

## Hildegard von Bingen's Visions of the Divine Feminine

By Dianna Elizabeth Conner

*"The Spirit of God Is a Life-giving Life, Root of the world-tree, Breezes in its boughs... She is Radiant-Life, All awakening, All Reviving, Alluring all praise" (from Antiphon for the Holy Spirit).*

A few years ago I rejected the suggestion of a professor to do a research paper on the "virtues" (divine aspects of God) as described by Hildegard of Bingen, an illustrious early twelfth-century Germany abbess whose works have recently reemerged in the Western world. Deciding that this topic would be boring and too much work, I chose an easier book with which I was much more comfortable. Apparently I wasn't ready to learn about the divine feminine archetype – or to read more religious doctrine. I am now catching up with myself and would like to share some wonderful discoveries.

Hildegard von Bingen is probably the first important person to talk about God as the Divine Feminine—something women with no self-image of the Creator still desperately need. As the tenth child of a well-to-do noble family, Hildegard was tithed to God (given to the head nun of a local monastery) at the age of eight, probably because she was frail and had visions of the future. Keeping her clairvoyance a secret, she became abbess of that monastery at the age of thirty-six, grew to trust her own inner guidance and became a fiercely powerful leader-reformer, known for her fervent tongue as well as her brilliance in all the arts and sciences.

After a life threatening illness at the age of forty-two, Hildegard was suddenly filled with a brilliant, fiery vision that she called Living Light. This Light gave her a deeper understanding of the most important religious texts extant and told her to speak and write about all she learned. A powerful stream of inspired visions followed, many describing the Divine Feminine as a metaphor for the "virtues," the cosmos and the unity of creation. She incorporated them into a manuscript called *Scivias* (Know the Ways). Although riddled with religious thought and dogma of the day, these visions were probably as reformed as the minds of the time could absorb or would tolerate. This includes the clergy that brought the manuscript to the attention of the pope, who then endorsed the visions and insisted that they be recorded as teachings of the Holy Spirit. These extraordinary visions give balance to the standard patriarchal view of God, nourishing us with feminine wisdom to help us remember and reclaim our own divine heritage.

Hildegard the theologian compared God to a Cosmic Egg that surges flames into the universe, emptying and filling itself like a womb – creative, beneficial, and nurturing to all life within. She spoke of this sacred feminine as Divine Love, the essence of the universe – the highest fiery power that shines in water, burns in the sun, moon and stars, stirring everything into existence, and causing all life to glisten with this light. This feminine Cosmos "flushed with rapture at the sight of God and her soul was kissed in its innermost regions at the sight of God." Feminist theologian Nancy Fiero calls it a "regenerative and cooperative universe orchestrated for life, growth, pleasure and fulfillment of needs – warm, moist, bright, precious and purposeful with each person contributing his or her part of the universal melody."

**The Green Virgin, *Viriditas* (greenness, germination, the principle of life), we are told, is "a combination of the Virtues and the Virgin Mother, the divine feminine signifying the liquid life energy of newness and growth. *Viriditas* is eaten by plants and animals and absorbed by precious stones that are then eaten or worn by humans who give out the *viriditas* through the "virtues." (Hildegard often prescribed gems to be ground and eaten with herbs and other substances.)**

These "virtues" themselves are metaphors for the divine feminine life force, "sweetest blessedness of the divine majesty", all representing various strengths of God,

harmoniously interacting with each other. Hildegard's radiant visions of "virtues" are in the form of maidens clothed in silken garments, varying in color from brilliant white to black. Many wear or hold brilliant gems and other symbols. These Virtues include Charity or Love, Wisdom, Faith, Justice, Truth, Grace, Peace, Piety, Bounty, Hope, Holiness, Chastity, Blessedness, Discretion and Humility.

Wisdom is a very beautiful image, standing high on an iron floor supported by seven columns. Clothed in a gold tunic with a green, white, red and blue sash embellished with purple glitter and precious gems she is "with the highest God *before every creature*. Wearing a crown that flashes lightening, she is an adornment that shines with God. She has been joined in God and to God in the sweetest embrace in a religious dance of burning love. And She exists as a very large step among the steps of the other Virtues... Her head is radiating like lightening—with such brightness that I could not look at it fully... Her hand is held reverently to her breast and she is looking into the world for people because of her great love for them... She guides and protects those who wish to follow her and stand firm with her." (*Mystical Visions*)

Every Virtue is important and has a message for Hildegard to pass on. Grace is the brightest, but other notable visions include: Chastity, glistening in whiteness in a crystal-like tunic; Peace, in the shape of an angel springing forth from the greenness of truth and Piety wearing the color of red hyacinths and an angel at her breast as she relates thoughts on bountifulness and on abstinence from hate and envy. Blessedness wears a pure white tunic decorated with greenness of the Holy Spirit and instructs that "through faithfulness and gentle blessedness truth is able to speak" harmoniously against evil and deception. Discretion, clothed in black relates, "I am the Mother of the Virtues. I always hold the judgment of God in all things."

Humility speaks last, but ranks first of the "virtues." She shines in white from head to toe and her white hair is embellished with a precious crown of gold and jewels. It has three branches reaching up, signifying that "she sweetly precedes and surpasses all the other "virtues"...and is the most solid foundation of all good things within people."

Hildegard, the wholistic doctor, viewed the human body as a microcosm of the universe, created with great beauty and mathematical precision. Without balance it could fall into disharmony, leading to disease. Illness, a dysfunction of order, was a disintegration of life, but all illness could be reversed and brought back to vitality with rest, balanced diet, exercise and a moral life. (Fiero)

**Because women are permeated with *viriditas*, Hildegard instructed that creativity and spiritual vitality are inherent in them and their bodies are sacred due to their reproductive role.** She had a scientific as well as philosophical interest in sexuality, and knew that in its highest form, it was a powerful symbol of divine union, even relating the three persons of the sacred Holy Trinity to sexual strength, desire, and action. She also likened the Holy Trinity the sacred feminine. The devotional lyrics of "For the Trinity" testify to this: "Praise to the Trinity, which is sound and life and creatrix of all beings in their life, and in which is the praise of the angelic host and the wondrous splendor of the arcane mysteries."

A woman's womb was considered holy. Because "unwanted suitors" were a serious threat in that age when even married women were unsafe in their own castles due to the constant flow of outsiders coming in, Hildegard developed an herbal potion to deter their 'ardor'. Women's blood was also considered sacred because it related to life and nurturing of the growing fetus, so menstruating women were allowed in church while wounded men were not. (Man's blood was considered profane because it was shed from a destructive act.)

Hildegard believed that women were a "mirror of the divine...spiritual, intuitive, open to inspiration and spacious enough to enclose the stars." As such, women deserved to express themselves in beautiful clothing and shimmering jewels to better reflect the

beauty of the Holy Spirit – their own divinity. She reminds women that we are all visionaries just as she reminds men that becoming in touch with their feminine side – creative self-expression and self-nourishment – will help us all heal and grow. Likening Earth to Divine Motherhood because it creates the basic material for which the human body is created, Hildegard taught that to despoil the earth was sacrilegious. She warned that all life would suffer if the feminine were restricted or prohibited. (Fiero)

And all life has suffered. But with the reintroduction of the Divine Feminine we are beginning to return to balance and wholeness as we remember Who we are and how we are all divinely connected to the Holy Creator and the Cosmos.

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Sources: *Hildegard von Bingen’s Mystical Visions* translated from *Scivias* by Bruce Hozeski; *Sacred Voices: Essential Women’s Wisdom Through the Ages* by Mary Ford-Grabowsky; *Hildegard and Her Vision of the Feminine* (tape) by Nancy Fiero; *Vision: The Music of Hildegard von Bingen* (CD).

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