

4. Hildegard of Bingen: Theology of the Holy Spirit

Hildegard's theology of the Holy Spirit weaves together biblical and traditional ideas and imagery of the Church. She speaks of the Spirit in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity; prophetic voice; cosmic harmony; "greening"; and understanding. "The sweetness of the Holy Spirit is immeasurable and swift, encircling all creatures in grace... Its path is a torrent... For the Holy Spirit is a burning and shining serenity that will never be depleted and which kindles fiery virtues so that, by the Holy Spirit, all darkness is banished." - Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* II.4.2 (New York: Paulist Press, 1990)

I. Highlights of Hildegard's Theology of the Holy Spirit: Hildegard's theology of the Holy Spirit relies heavily on imagery from sources such as: The Bible (e.g., Isaiah 11:1-3; Psalm 103; Ecclesiasticus 24). Nature: fire, breath/air/wind, oil, water, earth.

Her theology is also practical, focusing on human behavior; the links between the human person and creation; and the inner harmony of soul and body. Hildegard described her visions as "great marvels" revealed by the Spirit of God. She used the Latin term *lux vivens* or "living light" to describe the dynamic presence within her that also penetrated every aspect of creation. Our tradition has consistently named this ongoing divine presence in history, Holy Spirit.

II. Trinity: Hildegard's theology of the Holy Spirit is best understood in the context of her theology of the Trinity. Unlike theology today, medieval theology was steeped in a lively, existential awareness of omnipresent Trinitarian patterns. In a liturgical antiphon in honor of the Trinity, Hildegard showcases her sacramental view of the world.

Antiphon for the Trinity (26): To the Trinity be praise! God is music, God is life that nurtures every creature in its kind. Our God is the son of the angel through and the splendor of secret ways hid from all human kind, But God our life is the life of all. - Hildegard of Bingen: *Symphonia*, 2nd ed., trans. Barbara Newman (1998), p. 143

III. Spirit of Prophecy and Reform: The Spirit plays a central role in Hildegard's role as prophet. She imagined the Church as a remnant, a Pentecost-filled body made up of repentant clergy, monks, and faithful laity. Hildegard was not afraid to voice her concern that the cancer of the Antichrist was not just outside the Church but also within - coming from its very womb. Ironically, Hildegard's

disillusionment about the Church propelled her to bolder demands for conversion. Her role as reformer embodies a theology of the Spirit that empowers humanity to be courageous and unafraid.

IV. Harmonious Chants of Praise: Singing the liturgy and the Divine Office was at the heart of Benedictine life and linked to the Holy Spirit. The Church's entire liturgy is seen as giving voice to the Spirit's presence and power, without which it would not be possible to praise and thank God.

External rituals were intended to bring interior Spirit power and transformation. Singing was carried by breath, a symbol long associated with the Holy Spirit. For Hildegard, the idea of "harmony" referred not only to the music they sang, but had a broader theological significance. It pointed to the cosmic order of the celestial spheres, to the original right relationship between the divine and the human before the fall, as well as to paradise. This cosmic order was a primary means of creating harmony within a person, uniting physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions.

V. The Holy Spirit and "Greening" One of the most well-known aspects of Hildegard's theology is her use of the term "greening" (viriditas). She associates the Spirit with planting, watering, and blooming life. Viriditas refers to the abundant, outpouring bounty of God, the fertility of nature, the aliveness of the soul - all signs of the presence of the Spirit. Commenting on the Annunciation, Hildegard imagines Mary as the grass and the green earth; the Spirit is the dew that made her womb fruitful.

In spiritual terms, Hildegard describes souls that are filled with virtue and fervor as "green." They are alive in holiness. In contrast, she counsels clergy and nuns whose spirits are dry, tepid, or weary to renew their dedication and energy to follow the way of Christ.

V. The Spirit of Understanding: It is appropriate in a course on women's theology to call attention to the ways in which Hildegard understood the Spirit's contribution to understanding. Most often we associate knowledge and understanding with the Word or Logos - the second person of the Trinity.

John's Gospel extends this role to the Holy Spirit who teaches truth (1 John 5:7-8). The Spirit teaches what Jesus taught, but most importantly, causes this teaching to take root in fertile hearts. Without the Holy Spirit, the Word of God remains distant, abstract and unrealized.

Hildegard relied on reason and intellectual work to probe both the mysteries of nature (scientia) and the things of God (theologia; sapientia). In the process of "faith seeking understanding," the Holy Spirit becomes a partner in the search for knowledge.

Hildegard's message about Spirit knowledge calls us to reflect on how deeply we hear and appropriate the divine word. It is easy to think that we understand God because we have been hearing about God for as long as we can remember. Hildegard wants us to notice the difference between a surface hearing and a deep listening that allows God to penetrate hearts and bear fruit in everyday life.

VII. Hildegard Today: One of Hildegard's most valuable theological contributions is her ability to honor the tradition without sacrificing intellectual innovation and creativity. She knew and used the Tradition, but not in a slavish way. Her writing and her music reveal that she was always thinking, integrating the theological tradition with what she knew to be the truth of her experience and in response to what she perceived as the needs of her time.

Hildegard challenges Christians to imagine a healthy, holy Church and to work to become more faithful to its identity as the Body of Christ. Hildegard loved the Church enough to want to reform it.

In our ecologically awakened world, Hildegard reminds us of the connectedness of all things in God. Like Teilhard de Chardin, Hildegard saw the universe as one in God, made possible by the Spirit's presence. For Hildegard, the chapel, the garden, the infirmary, the court, and the family hearth are all the same room. Hildegard wrote: "Sequence for the Holy Spirit (28): O current of power permeating all in the heights upon the earth and in all the deeps: you bind together and gather all people together. - Hildegard of Bingen: Symphonia, p. 149

Reflection Questions

1. Nature is perhaps the most common way for people to notice the Spirit of God's presence. The seasons invite reflection on the cycles of life, death, and rebirth. Take some time to attend to nature and to savor the Spirit's presence therein.
2. What do you think about Hildegard's association of the Holy Spirit with music? Does it resonate with your experience in any way?

3. Hildegard develops a link between the Spirit and theological/spiritual understanding. What is your greatest intellectual need/desire related to your faith?

4. Do you ever ask the Spirit to increase your curiosity and knowledge of the mysteries of the faith?