

Companion guide
for the video program

PIONEERS
of the
Spirit

Hildegard
of Bingen

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Gateway Films
VISION  **VIDEO**

Pioneers of the Spirit HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

Background

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was born at the castle of Bockelheim, Germany. Jutta, a woman recluse and sister of Count Meginhard of Spanheim, took over her education at an early age. Hildegard, never physically strong, was raised in seclusion at the St. Disibod abbey on the Diessenberg where, in 1136, she became abbess.

Later, she founded a convent in Eibingen, near Rudesheim.

Hildegard was an intellectual — writer, composer, artist — a renaissance woman far ahead of her time. She was outspoken and 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.”

Hildegard traveled through France, Swabia, Cologne and the Netherlands, influencing clergy and nobles by her example and words. She was a woman to be reckoned with. The historian Philip Schaff writes 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.” He also reminds us that she 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.”

Hildegard’s visions began in 1141 when she was forty-three years old. 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 Helfa, “the Great” (1256-c.1302), and St. Mechthild of Magdeburg (c.1210-c.1280) who also influenced their times within the following century.

Hildegard describes twenty-six visions in *Scivias*, which is divided into three books. They emphasize vice in the world and foretell disaster, as do most of her letters, nearly 400 of which survive. Hildegard dictated *Scivias* to a monk with the approval of the Archbishop of Mainz. Her other books deal with natural history, physics, and medicine. Her theological works include expositions on the Athanasian Creed, the Rule of St. Benedict and the Evangelists. Hildegard’s music was composed for her nuns, but it has been resurrected and samples are heard today.

During her lifetime Hildegard made numerous journeys, but towards the end of her life she became a semi-invalid and had to be carried from place to place. It was during her last year that the incident of the crusader’s burial at St. Rupert’s occurred. It was known that at once time the young man had been excommunicated by the church. Hildegard was placed under interdict for permitting the burial, but she assured the vicar general that the young man had since received the sacraments and that her action had been guided by a vision. She wrote to the canons of Mainz and to the archbishop who was in Italy. The interdict was lifted. She died not long after.

Miracles were reported at her tomb. Two attempts were made for her canonization, but these failed. Nevertheless, Hildegard was called a saint in the Roman Martyrology beginning in the 15th century, and she is listed in the 1991 edition of *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*. Her feast day is September 17.

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

Hildegard's Writings

Scivias Dei: Her major work. Divided into three books, Scivias describes 26 of her visions, condemns vice and prophesies disasters.

Her works on the natural world describe observations to an extent unusual in her day. She deals with such subjects as medicine (*Liber Compositae Medicinae*), horticulture (including fruits, herbs and orchards), and other aspects of the physical world.

Hildegard's religious works include explanation of the Athanasian Creed (*Explicatio Symboli S. Athanasii*), the Gospels (*Expositio Evangeliorum*), and a discussion of the Rule of St. Benedict (*Expositio Regulae S. Benedicti*).

Questions for Discussion

1. During her lifetime, Hildegard had many supporters and also detractors. She did not have an easy life. How do you think she would fare today?
2. Do you think Hildegard's "visions" were sent from God?
3. How do you think Hildegard influenced the people of her time? How was she able to achieve such influence in her day?
4. Is Hildegard a woman you can admire?
5. Her music has enjoyed a recent revival. Have you heard any of it? Why do you think it is so popular today?
6. Hildegard is one of the most creative saints in the Christian church. How do you think she expressed God in her creativity? How do you express God?
7. Have you ever found yourself repressing an inner voice that seems to come from God? What were the signals that told you this? (Did you become ill and depressed, as it seems Hildegard did?) Were you able to listen and respond to the inner voice? How were you changed, or how do you think you might be changed if you were able to listen more closely and respond more deeply to God?
8. Joan Ohanneson, author of an historical novel on Hildegard, describes Hildegard's visions as "overwhelming" and "terrifying." Have you ever experienced religious visions? What was your experience like?
9. Hildegard is a very dynamic, creative personality. What does she offer to those of us whose personalities are more "level" and whose talents lie outside the realm of intense creativity?
10. Part of Hildegard's story involves conflict within the church. Remember how angry the monks were when she insisted on founding her own abbey? What advice do you think Hildegard would offer us regarding our own squabbles and battles within the church? Professor Bruce Hozeski speaks about the pain Hildegard and her nuns felt by the interdict that silenced them. Have you ever felt silenced by the church? How did it feel? Were you able to address those feelings? How can the church better respond to those who feel it silences them?
11. Hildegard experienced a great deal of loneliness in her life. As a small child, she was given to the church by her parents, as a leader she often found herself with no one to discuss ideas and feelings with, and we know that she outlived many of her fellow sisters, such as Richardis. What is the place of loneliness in spirituality?

12. The Rev. Victoria Sirota says this about Hildegard's joy: "...it's not an easy joy. It's a joy that comes from having gone to the depths, having had a tough life, having had to deal with illness at times that tested her, strengthened her and increased her relationship with God. So it's a joy that comes out of darkness and is real." What has going to "the depths" brought you?
13. As Sister Miriam Schmitt notes, Hildegard's visions often depict a struggle between good and evil. If you asked Hildegard why evil exists, how do you think she would answer you?
14. What do you think Hildegard means by "being a feather on the breath of God"?
15. Write a letter to Hildegard telling her about a time in your life when you've heard and obeyed the prompting of God.

For further reading:

Flanagan, S. *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Baird, Joseph L. and Radd K. Ehrman, Editors. *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Vol. I*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

Hart, Columba, and Jane Bishop, trans. *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*. NY: Paulist Press, 1990.

Bowie, F. and O. Davies, *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writings*. NY: Crossroad, 1990.

Lachman, Barbara. *The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen*. NY: Bell Tower, 1993. (A fictional "journal" giving a real feeling for Hildegard and the times in which she lived.)

Discography

A Feather on the Breath of God: Sequences and Hymns. Gothic Voices, Christopher Page. Hyperion A66039 (CD, LP and cassette)

The Lauds of St. Ursula. Early Music Institute, Thomas Binkley. CD: Focus 911.

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