Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179): Excerpts from her Writings

Scivias

BK 2: Vision 5, [p.224-25]

[Neither God nor Hildegard have any illusions about the motives of some who join religious communities:]

For some undertake the religious life renouncing not their own will but only their secular clothes, because they have experienced misery and poverty instead of riches in the world; they leave the world because they cannot have it as they wish.

Others are foolish and simple about the world and, being unable to guide themselves, are contemptible to people; so they flee from the world because they are mocked by it.

Others labor greatly under the calamities of sickness and bodily weakness, and so leave the world not for my sake but to remedy these afflictions more easily.

Yet others suffer such great anguish and oppression from the temporal lords to whom they are subject that they withdraw from the world for fear of them, not so as to obey My precepts but only so that those lords can no longer have power over them.

So all these come to the religious life not for the sake of celestial love but for the sake of the earthly troubles they have, not knowing whether I am salted with wisdom or insipid, sweet or bitter, a dweller in Heaven or on earth.

Bk 2, Vision 5 [p. 227-8]

[on religious life, God and Hildegard warn parents against forcing children into monasteries:]

If you offer your child to me when discerning intellect is not in him, but all his understanding lies undeveloped, and that offering is against his will because you have not sought his consent to it, you have not acted rightly....

And if you, O human, confine that child with such great strictness of bodily discipline that he cannot free himself from the pressure of his soul’s repugnance, he will come before Me arid and fruitless in body and soul because of the captivity unjustly inflicted on him without his consent....

If I comfort him by miracle so that he may remain in the spiritual life, that is not for humans to look into; for I want his parents not to sin in this oblation, offering him to me without his will.

Bk 3 Vision 11 [p. 499]

[It is because the Scriptures and the books of the Doctors of the Church are not followed that this new book, Scivias, is needed. The speaker here is God:]

But now the Catholic faith wavers among the nations and the Gospel limps among the people; and the mighty books in which the excelling doctors had summed up knowledge with great care go unread from shameful apathy, and the food of life, which is the divine Scriptures, cools to tepidity.
For this reason, I now speak through a person who is not eloquent in the Scriptures or taught by an earthly teacher; I Who Am speak through her of new secrets and mystical truths, heretofore hidden in books, like one who mixes clay and then shapes it to any form he wishes.

**Ordo virtutum**


*At the start of the play, a rather naive soul, Anima, wants the radiant robe of heaven:*

**Anima:** Oh, sweet divinity, oh gentle life, in which I shall wear a radiant robe,...

*But she doesn't want the armor which she will need to fight the battle of life:*

**Anima:** Oh, grievous toil, oh harsh weight that I bear in the dress of this life: It is too grievous for me to fight against my body....

**Knowledge of God:** Look at the dress you are wearing, daughter of salvation: be steadfast, and you'll never fall.

**Anima:** I don't know what to do or where to flee. Woe is me. I cannot complete this dress I have put on. Indeed I want to cast it off....

**Knowledge of God:** You do not know or see or taste the One who has set you here.

**Anima:** God created the world: I'm doing him no injury – I only want to enjoy it!

**Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum**


*[For Hildegard, virgins dedicated to God are active agents of their king. The antiphon "O pulcre facies":] Exquisite eyes fixed on God,*

*blithe noble virgins,*

*beholding him and building at dawn:*

*the king saw his image in your faces*

*when he made you mirrors of all heaven's graces,*

*a garden of surpassing sweetness,*

*a fragrance wafting all graciousness. [p.219]*

**Liber simplicis medicinae /Physica**

*[Hildegard's Liber simplicis medicinae, called Physica when it was printed in 1533, is her medical encyclopedia. Under nine general headings, she tells of the basic qualities, the medicinal value, and the proper application of 230 plants, 63 trees, 45 animals, etc.]*

[From the introduction to the first section, on plants. Throughout the book, all creation is judged by its relationship to and usefulness to humans:]

With earth was the human being created. All the elements served mankind and, sensing that man was alive, they busied themselves in aiding his life in every way. And man in turn occupied himself with them. The earth gave its vital energy, according to each person's race, nature, habits, and environment....

Certain plants grow from air. These plants are gentle on the digestion and possess a happy nature, producing happiness in anyone who eats them.... Certain other herbs are windy, since they grow from the wind. These herbs are dry, and heavy on one's digestion. They are of a sad nature, making the person who eats them sad....

Every plant is either hot or cold, and grows thus, since the heat of the herbs signifies the spirit, and the cold, the body. [pp.9-10]

[From the introduction to the section on stones; on precious and non-precious stones:]

[ Precious stones] contain many powers and are effective for many needs. Many things can be done with them---but only good, honest actions, which are beneficial to human beings, not activities of seduction, fornication, adultery, enmity, homicide and the like, which tend toward vice and which are injurious to people. The nature of these precious stones seeks honest and useful effects and rejects people's depraved and evil uses, in the same way virtues cast off vices and vices are unable to engage with virtues.

Some stones... arise from other, useless things. Through them, with God's permission, it is possible for good and bad things to happen. [p.138]

[The opening of the section on birds:]

As long as it is in the body, the human soul, being airy, is lifted high and sustained by air, lest it suffocate in the body. It dwells in the human body with sensitive intelligence and stability.

Since birds are lifted by their feathers into the air, and since they dwell everywhere in the air, they were thus created and positioned in order that the soul, with them, might feel and know the things which should be known. [p.177]

[From the introduction to the section on animals:]

Lions and similar animals show the will of a person, which he wants to bring forth in works. Panthers, and those similar to them, show the ardent desire in the already incipient work. Other forest animals represent full abundance and show that a person has the potential to complete both useful and useless works. The tame animals that walk on land show the gentleness of the human being, which he has through his correct ways. And so human rationality says to each person, "You are this or that animal," since animals have in them qualities similar to the nature of the human. [p.205]

[From the last section, "Metals"; life in the Germany of the 1100s apparently had its risks:]

Steel is very hot and is the strongest form of iron. It nearly represents the divinity of God, whence the devil flees it and avoids it.

If you suspect there is poison in food or drink, secretly place a hot piece of steel in moist food, such as broth or vegetable puree. If there is poison present, the steel will weaken and disable it. If the food is dry, such as meat, fish or eggs, place a hot piece of steel in wine and pour the wine over the food.... Also, place the hot piece of steel in a drink – whether wine, beer, water, or any other beverage....
There is so much power in the steel that it dries up the poison, making it less able to harm the person who eats or drinks it. It will not be powerful enough to kill a person who tastes it, even though he may swell up or become sick for a little while. [pp.240-41]

**Liber compositae medicinae /Causae et curae**

[Liber compositae medicinae, renamed Causae et curae in the following century, appears to be a set of notes made for use at St. Rupert's and perhaps for the teaching of others. The notes were put into some kind of order, but never finally prepared for circulation, so there is quite a bit of repetition. In Part 1, Hildegard speaks of the external world, but always with reference to human health (e.g., the kinds of water that are safe to drink); Part 2 is on illnesses and their causes, Parts 3 and 4 on cures, and most of Part 5 on symptoms to be looked for. Patrick Madigan has translated the work from a German translation of the Latin text. One caution: The headings are not Hildegard's but added at least 100 years later; they are often seriously misleading:]

Holistic healing, Hildegard of Bingen; Manfred Pawlik, translator of Latin text; Patrick Madigan, translator of German text; John Kulas, translator of foreword; Mary Palmquist and John Kulas, editors of English text. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994.

[On the human soul and its power. Hildegard does not see her own prophetic role as unique:]

Man contains the entire creation within himself, and the breath of life that never dies is within him....

As waters flow over certain places, so the soul penetrates the body and is more noble than it. Even when our external eyes are closed, the soul often sees the future by means of its prophetic powers because it already knows it can live without the body. [p.41]

[The soul's interaction with the body can be a worrisome one for the soul; here Hildegard describes a serious illness marked by high fever, brought about by an imbalance of the good and bad humors within the body:]

Then the soul lies depressed in the body and waits, wondering if it should leave the body or remain in it. So it continues until the seventh day because it cannot yet free itself from its foul humours.

However, if it notices that the intensity of these humours, through the grace of God, is beginning to recede somewhat, it then does come to the realization that it can free itself from these humours. And so it gathers its forces again and by sweating it drives these foul humours out of its body. In this manner, the person regains his health.

However, it often happens that because of their excessive heat and cold, the soul cannot completely drive out these humours by sweating. Rather, the soul, gripped by fear because of happiness or sadness, anger or anxiety, draws back and closes itself up in silence... [pp.144-45]

[At the start of Part 3, which begins the description of poultices and medicines to help the illnesses that the book has already described, Hildegard makes a prudent disclaimer:]

The medicament given below were prescribed by God to be used against the above named ailments. Either they will heal the person or he will die if God does not will that he be healed. [p.147]

[The directions for cures – for pain of all kinds, for sterility or infertility, for anger or melancholy, etc. – follow a general pattern: The directions are spelled out clearly, possible alternatives are usually given, and the reason is explained. Here is a typical set of instructions, this one to cure a headache:]

If a depression conditioned by various fever attacks cause a person headaches, he should take mallow and twice that amount of sage, crush these into a pulp in a mortar and pour a bit of olive oil on it. If he has no oil, a little vinegar will do.
He should then apply it over the skull from the forehead to the neck and wrap a cloth over it. He should do this for three days. During these three days he should add fresh olive oil or fresh vinegar in the evening and continue this until he gets better.

For mallow juice releases the bile; however, the sap of the sage dries it up, the olive oil anoints the afflicted head, and the vinegar draws out the bitterness from the bile. [p.147]

Liber vitæ meritorum

[Liber vitæ meritorum, the second of her visionary works, Hildegard deals with good and evil actions, by lay people as well as religious, and their respective rewards and punishments, in this world as in the next.


Each of the first five of the book's six parts starts with scenes in which a vice speaks and is then answered by its corresponding virtue. The dialogues are vivid, and as usual, the devil has the best lines. Hildegard certainly sounds as if she had heard all the arguments. First, gluttony and abstinence:]

This image said: "God created all things. How then can I be spoiled by all these things? If God did not think these things were necessary, he would not have made them. Therefore, I would be a fool if I did not want these things, especially since God does not want man's flesh to fail."

Again I heard a voice responding to these words from the cloud.... It said: "No one should play a lyre in such a way that its strings are damaged. If its strings have been damaged, what sound will it make? None. You, gluttony, fill your belly so much that all your veins are bloated and are turned into a frenzy. Where then is the sweet sound of wisdom that God gave man?" [p.74]

[Then sloth and strength:]

This image said: "Why should I suffer a narrow and laborious life? Why should I suffer from so many tribulations when I have not committed very many sins? Each and every creature is allowed to be itself. Many, however, weep and howl and make their bodies so thin that they live only with difficulty. They live depraved lives and add sin to sin. What does all this bring them? I, however, live a soft life and avoid hard work; I do not even want any work. If I flee work and other harmful things, God will not destroy me, will he?"

I heard a voice from the storm cloud give an answer to this image: "....You are not like the serpents that work in their caves and drag in food to feed themselves, nor are you like birds that build their nests and then seek food to restore their bodies again. For what is alive and can give life in this life that can live without care? Nothing, for this life is removed from the anxiously awaited life in paradise where eyes living in blessedness are never darkened. You, however, O wretched one, living without God's wisdom and rejected by God's mercy, desire things that no one can give you since you want to have these things without working for them in your numb sluggishness...." [p.177]

[And sorrow and joy:]

I saw a fifth image that had the form of a woman.... She said: "Alas that I was ever created! Alas that I am alive! Who will help me? Who will free me? If God knew me, I would not be in such danger. Although I trust in God, he does not give me any good things; although I rejoice in him, he does not take evil away from me. I listen to a lot of things from philosophers who teach that there is much good in God, but God does not do any good for me. If he is my God, why does he hide all his grace from me? If he were to bring something good to me, I might know him. I, however, do not know what I am. I was created for unhappiness, I was born into unhappiness, and I live without any consolation. Ah! What use is life without joy? Why was I ever created when there is no good for me?"
I again heard a voice from the storm respond to this image: "O blind and deaf one, you do not know what you have said.... Behold the sun, moon, stars and all the embellishments of the earth's greenness, and consider what great prosperity God gives to man in those things.... Who gives you these bright and good things unless it is God? When the day rushes up to you, you call it the night; when salvation is present to you, you say that it is a curse, and when good things come to you, you say they are evil...." [p.226]

**Explanatio regulae Sancti Benedicti**

Sometime in the late 1150s or early 1160s, a religious community of men wrote to Hildegard, asking for her views on "what is needful" to follow the Rule of St. Benedict.


[Hildegard's explanation of the Rule repeatedly emphasizes Benedict's moderation and discretion, and his reliance on the discretion of abbot and monk. The image used here is of a large cask of wine or beer, lying on its side, that has been broached by a nail:]  
[Benedict] poured forth his doctrine in the discretion of God. For he drove in the sharp nail of his doctrine neither too high nor too low, but in the middle of the wheel, so that each one, whether strong or weak or sick, would be able to drink from his according to his capacity.  [p.19]

[On the training of boys being raised in the monastery (unlike the Benedictines, the Cistercians and the other new orders were recruiting only adults):]  
...[J]ust as a boy under fifteen years of age is delicate of body, so he is delicate of mind. For the time being he has no fear and can be bent toward what is good; he does not dare wantonly to resist those who correct him.  
But when he reaches fifteen years he is already in the bloom of youth. Like a flowering tree strengthened by the pith and fluids in it, so the powers of his mind surge up so that he disdains to accept and bear the childish corrections he used to accept.  [p.45]

**Liber divinorum operum**

*There is no complete translation of Liber divinorum operum, the last of Hildegard's visionary works, but this collection includes a partial translation by Robert Cunningham.*  

[Hildegard's book reports ten visions which show the love of God revealed in man and in man's relation to Christ. The first part of the work is on of the world of humanity; here Hildegard speaks of the need to consider the needs of both body and soul:]  
Zeal for goodness is like a day when we can ponder everything in our mind, while laziness is like a night where we can no longer see anything at all. Just as the night is often moonlit and then later overshadowed if the moon goes under, our deeds are all mixed up. Sometimes they are luminous and at other times they are dark.  
If our soul, under the body's urging, does evil with the body, the power of our soul will be darkened, because the light of the truth is missing. But if later the soul feels humiliated by sin and rises up again in opposition to the desires of the flesh, it will henceforth harry that flesh and hinder its evil deeds....
Indeed, the soul sustains the flesh, just as the flesh sustains the soul. For, after all, every deed is accomplished by the soul and the flesh. And, therefore, the soul can achieve with the body good and holy things and be revived as a result.

In this connection, it often happens that our flesh may feel bored when it cooperates with the soul. In such a case, therefore, the soul may give in to its fleshly partner and let the flesh take delight in earthly things. Similarly, a mother knows how to get her crying child to laugh again. Thus the soul accomplishes good deeds with the body, even though there may be some evil mixed up with them. The soul lets this happen so as not to overburden the flesh too much. [Vision 4, pp.100-102]

[And of the relationship between men and women:]

When God looked upon the human countenance, God was exceedingly pleased. For had not God created humanity according to the divine image and likeness? Human beings were to announce all God's wondrous works by means of their tongues that were endowed with reason. For humanity is God's complete work....

But the human species still needed a support that was a match for it. So God gave the first man a helper in the form of woman, who was man's mirror image, and in her the whole human race was present in a latent way. God did this with manifold creative power, just as God had produced in great power the first man.

Man and woman are in this way so involved with each other that one of them is the work of the other. Without woman, man could not be called man; without man, woman could not be named woman. Thus woman is the work of man, while man is a sight full of consolation for woman. Neither of them could henceforth live without the other. Man is in this connection an indication of the Godhead while woman is an indication of the humanity of God's Son.

And thus the human species sits on the judgment seat of the world. It rules over all creation. [Vision 4, pp. 122-23]

Correspondence


[Sometime before 1156, Elisabeth of Schonau wrote to Hildegard explaining the scandal that had been caused by the publication of Elisabeth's visions; she wanted Hildegard to "know my innocence... [and] make it clear to others" (v.2, p.119). Hildegard's reply offers moral support, but then a warning:]

Listen now, O my anxious daughter. The arrogant deception of the ancient serpent sometimes wearies those persons inspired by God. For whenever that serpent see a fine jewel he hisses and says, What is this? And he wearies that jewel with the many afflictions that distress a blazing mind longing to soar above the clouds, as if they were gods, just as he himself once did.

Listen again: Those who long to complete God's works must always bear in mind that they are fragile vessels, for they are only human. They must always bear in mind what they are and what they will be.... They can only sing the mysteries of God like a trumpet, which only returns a sound but does not function unassisted, for it is Another who breathes into it that it might give forth a sound....

O my daughter, may God make you a mirror of life. I too cower in the puniness of my mind, and am greatly wearied by anxiety and fear. Yet from time to time I resound a little, like a dim sound of a trumpet from the Living Light. May God help me, therefore, to remain in his service. [v.2, pp.180-81]
Hildegard wrote to the laity as well as to clerics and religious. In the early 1150s she tells a countess that simply thinking about doing good was not enough. She then describes the duties of an aristocratic laywoman:

The person who does good works sees God, but the one who has a mere thought about good works is like a mirror in which an image is reflected, but the image is not really there. So rise up and begin good works and bring them to perfection, and God will receive you.

But you will respond: "I have a husband, and I am of the secular world. What is this you are calling me to?"

But in response I say that you should have mercy and benevolence and virtue (which tramples pride underfoot). And, also, you should stretch out your hand to the weak and to those prostrated with troubles, and you should be lenient to those who sin against you..., and you should not slay God in the face, that is, begrudge the happiness God gave to others, lest you fall because of envy. Then, you will live. [v.3, p.124]

Besides counseling others, Hildegard also had to control her own monastery of St. Rupert. That her nuns did not always follow her lead cheerfully is shown in a letter she wrote to them, probably in 1161 or 1162. She reports God's words, first describing the life they should be living, and then:

You, however, are not doing these things, for you turn instead to carnal desires, neglecting your proper duty.

For in one way, a way that inclines to the world, you set before Me all sorts of fleshly desires like those whores who zealously and eagerly serve the world as they have been trained to do.... In the other way, you turn to the pleasurable desires of those who frequently sweat in carnal embraces, in which lovers please lovers.

And I have never demanded this of you, neither by word nor by writing, nor by command, for you have joined a spiritual --- not a carnal --- embrace. Yet you have become enslaved to carnal embraces, although I did not choose you for the vain and soon-to-fade flowers of this rotting world. I brought you, instead, into the vineyard of true election and true bliss.... [v.2, pp.166-67]

In 1163, Hildegard preached a sermon to the higher clergy at Cologne. Later, some of the clergy asked her to send them a copy. This is a brief excerpt from a long document, but it reflects the prophetic tone of the whole. First the opening:

"The one who was, and is, and is about to come" speaks to the shepherds of the church:

[The words to follow are, until the last paragraph, are God's:]

....Oh, what great evil and enmity this is! that a person is unwilling to live an upright life, either for God's sake or mankind's, but, rather, seeks honor without work and eternal rewards without abstinence. Such a one, in his supposed sanctity, vainly longs to cry out, as the devil does, I am good and holy. But this is not true....

You are worn out by seeking after your own transitory reputation in the world, so that, at one moment, you are knights, the next slaves, the next mere jesting minstrels, so that in the perfunctory performance of your duties you sometimes manage to brush off the flies in the summer....

You ought to be the day, but you are the night. For you will be either the day or the night. Choose, therefore, where you wish to take your stand....
[Hildegard and the German clergy are concerned about the growing strength of "certain people," the Cathars, a new group that was considered heretical, but whose members were praised by the populace for their virtue.]

When this time comes, ruin will fall upon you at the hands of certain people, you wicked sinners, and they will pursue you relentlessly, and they will not cover up your works, but will lay them bare, and they will say about you: "These are scorpions in their morals and snakes in their works."...

The people who will say these things about you will walk about in black robes, with proper tonsure, and will appear to men serene and peaceful in all their ways. Moreover, they do not love avarice, and do not have money, and, in their secret selves, they hold abstinence as so great a virtue that they can scarcely be reproached. The devil, however, is within these men....

Whoever wishes to escape these dangers, therefore, let him beware lest with darkened eyes he runs into the nets of these woes. But let each, to the best of his ability, escape them through good works and the safe harbor of uncorrupted will, and God will provide him with His aid.

[At the end of the sermon, Hildegard returns to her own voice:]

Poor little timorous figure of a woman that I am, I have worn myself out for two whole years so that I might bring this message in person to the magistrates, teachers, and other wise men who hold the higher positions in the Church. [v.1, p. 55-60]

[A letter to King Henry II of England, written before the 1170 murder of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, for which Henry would be generally held responsible:]

To a certain man holding a certain office, the Lord says:

Gifts are yours for the giving: by governing and defending, by protecting and providing, you may gain heaven.

But a black bird comes to you... and says, "You have the power to do whatever you like. Therefore, do this and do that, take up this matter and that, for it is not good for you to look to justice, because if you are always looking to her, you are not the master but the slave."

Do not listen to the thief that gives you such advice.... Look more diligently, instead, to your Father, Who created you, because you have good intentions and would willingly do good if not influenced by the squalid morals of the people who surround you, as you have been for some time.

Dear son of God, boldly flee from these things, and call on your Father, for He gladly stretches out His hand to assist you.

Now, live forever, and remain in eternal felicity. [v.3, p.116]

[And from the same period, a brief letter to Henry's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, concerned about her husband's infidelities but especially about her children's future:]

Your mind is like a wall battered by a storm. You look all around, and you find no rest. Stay calm and stand firm, relying on God and your fellow creatures, and God will aid you in all your tribulations.

May God give you His blessing and His help in all your works. [v.3, p.117]
In a letter from the last decade of her life, Hildegard explains to an abbess why she speaks in metaphorical language. We don't have the letter that brought this response, but perhaps the abbess wondered why Hildegard didn't speak more plainly:

I say to you that never in the vision of my spirit am I wont to speak in undisguised words, but only as I am taught. Thus I always employ some kind of metaphor, as it is written, "I will open my mouth in parables...."

God indeed has from the beginning set parables and metaphors before humankind, through which, usually, they are taught the way to salvation better than the naked words themselves. [v.3, p.63]

When asked, as she often was by clerics and religious, whether they would be saved, Hildegard would reasonably respond that they would be if they followed God's will. But two letters from the 1170s to lay people hint most clearly at what for centuries would become her reputation- not a teacher but a fortune-teller. In the first she answers a woman asking about her dead husband's future (Hildegard will go on to urge the widow to pray for her husband's soul):

...[I]n the vision of my soul I see many miracles of God, and, through God's grace, I understand the profundities of the Scripture, but what sorts of things lie in store for individuals are not revealed to me in that vision. [v.3, p.149]

And in another, she responds to a more mundane request (but even here she ends on a gentle note):

God reveals matters to me about the correction of sins and the salvation of souls, but nothing about how to find treasure, because He is more concerned with the salvation of mankind than with transitory treasure. Therefore, God has shown me nothing concerning the matter you ask me about, not even about the danger.

Yet He may help you according to His will and your need. [v.3, pp.150-51]

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