

Leader's/User's Guide
to the Video Program

Hildegard of Bingen

(1098-1179)

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Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was born at the castle Böckelheim, Germany. Jutta, a woman recluse, and sister of Count Meginhard of Spanheim, took over her education at an early age, and raise her at the St. Disibod abbey on the Diessenberg, of which Hildegard herself become abbess in 1136. Later, she founded a convent in Eibingen, Rudheim.

Hildegard was an intellectual- writer, composer, artist- a renaissance woman far ahead of her time. She criticized abuses wherever she saw them; kings and clergy alike, received her admonitions. To Frederick Barbarossa she wrote: "Take care that the Highest King does not strike you down because of the blindness which prevents you from governing justly. See that God does not withdraw His grace from you." She journeyed through France, Swabia, Cologne, and the Netherlands, influencing clergy and nobles by her example and words. She was a woman to be reckoned with. This is not sufficiently apparent in the video, which focuses on her as a compassionate elderly nun, on her visions and on her stubbornness under the interdict imposed upon her and upon her convent. This interdict was a condemnation for burying an excommunicated man near her church, presumably in consecrated ground. She was eventually cleared by the Archbishop of Mainz. Schaff notes that "at a time when heretics were being burnt at Bonn and Cologne, (Hildegard) remonstrated against the death penalty for the heretic on the ground that in spite of his heresy he bore the image of God." Schaff reminds us that Hildegard was "The most prominent woman in the church of her day." He quotes her letter to St. Bernard in which she said that the deeper meanings of Scripture "touched her breast and burnt into her soul like a flame." In a footnote Schaff says that St. Bernard, writing to Hildegard, spoke of the "sweetness of her holy love."

The Visions

Hildegard's visions began in 1141. Hildegard tells us, "...when in my forty-third year, attentive, yet trembling with great fear, I worshiped the heavenly vision. I saw in it a mighty brilliance through which came to me a voice from heaven crying out 'You frail creature, ash from ashes, dust from dust, say and write what you see and hear'."

The visions of nuns were a phenomenon of German mysticism. According to Will Durant. "The German nunneries tended to be havens of intense mysticism." Hildegard was followed by Elizabeth of Schonau (d. 1167). St. Gertrude of Hefla, "the Great" (1256-c.1302). Mechthild of Hackeborn, and St. Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210-c.1280), also influenced their times within the following century. Although not officially canonized, after two attempts, Hildegard is listed in the 1991 edition of Butler's Lives of the Saints.

The film emphasizes her love of song and music, which is also reflected in her writings:

"The body is truly the garment of the soul, which has a living voice; for the reason it is fitting that the body simultaneously with the soul repeatedly sing praises to God through the voice."

"The prophetic spirit orders that God be praised with cymbals of jubilation and with the rest of the musical instruments which the wise and studious have created, since all of the arts (whose purpose is to fill uses and needs of man) are brought to life by that breath of life which God breathed into the body of man: and therefore it is just that God be praised in all things."

In the film, Hildegard's world is shown in great simplicity. There is no reference to the scholarship that went hand in hand with religious duties in a Benedictine monastery.

A list of her scientific and theological writings includes:

Scivias (3books, 26 visions)
Expositio Evangelorum
Metallorum

Liber Compositae Medicinae
Physicae Elementorum
Expositio Regulae S. Benedicti

Hildegard's visions are difficult for us to evaluate, but the real importance of Hildegard lies in her fearless condemnation of abuses and her unquestioned influence upon her church and her age.

The Film

Hildegard of Bingen
Co-production Barry Allcott
Associate Producer Tanya Seghatchian
Executive Producer Roger Thompson
Editor & Story Associate Nigel Williams
Written and Directed by James Runcie

An Omnibus/ CTVC
Co-Production
BBC/1994

(We suggest that it will be helpful to divide the showing of the film into two parts.)

Some General Discussion Starter Questions

Part I

The film opens on a wooded scene. Several monks are pursuing a young girl, Ricardes, who has left her convent. They hang her upside down from a tree. She is found by the nun, Hildegard, who takes her to her convent and tends to her.

*What does this scene tell you about the conditions of the times?
Why does Hildegard take it upon herself to look after the girl?*

The abbot warns Hildegard that she cannot accept a novice who has abandoned her own convent.

*Compare the abbot's severity and Hildegard's determination.
Why is Hildegard determined to keep Ricardes with her?
Does she have some intuition that the girl is destined to die soon?*

Ricardes says that she is afraid. Hildegard assures her that she was afraid when she was taken to the convent at 8 years of age and that she is still afraid, but that music changed her life. She introduces Ricardes to the other nuns whom we see playing a game and singing.

*Why is music so important to Hildegard?
How does Hildegard's love of music affect the lives of her nuns?
How important is music in the praise of God?*

The abbot leaves to bring back Ricardes' mother. Meanwhile, a crusader is being tended, apparently in the infirmary of the monastery. He is dying and the chaplain tells Hildegard that he is from a family of heretics. Hildegard is determined to go to him and minister to him in his last moments. The chaplain reminds her that only the abbot can give the man absolution. Hildegard insists they must risk the abbot's anger if they are to heed the word of God. The young man fears it is too late for his salvation. Hildegard speaks words of faith and encouragement to him, and the chaplain recites a psalm. The crusader dies. The chaplain prays: "Bid thy holy angels welcome him and lead him home to paradise."

*How do Hildegard and the chaplain prove themselves to be true Christians in this emergency?
What do the chaplain's and Hildegard's words teach us about compassion?
What does this scene tell us about the need to minister to those in spiritual need.*

Hildegard and her nuns bury the crusader in the churchyard. When the abbot returns he is furious that a heretic has been buried in consecrated ground. He demands that the body be exhumed. Hildegard refuses, saying, "We ought to obey God rather than man." The abbot places a six-month interdict upon the convent, denying the nuns reception of Holy Communion and forbidding all music.

*Why does Hildegard say that "we must obey God rather than man?"
Is the young man heedful of the words of Hildegard and her chaplain?
Does the chaplain assist on his own, or is he influenced by Hildegard's leniency?
The impression is that Hildegard is more disturbed about the injunction against music than the loss of the Sacrament. What do you think?*

Part Two

Now the visions begin. First an angelic figure blesses her. This is followed by strange images, then a figure in crusader garb appears. Hildegard is then able to rise. She says, "God has shown me what to do." She writes to the Archbishop, "...the corpse (of the crusader) must not be removed. To do any other would be to bring upon you the shadow of a great danger." At this point Ricardes' mother, the marchioness, arrives determined to remove her daughter. Hildegard advises her that her daughter has not been well. There is a battle of wills between Hildegard and the marchioness for possession of the girl. At this point Hildegard has another vision.

*Do you think Hildegard's "visions" were sent from God?
Do you have any other explanation for them?
Does Hildegard's value for us today depend upon these visions?*

Ricardes' mother declares. "This woman is a lunatic." She tells Hildegard, "Nothing is left to me but this my daughter," and to Ricardes she says, "Let me offer you my love." She kisses her daughter's hand.

*How are we to understand Ricardes' mother? Does she really love her daughter?
Is the Marchioness more embarrassed by having her daughter in the convent of a visionary
than she is concerned about her welfare?*

At last Ricardes decides to go with her mother. As they part Hildegard says, "Go then - may you keep the joy of song." Hildegard then quotes at length from the Song of Solomon.

*Why does Ricardes decide to go with her mother?
Was Hildegard right to try to keep the girl with her?
Why was the girl so important to Hildegard?*

The archbishop of Mainz arrives at the convent to examine Hildegard in relation to the interdict. He examines her about her visions. Hildegard reminds him of the apostles' ability to speak in tongues at Pentecost. He asks her if she is making herself equal to the apostles. She says: "I am a poor, weak woman-a vessel of clay. I have not asked for these visions; I have not sought for them; I have not even prayed for them. I am no more than a feather carried on the breath of God." When asked, Hildegard says she does not fear the rack or burning. She then relates a vision of the throne of God at the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. The archbishop declares, "Let us pray that we may see the day," "I long to taste it," says Hildegard. The interdict is lifted.

*For the times, the archbishop is patient with Hildegard. Why do you think this is so?
Do you think Hildegard makes a good defense for herself?
Did her description of her vision of heaven convince the archbishop?
What does Hildegard mean when she says, "I long to taste it?"*

Nuns are singing. The chaplain enters. It is obvious that he has bad news. He reluctantly tells Hildegard that Ricardes has died. "She had always suffered, now she is at peace." Hildegard is reconciled to her loss, and shortly thereafter experiences another strange vision. She says, "At last I know what I must do." She decides to found another convent. She asks the chaplain to come with her. "I don't know if I can go without you." He replies, "I can hardly stay without you." They set out with the nuns for their new life.

*Hildegard seems reconciled to the death of Ricardes and shows less emotion than we would expect. Why is this so?
Is the next vision a delayed reaction to Ricardes' death?
Why does Hildegard decide to found another convent?
What have we learned from this film about compassion, loyalty and the need to praise God joyously?
What have we learned about the medieval church and Christian faith in that era?*

For further reading:

Flanagan, S. Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary life. London: Routledge, 1989.
Baird, Joseph L. and Ehrman, Radd K. Editors. *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Vol. 1.* Oxford University Press, 1994.