Hildegard and the Bible
Session One

Hildegard of Bingen: Life and Works

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a Benedictine nun and superior (magistra) of two women’s communities, spent her life immersed in the Scriptures and their interpretation: listening, singing, reading, praying the liturgy of the divine office, and eventually writing her own commentaries on Scripture. Hildegard entered a small women’s community at Disibodenberg in 1112 and became its superior in 1136. She founded two houses for women: Rupertsberg and then Eibingen. In 1141, Hildegard experienced a forceful vision that instructed her to “speak and write” what she heard and saw. Subsequently she produced three visionary treatises: Sciuias (“Know the ways”), The Book of Divine Merits, and The Book of Divine Works. In addition, Hildegard composed numerous letters; the Play of the Virtues, the lives of saints Disibod and Rupert, the Causes and Cures, the liturgical songs of the Symphonia, commentaries on the Rule of Benedict and on the Athanasian Creed, the Solutions to Thirty-Eight Questions, and the Homilies on the Gospels.
Hildegard claimed that visions taught her the deepest meaning of the Scriptures. The Divine Office, the *Rule of Benedict*, and the daily monastic activities are and were spent in some form of rumination on the Scriptures. Learning the Divine Office with its music required a basic education in Latin. Moreover, the study of monastic manuscripts reveals that hymns, sequences, and psalms were accompanied by notes called glosses which explained their theological, grammatical, and lexical content. In addition, the community listened to readings during the liturgy, at meals in the refectory, and they practiced individual devotional reading. Hildegard both learned and taught with this monastic method of primary schooling.

Furthermore, the *Rule of Benedict* called for explicating the *Rule* itself or another sacred text during chapter meetings each morning. That would have allowed for Hildegard to preach in chapter at the least. She probably expounded on the gospel reading during chapter meetings, when the male provost was absent, and she possibly preached on other days as well. Volmar, her teacher and then secretary, recognized Hildegard’s “new interpretation of Scripture.” Hildegard composed exegetical letters that reflect monastic discussion around difficult passages of Scripture and points of theological controversy. Hildegard addressed monasteries of men and women not only through her letters but also in person, during visits to
other religious houses and to cathedral chapters. There she offered advice and sermons that conveyed further interpretation of Scripture.¹

Sciuias (“Know the ways”), composed 1141-51; Liber uitae meritorum (The Book of Life’s Merits); composed 1158-63; Liber diuinorum operum (The Book of Divine Works): 1163-1173/74; Causae et curae (Subtilitates diuersarum creaturarum naturarum) (Causes and Cures; The Subtleties of the natures of diverse creatures); Vita S. Disibodi, (The Life of Saint Disibod) composed 1170; Symphonia; Epistolarium (her letter collection); Expositiones euangeliorum (Homilies on the Gospels); Ordo uirtutum (The Play of the Virtues); Explanatio Symboli S. Athanasii (Explanation of the Athanasian Creed)
Explanatio Regulae S. Benedicti (Explanation of the Rule of St. Benedict);
Solutiones XXXVIII Quaestionum (Solutions to 38 Questions); Lingua ignota (The Unknown Language)
Vita Hildegardis (The Life of Hildegard)(Four contributors: Hildegard, Gottfried of Disibodenberg, Theodoric of Echternach, Guibert of Gembloux)

Monastic Life

Hildegard considered her role of spiritual teacher to be her creative work and her moral responsibility. In her third visionary work, Liber divinorum operum, or Book of Divine Works, she writes, "the duty of teaching involves singing righteousness into the hearts of human beings through the voice of rationality.”²

¹ The material above is discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of Beverly Kienzle: Hildegard of Bingen and her Gospel Homilies: Speaking New Mysteries. Turnhout, 2009.
² Beverly Kienzle: Hildegard of Bingen and her Gospel Homilies, Speaking New Mysteries, p. 286
The heart and soul of life in a monastery was (and is) the Rule of St. Benedict, which instructed the members to sing the canonical hours: lauds, matins, vespers and so on, throughout the day and night. This was, for Hildegard, the defining act of monastic life, along with the time spent in prayer, meditation and *ruminatio*, letting the Scriptures, Psalms and texts of the sung responses for the day ruminate in their spirits. As leader of her community, she sometimes preached to her nuns, probably on Sundays and feast days, expounding on the gospel readings that Dr. Kienzle has translated into English for the first time. This collection of homilies establishes Hildegard as the only woman of the Middle Ages known to have written systematic explanations of the gospels. This method of explaining the gospel texts is known as *exegesis*.

Eight hours for prayer are specified in the Rule of Benedict (Chapter 16). These are called the Canonical Hours or simply the Hours. The whole of the daily liturgy is called the Divine Office. The exact time for the Hours varies according to the season and the location. The Hours consist of the Night Office: Matins or Vigils (after midnight); the Morning Office: lauds (dawn, 5-6 am); prime (7:30 AM), terce (9:00 AM); sext (Noon), none (3:00 PM), vespers (sunset), compline (after sunset, before bed).
Readings in the monastic day were taken from the Scriptures and from commentaries on the Scriptures written by the Church Fathers. Some of the most influential were St. Ambrose, St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Jerome, and St. Gregory the Great, the four named by Hildegard in her Homily 47. The office of Matins was divided into sections called Nocturns, and during the Nocturns selections were heard from the Fathers and other sources, such as the lives of Saints. The Gospel reading was done after the Nocturns. A talk or sermon was given after Prime. The entire Psalter was chanted in one week, beginning on Sunday at the Night Office.

**START DVD Session One**

**Questions for discussion after viewing**

1. Hildegard relates her vision of 1167 as receiving drops of gentle rain from God. She continues with the connection to the Gospel of John 1:1, and then relates that passage to Genesis 1:1.

What stands out for you in these verses? What does the image of "gentle rain" express?

What do you think it meant for Hildegard?

**Group leader:** You may have someone read Ps. 72:6-7. How does this passage reflect the meaning of “gentle rain” that Hildegard speaks of?
You may also choose from other passages that contain a reference to rain:

Deuteronomy 32:2-3

Hebrews 6:7

James 5:7

2. Hildegard describes her vision in 1141 as receiving an instant enkindling, in which she knew the meaning of scriptures without human instruction. This was a pivotal moment in her life. What impact do you think this experience had on Hildegard's life and teaching? What stands out for you in the painting of Hildegard receiving the flames of inspiration? Have you experienced such a moment of inspiration, a time when things have come together for you in a new way?

**Group leader:** You might ask someone to read Acts 2:1-4. How does this scripture relate to Hildegard’s instant enkindling?

3. Hildegard speaks about the circular movement of the Holy Spirit from Genesis 1:1 all the way through history to the beginning of John 1:1. The Spirit takes part in daily life as well, by sending virtues (such as humility, hope, chastity, mercy, patience, etc.) to help the believer to stay on the path.
• Look at this painting by Anita Dana. What stands out for you in the painting?

• Do you find that the circular movement of Spirit depicted in the painting expresses the movement of the Spirit?

• How else might we describe the Spirit’s movement and inspiration?

**Group leader:** You may ask someone to read John 3:8 and ask the following: What stands out for you? How does this passage describe the movement of the Spirit?