

3. Hildegard of Bingen:

Benedictine Abbess, Physician, Composer & Theologian

Women chose to compose theological works, and that their work survived. What factors enabled Church strictures against women teaching, writing or preaching, it is amazing that some to produce these writings? In particular, we delve into the creative, tumultuous social fabric of twelfth century Germany and the life and thought of Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen - visionary, healer, theoretician of medicine, composer of liturgical music, and theologian. Her theology of the Holy Spirit is notable for its creative use biblical imagery and natural metaphors.

1. Medieval Women Doing Theology: The family/social backgrounds and supporters of medieval women theologians provided the means and encouragement to write theology.

Using their notable intellectual skills, medieval women employed a wide range of sources in this pursuit including: Liturgy; Personal contemplation; Visionary experience; Lectio divina; Conversations with educated, male clergy; Service to the world

Except for Hildegard, who wrote in Latin, the three other women Doctors of the Church were among the first to express deep and nuanced spiritual experience and theological ideas in the vernacular. By embracing the language of everyday life, these women broadened the content and tone of the theology of their time. In each case, women were allowed to speak and write publicly because Church leaders needed their gifts to fight decline and error within and beyond the Church. Those who defended the women appealed to two major arguments: God speaks through the lowly (Magnificat); and the Holy Spirit is free to blow where she wills (John 3:8).

These women did theology out of their experience as women. Their works display brilliance and courage to speak or write publicly about God in a Church that forbade it.

II Hildegard's Life and Works: Hildegard is rightly called a "Renaissance woman" long before the historical period we label the "Renaissance." The breadth, depth, and volume of her writing easily fulfill the requirement of a "significant body of work" for being named a Doctor of the Church.

Hildegard was from a noble family with ten children, living in the lush, green valley of the Rhine. Her parents dedicated her to God when she was just eight years old (three of her siblings also followed religious vocations). She led a rich and varied religious life as a recluse and later a prioress of a group of Benedictine sisters.

From childhood, Hildegard reported seeing images in living color - what she called the "shadow of the Living Light." The images included: Shimmering light; Larger-than-life female figures such as Caritas and Ecclesia; Umbilical cords; Cosmic eggs; Mountains

In 1141, at the age of forty-three, Hildegard heard a voice telling her to record her visions. The trauma induced at the thought of writing made her ill - there was no precedent for public female theologians. She sought and received affirmation from Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugene III, who authorized her to undertake four preaching tours in Germany and The Universe as an Egg, Scivias, Hildegard of Swabia. By this point, Hildegard was sixty years old. Bingen. Image courtesy of the Yorck Project.

Hildegard produced a significant theological corpus: The life of her monastery's patron, St. Rupert; Seventy liturgical songs; Medical works; A play on the virtues
A theological trilogy: Know the Ways of the Lord (Scivias) (1141-51)
The Book of Life's Merits (Liber vitae meritorum) (1158-63)
The Book of Divine Works (Liber divinorum operum) (1163-73)

A visual thinker, Hildegard's texts are best read in tandem with the images that form an integral part of her theology.

III. The Twelfth Century: A World of Symbol and Sacramental Awareness

The twelfth century in Europe witnessed urban growth; a fascination with the natural world; sophisticated approaches to theology; and new religious orders (Cistercians, Carthusians, and Premonstratensians). Hildegard's contemporaries include Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Abelard and Heloise, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, Thomas a Becket, and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

The world was viewed as connected in all its parts—a great chain of being that emerged from God and returned to the embrace of the Trinity. Like the theory of evolution in our time, the notion of an ordered, hierarchical universe functioned as an overarching framework.

A sacramental view of the world prevailed in which the visible outer world symbolized deeper, hidden truth. Hildegard was a woman of her time in her use of symbols, metaphors, analogies and allegories to speak about how the world revealed the sacred. Animals, nature, color, numbers, art, the human person, and names all contained hints of the divine.

The Church can be described as a mix of new, reforming life, and decadence (often there were multiple popes contending to reign at the same time). Hildegard contributed to the reform, but was disturbed by clerical attachment to wealth and prestige and a widespread laxness in spiritual discipline.

She was outraged by the military, political and economic battles between Church and civic leaders for power and control. Such conflicts made life uncertain. Political and family allegiances shifted like the sand bringing sudden prosperity or devastation.

Reflection Questions

1. Recall an experience in which you felt the Holy Spirit working in or around you. What are the hallmarks of this experience?
2. Do you experience any tension between institutional and charismatic expression of the Holy Spirit's power? If so, is the tension creative or divisive? How might individual and institutional charisms work to enhance each other?
3. What channels are available to the faithful to address Church reforms? How do these contrast with those used by Hildegard?