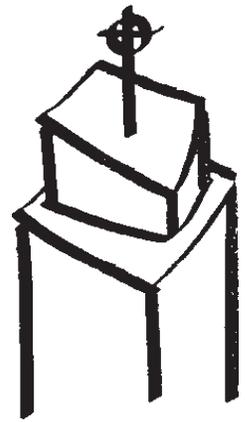


# OUR FAMILY



# NEWS



For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois

September &  
October, 2017

## Hildegard of Bingen: Benedictine Woman of Vision



**HILDEGARD  
OF BINGEN**

On October 7, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI issued an Apostolic Letter declaring “St. Hildegard of Bingen, professed nun of the Order of St. Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church.” In this letter, Pope Benedict notes that his predecessor, now St. John Paul, had called St. Hildegard “a light for her people and her time.” Pope Benedict, however, asserts that “her authority reaches far beyond the confines of a single epoch or society.”

St. Hildegard of Bingen is one of only four women, and only five Benedictines—including St. Bede—who, because of the significant value to the Church of their writing and preaching, have been officially declared Doctors of the Church. Pope Benedict notes about St. Hildegard that in her “there is a wonderful harmony between teaching and daily life” and that “at the basis of her spirituality was the Benedictine Rule.” In this article I would like first to look at St. Hildegard’s life and writings and then reflect on what insights we might gain from her for our own lives as Benedictine oblates.

Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bermersheim, Germany, a municipality about 15 miles south of Mainz. Her family were probably members of the minor nobility. When she was about eight, Hildegard’s parents gave her over to the care of Jutta, an anchoress who lived in a cell attached to the Benedictine monastery at Disibodenberg. (We see here a similarity to St. Bede, whose parents placed him at a young age into the care of Benedict Biscop at the abbey of Monkwearmouth.) Thus, from an early age, the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the daily rhythms of prayer and work set down in it governed Hildegard’s life. Scholars believe that Jutta taught Hildegard, not just how to recite, but how to read the psalms and prayers of the *Opus Dei* as well as the scriptures

and other books, including writings of the early Fathers of the Church. Thus, although she did not have the formal education thought necessary at the time for someone to write theology (an education available almost exclusively to men), she was not totally unschooled.

Jutta's holiness attracted other women, and by the time of her death in 1136, her "cell" was, in actuality, a small convent of sisters who elected Hildegard to be their next head. Thus began Hildegard's remarkable career as abbess of her community, first at Disibodenberg, then at Rupertsberg near Bingen where she moved her convent in 1150. Her time as abbess ended only with her death in 1179.



Like St. Bede, St. Hildegard had a wide range of interests, and her writings include books on science and medicine. For example, her book *Physica* looks at the properties and possible medicinal uses of over two hundred plants, along with descriptions and benefits of numerous trees, rivers, and animals. She advises that eating spelt "promotes sound flesh and healthy blood," while placing "living glowworms tied in a cloth" on the stomach of someone suffering an epileptic seizure revives them. Similarly, *Causae et curae* gives a short description of over two hundred diseases along with remedies for some of them. Hildegard's advice to a young man who finds his hair falling out is to "take bear grease and a little ash of wheaten or tritcale straw and mix them together and smear his whole head with it."

One of Hildegard's major interests was music, and she was a gifted composer. Her most well known work is a cycle of more than seventy compositions for liturgical use known as the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* (Symphony of the harmony of heavenly revelations). Hildegard believed that every day, as she and her sisters sang the psalms and prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours, they were participating in this symphony. She wrote her compositions to enhance prayer on various feasts. These beautiful antiphons, sequences and songs reflect Hildegard's focus on salvation history. For example:

Antiphon for the Redeemer

O shed blood  
that rang on high  
when all the elements  
clashed together,  
voicing their woe  
and trembling  
as the blood of their Creator  
touched them,  
salve our sickness.

In recent years, classical musicians have taken a renewed interest in these compositions, and today almost forty recordings of Hildegard's work are available. (Many can be sampled on YouTube.)

Hildegard also wrote numerous sermons addressed to the sisters in her community, a commentary on scripture passages used for major feasts, a commentary on the *Rule*, lives of various saints, and over four hundred letters. But she is best known for the writings that came from her unusual “visions.”



According to Hildegard, some form of her visions first occurred when she was between three and five years old. She writes that she experienced “such a great light that my soul quaked,” but she was too young to be able to understand or explain this. As she grew older she tried to express what she was experiencing but notes, “When I was filled with this vision, I said many things which were strange to the hearers.”

Over the years, Hildegard strove to keep her unusual gifts to herself until, in 1141, when she was forty-three, she “saw a great splendor, in which sounded a voice from Heaven.” The voice commanded her to “speak what you see and hear... according to the will of Him who knows, sees, and arranges all things.” Following this, she says, “the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain... And suddenly I grasped the underlying meaning of the books—of the Psalter, the Gospels and other catholic books of the Old and New Testaments.”

Hildegard felt she had received a direct command from God, and though still reluctant to share her visions and insights, she eventually did tell the local abbot. He encouraged her to begin writing down what she saw and heard. In time, the abbot told the Archbishop of Mainz, who in turn made it known to Pope Eugenius. After a papal commission examined Hildegard and her writings, they declared her work “authentic,” and the Synod of Trier (1147) resolved that she “be commanded to transcribe and make known whatever she received in this way from the Holy Spirit.”

The accounts of what Hildegard saw and heard are contained in her three major works: *Scivias*, *The Book of Life’s Merits*, and *The Book of Divine Works*. Pope Benedict writes, “In her visions and her subsequent reflections she presents a compendium of the history of salvation from the beginning of the universe until its eschatological consummation.” He praises her language for its “original and effective style...rich in symbols, dazzling intuitions, incisive comparisons and evocative metaphors.” One example of this is her beautiful description of the unity of the Trinity:

I saw... an incomprehensible, inextinguishable brightly blazing fire, totally alive and bearing the totality of life, having in itself a flame the color of air, which burned ardently with a steady incandescence and which was as inseparably present in the bright fire as are the inward parts of a human being. And ... a shining white flower, suspended in that flame as a dewdrop hangs on a blade of grass.

The transformative experience of 1141 led Hildegard to see her life as “set in a prophetic mold” and herself as “the mouthpiece of the Lord, merely conveying his messages to her hearers and readers.”

Her superiors shared this understanding of her gift. Thus, since she was not acting out of her own abilities, Hildegard was accepted as one able to engage in theology despite her lack of the formal schooling considered essential for such a pursuit and, more importantly, despite her being a woman.

As Hildegard's reputation grew, various nobles and abbots began consulting her, not only about questions of theology but also of religious discipline and even, in one case, an exorcism. She made preaching tours to various abbeys and was encouraged by both Popes Hadrian IV and Alexander III to preach in public squares and even in cathedral churches, a remarkable ministry for a woman at the time. Hildegard often drew attention to lax liturgical practices and needs for reform in the Church, and she was not shy about admonishing abbots and bishops to correct these ills.

If, as Pope Benedict asserts, Hildegard has something to offer to us today, what might that be? He suggests, for example, "her appreciation of the liturgy as a celebration of life" and "her sensitivity to nature, whose laws are to be safeguarded and not violated." I believe that as Benedictine oblates we can learn two other things from St. Hildegard's life. First, Hildegard's writings remind us of the importance of paying attention to the world around us as we pursue our daily tasks. We know that St. Benedict sets out time for work as well as for prayer, and I like to muse that in order to teach this to little Hildegard, Jutta gave her tasks to do in the garden, perhaps caring for herbs used by the monastery and tending flowers to adorn the altar. Her writings clearly indicate that she was a keen observer of nature. Although we may dismiss as "non-scientific" many of Hildegard's comments on the medicinal properties of various plants, etc., we cannot deny that these observations give clarity and beauty to many of the wonderful images and metaphors that make her theological writing so vibrant. Our reflections on God's work in our life can similarly be enriched by careful attention to the details of our everyday tasks.

More importantly, Hildegard's life can prompt us to a renewed faithfulness to the *Rule's* instructions to, as far as possible, devote regular times to prayer, particularly the Liturgy of the Hours and *lectio divina*. For Benedictines, these are not just two among a number of other devotions we might pray. They are central to who we are. Praying the psalms and meditating through *lectio* on the scriptures and other texts allowed Hildegard to find the unifying force of God's love in the world. If we follow her example, we, too, can enjoy a fuller experience of that love.

---Kathy Martin



## Sources

Benedict XVI, “Apostolic Letter Proclaiming Hildegard of Bingen as a Doctor of the Church,” (2012), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20121007\\_ildegarda-bingen.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html)

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## Note

By looking at Hildegard’s statements about her visions in light of current medical research, many scholars have concluded that Hildegard suffered from severe migraines, and her visions occurred at these times. For a thorough discussion of this see Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 185-204.



## Passage for *Lectio* at the September Meeting

O Lord, our Lord,  
how awesome is your name through all the earth!  
I will sing of your majesty above the heavens  
with the mouths of babes and infants.  
You have established a bulwark against your foes,  
to silence enemy and avenger.  
When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and stars that you set in place—  
What are humans that you are mindful of them,  
mere mortals that you care for them?  
Yet you have made them little less than a god,  
crowned them with glory and honor.  
You have given them rule over the works of your hands,  
put all things at their feet:  
All sheep and oxen,  
even the beasts of the field,  
The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,  
and whatever swims the paths of the seas.  
O Lord, our Lord,  
how awesome is your name through all the earth.

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**Our Family News** is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

## Passage for *Lectio* at the October Meeting

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed to us. For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 8:18-23

## NOVEMBER 12 OBLATES DAY SCHEDULE

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| 10:00 A.M.  | Conventual Mass, within which oblates will renew their oblations |
| 12:00 noon  | Midday Prayer with the monks                                     |
| 12:15 P.M.  | Lunch with the monks in the monastery refectory                  |
| After lunch | Gathering in the abbey church                                    |
| 2:30 P.M.   | Conclusion of meeting  |

## SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from 1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2017

Sunday, October 15, 2017

Sunday, November 12, 2017  
(Oblates Day)

Sunday, December 3, 2017  
Sunday, January 7, 2018  
Sunday, February 11, 2018  
Sunday, March 11, 2018  
Sunday, April 8, 2018  
Sunday, May 6, 2018

