



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Hall*

*Wednesday, 8 September 2010*

*Saint Hildegard of Bingen (2)*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to take up and continue my Reflection on St Hildegard of Bingen, an important female figure of the Middle Ages who was distinguished for her spiritual wisdom and the holiness of her life. Hildegard's mystical visions resemble those of the Old Testament prophets: expressing herself in the cultural and religious categories of her time, she interpreted the Sacred Scriptures in the light of God, applying them to the various circumstances of life. Thus all those who heard her felt the need to live a consistent and committed Christian lifestyle. In a letter to St Bernard the mystic from the Rhineland confesses: "The vision fascinates my whole being: I do not see with the eyes of the body but it appears to me in the spirit of the mysteries.... I recognize the deep meaning of what is expounded on in the Psalter, in the Gospels and in other books, which have been shown to me in the vision. This vision burns like a flame in my breast and in my soul and teaches me to understand the text profoundly" (*Epistolarium pars prima I-XC: CCCM 91*).

Hildegard's mystical visions have a rich theological content. They refer to the principal events of salvation history, and use a language for the most part poetic and symbolic. For example, in her best known work entitled *Scivias*, that is, "You know the ways" she sums up in 35 visions the events of the history of salvation from the creation of the world to the end of time. With the characteristic traits of feminine sensitivity, Hildegard develops at the very heart of her work the

theme of the mysterious marriage between God and humanity that is brought about in the Incarnation. On the tree of the Cross take place the nuptials of the Son of God with the Church, his Bride, filled with grace and the ability to give new children to God, in the love of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Visio tertia*: PL 197, 453c).

From these brief references we already see that theology too can receive a special contribution from women because they are able to talk about God and the mysteries of faith using their own particular intelligence and sensitivity. I therefore encourage all those who carry out this service to do it with a profound ecclesial spirit, nourishing their own reflection with prayer and looking to the great riches, not yet fully explored, of the medieval mystic tradition, especially that represented by luminous models such as Hildegard of Bingen.

The Rhenish mystic is also the author of other writings, two of which are particularly important since, like *Scivias*, they record her mystical visions: they are the *Liber vitae meritorum* (Book of the merits of life) and the *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of the divine works), also called *De operatione Dei*. In the former she describes a unique and powerful vision of God who gives life to the cosmos with his power and his light. Hildegard stresses the deep relationship that exists between man and God and reminds us that the whole creation, of which man is the summit, receives life from the Trinity. The work is centred on the relationship between virtue and vice, which is why human beings must face the daily challenge of vice that distances them on their way towards God and of virtue that benefits them. The invitation is to distance themselves from evil in order to glorify God and, after a virtuous existence, enter the life that consists "wholly of joy". In her second work that many consider her masterpiece she once again describes creation in its relationship with God and the centrality of the human being, expressing a strong Christo-centrism with a biblical-Patristic flavour. The Saint, who presents five visions inspired by the Prologue of the Gospel according to St John, cites the words of the Son to the Father: "The whole task that you wanted and entrusted to me I have carried out successfully, and so here I am in you and you in me and we are one" (*Pars III, Visio X*: PL 197, 1025a).

Finally, in other writings Hildegard manifests the versatility of interests and cultural vivacity of the female monasteries of the Middle Ages, in a manner contrary to the prejudices which still weighed on that period. Hildegard took an interest in medicine and in the natural sciences as well as in music, since she was endowed with artistic talent. Thus she composed hymns, antiphons and songs, gathered under the title: *Symphonia Harmoniae Caelestium Revelationum* (Symphony of the Harmony of Heavenly Revelations), that were performed joyously in her monasteries, spreading an atmosphere of tranquillity and that have also come down to us. For her, the entire creation is a symphony of the Holy Spirit who is in himself joy and jubilation.

The popularity that surrounded Hildegard impelled many people to seek her advice. It is for this reason that we have so many of her letters at our disposal. Many male and female monastic communities turned to her, as well as Bishops and Abbots. And many of her answers still apply for

us. For instance, Hildegard wrote these words to a community of women religious: "The spiritual life must be tended with great dedication. At first the effort is burdensome because it demands the renunciation of caprices of the pleasures of the flesh and of other such things. But if she lets herself be enthralled by holiness a holy soul will find even contempt for the world sweet and lovable. All that is needed is to take care that the soul does not shrivel" (E. Gronau, *Hildegard. Vita di una donna profetica alle origini dell'età moderna*, Milan 1996, p. 402). And when the Emperor Frederic Barbarossa caused a schism in the Church by supporting at least three anti-popes against Alexander iii, the legitimate Pope, Hildegard did not hesitate, inspired by her visions, to remind him that even he, the Emperor, was subject to God's judgement. With fearlessness, a feature of every prophet, she wrote to the Emperor these words as spoken by God: "You will be sorry for this wicked conduct of the godless who despise me! Listen, O King, if you wish to live! Otherwise my sword will pierce you!" (*ibid.*, p. 412).

With the spiritual authority with which she was endowed, in the last years of her life Hildegard set out on journeys, despite her advanced age and the uncomfortable conditions of travel, in order to speak to the people of God. They all listened willingly, even when she spoke severely: they considered her a messenger sent by God. She called above all the monastic communities and the clergy to a life in conformity with their vocation. In a special way Hildegard countered the movement of German *cátari* (Cathars). They *cátari* means literally "pure" advocated a radical reform of the Church, especially to combat the abuses of the clergy. She harshly reprimanded them for seeking to subvert the very nature of the Church, reminding them that a true renewal of the ecclesial community is obtained with a sincere spirit of repentance and a demanding process of conversion, rather than with a change of structures. This is a message that we should never forget. Let us always invoke the Holy Spirit, so that he may inspire in the Church holy and courageous women, like St Hildegard of Bingen, who, developing the gifts they have received from God, make their own special and valuable contribution to the spiritual development of our communities and of the Church in our time.

### To special groups:

I am pleased to greet the participants in the Communications Seminar sponsored by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, and I offer prayerful good wishes for their work. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially the pilgrim groups from England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Nigeria, Indonesia, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke God's abundant blessings.

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I am very much looking forward to my [visit to the United Kingdom](#) in a week's time and I send heartfelt greetings to all the people of Great Britain. I am aware that a vast amount of work has

gone into the preparations for the visit, not only by the Catholic community but by the Government, the local authorities in Scotland, London and Birmingham, the communications media and the security services, and I want to say how much I appreciate the efforts that have been made to ensure that the various events planned will be truly joyful celebrations. Above all I thank the countless people who have been praying for the success of the visit and for a great outpouring of God's grace upon the Church and the people of your nation.

It will be a particular joy for me to beatify the Venerable John Henry Newman in Birmingham on Sunday 19 September. This truly great Englishman lived an exemplary priestly life and through his extensive writings made a lasting contribution to Church and society both in his native land and in many other parts of the world. It is my hope and prayer that more and more people will benefit from his gentle wisdom and be inspired by his example of integrity and holiness of life.

I look forward to meeting representatives of the many different religious and cultural traditions that make up the British population, as well as civil and political leaders. I am most grateful to Her Majesty the Queen and to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury for receiving me, and I look forward to meeting them. While I regret that there are many places and people I shall not have the opportunity to visit, I want you to know that you are all remembered in my prayers. God bless the people of the United Kingdom!

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