which praises God, also teaches man to be obedient, to praise, and to work, as is his duty: "thus creation is praise, and man is work."[49] In Hildegard's view, then, creation is ordered to man, as it was made for his benefit and is within him, since he is a microcosm; yet part of this benefit is through teaching and through being an example of praise and obedience. Creation is not a final goal, though, for Hildegard is firm on the preference for heavenly things: her prophecy teaches us "to reject the things of earth and to seek the things which are in the heights of heaven," for she calls us, as St. Disibod, to "live according to the heavenly harmony, as spiritual men do" so that, by persevering in good, we may "ascend into heaven to God" and see Him with spiritual eyes.[50]

We have already seen Hildegard's frequent use of the creation accounts in the opening of Genesis, both in her anthropology and in her view of creation.[51] Yet her references to salvation history are not limited merely to these few chapters; indeed, she has multiple letters that present the entire narrative of salvation in one piece, and many other writings reference particular episodes. The life of Christ is, of course, a centerpiece, though, as one commentator points out, she particularly focuses on the Incarnation rather than Christ's Passion and Resurrection; this commentator goes so far to say that "virtually everything in her sphere of discourse is in some way a condition, a consequence, or an analogue of" the Incarnation.[52] Of course, Hildegard does not ignore Christ's Passion: one of her most powerful hymns is *O cruor sanguinis*, which

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[48] Hildegard, *Physica*, 9.
[49] Hildegard, *Letter*77r, 1:167; see *Letter* 194, 2:166.
[50] Gottfried and Theodoric, *Vita* II.VI, 54; Hildegard, *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi*, §§53 and 39, 157 and 135. On spiritual eyes, see Hildegard, *Solutions* §3, 43.
[51] One interesting account of the creation and garden narrative is Hildegard, *Letter* 385, 3:178-179, which recounts the narrative within the framework of the monastic hours, with the creation being at Prime and the expulsion from Paradise at Vespers.
[52] Newman, "Introduction" 45; cf. Newman, "Commentary," 268.

recounts the lamenting of all the elements when "the blood of their Creator / touched them."[53] Nor does she ignore all the history before Christ: she often discusses Abel, Noah, Abraham, and Moses, in order to provide models for our behavior or in terms of their connection with salvation history.[54] When all of these figures from before Christ are discussed in terms of history, Hildegard keeps in mind the Christian focus, for "the New Law lies hidden in the Old," and the patriarchs were aware of this, for they had "the spirit of prophecy."[55] Hildegard thus uses the narrative of salvation history to point readers to Christ, to provide examples of virtuous (or vicious) behavior and to provide insight into human nature (though this is mainly seen in the creation and garden narratives), and all of it has a culmination in the Incarnation of Christ and, to a lesser extent, His Passion and Resurrection.

As seen above, Hildegard has a high view of human works, and possibly the greatest category of human works, for her, is works of penance; linked with these works are also discipline and mercy. First, I will discuss Hildegard's views on penance in general; second, I will discuss her views on the application of penance, that is, discipline. Regarding the blessings of a sinner's penance, Hildegard's thoughts often bring to mind the *felix culpa* concept of St. Augustine: "these [sinners] were all, afterward, made more useful and more perfect than they would have been if they had not fallen."[56] One of the great images is that of the scarred stones of the New Jerusalem, which have been "polished vigorously" by the Lord.[57] The fact that God polishes does not negate our actions, though, for she tells a correspondent to "make yourself a

[53] Hildegard, *Symphonia*, no. 5, *O cruor sanguinis*, 103.
[54] As examples, see Hildegard, *Letter* 15r, 1:60-61, and *Letter* 389, 3:182-191. See other works for more examples, such as Hildegard, *Solutions* §30, 79-80, which describes the character of Jonathan as a model to follow.
[55] Hildegard, *Solutions* §10, 53.
[56] Hildegard, *Letter* 103r, 2:22.
[57] Hildegard, *Letter*148r, 2:90; cf. *Letter* 41r, 1:114.

precious stone, and you will be adorned in the heavenly Jerusalem."[58] These "glowing stones" were once "publicans and sinners / who were lost sheep, / but, found by the Son of God, / they ran to you / and were laid in you," she sings to Jerusalem; and the running and polishing of these scarred stones occurs through penance.[59] Penance leads to immortality: "Wash yourself, therefore, in confession and in penitence, and you will live in eternity."[60] At one point, she breaks down the mechanics of penance into five steps: remembering misdeeds with sighs (which nullifies the sins), dissociating oneself from misdeeds, confessing one's sins, doing penance, and cutting oneself off from evil.[61] Confession is one of the most commonly mentioned Sacraments for Hildegard (the other being the Eucharist); in one of her visions, she gives a beautiful description of how, in Confession, the penitent "places himself on the cross of repentance and…wounds himself with tears by confessing his sins to God through a priest."[62] Through repentance, not only do we live forever and become stones in the New Jerusalem, but we also receive a more lenient sentence from God. "Repentance avoids punishments" because "whatever repentance has cleansed, the zeal of God does not examine because repentance is the fire and scourge of the zeal of God. But whatever repentance does not boil away, the zeal of God consumes."[63] Words such as these express Hildegard's adherence to the doctrine of Purgatory: by repentance and good works in this life, we lessen our cleansing sufferings in the next, sufferings which the prayers of those on earth can alleviate.[64] In her visions in the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, which describe various vices and their corrective virtues, Hildegard exhorts sinners

[58] Hildegard, *Letter* 45, 1:119.
[59] Hildegard, *Symphonia*, no. 49 (*O Ierusalem*), 199.
[60] Hildegard, *Letter* 88, 1:199.
[61] See Hildegard, *Letter* 226, 3:25.
[62] Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, III.56, 153.
[63] Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, V.34, 233; IV.49, 198.
[64] On prayers assisting the dead in Purgatory, see Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, V.97-98, 258 and V.101, 259; for Purgatory in general, see Hildegard, *Scivias* I.2.7, 75-6.

to do various good works to atone for their various sins (though all these works should be under the guidance of a spiritual director): fasting, scourging, hair shirts, prayers, kneeling, sighing, solitude, almsgiving, silence, avoidance of luxury. This mention of a spiritual director leads into the second aspect of Hildegard's views on penance: discipline.

Hildegard writes much about the imposition of discipline by those in authority, and many of her letters are to those who must discipline their subordinates. Many of those she writes to are under the Benedictine Rule, as she was herself, so she emphasizes the importance of Rule in their discipline and how "the pilot of the ship is, in fact, the teaching of the blessed Benedict."[65] Despite this monastic emphasis, her teachings on discipline can be applied more widely. The general rule is to never give too much penance and discipline; instead, one must apply "anointing mother Mercy."[66] This, of course, does not mean that one should never be harsh. An example can be taken from her own practice: "in her, gravity was seasoned with gentleness."[67] To determine the respective amounts of discipline and mercy to be applied in each case, one must use discretion, "the mother of virtues," and look at the needs and condition of each individual.[68] The "wine of penance and oil of mercy" (images taken from the parable of the Good Samaritan) must be prescribed in the correct dosages for the individual patient.[69] As mentioned above, her *Liber Vitae Meritorum* prescribes different penances for different vices, yet all should be guided by a wise, discerning spiritual director. By the direction of a prudent leader, whether a spiritual

[65] Hildegard, *Letter* 95, 2:11; see also *Letter* 156r, 2:103, among others.
[66] Hildegard, *Letter* 120r, 2:66.
[67] Gottfried and Theodoric, *Vita* II.XIII, 62.
[68] Hildegard, *Letter*258, 3:54. In other spots, she also says that humility is the queen of virtues (*Letter* 307, 3:106) and that obedience is the origin of all other virtues (*Letter* 220r, 3:11). It does not seem Hildegard was consistent in affirming the pre-eminence of any one virtue; a similar situation regarding the vices can be found throughout the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*.
[69] Hildegard, *Letter* 291, 3:89. *Letter* 256, 3:52, describes how to apply discipline to different types of men. The wine and oil image is also used in Hildegard, *Scivias* I.4.30, 128.

director or an abbot, one can "conquer sin through reasonable means."[70] In summary, confession and works of penance are necessary in order to cleanse one of sins and polish one to become a stone in the New Jerusalem, but the correct method of penance is keyed to the individual, and the proper mixture of penance and mercy should be determined by a wise director.

In speaking of those who direct souls, we come to Hildegard's views on vocation. As previously mentioned, Hildegard herself was a nun, and she frequently wrote to nuns and monks, so many of her writings deal with the religious life, as was seen in her calls to heed the Rule of St. Benedict. Yet despite the fact that virgins and monks are similar to angels in their holy lives, she does not deny the ability of those leading lives in the world to be holy, nor does she call everyone to be a religious.[71] In one vision of the various states of glory of those in Heaven, she sees not only virgins and monks, but she also beholds the holy secular people.[72] There is a complementarity in the Church between those who live in the world and those who are consecrated in religious life. The key is that both be devout in following of the Lord: "Secular people are the embrace of God's arms, and spiritual people are His eye, and God greatly loves both of them when they follow His precepts."[73] What matters is following the Lord's call. Regarding virgins, Hildegard writes, "let no woman undertake anything that the Holy Spirit did not bestow upon her, lest afterward she remain unfulfilled"; however, this idea could be applied to all vocations, so that no Christian follows a path to which God is not calling him.[74] Once a Christian has determined where God is calling him, he must follow that call, and he must persevere in it. Hildegard frequently exhorts people to remain in the vocations to which God has

[70] Hildegard, *Letter* 140r, 2:80.
[71] See Hildegard, *Letter* 106r, 2:41.
[72] See Hildegard, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, VI.26-28, 274-275.
[73] Hildegard, *Letter*351, 3:144.
[74] Hildegard, *Letter* 250r, 3:48.

called and led them, and this applies to a wider range than simply the choice between being "secular" and "spiritual": one of the most common exhortations in this manner is Hildegard's abjurations to abbots, superiors, and others in authority to remain in their positions. A surprising number of her letters are in response to those who want to escape their role of authority in order to live the life of a simple monk, nun, or hermit. Her response is almost invariably to tell them to remain: "if any spark still shines among them, do not abandon them, lest the devil snatch them away."[75] The common complaint among these correspondents is that no one obeys their rightful authority; Hildegard only tells her inquirers to abandon their offices if no one at all listens to them, "for if you cannot serve well as a master over your brothers, then be in subjection like them."[76] To summarize, Hildegard sees that God calls His followers to a multitude of different vocations, and it is the duty of Christians to follow God in whatever path He calls them, and *only* in the path He calls them; they should never undertake a path without God's call, but neither should they abandon a difficult calling unless it is absolutely necessary.

One of the aspects that must be present in all Catholic spiritualities is Marian devotion, and Hildegard's spirituality is no different; however, Marian devotion is not as prominent in her writings as in those of some of her contemporaries, such as St. Bernard, author of the *Memorare*, though a strong devotion to saints and pleas for their intercession are common.[77] While mention of Mary occurs fairly frequently in her letters and other writings, it is often in the context of her depictions of the Incarnation, which is the main event of salvation history in her thought, as seen above. Even when she uses beautiful images, such as how the Father "sent the Word with sweet fruitfulness into the womb of the Virgin, from which He soaked up flesh, just as honey is

[75] Hildegard, *Letter* 150r, 2:95.
[76] Hildegard, *Letter*112r, 2:54; cf. *Letter*145, 2:85.
[77] For a few examples of Hildegard's devotions to the saints, see her *Vita sancti Dysibodi episcopi*, *Vita sancti Rupperti confessoris*, and hymns to Saint Ursula in Hildegard, *Symphonia*, 230-247.

surrounded by the honeycomb" or how she is the Virgin in whose lap the unicorn slept, these frequently just allude to Mary's general role as the mother of Jesus, with no mention of how Mary's intercession or even example affects our lives directly.[78] As one commentator describes her Marian lyrics (although the description can be applied well to all her references to Mary), "there is no sign of interest in the Virgin's psychology, no sentimental devotion no apocryphal legends or miracles—in short, nothing at all about Mary's life before, after, or apart from the Incarnation."[79] This is not an absolutely binding statement, though: one can still find Marian devotion in her writings. Thus she fills one letter to a congregation of nuns with her Marian lyrics, also stating that "the complete sanctification of souls" is "breathed forth…though that Virgin"; in another letter, she declares that "monks and virgins are obliged to imitate the virginity of Mary."[80] In general, it is her hymns that have the strongest Marian devotion; a total of eighteen of her hymns are focused on the Virgin.[81] Here we find a plea for intercession to the "most radiant mother / of sacred healing…life-giving instrument / and joyful ornament / and sweetness of all delights."[82] She is the "author of life" in whom "the elements received / joy," and it is she who "[cries] out with a clear voice, / in this way lifting humanity / from this wicked / fall."[83] Hildegard prays to Mary, "deign to set us frail ones / free from evil habits / and stretch forth your hand / to lift us up"; she also depicts Mary as responding to our prayers and pleading to the Son on our behalf.[84] Thus, Marian devotion is not completely foreign to Hildegard's spirituality, and references to the Virgin as the one through whom the Son became man are

[78] Hildegard, *Letter* 1, 1:28; see *Letter* 15r, 1:61. The reference to the unicorn is explained in note 22 to this letter, 1:64-5.
[79] Newman, "Introduction," 46.
[80] Hildegard, *Letter*192, 2:162; *Letter* 260, 3:55.
[81] Hildegard, *Symphonia*, 110-137, 260-261, 264-265.
[82] Hildegard, *Symphonia*, no. 9, *O clarissima mater*, 113.
[83] Hildegard, *Symphonia*, no. 8, *Ave Maria*, 111; no. 13, *Cum processit factura*, 119; no. 14, *Cum erubuerint*, 119.
[84] Hildegard, *Symphonia*, no. 15, *O frondens virga*, 121; see *O Fili dilectissime*, 260-261.

abundant, but Hildegard rarely urges imitation of Mary and prayer to her, with most of her strongly devotional passages about Mary occurring in her hymns.

Another necessary element in Catholic spirituality is the Sacramental aspect, particularly focus on the Eucharist. As seen above, Hildegard encourages Christians to penance, particularly through the Sacrament of Penance. It is through this Sacrament that Christians obtain "the purgation of the sinners," and it is through this Sacrament that priests "will receive the confession of the peoples and show them the remedy of salvation."[85] These are the same priests who are joined to Christ's priesthood in which "He sacrifice Himself for mankind on the altar of the cross"; they imitate the angels who "show the works of mankind…to God."[86] Though this cleansing is one of the priestly duties, another key duty is "to make sacrifice to God on high," that is, to offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist.[87] Hildegard strongly affirms the real presence of the Eucharist throughout her writings.[88] Though not frequently exhorting others to devotion to the Eucharist, she is by no means opposed to it: for instance, she encourages spiritual communion if someone is violently ill with vomiting, and she agrees with St. Paul's direction that one must not receive the Body and Blood unworthily.[89] Other Sacraments appear in her writing, such as Baptism and Matrimony, but, in general, it appears the Sacrament that is most prevalent in Hildegard's thought is Penance, with Eucharist also important, though less emphasized.[90]

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[85] Hildegard, *Scivias* I.2.13, 79.
[86] Hildegard, *Letter* 113r, 2:57. She further discusses the Sacrament of Penance here, saying that priests "receive the sins of mankind through penitence and show them to God through indulgent mercy."
[87] Hildegard, *Letter* 289, 3:87.
[88] See Hildegard, *Letter*46, 1:119; *Letter* 89, 1:200; *Letter* 149r, 2:92; *Letter* 386, 3:179-180.
[89] See Hildegard, *Letter* 388, 3:181-182.
[90] On Baptism, see Hildegard, *Scivias* I.3.14, 97; on Matrimony, see *Scivias* I.2.11-19, 77-82.

In conclusion, we can offer some summaries of important aspects of St. Hildegard's spirituality. Before reviewing the previously-discussed aspects, a short mention must be made of prayer. Hildegard speaks little of prayer and a personal relationship with God. She speaks of many practices connected to this relationship, especially virtues and ascetic works, and she calls sinners to offer prayers as one of their works of penance, but the relationship with God receives little attention. Part of this may be due to her own relationship with the Lord: much that is seen in her writings of her own relationship with God is through her constant visions and prophetic utterances. She is not completely without a more personal relationship, though; one of the best places to see this is her hymn *O dulcissime amator*, where a symphony of virgins (of which she would be part) cries out longingly, "O sweetest fragrance / of longed-for delights, / we sigh for you always / in tearful exile. / When may we see you / and remain with you?"[91] In general, though, it seems that prayer is discussed more obliquely in Hildegard than in other spiritual writers.

Hildegard's spirituality calls for extensive effort on the part of men to advance towards holiness. Using their rationality, and the knowledge of both good and evil, they must strive for heavenly things, avoiding vice and earthly things, embracing virtue, and heavily practicing penance. They must accept discipline—tempered with mercy—from a good spiritual director or superior. God, of course, assists man in this struggle, and He teaches men how to work towards holiness. He directs them into their individual vocations and guides them throughout their lives, and they must be faithful to His direction. In this struggle, God grants the Sacraments, particularly Penance, as strength and healing, and He accepts the prayers and intercessions of the saints and of Mary on our behalf. To utilize common Hildegardian images, in staying in the

[91] Hildegard, *Symphonia*, no. 57, *O dulcissime amator*, §7, 223.

garden where the Lord plants them, Christians till the soil in order to bear good fruits, but these fruits can only come about when *viriditas* is bestowed by the Lord upon the land so that it sweats forth holiness. This tilling involves penance and a turning away from the pests of vice and excessive concern with earthly things so that the land of the heart is plowed and open to the rain of the Spirit. The prayers of the saints and of Mary can pour rain upon this garden, and the Sacraments act as great irrigation channels to soak the soil. The Lord is the great Gardener, but he lends the tilling of the garden to us; He continues to assist us, but we must work, though a wise fellow tiller (a spiritual director or superior) should direct us and discipline us in our gardening. By this work in the garden of the virtues, we can receive back the heavenly garment that Adam lost through his sin, the heavenly garment granted us again by Christ in His Incarnation and Redemption.

In summary, St. Hildegard of Bingen offers us a spirituality infused by her prophetic charism and visions. It is a spirituality of penance and struggle for virtue, a spirituality of humility and obedience to superiors and to the Lord's call to us. It is a spirituality that emphasizes man's work in his sanctification, a work based on his own rationality and on the use of creation, without neglecting the necessity of God's work in us. Though somewhat lacking in terms of a personal, tender relationship with Jesus, it is a spirituality that can bear great fruit even now, almost a thousand years after this Doctor of the Church lived.

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