

**The “Resurrection” of Hildegard of Bingen:
Complements of the Feminist, New Age, and Social Justice Movements**

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Submitted by

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Introduction

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) a visionary, composer, healer, theologian, prophetess, prolific writer, mystic and spiritual warrior, in the twelfth century; has been adopted by the new age, feminist, Creation Spirituality, social justice and liberation theology movements. The reason for her canonization, which occurred in 2012, is not completely clear. I would like to posit that Hildegard's canonization and subsequently being made a Doctor of the Church, had more to do with "outside" influence than "inside" influence. I will go about doing this by first giving a brief background of Hildegard, her most important creative works and very specific events in her life. I will then fast forward from the time of her death to the twentieth century. It is at this point that we see a "resurrection" of Hildegard, what that entails, and the overlapping similarities between the Catholic Church's issues in the twelfth century and similar issues in the late 20th to early 21st century.

The Life of Hildegard

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098 to noble parents near Bermersheim, a small village located twelve miles southwest of Mainz, Germany. Being the tenth (tithed) child, she was dedicated to God from birth. Carmen Acevedo Butcher informs us that Hildegard's name "indicates strength in fighting," traits that a spiritual warrior needs.¹ Hildegard's name belies the

¹ Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *St Hildegard of Bingen—Doctor of the Church: A Spiritual Reader*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press 2013) 4

fact that she was a sickly child. Beginning at the age of three she started having visions which continued throughout the rest of her life.

At the age of eight Hildegard was placed in the care of Jutta of Sponheim, a Benedictine anchoress and abbess who resided in a cell near the Benedictine church in Disibodenberg. She was responsible for Hildegard's education, which consisted of learning the Psalter, and how to read and write.² At fifteen Hildegard became a Benedictine nun.

As a nun, Hildegard would eventually confide in Jutta that she was continuing to have visions. Jutta in turn told the monk Volmar of Disibodenberg of Hildegard's visions. It was Volmar who recognized Hildegard's spiritual talents and was one of the first to recognize her visions for what they were: a "gift" from God.³ As a Disibodenberg monk Volmar served as the "prior and father confessor for the nuns at Disibondenberg"⁴

In 1136, Hildegard was unanimously elected as the magistra (acting Abbess) of a small convent of women (~20) that had formed around Jutta and Hildegard. It is at this point that we see Hildegard embracing her leadership and visionary roles.

In 1150 Hildegard would move her convent to Rupertsberg, near Bingen, on the Rhine. Approximately 15 years later she would open another convent at Eibingen. Hildegard became known for her roles as confidant, friend and/or foe to the nobility, commoner and religious communities. She also completed four tours as an ecclesiastic speaker, rarely done by a woman in the twelfth century.

² Sabina Flanagan, "Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)," in *Dictionary of Literary Bibliography, Vol 148: German Writers and Works of the Early Middle Ages, 800-1170*. Eds: James Hardin and Will Hasty. (Detroit: Gale Research 1995) p. 59-73 retrieved from: (<http://www.hildegard.org/documents/flanagan.html>) accessed 4/1/2014

³ Ibid

⁴ Butcher, *St. Hildegard of Bingen—Doctor of the Church: A Spiritual Reader*, 6

When Hildegard was forty-two years old she had a vision from God commanding her to record her visions. She confided this to Volmar who then received permission from Abbot Kuno of Disibodenberg for Hildegard to record her visions. This visionary work, the first in what was to become a trilogy, was *Scivias* (“*Know the Way*”). Pope Eugene III read an unfinished section of it at the Synod of Trier in 1147-1148.⁵ This simple act became the Papal stamp of approval for all of Hildegard’s writings, elevating her to a learned mystic and prophet.

Between 1158 and 1173 Hildegard would complete *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (“*Book of Life’s Merits*”) and *Liber Divinorum Operum* (“*Book of Divine Works*”) which completed her trilogy. Her two “medical” texts *Physica* (“*A Study of Nature*”) and *Causae et Curae* (“*Holistic Healing*”) were also completed during this time. *Physica* describes the physical and healing traits of plants, elements, trees, stones, metals, birds, fish, and animals. *Causae et Curae* on the other hand “binds theological, scientific, cosmological, anthropological, pathological, and therapeutic themes into an integrated whole.”⁶ These books will become important again in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Hildegard also wrote numerous other books, homilies, songs, artwork, and over 300 letters as well as inventing her own alphabet and language. Her music, poetic as it was, also incorporated some of her made up language.⁷

Hildegard’s musical compositions were as prolific as her writings. *Ordo Virtutum*, the first surviving morality play, was her musical drama about the pilgrim Soul, Soul’s challenges

⁵ Gottfried and Theoderic, *The Life of the Holy Hildegard*, tr. From Latin to German by Adelgundis Fuhrkotter. O.S.B. tr. From German to English by James McGrath, eds. Of English text Mary Palquist and John Kulas, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995) 9

⁶ Hildegard of Bingen, *Holistic Healing*, tr. Of Latin text Manfred Pawlik, tr. Of German text Patric Madigan, S.J., tr of forward John Kulas, O.S.B., eds, of English text Mary Palmquist and John Kulas, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994) xii

⁷ Sarah L. Higley, *Hildegard of Bingen’s Unknown Language: An edition, Translation and Discussion*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 14, 30 and 205-230

with the devil and the encouragement she receives from the Virtues. There are many similarities between Hildegard's music and "New Age" music. In 1994 "*Visions-The Music of Hildegard von Bingen*" won the Billboard Classical/Crossover album of the year.⁸

Hildegard was sought out by men and women, ecclesiastical and secular leaders, wealthy and poor for advice, medical care, and even exorcism. It is her celebrity and authority that allowed her to speak out against injustices, an "effeminate" papacy, and false accusations including an interdict or silencing of the nuns leveled against Hildegard and her nuns at Rupertsberg in 1178. This was overturned in March of 1179 when Archbishop Christian rescinded the interdict, siding with Hildegard in the matter.

On September 17, 1179 Hildegard passed away. Although Hildegard's texts were "canonized" in 1148 by Pope Eugene, it would take another 800 plus years before Hildegard herself would become canonized and made a Doctor of the Church.

Over the centuries there were many attempts to have Hildegard made a saint. She had consistently been listed in the Roman Martyrology, but this did not give her "saintly" status worldwide via the Church.

The Resurrection of Hildegard

In 1979, there began to be a wide reception of her works from her music to her written works. By 2010, there were numerous publications of her critical works. At the same time the feminist, Creation Spirituality, ecofriendly, and liberation theology/social justice movements were taking a stronger hold worldwide. Hildegard's works were being embraced by many

⁸ Marg Herder, "Music Reviews: Vision-The Music of Hildegard von Bingen" *Christian Feminism Today* <http://www.eewc.com?MusicReviews?vision-music-hildegard-von-bingen> accessed 4/1/2014

“fringe” groups as well as within mainstream Catholic theology under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Authors such as Barbara Newman look to Hildegard and her teachings on the Divine Feminine. Newman points out that Hildegard often presents God in the feminine in the guise of Knowledge, Justice and Divine Wisdom. Other feminist writers who had embraced Hildegard were not only interested in her visionary trilogy but also her music and medical texts for how she viewed men and women. It is these teachings that have Hildegard being embraced by holistic health practitioners, feminist, new age movements and Matthew Fox’s Creation Spirituality movement.

Matthew Fox a defrocked Dominican monk and teacher has written six books on Hildegard of Bingen and uses her teachings in his own Creation Spirituality and Divine Feminine classes. Matthew Fox was silenced by Cardinal Ratzinger for embracing the teachings of Hildegard.

In his letter to Cardinal Ratzinger explaining Creation Spirituality, Fox sounds very similar to Hildegard when she was chastising Pope Anastasius IV for his duplicity. Fox calls Cardinal Ratzinger a bully, the alcoholic father whose “family” members need to appease him. “Their silence sucks them into that very sickness that has so overtaken their violent father. Yet silence denial prolongs and intensify the suffering of everyone in the family.”⁹

Matthew Fox, like Hildegard, addresses injustices that are being done in the guise of religion via the Catholic Church. These include not just the abandoning of the poor, but also crimes that have been committed by the clergy and then hidden. He states he believes it is time

⁹ Matthew Fox, 2011, *The Pope’s War: Why Ratzinger’s Secret Crusade Has Imperiled the Church and How It Can Be Saved*. (New York: Sterling Ethos) 82-83

for the clergy to speak out about the injustices that are occurring in the Catholic Church. Stating “Servile patience is a sin.”¹⁰

Matthew Fox and others found that when dealing with Cardinal Ratzinger, who would later be elected as Pope Benedict XVI, they were dealing with a man who had no desire to uphold Vatican II.¹¹ Hildegard also spoke out about the injustices she saw, when Pope Anastasius IV defended the men under him who were acting in impious ways.¹² “Justice” would not follow for the poor or disenfranchised. Fox states that Hildegard’s experience and his experience are very similar as they both are trying to bring the church back to working for justice, going from darkness to light.¹³

New Age movements were embracing Hildegard’s writings on the use of crystals, the elements, herbs, power animals and even the healing power of metals. As well as her teachings on embracing nature, that one should be green and juicy and by doing so we could be at one with God. This view of “wholeness” would explain why the New age, feminist, ecofriendly, social justice movements embraced Hildegard. What does any of this have to do with Hildegard being canonized and made a Doctor of the Church?

¹⁰ Daniel Gawthrop, *The Trial of Pope Benedict: Joseph Ratzinger and the Vatican’s Assault on Reason, Compassion, and Human Dignity*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press 2013) 85

¹¹ Ibid 39-41, & 138: Vatican II convened between 1962 to 1965 by Pope John XXIII. The purpose was to create a progressive mandate in order to bring the church into the modern world Pope John XXIII “wanted a more pluralistic view Catholicism.” Pope John XXIII recognized that the church would be facing new challenges and need to move into the 20th century. These reforms included recognizing other world religions. Pope John XXIII “endorsed a range of civil liberties...the *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) declared that each person is endowed with intelligence and free will, and that the full and equal rights of all persons—including the right to freely express and communicate opinions—flow from this. The encyclical affirmed various freedoms, including the freedom to choose one’s state of life. It also endorsed women’s equal inclusion in these rights...”

¹² Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, *Hildegard of Bingen: An Anthology*, tr. Robert Carver, 134

¹³ Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Saint for Our Times*, 103

Hildegard's canonization and being made a Doctor of the Church was an eight hundred plus year process. From the time of her death until Hildegard was canonized in 2012, there have been many twists and turns with change beginning to occur in the late 20th century.

Although the 1979 German Episcopal Conference was not able to convince Pope John Paul II to make Hildegard a Doctor of the Church, the Pope did give her high praise including acknowledging that she is known as Saint Hildegard. In 2001 Hildegard, unlike other saints, was still listed in the Roman Martyrology.

On the one side, you have a strong push from the German diocese, on the other side, there was an embracing of Hildegard's writings worldwide, from scholars to herbalists, New Age converts, feminists, ecologist and social justice movements.

Hildegard stood for justice and wisdom informing everyone she encountered that justice was what one was to be working for. Matthew Fox and others would follow in her footsteps in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by calling out Pope Benedict XVI due to his lack of compassion for those suffering at the hands of injustice. In so doing they reminded Pope Benedict that he was not following Vatican II's mission to get back to doing social justice work, in which one works for the good of people not of self.

The German contingent asking for Hildegard's canonization and being made a Doctor of the Church, the New Age, feminists, Creation Spirituality, and social justice movements were all swirling around the Church. While at the same time, the Church was facing major criminal/legal issues worldwide.

How could the church recover from this? What could a Pope do who had been chastised for appearing to be anti-female and who allowed pedophiles to continue to be placed in

congregations that had children? Why was he not working for social justice? The answer it would seem was to canonize Hildegard.

In 2010, the stage was being set to move forward with the canonization of Hildegard. On September 1, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI refers to Hildegard's "love for Christ and for His Church, suffering in those times as well as ours, wounded by the sins of priests and of laypeople."¹⁴ On December 20, 2010 Pope Benedict XVI quotes Hildegard again saying "In the vision of Saint [*sic*] Hildegard, the face of the Church is stained with dust, and this is how we have seen it. Her garment is torn—by the sins of priests. The way she saw and expressed it is the way we have experienced it this year. We must accept this humiliation as an exhortation to truth and a call to renewal. Only the truth saves."¹⁵ Hildegard has spoken true words, rephrased a bit by a Pope who himself is seeing trouble, recognizes that to canonize her would be in the best interest of the Church.

With a push here, and a shove there Hildegard was finally canonized on May 10, 2012. Although she had been considered a saint since her death by many, she was now recognized universally as a saint. Then on October 7, 2012 Pope Benedict XVI confers on Hildegard the title Doctor of the Church.

Conclusion

Hildegard was a woman for both her times and ours. With the resurrection of her works we see how she has had an impact on the new age, feminist, social justice, and holistic health movements. She spoke out against the injustices of the twelfth century, which are similar to those of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Her followers have been many, both

¹⁴ George Ferzoco, "The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, eds, Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco 313

¹⁵ *Ibid* 313

Catholic and non-Catholic. Holistic healers and herbalists use her books as references and her music is soothing to almost anyone who listens to it. She reaches across the Internet from Facebook to YouTube.

She has won music awards, has had two films made about her, healing centers named after her and the list goes on. Could it be that she was canonized and made a Doctor of the Church in 2012 because of the times we are in now? Today, like Hildegard's time, is one filled with turmoil and dissent within the Catholic Church. Her message is relevant given the political, economic, ecological, educational, and religious divisiveness being experienced today, locally and globally.

I believe that she was canonized due to the "perfect storm" of becoming a worldwide cult figure, whose teachings resonate cross-culturally and cross-religiously. The Catholic Church was shackled with legal issues, improper behavior by its clergy, and a papacy that penalized clergy members who were standing up for the truth and social justice. A Papacy that consistently balked at Vatican II dictates of working for social justice and accepting all faiths as being valid. One couldn't have all these new age, pagan, feminist, ecofriendly, juicy green people, who wanted to be in touch with the divine, hijacking Hildegard for themselves. Pope Benedict XVI had no choice but to canonize Hildegard, and then make her a Doctor of the Church. She had to be reclaimed and revered by the Universal Catholic Church. Being designated as a Doctor of the Church will remind people that St. Hildegard was a Benedictine mystic, whose writings are to be considered doctrinally sound.

This frail, often sickly, gifted seer, mystic, and spiritual warrior is a saint for all of us, not just the Catholic Church. People today want this, they need this and if at the same time,

Hildegard can keep the Church in line by making sure that they follow the teachings of the early fathers and Gospels, so be it.

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