
Original Article

The prophetess and the pope: St. Hildegard of Bingen, Pope Benedict XVI, and prophetic visions of church reform

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Abstract Pope Benedict XVI seemed an unlikely fellow to declare Hildegard of Bingen a Doctor of the Church in 2012. Yet Joseph Ratzinger's studies as a medievalist disposed him to the symbolist tendencies of Hildegard and her contemporaries in reflecting on the relationship among scripture, history, and the Church. Deeply affected by the abuse of political power and corruption within the Church, both Ratzinger and Hildegard developed prophetic outlooks on the nature of the Church and its mission in the world, centered on the singular light of Christ's Incarnation. We find, across the centuries, a shared embrace of the enigmatic tension between the Church's corrupted institutions and their prophetic renewal. Ironically, Hildegard came to distrust the authority of the papacy and prophesied its ending, even as Benedict would be, as pope, her greatest champion.

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1 On 10 May, 2012, the Pope made Hildegard's longtime German veneration universal; her feast day is 17 September. On 7 October, 2012, she became the fourth woman among the 35 Doctors of the Church.

When news broke in 2011 that Pope Benedict XVI intended to formally canonize Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) and declare her a Doctor of the Church, it caught many of her admirers by surprise (Newman, 2013, 36–8).¹ The visionary prophet and fiery critic of churchmen seemed to some an ill fit with a pope often characterized as an arch-conservative. It was not hard to see



that the Hildegard of popular imagination – the co-opted mystic of ‘creation-centered’ New Age spirituality, the guru of holistic healing, or even the icon of feminist defiance rumored to have been a lesbian – might have influenced previous papal rejections of formal canonization. But Benedict, the first German pontiff since the Middle Ages, showed an enduring fondness for the ‘prophetissa teutonica’ (Clendenen, 2012, 210–5). The affinities run deeper than nationality, however. The abuse of political power deeply affected both Ratzinger and Hildegard as they developed prophetic outlooks on the nature of the Church and its mission in the world. For Hildegard, the context was schism and the clashes between Empire and Papacy in the twelfth century. For Ratzinger, it was the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, whether Nazi or communist.² Both looked to the Church’s eternal source within Christ to find a way past corrupted human fallibilities. The irruption of divinity into time in the moment of the Incarnation stands for both Hildegard and Ratzinger at the fixed center-point and end of all created order; as history past and future bends towards that asymptote, its path is prophetic. Neither considers prophecy simply as an obscure future-telling text. Rather, each looks past the words to see the Word whose creative and redemptive acting orients everything. This shared prophetic outlook encourages us to critically examine the assumptions that would make them seem such strange companions. It also shows that when prophecy is an act rooted in the Incarnation, it can escape the limitations of specific historical moments to speak, grow, and enlighten the Church across the centuries.

The seeds of this orientation were sown for Ratzinger in his post-graduate studies on the work of the thirteenth-century Franciscan, St. Bonaventure, and they sprouted during his pivotal time as a theological advisor during the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). But it was after the student protests of 1968 that they bore fruit, as Ratzinger reacted against a politicized means of salvation. Hildegard’s own disgust at institutional abuses of power then became a prophetic companion during his papacy (2005–13), as the now Pope Benedict called upon her to help shape his visions for Church reform. In 2010, he devoted two General Audiences to Hildegard, with particular focus on her prophetic charism speaking out against abuses of the Church. Her preaching against the Cathars recognized that ‘a true renewal of the ecclesial community is obtained with a sincere spirit of repentance and a demanding process of conversion, rather than with a change of structures’ (Benedict XVI, 2010b). But Hildegard also spoke out against internal corruption of the Church, ‘wounded also in that time by the sins of both priests and lay people’ (Benedict XVI, 2010a). Hildegard the reproaching preacher made her starkest appearance in the Pope’s address to the Roman Curia at the end of that year. In response to a flood of new allegations of the clerical abuse of children and its hierarchical cover-up, he invoked Hildegard’s bitter condemnation to the clergy at Kirchheim in 1170:

2 Following convention, I refer to Ratzinger by his given name for references before his 2005 papal election, and as Benedict for references thereafter.

I had a vision of a woman of such beauty that the human mind is unable to comprehend. She stretched in height from earth to heaven. Her face shone with exceeding brightness and her gaze was fixed on heaven. She was dressed in a dazzling robe of white silk and draped in a cloak, adorned with stones of great price. On her feet she wore shoes of onyx. But her face was stained with dust, her robe was ripped down the right side, her cloak had lost its sheen of beauty and her shoes had been blackened. And she herself, in a voice loud with sorrow, was calling to the heights of heaven, saying, “Hear, heaven, how my face is sullied; mourn, earth, that my robe is torn; tremble, abyss, because my shoes are blackened! [...] For my Bridegroom’s wounds remain fresh and open as long as the wounds of men’s sins continue to gape. And Christ’s wounds remain open because of the sins of priests. They tear my robe, since they are violators of the Law, the Gospel and their own priesthood; they darken my cloak by neglecting, in every way, the precepts which they are meant to uphold; my shoes too are blackened, since priests do not keep to the straight paths of justice” (Benedict XVI, 2010c)³

3 Edited elsewhere as Ep. 149r (Hildegard, 1998a, 333–7; 1998b, 92–4); see analysis in Newman (1987, 241–3) and Kerby-Fulton (1998, 78–80).

This allegorical figure of Ecclesia, the virgin Mother Church, was one of Hildegard’s most frequent visionary images – ‘a living and substantial person,’ dwelling eternally in heaven to mediate God’s eternal plan as ‘it follows its painful but triumphant course through history to a consummation at the end of time’ (Newman, 1987, 248 and 196). Hildegard’s images of the Church are vast, powerful, vibrant – yet also vulnerable. Despite the procreative, saving energy that courses through Ecclesia’s gleaming body, she suffers like her Bridegroom the ravages of sin. Evil’s abuse is even more graphically depicted in Hildegard’s vision in *Scivias* III.11 of the Antichrist’s leering, monstrous head, born violently from the Church’s vagina. This rape is a direct assault on the Church’s motherhood of the faithful, as Antichrist takes over her womb and corrupts her fertile mission. The abuse is also domestic, the result of ‘fornication and murder and rapine’ committed by Ecclesia’s own ministers, their ‘vile lust and shameful blasphemy [...] infused’ in them by the Antichrist’s ‘voracious and gaping jaws’ (*Scivias* III.11.13–14: Hildegard, 1990, 497–8).⁴

4 On this image, see Emerson (2002).

5 As discussed later, Hildegard’s prophetic identity was stronger because of her virgin femininity; the gendered term ‘prophetess’ is thus not just appropriate but essential.

This powerful prophetess speaking out against corruption in the Church is the Hildegard that Joseph Ratzinger would have met in his studies in Munich and Freising as he delved into medieval ‘symbolist’ theologies of history.⁵ In 1957, the future pope and budding medievalist completed his Habilitation (second dissertation) on *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (published 1959). Focused on the Seraphic Doctor’s *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, the book explored Bonaventure’s complicated relationship to Hildegard’s slightly later prophetic contemporary, Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202), and his intricate, exegetical patterns of salvation history. In considering the theological meaning of his own particular moment in history, Bonaventure – and Ratzinger with him



– took from Joachim an understanding of the prophetic latency of all history within God’s Word. Joachim’s ‘symbolist’ approach to history and exegesis belongs to a wider current of twelfth-century monastic thought, and Hildegard stands next to him at its summit (Dempf, 1929, 229–84; Ratzinger, [1959] 1992, 97–110; 1971a, 95–108).⁶ Inculcated in the deep engagement with Scripture characteristic of monastic *lectio divina* and liturgy, this approach explores its symbolic, progressive, and correlative revelation of history across the Old Testament into the New Testament and beyond into the life of the Church. As Ratzinger explains:

Objectively, Scripture is indeed complete, but its meaning is grasped in a constant unfolding throughout history that is not yet complete. Like the physical world, it contains ‘seeds’ – seeds of meaning that as time grows are perceived in a constant state of growth. [...] New insights thus are always growing out of Scripture, within it something is continuously taking place; and this happening, this history, continues as long as history exists. For the theologian as expositor of Scripture, this is an important insight, as it proves that in his exposition, he cannot ignore history, whether future as much as past. So the exposition of Scripture becomes a theology of history, the illumination of the past becomes prophecy of what is to come. (Ratzinger, [1959] 1992, 11–12; 1971a, 9)

As it was for Bonaventure and for Hildegard, so the Gospel is for Ratzinger fundamentally not words, but the Word made flesh. Revelation is a process, an act, and a relationship. The unveiling of God’s truth and love can only happen in relationship to a person (both the individual and collective humankind) for whom the veil is removed. This is the sense in which Ratzinger understands Scripture and the Church to speak prophetically together in history: in bearing witness to the radical act of love that poured itself out to unite time and eternity, humankind and God. To be a recipient of revelation is not simply to read Scripture, but to be prophetically inspired by God’s grace to understand its deepest mystical meanings, which all circle about the Christ-event at its center (Ratzinger, [1959] 1992, 63–71; 1971a, 62–9).

The idea that Scripture can still speak prophetically of the Church’s history, however, provokes the inherent tension between prophetic hope and the Church’s presently incomplete mission to a fallen world. The Gospel proclaims a new world order in the Sermon on the Mount, but that order proves unrealizable in institutional form before the eschaton (Ratzinger, [1959] 1992, 41–3; 1971a, 40). As Ratzinger noted in the preface to the 1992 reprinting of his study: ‘The question of whether one as a Christian can entertain a kind of this-worldly perfection, of whether something like a Christian utopia, a synthesis of utopia and eschatology, is possible, is perhaps the theological heart of the debate over liberation theology’ (Ratzinger, [1959] 1992, n.p.). Ratzinger recognizes that the marriage of a this-worldly ideology to the Gospel undermines the

6 Translations of Ratzinger (1959) are the author’s, but references are also given to Ratzinger (1971a, trans. Z. Hayes).



latter's radical optimism, which is oriented to and rooted in the truly Other beyond the limits of the world. Having lived through the horrors of the Nazi promise of salvation to the German people, Ratzinger knew not to trust in political ideology to accomplish what only the Gospel can.

His skepticism of political power joined a prophetic voice inherited from his medieval forebears in a radio address Ratzinger delivered in the winter of 1969–70, offering a vision of 'What Will the Church Look Like in 2000?':

From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge – a Church that has lost much. It will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. [...] The Church will be a more spiritualized Church, not presuming upon a political mantle, flirting as little with the Left as with the Right. It will be hard going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost it much valuable energy. It will make it poor and cause it to become the Church of the meek. The process will be all the more arduous, for sectarian narrow-mindedness as well as pompous self-will will have to be shed. [...] But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. [...] And so it seems certain to me that the Church is facing very hard times. The real crisis has scarcely begun. We will have to count on terrific upheavals. But I am equally certain about what will remain at the end: not the Church of the political cult [...], but the Church of faith. It may well no longer be the dominant social power to the extent that it was until recently; but it will enjoy a fresh blossoming, and be seen as humanity's home where they will find life and hope beyond death. (Ratzinger, 1971b, 103–6)

The reformist rhetoric of this passage offers a complicated mixture of pessimistic crisis and optimistic renewal. The enigmatic tension between those poles is also a defining feature of Hildegard's reformist and apocalyptic tendencies. Two aspects of Ratzinger's reformist vision find striking parallels in her thought: the political relationship between Church and Empire (or secular world), and the renewal of the Church as a purified but diminished institution. Although Hildegard must be situated within the legacy of the eleventh-century Gregorian reform, what is most striking are the ways in which she departs – sometimes radically – from a Gregorian vision of the Church. Ratzinger follows her lead.

Though the reform movements of the eleventh century initially targeted pervasive moral corruptions within the clergy, they came to espouse the wider reform of all Christendom under the influence of their namesake and boldest partisan, Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–85). For Gregory, the Church, with himself at its head, was the highest leader of Christian society, and secular authority was subservient to it. Hildegard represents one of the fiercer proponents of the Church's moral reform in the generations after Gregory, but also one of the more ambivalent regarding the relationship between *imperium* and *sacerdotium*.



Her ambivalence towards *both* sources of institutional authority – empire and papacy – grew out of an increasing frustration at the moral failures of each. When Anastasius IV came to the papal throne in 1153–4, his failures to continue reform earned Hildegard’s harsh disapprobation (Ep. 8, in Hildegard, 1991, 19–22; 1994, 41–3); so too did Emperor Frederick Barbarossa’s perpetuation of the papal schism of 1159–77 (Ep. 313 and 315, in Hildegard, 2001, 74–5; 2004, 113–4).

That schism deepened Hildegard’s pessimism over the state of the Church. All institutions of Christianity seemed hopelessly corrupt, but it was the corruption of the Church’s own ministers that particularly disturbed her. The roots of her reformist concern for the internal state of the Church preceded the schism, as in the violent vision of Antichrist raping the Church in *Scivias* III.11. But that book’s description of the ‘five ages’ to come from Hildegard’s time until the Antichrist remains vague, and she still seems optimistic that contemporary reform can be effective. Thus, when she writes in admonition to the German King Conrad around 1152, even the prophesied corruption is tempered by her hope that the King might lead God’s people back to the holiness of ‘the first dawn of justice,’ her distinctive term for the apostolic Church (Ep. 311r, in Hildegard, 2001, 71–2; 2004, 110–1).

Over the course of the next two decades, as papacy and empire alike appeared ever more corrupt, Hildegard’s visionary denunciations grew sharper. Yet, as her pessimism deepened over the current state of the world – the ‘tempus muliebre’ [‘womanish age’], as she called it, purposely employing every misogynistic connotation the phrase could conjure – it was translated into an ever-brighter optimism about periods of renewal awaiting the once and future Church. The most extraordinary aspect of that renewal, however, is that it would involve the radical confiscation of clerical wealth and the disestablishment of the Church’s claims to secular authority. In these images of the Church’s future, Hildegard’s visions are strikingly similar to those of Ratzinger.

The proving grounds for those visions of Church reform were her great preaching tours in the 1160s. Her public sermons to the clergy throughout the Rhineland were *tours-de-force* of fiery rhetoric and sharp castigation of clerical turpitude. In the 1170 sermon at Kirchheim, from which Pope Benedict quoted to the Curia at the end of 2010, her disgust at clerical corruption eclipses any earlier restraint as she grows more certain that disendowment is the only sure and just way forward to a holier Church. After Ecclesia laments her once-splendid vesture now soiled by the sins of priests, she thunders down a woeful prophecy of coming vengeance, not only upon the clergy but upon the viridity [*viriditas*] of the earth itself – for in Hildegard’s eyes, the moral health of society and the ecological health of the earth are closely intertwined.⁷ She bluntly declares, ‘the princes of the earth and the rash mob will rise up against you [the clergy], cast you out, and put you to flight’ (Ep. 149r, in Hildegard, 1998a, 333–7; 1998b, 92–4). Meanwhile, in the famous sermon preached at Trier in

7 Newman notes (in Clendenen, 2012, 224): ‘There is no question that Hildegard is a precursor to deep ecology – the interconnectivity of all creation. [...] Hildegard was a theological ecologist, and bringing her ecological imperatives to the fore [...] is a unique feature of this papal choice at this time in history.’



1160, Hildegard prophesied a future period of renewal: ‘Afterward, the justice and judgment of God will arise, and the people will know the discipline and fear of God. There will also be good and just individuals among the spiritual people, who, nevertheless, will remain few in numbers because of their humility, but who, like the hermits, will turn back to the first dawn’ (Ep. 223r, in Hildegard, 1998a, 490–6; 2004, 18–23).

Out of her preaching emerged the dominant themes of Hildegard’s vision for Church reform: a deep pessimism about the current state of the Church; an equally optimistic vision of future prophetic renewal; the confiscation of ecclesiastical property as its prelude; and its foundations in a small, central band of saints, returning the Church to her ideal apostolic state (Kerby-Fulton, 1989; and 1990, 26–51). These themes would find their most extensive and dramatic treatment in Hildegard’s last and grandest visionary work, completed in 1174, the *Liber diuinorum operum*.⁸ Freed from the constraints of the preacher’s sermon, the book’s last vision (3.5) explodes with prophetic power into Hildegard’s most detailed treatment of the times to come. The cycles between corruption and reform grow more radical and acute – the crises deeper, the renewals more holy. The key to understanding these cycles lies in Hildegard’s symbolist mode of thinking: the history of the Church after Christ recapitulates not just thematically but sacramentally, as it were, its history prophetically foretold in Scripture. Thus, ‘the dialectical triad of building up, falling away, and restoration’ is a key historical principle, foreshadowed and foreordained in the process of creation, fall, and redemption at the heart of salvation history (Rauh, 1973, 510–1).

In ecclesiastical history, creation corresponds to the foundation of the apostolic Church, while the Fall can be seen in the ‘womanish time’ of corruption Hildegard views all around her. Although the final, complete restoration will only come at the end of the world, there is nevertheless the possibility for this process of establishment, crisis, and resolution to be repeated and renewed. These historical cycles of established, lost, and reformed holiness are the most prominent feature of Hildegard’s vision of the end times, intricately developed from the simple ‘five ages’ in *Scivias* 3.11. An illuminating example can be found in one of the cyclic periods of crisis Hildegard elaborates out of the age of the pale horse (the third in *Scivias*), described in LDO 3.5.21–6. This period, as with others before it, begins with a time of peace and prosperity in Christendom, lasting only a short time before the two great world powers of the Middle Ages are destroyed:

Yet in those days, the Emperors of the Roman office will fall from the strength by which they once held tightly the Roman Empire, and become weak in their own glory, so that the imperial power in their hands by divine judgment will shortly decrease and fail. [...] But after the imperial scepter is in this way broken up beyond repair, then too the miter of the

8 Cited hereafter as LDO and by part, vision, and chapter.



apostolic office [i.e. papacy] will be broken. For because neither princes nor any other persons of either the spiritual or the secular order will then find any religion left in the apostolic title, the dignity of that title will diminish. They will prefer other prelates and archbishops under other titles in various places, so that after it has been diminished by the adjournment of its original dignity, the apostolic see will then maintain only Rome and a few nearby places that still lie under its miter. (LDO 3.5.25: Hildegard, 2018, 460–1)

One might expect the destruction of both imperial and papal power to have prompted the Antichrist's coming. Remarkably, however, this is just one of the many crises to come *before* the end times. Shortly after the reduction of the papacy to simply another bishopric, 'Justice will stand for a time in her uprightness, so that the people of those days will turn themselves with integrity to the ancient customs and disciplines' (LDO 3.5.26: Hildegard, 2018, 461). This return to the simple life of the early Church will also be reflected in the renewal of material creation: 'The air too at that time will again grow sweet and the fruit of the earth useful, and humans will be healthy and strong.' Finally, the faithful 'will prophesy in that same spirit in which the prophets of old announced the mysteries of God, and in the likeness of the apostles' teaching' (Hildegard, 2018, 461–2).

The rhetoric of reform as a return to the apostolic Church has served Christianity for as long as it has needed reform – that is, for as long as its institutions have existed. What is extraordinary about Hildegard's portrait of that renewal is her distrust of institutional authority in carrying it out. This golden age of reform grounded on the ideal of the apostolic Church will come *after* the fall of the papacy. Such antipathy toward the institutional Church is often seen as a hallmark not of medieval or Roman Catholic thinking, but of the Protestant Reformation.⁹

Indeed, dissent from Vatican authority was a central concern in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 2012 'Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious,' an association of American nuns. Among the Assessment's concerns were controversial statements made at the LCWR's annual assemblies (CDF, 2012, 2–3). In particular, Sr. Laurie Brink's 2007 Keynote Address suggested that the Gen-X crisis in religious vocations might demand that some religious congregations 'sojourn in a land yet unknown' – a reference to the story of Hagar, Sarah's slave girl and mother of Abraham's first child, Ishmael. Following Hagar into the desert and away from the Covenant, '[a] sojourning congregation is no longer ecclesiastical. It has grown beyond the bounds of institutional religion. [... In] most respects [it] is Post-Christian' (Brink, 2007, 15–9). The Doctrinal Assessment was issued just a few weeks before the final raising of Hildegard to the altar, and the coincidental timing led some commentators to link the two, posing Hildegard as a model of

⁹ See Widmer (1955, 260–1) and Newman (1987, 241).

10 See, for example, Clendenen (2012, 198–227).

feminist activism against the hierarchy, with seemingly more freedom in the twelfth century than nuns have today.¹⁰ Yet, Hildegard's theology could in no way envision a 'post-Christianity,' let alone an extra-ecclesial exercise of the religious life. For Hildegard, the Church 'embraced the whole of humanity,' thus demonstrating 'that humankind in its totality – women and men in history, community, in relation with God – had a feminine face' (Newman, 1987, 248–9). We must distinguish, in Hildegard's critiques of the Church, between her often corrupt ministers and her eternally virginal presence as Ecclesia, the Mother of all Christians and Bride of Christ. Hildegard's prophetic rejection of the papacy's ultimate authority is not a rejection of the Church or even necessarily of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – for in the aftermath of the papacy's fall, the bishops and archbishops of each local and regional church endure. Furthermore, her images of the Church as feminine were always balanced by an awareness of the masculinity of the Church's ministers – a balance that her theology of gender demands, for it views masculine and feminine as different but complementary principles (Thompson, 1994; Newman, 2013).

11 See, for example, Kienzle and Walker (1998).

Hildegard's voice of authority, then, was not presbyterial but prophetic – two charisms in which she saw, in principle, no conflict (Newman, 1987, 254). Throughout Christian history, women have served as prophets who complement but do not replace the priest, and the 'prophetic place on the margins' was also key to Sr. Brink's evaluation of the religious life today.¹¹ Even the Doctrinal Assessment acknowledged that the prophetic office complements ecclesial life as a grace – yet problematically, the Vatican seemed to denounce any prophecy that is critical of ecclesiastical abuses as a 'distortion' (CDF, 2012, 5), despite the nearly simultaneous declaration of one of the greatest critical prophets of the Middle Ages as a Doctor of the Church. This more radical Hildegard is, in turn, tempered by Pope Benedict's insistence on her orthodox obedience to ecclesiastical structure. As Newman notes, citing Rainer Berndt, one of the authors of the canonization protocol: 'Pope Benedict had long been stressing the saint's obedience to authority, to the amazement of historians who recall her fiery reprimands to the leading prelates of her day. But ecclesial authority, Berndt maintains, must be understood on an "early medieval partnership model" rather than a "modern authoritarian model"' (Newman, 2013, 49).

This casts light on a final wrinkle to this complicated relationship between the sharply critical prophetess and the German Shepherd pontiff: in February 2013, Pope Benedict voluntarily chose to renounce the Petrine office and retire into monastic seclusion. He was succeeded by the Argentinian Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who took the name of Francis. According to his declaration, Benedict had become keenly aware that his own advanced age left him without adequate strength 'in today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter' (Benedict XVI, 2013). In severing the long-standing link between man and office, this final act sealed Benedict's vision of his papacy as ministry



rather than monarchy, and hearkened back to his younger visions for the reform of the Church. The rehabilitation of the papacy as the pastoral service of the Bishop of Rome rather than the regal government of a worldly institution could be seen, perhaps, in Benedict's early choice to replace the papal tiara with a bishop's mitre in his pontifical coat-of-arms. It took a final, radical act of renunciation, however, to confirm just how much 'pompous self-will' would have to be shed in the service of reforming the Church so that she might then reform the world (Ratzinger, 1971b, 105). But his renunciation should not be seen as a form of discontinuity. For him, as for Hildegard, no event today – even a papal resignation or the fall of the papacy itself – can be the radical rupture of history. Rather, the decisive and epochal event that indelibly defines the entire character not just of the Church but of the whole world, is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Christ is the end – both terminus and goal – of the world.

From the beginning of time to its ending, Hildegard thus sees prophecy's beam focused on Christ, shining 'from generation to generation through the diverse ages of humankind, like a light in the darkness, and it will not rest from its sound until the world's ending, offering words of multivalent signification because it is imbued with diverse mysteries by the Holy Spirit's inspiration' (LDO 3.2.2: Hildegard, 2018, 360). The moral purpose of this revelation is woven into the very fabric of creation: 'For prophecy exists in humankind like the soul in the body, because as the soul is hidden within the body and the body is governed by it, so prophecy that comes from God's spirit, which excels all creation, is invisible, and by it every failure is reproached, and all who leave the path of righteousness are led back' (LDO 3.2.2: Hildegard, 2018, 360). As Liebeschütz noted, this prophetic process involves the same macrocosm-microcosm structure that defines the place of humankind within the world: 'God has continually embodied his creative power both in the great world of the cosmos and in the small one of the person – and this power is precisely the heart of the eternal office of prophet to prepare for the God-Man, the seal of the entire process' (Liebeschütz, 1930, 136; my translation).

With this 'light of living knowledge' – an 'inner sight [that] teaches a person about divine things' – Adam was first created, but the ancient serpent obscured that light within him, like the eyelid obscuring the pupil's vision (LDO 3.2.12: Hildegard, 2018, 377–8). This Adamic knowledge was 'like prophecy, and it endured until the Son of God became Man, so that he enlightened it through himself as the sun illuminates the whole earth, and all the things foretold [...] he fulfilled spiritually within himself' (LDO 3.2.12: Hildegard, 2018, 377–8). This living light is obscured for the mortal human body, '[b]ut when humankind is taken out of mutability and made immutable, then will they see and know God's radiance and dwell ever with him' (LDO 3.2.10: Hildegard, 2018, 375). Alongside light, Hildegard describes prophecy with the organic image of the tree, whose root and branches transmit prophetic knowledge of Christ. The prophets declare 'in shining shadow / a living, piercing light / that buds upon



12 The author's translation of the antiphon, 'O spectabiles viri': 'in lucida umbra / acutam et viventem lucem / in virga germinantem, / que sola floruit / de introitu / radicantis luminis.'

that single branch / that flourished at / the entrance of / deep-rooted light' (Hildegard, 1988, 158).¹²

That branch blooming with divine radiance is the Virgin Mary. Her pure womanhood has a unique power to be assumed into the changeless divinity, for the first man's substance was changed from earth to flesh, 'but woman, taken from that man, remained flesh from flesh, never to be changed into something else' (LDO 3.2.3: Hildegard, 2018, 361). Woman's capacity as the peculiar matrix of the divine image – the garment of the incarnate Christ – gives her the central role in mediating the drama of salvation:

O Son of God, you assumed [your] garment from the unique and complete Virgin, whose enclosure no man ever opened or touched. For as dew upon the earth you entered into her, taking root not from man's root but from divinity, like a sunbeam caressing the earth so that it brings forth its bud. From her you came forth as you entered into her, without any corruption and pain, as if in sleep, just as Eve was taken from the man as he slept. [...] Indeed, Eve was created not from man's seed but from man's flesh, because God created her with the same power by which he also sent his Son into the Virgin; and so thereafter one can find no others like Eve, a virgin and mother, or Mary, a mother and virgin. In this way God clothed himself in human form and with it covered over his deity [...] to be his dwelling. (LDO 3.2.13: Hildegard, 2018, 378–9)

The Virgin Mother Church is, for Hildegard, the successor of this pair of virgins and mothers (Newman, 1987, 196–7). Yet the Visionary Doctor was also aware that Ecclesia was not static, but sojourning in time. Hildegard's exegesis of the Genesis account of the seven days of creation (LDO 2.1.17–49; Hildegard, 2018, 287–347) tracks the distinct 'days' of Church history in its allegorical interpretation, from the apostolic ministry of the first and second days to the persecutions of the third, the establishment of sacred and secular authorities in the sun and moon on the fourth day, and the culminating development of monastic orders on the fifth. The creation of humankind on the sixth day recapitulates the Church's 'edificatio,' and the seventh day's rest spirals back to the fullness of Christ, with the order of virgins, 'the blooms of roses and lilies,' gleaming as the crown jewel (LDO 2.1.48: Hildegard, 2018, 346). Like Mary's rose, Hildegard's bloom shone with prophetic light.

The modern historian could tell that same history of the western Church, in a sense, through the tensions between local ecclesial communities, like Hildegard's house of virgins, and the ever-more centralized authority of the episcopal hierarchy, with Rome as its crown. In Hildegard's later and more radical years, she sometimes saw that authority as dangerously corrosive. But though she fought injustices in the hierarchy, she also never broke the fundamental bonds of ecclesiastical obedience to which she was sworn at an early age. At times, Pope Benedict seemed fiercely protective of the centralized Roman authority he held



in his hands. Yet in the end, he renounced it in an attempt to reform it. When faced with corruption within the Church, Hildegard's prophetic voice found its surest might by orienting itself, not around structures of worldly power, but around the gleaming hope of redemption offered by the Incarnation. Benedict too was shaken by the Church's corruption, especially in the form of child sexual abuse and its cover-up, and he took Hildegard's humiliating words in condemnation of the sins of priests as a prophetic call for renewal (Benedict XVI, 2010c). The Visionary Doctor became for him an essential partner in the search for an authentic reform of the Church, understood 'not as an empty change of structure but as conversion of heart' (Benedict XVI, 2012). The organic flexibility of the Church's prophetic roots in the Word of God is what can allow such renewal to flourish. By focusing their attention on 'the event of revelation' unfolding across time, both Benedict and Hildegard could with 'prophetic sensitivity' attend to 'the activity of the Church that extends in time the mystery of the Incarnation' (Benedict XVI, 2012).

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