



## The Woman Who Told the Church: Man Up!

The Doctors of the Church are those whose teaching is for all of us and for all time. They are saints among saints, and Hall of Fame within a Hall of Fame. [In 2012, the late] Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed two new doctors: St. John of Avila and St. Hildegard of Bingen. St. Hildegard is the fourth woman Doctor of the Church, [her feast day is September 17<sup>th</sup>]. A Benedictine nun who lived from 1098 to 1189, she is well-known for her visions and for her musical compositions.

Pope Benedict spoke about her during two Wednesday audiences in 2010, when he held her up as an example for having sought approval for the publication of her visions, placing them in this way at the service of the whole Church:

*“This, dear friends, is the seal of an authentic experience of the Holy Spirit, the source of every charism: the person endowed with supernatural gifts never boasts of them, never flaunts them and, above all, shows complete obedience to the ecclesial authority. Every gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit, is in fact intended for the edification of the Church and the Church, through her Pastors, recognizes its authenticity.”*

A woman intensely aware of both the natural and supernatural, St. Hildegard sees parallels between the natural world and the supernatural. We may think of a “springtime” of evangelization as a very modern term in the Church, but St. Hildegard speaks often of viridity (“greenness” *viriditas*), a quality God pours into both the garden of nature and the garden of the virtues. She calls Our Lady “the greenest stem” of all. For a plant or a soul to have greenness, it must also have moisture (*humiditas*), which comes from God’s subtle yet awesome power.

This harmony of faith and reason made St. Hildegard put not only her spiritual insight but her observations of the natural world at the service of mankind. Her knowledge of nature led to her writings about which plants could cure what ailments. Only a handful of medical writings have come down to us from the 12th century. They are St. Hildegard’s.

*Viridity* and *humidity* notwithstanding, St. Hildegard, above all in her letters to those in power in the Church and the world, recommends *virility* and *humility*, as well. She lived at a time of schism and heresy, in her own words a “squalid, womanish age.” She felt that God has called her, a woman, to call the men of the Church back to manhood.

She was not afraid to take leaders to task. The Holy Father recalled such an occasion:

*“[W]hen 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 judgment. 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!”*

She lived at a time when the heresy of Catharism was very prevalent. A dualistic, gnostic heresy, Cathars believed in two eternal principles, one good (creator of the spiritual realm) and one evil (creator of the material realm.) They strove to keep themselves “pure” (“catharos” in Greek) and unstained in this material realm.

St. Hildegard wrote against this heresy, which went against her view (and that of the Church) of the unity of God’s creation and God as the one source of all things, both visible and invisible. But she also criticized the prelates of the Church for not living lives that were pure enough. It was the scandal of their worldly lives that made the Church effeminate and made the heresy more believable to the people.

St. Hildegard also wrote dramatic works and taught through stories and lessons. But an important lesson she dramatized for her time and ours is that we need to be courageous, faithful and strong to push back the winter of vice and prolong God’s springtime in our lives.

When not watered by grace, the garden of virtue dies. And that is the greatest disaster that can befall the Church or the world.

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**“Even in a world  
that’s being  
shipwrecked, remain  
brave and strong.”**