

Corrie Terlouw

## Hildegard could wait

Medieval theologian recognized posthumously



Hildegard of Bingen, Bronze-sculpture by Karl Heinz Oswald, 1998  
Bingen, Abtei St. Hildegard

Seer, prophetess, theologian, composer, and, manager. All these characterizations are applicable to the Benedictine nun Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179). She founded two convents and was abbess of both. Only in her, forties Hildegard started talking about her visions, and, she began to write and draw, with the help of others. *Scivias* - her first work, which established her reputation - *Know the Ways*, is available in Dutch translation only this year. She wrote three theological works with visions, a medical work on herbs and gems, 77 songs, an oratorium and 428 letters. She is particularly popular in Germany, where many herbal products and cookery books inspired by Hildegard are available. Actually, she has always been revered as a saint. Yet it was not until May 2012 that she was canonized and then elevated as a church teacher by Pope Benedict on October 7, 2012. For me enough reasons to attend to a conference in Bingen organized by the new 'Scivias Institut für Kunst und Spiritualität'.

When I told my destination to the taxi-driver, he said: "What's so special about her and what do we gain?" A woman writing theology in the Middle Ages, there he was not immediately enthusiastic. I told him she criticized the bishops, and this attracted his attention, "Then it is special that they have canonized her!" He had abandoned membership after the abuse scandals. Yes, and he believes that she is an inspiring example for women in our time. "I wish you a good trip."

## **Late**

Why took it until now that Hildegard has been canonized and elevated as a "Doctor of the Church"? This may be approached with some suspicion, said Susan Roll, Professor of Liturgy at St. Paul's University, Ottawa, Canada. As early as in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, attempts for her sanctification were made. Today, the timing coincides with the declaration of the 'Year of the Faith'. The words of the papal decree unfortunately sketch a very traditional image of obedience and simplicity. They refer to the dogmatic belief in which Hildegard was engaged, but they are silent about her visions, her music and her medical work. Reactions to this elevation are diverse.

There is gratitude in groups who for years have committed themselves to the process of canonization. The current pope - a remarkable detail - participated in a previous attempt when he taught as professor Ratzinger. Only since 1970 mystical experiences are recognized as a reason for canonization. But Hildegard was not a mystic like Theresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna and Theresa of Lisieux, who were elevated as Doctors of the Church after that date. Another criterion prevented her canonization until today, namely the requirement of a documented event of healing due to her intercession. For Hildegard this criterion was abandoned.

## **Irrelevant?**

There is also criticism. Why not choose someone who addresses the questions of our time? Here, Susan Roll presents a sizeable list from the church press in which ideas of Hildegard are named as relevant. I chose a few. The dignity of the female body and the equality of women compared to men. Hildegard's holistic vision of the cosmos, that is relevant to awareness of ecological issues. The 'Ordo virtutum' that is perhaps the first opera, and can thereby inspire others to seek new forms, new expressions of spirituality. Some visions that can be interpreted as mandalas and that form a connection to Eastern forms of spirituality and interreligious dialogue.

Despite all criticism, feminist theologians embrace the canonization. There is rejoicing about her vision of 'Sapientia' or 'Wisdom' as a female figure, sitting on the edge between earth and heaven at the divine power that pervades everything. In two visions of the 'Scivias', the female figure of 'Synagoga' looks onto the divine commandments and the prophets in her womb, and the female figure of 'Sapientia' stands amongst a throng of virgins raises her hands to teach. With some imagination one Hildegard herself here, learning and teaching. The Catholic Church has now drawn the name of Saint Hildegard onto her walls. The question is, whether it has not really got a 'Trojan Horse' here that will influence the struggle for equal rights into these walls?

## **Not only for women**

Dr. Annette Esser, theologian and initiator of this conference, outlines the visionary theology of Hildegard. She was no mystic in the sense that she received her visions in ecstasy. "The images appeared before her mind's eye. With her visions she gave a summary of her theology. In these visions she talked over and over again about the 'living light'. Also, Mary is referred to as light, the light of dawn." Even though there are many pictures of female figures (Sapientia, Synagoga, Ecclesia), there is no picture of the Mary as a person (also Eve is not depicted as person). There are only many Marian songs that contain many images of nature: here the Virgin Mary (virgo) is the green twig (virga), which bears Christ as a flower, as an expression of the creative power of God (viriditas). Hildegard's theological eyes are focused on the Incarnation of Christ, of his birth by the virgin mother, and not on his passion and death.

A highly original vision is the representation of a theological idea: the Trinity of God. This vision can be seen as a large mosaic in the parish church in Eibingen - that actually is her former original convent on the Rhine opposite to Bingen. At the place where in many Catholic churches a crucifix hangs, a human figure, sapphire blue, with praying hands, denotes Christ, surrounded by the golden fire of the Holy Spirit and the surrounding silver which represents the creative light of the Father.



Hildegard's Vision of Trinity in the Parish Church of Eibingen (Scivias II, 2)

"We need to translate it. How can we connect our modern worldview with to her vision of salvation history and healing. How do we understand her feminine and masculine images. How can our spirituality today gain by her **insights**?" This direction is pointed out by Annette Esser. In reactions from the audience someone characterizes Hildegard's writings as a theology of birth and rebirth, which connects to a postmodern worldview. Another one points out that incarnation as a central concept refers to the vulnerability of human life that still needs healing. Theologically, there is still much to be thought through. The conference then divided into workshops on politics, medicine, literature, the fine arts, and music. The international group sings together songs from Taizé.

### **Song and spirituality**

Singing Hildegard's songs was for some participants as a dream come true. Prof. Margarida Barbal, one of the four members of the Scivias Ensemble from Barcelona specialized in Medieval music led the music-workshop. She invited to experience the sound of Hildegard's music and the resonance in our body and our head. "The melody goes up to *caelestia organa*, the heavenly musical instruments. Do not sing with your voice, sing with your head" - a light thin way of singing. The singers were kept on tone by a small lute, the citole, and by the sound of brass chimes. Learn to sing lovely in Medieval style, is this a form of spirituality? "Sung in this way religious music can lead to a meditative trance. You can get drunk – so to say," says Margarida. I tasted primarily a spiritual attitude, the attitude with which you sing, concrete physically and also figuratively. All singers must refrain from individual performance, the group creates a sound, and everyone contributes, skilled and unskilled. All errors were forgiven, but not this one: the 'large throat', the singers were corrected for that. Synergy through sound, support and reinforce one another, to me it is a good metaphor for collaboration.



Music Workshop held by the Scivias Ensemble, Barcelona, in 'Hildegard Gedächtniskirche', Bingen-Bingerbrück

### **The body as an instrument**

Hildegard's imagery shows the human body as participating in a world of divine sound. A man or woman is blown by God as a musical instrument. She wanted her nuns to sing her new songs and experience this. She described that their female bodies "are open like a wooden frame in which strings have been fastened for strumming; or they are like windows through which the wind blows, so that the elements affect them more vehemently than men ..." This vulnerability also creates opportunities. Her music uses those strings in much more height and depth than was common in those days, as Margarida Barbal puts it: "Wow, I can sing that, I must do it!" Pious and powerful. These two movements, to be blown and to let yourself be carried along very far, seem to me typical for the spirituality of Hildegard. On the one hand, Hildegard called herself "a feather in the breath of God" plagued by disease, while at the same time she was a powerful prophetess, who ran two monasteries on both banks of the Rhine. Put into one image: the fragile nun in a small boat crossing the fast flowing river.

There was more music in Bingen, Marie-Luise Hinrichs played on piano variations based on songs of Hildegard. The flowing melodies, like "echo of the cosmos", enter the modern ear as music from a new age.

### **Fine arts**

Artists held workshops: sculpture in wood, painting in watercolor, oil on canvas.



Entrance of Rupertsberger Gewölbe with participants of art-work of Dr. Armin Thommes

Sculptress Caroline Mackenzie gave a glimpse into her own growth as an artist. Her Christian upbringing and a long stay in a Hindu environment in India have influenced her sculptures. When then exhibited in a Christian church, a complex interpretation process was the result. Questions remained, but interestingly we met an artist who, like Hildegard, found new religious imagery.

### **Know the ways**

The town of Bingen am Rhein celebrated the event with a 'Hildegard-Herbst': theater, exhibitions, workshops with herbs and concerts. Autumn becomes winter. Is there also a lasting influence? A librarian who enjoys monastery detectives and also connects to the monastery of Holy Hildegard. A therapist who sees visions. A young woman who has taught herself the songs of Hildegard. A woman who does not want to be considered heretic when she talks in church about gemstones on which Hildegard wrote. Whoever was fascinated by Hildegard finds his or her way. But the recognition of Hildegard as a church teacher might make it a little easier for them to follow their own spiritual path.

What remained from Hildegard's Rupertsberg Convent are only arcades built into a villa, and, the cellar of the 'Rupertsberger Gewölbe'. "A sacred space" according to Dr. Annette Esser, foundress of the Scivias Institut. She regrets that not more had been saved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a part of the Rupertberg was even blown up to give way for the railway in the Nahe-valley.

What remains is a modest space, restored in the last three years and now used by groups who want to bring Hildegard's spiritual inheritance to this time. There are courses, lectures and evening meditations to the visions of the Scivias led by Dr. Esser once a month. What she wants is to create an international network of teachers and studied people who work with this legacy to deepen it theologically, artistically and spiritually. What has to be discovered is the structure of words, images and music that Hildegard has left to us. In this sense, the basement is a good place to start: "Much groundwork remains to be done."



Dr. Annette Esser at Evening Meditation in the Rupertsberger Gewölbe

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*Information:* [www.scivias-institut.de](http://www.scivias-institut.de) , [www.rupertsberg.de](http://www.rupertsberg.de) , [www.hildegardvanbingen.nl](http://www.hildegardvanbingen.nl) , Scivias, *Ken de wegen Pars 1*, Drs. M. Kock-Rademakers, available on [www.shopmybook.com](http://www.shopmybook.com).

*Photographs taken by Jone Witschge-van Rees*

