

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: A SELF-MADE SAINT

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It was a holy feast day around the year 1150. Standing in the Church with “unbound hair” and “white, silk veils...so long that they touch the floor,” Hildegard and her fellow virgins were adorned with “crowns of gold filigree...and...golden rings” when singing the psalms.¹ While it must have been a stunning scene, Hildegard’s decision to dress up her nuns so extravagantly risked violating Christian norms of female modesty and indeed was questioned—albeit in a subtle yet ironic manner without any direct accusations—in a letter by Mistress Tengswich, a superior of Hildegard.² Hildegard vigorously refuted Tengswich’s suspicions about her “unheard-of practices” and thus avoided any serious chastisement or penalty.³ Indeed, this anecdote captures only one of many occasions when Hildegard introduced such a novelty without provoking censure.⁴ It was as if Hildegard’s reputation and aura of holiness were so well established that she could improvise with impunity, effectively beyond reproach.

This study explores how Hildegard of Bingen, a female mystic of the twelfth century, managed to gain such a universal reputation for saintliness from both the institutional church and ordinary Christians, despite the limitations under which she lived as a Christian woman and a nun operating in a male-dominated society. More specifically, this study aims to address how Hildegard managed to build such an extraordinary reputation and exercise such authority within the confines of a patriarchal church with deep suspicions about the spiritual potential of women.

Hildegard was born in 1098 toward the end of the so-called papal reform movement and lived a long life as a nun against the turbulent backdrop of political conflicts and church

¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*. Trans. Joseph L. Baird & Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 127.

² Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 127-128.

³ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 128-130.

⁴ Such as Hildegard’s petition to the papacy to write down her visions. Anna Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 143.

experimentation.⁵ The tenth child of noble parents, Hildegard ended up serving as the family's "oblation to God" and was confined,⁶ at a very young age, to the Abbey of Disibodenberg, with her *magistra* Jutta (1091-1136) and a few other girls of similar social rank. While Jutta instructed the young Hildegard in only the most basic religious songs and readings,⁷ she "carefully fitted [Hildegard] for a garment of humility and innocence," Christian virtues that would later prove essential to Hildegard's success.⁸ When Jutta passed away in 1136, Hildegard became her successor as both *magistra* and spiritual advisor to her fellow nuns. Ever since her childhood, Hildegard had been the recipient of holy visions,⁹ which, for a long time, she hesitated to commit to writing. Eventually, in her later years, she began working with a monk by the name Volmar—a *magister*, secretary, and friend—to compose various literary and religious works to record the visions and events she had experienced.¹⁰ The meticulous Volmar treated Hildegard's works with discretion at first; once he had confirmed their orthodoxy and holiness, he decided that they truly contained the words of God and sent them to various religious authorities for further review and public reading.¹¹ Hildegard's reputation for holiness then truly began to take off. Important figures ranging from Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) to Pope Eugenius III (1145-1153) formally acknowledged her writings as divinely inspired by God;¹² archbishops and kings sought her spiritual assistance and consolation on various matters;¹³ even a certain Bishop Amalricus of Jerusalem, having heard of her extraordinary holiness from afar, requested her prayers in a personal letter addressed to her.¹⁴ Though she was not formally canonized until modern times, Hildegard was essentially elevated to the position of a living saint in the eyes of her contemporaries. She was, for instance, acclaimed by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) as "[a] prophet, a healer, a mystic, [and] a saint."¹⁵

⁵ For more on her life, see *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources* by Anna Silvas.

⁶ "Making the most fitting provision they could, [Hildegard's parents] set her apart through their mutual decision and free offering as their own tithe to the same God who commanded that the tithes be offered him in law, in order that she might serve him in holiness and justice all the days of her life." While it was not mandated, offering the family's tenth child as a tithe, or "oblation," to God was a tradition Hildegard's parents decided to follow. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 103.

⁷ Hildegard confessed that she "had scarcely any knowledge of literature, since the woman who taught [her] was not a scholar." Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 160.

⁸ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 139.

⁹ According to Hildegard herself, she did not perceive these visions "with bodily ears, nor...with the cogitations of [her] heart or the evidence of [her] five senses"; rather, she saw them "only in [her] spirit, with [her] eyes wide open, and thus [she] never suffer[ed] the defect of ecstasy in these visions." Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 23.

¹⁰ Such as the volume *Scivias*, an illustrated work which depicted 26 religious visions Hildegard had experienced. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 141.

¹¹ Hildegard recounted that when she first expressed to Volmar her desire to write down her visions, he was "struck with fear and wondering what these things might be asked [her] to discreetly write down what [she] saw and heard, so that he could see their beginning and end and so that he could consider what they were and where they came from. But once he saw and concluded that they were from God, he made known these things to his Abbot, and from then on worked very keenly with [her] day and night in these things." Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 225.

¹² Pope Eugenius III not only "gave orders that the blessed Hildegard's writings be presented publicly," but also undertook the labor of reading out her works to a congregation of clerics. Bernard of Clairvaux, who was present on this occasion, also "intervened" to ensure the congregation's approval of her works. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 143-144.

¹³ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 52-139.

¹⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 101.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Gillan Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership*. (North York, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 89.

In order to appreciate Hildegard's accomplishments in this regard, it is important to realize how unusual it was for women, especially ones claiming such an unusually direct connection to God, to gain such official recognition and support from the church. In the medieval Christian world, an engrained and institutionalized misogyny denied religious women any significant role in "ordination and ecclesiastical responsibility."¹⁶ As a result, noblewomen "entered convents in droves around this time, searching for some other form of deep spiritual expression."¹⁷ The Abbey of Disibodenberg in which Hildegard grew up was profoundly influenced by the Hirsau Movement, a reformed German monasticism that recommended "separate cohabitation" of monks and nuns and mandated close observance of liturgical hours.¹⁸ Such mandated proximity yet segregation between monks and nuns essentially ensured that women remain under the "surveillance" and jurisdiction of their male counterparts and hold little independence. Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that Hildegard would later have to seek the approval of her abbot both for writing down her visions and for moving to an independent community to rid herself and her fellow nuns—though not entirely—of male control.

Such biases and suspicions against females' access to holy visions took a particular toll on Hildegard, apparently preventing her from making a name for herself earlier in her life. She recounted that "many were saying: 'What is this? So many mysteries are revealed to this foolish and unlearned woman (Hildegard) when there are so many strong and wise men?'"¹⁹ Even those who did acknowledge her holiness could not help marveling at the rarity of women being vessels of divine revelation. Guibert of Gembloux (1124/5-1213), a contemporary of Hildegard who had known her personally and later became her secretary, described Hildegard as a "delightful spectacle of the weaker sex triumphing with Christ's help over itself, the world, and the devil" in one of his letters.²⁰ A certain Dean Philip, in his letter to Hildegard, expressed his surprise and marveled that "God works through such a fragile vessel, such a fragile sex, to display the great marvels of His secrets."²¹ On the one hand, the misogynistic undertone in these words of praise could not have been more obvious. On the other hand, shrinking "from feminine bashfulness...and being the butt of common gossip and the rash judgements of others," Hildegard was so aware of the constraints and potential danger that came with her gender that she had not dared to write her visions down until divine revelations told her to do so in her forties, despite the fact that she had been seeing them since childhood.²² Throughout her personal correspondence with important religious figures, she always insisted that it was the Holy Spirit—rather than herself—speaking and explaining divine revelations to them, as if to anticipate and deflect any suspicion.²³ It could be argued that it was precisely this immense difficulty for female

¹⁶ Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership*, 22-23.

¹⁷ Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership*, 22-23.

¹⁸ Constant J. Mews, "Hildegard of Bingen and the Hirsau Reform in Germany 1080–1180," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 66-68.

¹⁹ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 164.

²⁰ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 225.

²¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 54.

²² Hildegard recounted that in a vision, she "was constrained by great pressure and many pains of [her] body to reveal openly those things which [she] had seen and heard. But [she] was very afraid and blushed at the thought of proclaiming these things which [she] had kept silent about for so long. Nevertheless, from then on, [her] veins and [her] marrow were filled with the strength which [she] had lacked from [her] infancy and youth" as she began writing her holy visions down. Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 225.

²³ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 14.

mystics to receive both clerical and lay endorsement that made Hildegard a rarity of her age and all the more extraordinary in the eyes of both her contemporaries and posterity.

In an effort to understand how Hildegard came to possess such extraordinary reputation and holiness as a female mystic supported by the twelfth-century Church, modern scholars have inevitably turned to Hildegard's writings and the hagiographies she inspired. Among them, Justin A. Stover explores Hildegard's role as a "deep and difficult thinker" and "visionary critic of the schools" through analyses of her complex yet consistently critical attitude toward scholasticism and human reason at the expense of faith.²⁴ Tova Leigh-Choate, William T. Flynn, and Margot E. Fassler turn to Hildegard's musical oeuvre and capacities, as they see her "remarkable body of songs" as an integral part to both her expression of holy visions and lifelong religious career.²⁵ Caroline Molina takes a rather innovative approach to the topic by paying particular attention to Hildegard's references to her chronic illness in her own mystic writings, arguing that Hildegard wittfully transformed her illness and female frailty—the "material cause" of her divinely inspired visions—into both a privilege in and subversion against the patriarchal society that she was living in.²⁶ Relevant to Molina's point, this paper aims to focus on how Hildegard attained wide acceptance and holiness and avoided misogynistic suspicions not just through ordinary Christian virtues such as piety, humility, and obedience, but specifically through the emphasis she put on the stress under which she operated as well as her own spiritual purity and corporeal frailty.

Part of Hildegard's strategy—if we can call it that—for transforming what would normally have been considered liabilities and weaknesses into advantages and power, was to project a deep sense of humility and obedience in both secular and religious affairs, thereby forestalling any accusations of pride. When she had been unanimously elected as the prioress after her *magistra's* death, she was reported to have "resisted it with all her strength" and only relented "by the command of the Abbot," fearing that she might be unworthy of her new office.²⁷ Once she had successfully moved her fellow nuns away from the Abbey of Disibodenberg into relative independence, she nonetheless pledged "deference towards the authorities of the monastery from which they had come" to show her unswerving loyalty and respect toward both her former superiors and church hierarchy.²⁸ Having cast out the demon from a woman's body, "she arrogate[d] nothing to herself," thus earning the blessing and sincere praise of many villagers and an abbot.²⁹ Thus it became clear that in spite of Hildegard's ability to receive extraordinary visions and perform miracles, she "kept guard over these gifts with the highest of all virtues, humility."³⁰ Her contemporaries' impression of her praiseworthy humbleness was the result of not only Hildegard's actions but also her words. In Hildegard's personal correspondence with popes and bishops, abbots and monks, she incessantly highlighted her "poorness" as a woman and ignorance of worldly knowledge. Her most famous contemporaries Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Eugenius III were among

²⁴ Justin A. Stover, "Hildegard, the Schools, and their Critics," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 134-135.

²⁵ Tova Leigh-Choate, William T. Flynn, and Margot E. Fassler, "Hearing the Heavenly Symphony: An Overview of Hildegard's Musical Oeuvre with Case Studies," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 163.

²⁶ Caroline Molina, "Illness as privilege: Hildegard von Bingen and the condition of mystic writing," *Women's studies* 23, no. 1 (1994): 85-91.

²⁷ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 111.

²⁸ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 148.

²⁹ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 202-206.

³⁰ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 163.

the very first persons whom Hildegard tactfully sought permission of and support for writing down her works.³¹ Hildegard called them, respectively, her “gentle” and “radiant” fathers while degrading herself as a “poor little woman...formed from a rib, ignorant of philosophical matters.”³² On the one hand, it might seem like she was yielding to prevailing misogyny by abjectly acknowledging male superiority over the female sex, since Eve had supposedly been formed from Adam’s rib; yet on the other hand, by denying any knowledge of “philosophical” and worldly matters, Hildegard implied her expertise elsewhere: in holy and religious truths inaccessible to powerful and educated men of this world. When the monk Guibert read out Hildegard’s letter—in which she explained her visions in full detail—to a certain Lord Robert, “former abbot of Val-Roi and a man of great reputation and learning,” Robert was reported to have flatteringly remarked that “not even the greatest theologians in France today, however great their (worldly) intelligence, could completely understand the power and depth” of the holy words of Hildegard.³³ It did not matter to him “if she [was] ignorant of the liberal arts and grammar” when she already possessed the extraordinary knowledge of the Holy Scripture and her visions.³⁴ On the contrary, Hildegard’s worldly ignorance—or at least her humble claim of ignorance³⁵—was a requisite for making people believe that she was delivering God’s message undiluted, as she was simply incapable of adding any untruthful detail of her own concoction. Such humbleness and willful subjection of herself to the inspection of her superiors in a hierarchal church structure not only secured Hildegard the authority’s acknowledgement of her saintliness but also gave credence and inculpability to her every word.³⁶

While humility and obedience helped reinforce her image as a trustworthy sister who diligently served Christ, it was Hildegard’s spiritual purity and innocence as a virgin that elevated her to a level of intimacy with Christ, lending all the more credibility as Christ’s bride, in whom He would reasonably confide. The Christian identification of virgins as brides of Christ long predated Hildegard, rooted in patristic Christian interpretations of the erotic poetry in the Song of Songs. According to the fourth-century letters written by Pseudo-Ignatius, for instance, virgins were already selected to become the priestesses of Christ.³⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux also made explicit references to the divine relationship between the chaste Bride and her Bridegroom in his Sermons on the Song of Songs. The Spouse, that is, a virgin who has dedicated herself entirely to God, “petitions not for liberty, not for a reward, not for an inheritance, not even for knowledge, but only for a kiss (from her Bridegroom). And this request she makes after the manner of a most chaste spouse, burning with a most holy love.”³⁸ It is through this kiss, “the privilege of the Spouse,” that Christ reveals His secrets to her and her alone.³⁹ Thus, in the eyes of Hildegard’s

³¹ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 27.

³² Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 32.

³³ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 29.

³⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 31.

³⁵ Hildegard was the author of a medical work, *Causae et Curae*, despite denying her knowledge in any worldly matters.

³⁶ It is worth noting that Hildegard was not just a model of humility and obedience herself, she also actively exhorted and encouraged her religious counterparts to take on these virtues. For instance, Hildegard wrote to a congregation of monks in 1169 or 1170 to exhort them to be obedient to their religious superiors through an interpretation of biblical verses. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 137.

³⁷ Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership* 14.

³⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on the Canticle of Canticles* Sermon VII.

³⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermon on the Canticle of Canticles* Sermon VIII.

contemporaries, Hildegard's identity as a virgin betrothed to God symbolized her uncontaminated spirituality and intimate relation with Christ. It was the intimacy of this perceived connection to Jesus that gave Hildegard the unusual intercessory and healing power in the eyes of her contemporaries. In a letter addressed to Hildegard some time before 1157, five abbots beseeched the mystic to pray for a sterile noblewoman so that she could become fertile again: acclaiming Hildegard as "truly the unstained bride of Christ" to whom He had "graciously revealed his secrets," they believed that the holiness and purity of virginity possessed by Hildegard could perform such a miracle.⁴⁰ Other healing miracles she was reported to have performed through her sanctity included curing a young woman and monk from a recurring fever, freeing a servant from a tumor in his neck, healing people from a distance, as well as restoring the health of those who were near their ends.⁴¹ More importantly, Hildegard herself was also so well aware of the sanctity conferred by her virginity that she not only emphasized but used it to exempt her fellow nuns from the common Christian norm of female modesty. In response to Mistress Tengswich's questioning, noted above, about Hildegard's justification for adorning herself and her nuns with gold ornaments and white veils,⁴² she argued that whereas a married woman "ought not to indulge herself in prideful adornment...or vanity[,] these strictures do not apply to a virgin, for she stands in the unsullied purity of paradise."⁴³ Since Hildegard saw "virgins [as] married with holiness in the Holy Spirit,"⁴⁴ she essentially elevated herself and her fellow religious women to a higher and much holier status than their lay female counterparts who remained bound by the chains of earthly marriage and modesty. In such a way, Hildegard created a perfect balance between her humility toward Church authority, as discussed earlier, and undeniable superiority in both holy and secular affairs.

Although Hildegard was by no means the first and only holy woman to rely on humility and virginity to carve out a space for herself in the male-dominated world of the medieval Church,⁴⁵ far less common was the way she "manipulated" her own physical weakness to this end. Throughout both her mystical writings and personal correspondence, Hildegard frequently referred to her own physical frailty, which turned out to play a significant role in her consecration as a saint. Hildegard herself described in a 1175 letter to monk Guibert of Gembloux that throughout her life, her "body suffer[ed] ceaselessly, and [she had been] racked by such terrible pains that [she was] brought almost to the point of death."⁴⁶ Yet in spite of the physical torments the illness had brought her, there are indications that Hildegard actually used it to advance her holy career. On one occasion, Hildegard was determined to transfer her fellow nuns, then growing in number due to her increasing reputation, to "more spacious quarters" away from Disibodenberg as instructed by the Holy

⁴⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 153.

⁴¹ For more details on Hildegard's miracles, see Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 181-210.

⁴² See the scene depicted in the first paragraph.

⁴³ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 129.

⁴⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 129.

⁴⁵ "Many female mystics exercised a high degree of political power, counseling kings and popes. Considered feminine spirituality, their visions made it acceptable for them to have access to a spirituality unmediated by the ecclesiastics of the Catholic Church. They were thought to have received gifts of prophecy and clairvoyance, and while many women's writings were not accepted by the church, most of the mystics' literature was generally seen as inspired." Muir, *A Women's History of the Christian Church: Two Thousand Years of Female Leadership* 133.

⁴⁶ It was somewhat ironic that while Hildegard had performed so many healing miracles on other people, never was she able to heal herself. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume II*, 23.

Spirit.⁴⁷ Her abbot and brothers denied her request to leave, because “they could scarcely tolerate the thought of her going at all,”⁴⁸ an understandable response given how much their monastery could lose without their sensational female mystic.⁴⁹ Of course, Hildegard was too stubborn to give up and feared going against divine wish. However, rather than directly going against the abbot’s command and risking disobedience, she simply and quite conveniently “fell into a long illness...and did not rise from her bed till the abbot and the others acknowledged that it was by divine command that they...give their consent...and indeed strove to help her as much as they could” to fulfill her sacred wish.⁵⁰ Seeing this “divine chastisement” for Hildegard, her abbot “would not offer any more opposition to the divine decree” brought about by her.⁵¹ Indeed, Hildegard’s chronic disease would constantly recur to act as a divine intervention to demolish the opposition against and ensure the fulfillment of her religious and earthly projects.⁵² Guibert once remarked how marvelous it was that a prosperous monastery was founded not by any powerful man, “but by a woman who was poor, a stranger, and sick,”⁵³ but perhaps it was precisely Hildegard’s seeming weakness that made her appear all the holier and stronger.⁵⁴ Regardless of whether her illness was truly a divine intervention, Hildegard did transform her physical weakness into strength, or “privilege,” as Molina has argued, to battle against oppositions and further her cause.

In conclusion, having turned the tides of gender discrimination and physical weakness to her advantage, Hildegard transformed herself into an exceptional “female warrior battling against [the] injustice” of her time, as she so rightfully called herself.⁵⁵ Her humility in both words and actions as well as obedience to religious authority molded her into a living emblem of Christian virtues, which garnered immense favor from the Church. Her chastity and virginity freed her from the patriarchy’s common constrictions on women, and were the infallible proofs of her spiritual purity and complete devotion to the love of Christ. Even her female frailty and chronic illness showcased the mystic’s direct contact with God, implying extraordinary saintliness. Indeed, by emphasizing her advantages while making the best out of every difficult situation, Hildegard managed to shape herself into a living saint in the eyes of popes and bishops, kings and queens, monks and nuns; her aromatic reputation of holiness spread far and wide as they diligently sought her prayers, assistance, and advice. In the case of Hildegard, there was no conflict between creating one’s own rules, or “unheard-of practices” questioned by Mistress Tengsich, and simultaneously being an orthodox Christian woman who dedicated herself ungrudgingly to Christ, her

⁴⁷ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 144.

⁴⁸ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 145.

⁴⁹ Prior Adelbert of Disibodenberg once complained about Hildegard’s departure, explaining to her that they “had hoped that the salvation of [their] monastery rested with [her].” Hildegard’s departure would lead to a drop in not only visitors but also consequently the monastery’s repute and revenue. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 172-173.

⁵⁰ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 145-146.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, 101.

⁵⁴ A similar inversion of weakness and power could be found in the gospels. In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, for instance, Paul remarked, “[God] has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (New American Standard Bible).

⁵⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I*, 79.

Bridegroom.

It is worth noting in closing that, while Hildegard's remarkable sanctity seems never to have been seriously doubted, she would not be canonized until 2012, more than eight hundred years after her death, effectively making her canonization process the longest in the history of the Church.⁵⁶ We could now only surmise the reasons for such a delay. For one, it could simply be written off as a case of bad timing. As the papal canonization process was, at Hildegard's time, just beginning to take shape, it took almost fifty years after Hildegard's death for the initial official papal investigation into her sanctity to be launched by Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241), while subsequent attempts to canonize her also failed supposedly due to either the undetailed accounts of the miracles she had performed or the deaths of the majority of her eyewitnesses.⁵⁷ Indeed, "the judicial document [the investigators] prepared in relation to Hildegard's life and miracles must surely be among the most meager and approximative of such texts ever submitted to the papacy for its examination," since "not only was it very short, but it was almost wholly lacking in fundamental details," thereby making any verification of Hildegard's holy deeds impossible.⁵⁸ However, another underlying factor might also be at work. Even though Hildegard's novelty in writing down her visions, applying her weaknesses as strengths, and being a rare female mystic of her time appealed to and was endorsed by the papacy,⁵⁹ formal canonization symbolized much more than simple acknowledgement of her orthodoxy. By making Hildegard a saint, the dogmatic and authoritative Catholic Church would essentially be acclaiming and commending religious innovations and novel interpretations of the Scripture, both a perilous step in an age rife with heresies and an unnecessary risk given that she was already a saint in the eyes of so many. As a matter of fact, when her sanctity was formally declared in 2012, "[m]any people were surprised...insofar as it was assumed by almost everyone that Hildegard had in fact been officially considered a saint by the Roman Catholic Church for many centuries."⁶⁰ To be sure, Hildegard's centuries-long journey to sainthood was an arduous one; but whether alive or posthumously, she made it anyway.

⁵⁶ Hildegard was proclaimed as "Doctor of the Church" in that same year. George Ferzoco, "The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle, Debra L. Stoudt & George Ferzoco (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 305.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁵⁹ Pope Eugenius III was especially important for Hildegard's success, as his approval led to the Church's endorsement of the "deeply, disturbingly original" writings of both Hildegard and Bernard of Clairvaux; if the remarkable Eugenius "had not been sitting on the papal throne" at Hildegard's time, "[e]vents might well have been vastly different" and unfortunate for her. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Volume I* 32.

⁶⁰ Ferzoco, "The Canonization and Doctorization of Hildegard of Bingen," in *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, 305.

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