



Hildegard of Bingen: Eco-warrior and Superwoman

It would not be an exaggeration to call Hildegard of Bingen a “superwoman”. How many other 12th century women have sold thousands of CDs of their music? But Hildegard’s extraordinary music is only one facet of the talent of this medieval polymath. As one of her modern biographers, Sabina Flanagan points out,

At a time when few women wrote as much as the occasional letter, Hildegard’s written works not only surpassed those of most of her male contemporaries in the range of their subject matter ... but also outshone them in visionary beauty and intellectual power.¹

Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bermersheim not far from modern-day Mainz in the German Rhineland. She was one of several children of a noble, well-to-do family. According to one of her hagiographers, Godfrey of Disibodenberg, Hildegard displayed such remarkable holiness from a very young age that her parents dedicated her to a religious life when she was only about 7 or 8 years old. This dedication took the form of having Hildegard enclosed with the anchoress, Jutta, in a cell attached to the local Benedictine monastery. From Jutta, Hildegard was to receive a basic education and instruction in the religious life. Jutta’s piety, however, saw her attract more young girls for instruction and while Hildegard was still a teenager, Jutta’s cell could no longer accommodate all her young charges, and the “cell” became a small Benedictine convent. Hildegard thrived in this new environment and, when Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard assumed leadership of the convent. Some time after this, in 1141, Hildegard began experiencing visions. Her visions were soon brought to the attention of Pope Eugenius (1145-53) who sent instructions back to Hildegard that she was to record them in detail. Thus began Hildegard’s life-long writing career which was to result in a wide range of extraordinary works, the most substantial being the *Scivias* in which Hildegard

¹ Sabina Flanagan. *Hildegard of Bingen. A Visionary Life*. London: Routledge, 1989. p.xi

records her series of vivid visions with full theological explication. Other works on natural science, medicine, cosmology, poetry and music followed. Hildegard's works are not "easy reads" but there is much in them that resonates with our current interests and concerns, particularly those writings that present an ecological perspective.

Don't be mistaken: Hildegard was a woman of her time and, it appears, a very strong personality. She had an extraordinary intellect and pulled no punches when it came to asserting the theologically precise view of the medieval Church; but, she also had a deep reverence for, and an amazing insight into, the beauty and order of creation. Hildegard's world was one in which the natural (as opposed to supernatural) microcosm reflected the macrocosm of God's creation. The term *viriditas*, though mentioned in passing by earlier theologians such as Gregory the Great and St Augustine, is particularly associated with Hildegard because of the new and interesting way that she used it. For Hildegard, *viriditas* was an attribute of the Divine nature, a reflection of God's goodness and beauty. It stood for vitality, fertility, fruitfulness and growth; in fact all the things that we now associate with the "greenness" of nature. For us today "greenness" is a sign that the Earth is healthy and flourishing. Similarly, for Hildegard, *viriditas* was synonymous with physical and spiritual health, with the continuing vivifying force of the Holy Spirit. Hildegard used the term often in her writings, frequently in the beautifully poetic antiphons and responsories she composed in praise of God and His creation.

Such praise and careful attention to Nature is a timely reminder to us, today, as we see the devastating effects of centuries of disregard and exploitation of our natural environment. If, like Hildegard, we could sometimes pause and remember that our world is a living entity, in need of care and love for its continuing *viriditas*, we would be doing not only ourselves but also all future generations, a great service.

Hildegard died in 1179. Her heart and tongue are preserved in a golden reliquary in the Rudesheim parish church but despite many efforts in the long centuries since her death, Hildegard has not been canonized. Her appreciation of the natural world, however, is ensuring that she stays in the forefront of our attention in the 21st century as we look not only forward but also back in time for help in sustaining and nurturing our planet.

Dr Carmel Bendon Davis
carmel.davis@dbb.edu.au

