

THE VOICE OF THE LIVING LIGHT

by Michael Giffin

The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen,

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DURING THE LAST few decades, historians have translated primary sources which suggest something happened to the role of women during the Middle Ages, particularly during a period often referred to as the High Middle Ages (1000–1299 AD); a period of rapid population and economic growth, urbanisation, rise of centralised government, and struggle for control between church and state. The relative tolerance of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries gave way to increasing pressure for unity and conformity from all classes. For example, earlier on, some wives went into separate trades from their husbands and, in some towns, were treated as a single woman when involved in trade disputes. How much this independence characterised the role of medieval women generally, and how much that role changed, as the twin cults of Chivalry and the Virgin combined to influence the perception and position of women, are subjects of debate.

Joseph Baird makes an important contribution to the debate, by giving us a selection from the correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century saint whose life provides a window to her period. The selection is taken from a longer collection, of three volumes, which would normally place Hildegard's correspondence beyond the range of the general reader. There are forty-five letters from her, twenty-five letters to her, and five miscellaneous pieces.

On reading this correspondence, it becomes clear that its authors used their language differently from the way we use ours. They were far richer in scriptural and classical allusion; they were more diplomatic; they tended towards a self-abasement that seems ironic to us now. Baird's introduction and commentary are useful here, as he gently reminds us of what's going on between the lines. But, even if we fail to read between the lines, there's still a lot going on, which makes this slim volume an accessible and valuable resource.

Born in 1098, Hildegard was enclosed at the age of eight in a hermitage with one door, locked from the outside, and one window, through which she received food and passed out refuse. She was expected to live out her life in this confinement, concentrating on her interior life, separated from the evils of the outside world. Little is known about her early life but she must have over-

come the obvious hardships and thrived.

The picture of a different life emerges, from her middle age onwards, once her story comes within historical view. She went on arduous tours, preaching to both the general populace and audiences of exclusively male clergy. She was invited to palaces, where she uttered prophecies to emperors. She founded two monasteries, the character of which upset the sensibilities of a few contemporary conservatives. She offered advice to many priests, who consulted her over their exclusively male prerogatives. She produced and staged an elaborate morality play, for which she wrote the words and music. She wrote three major books of striking originality. She corresponded with many of the most important people of her time—emperors, empresses, kings, queens, popes, archbishops, dukes, monks, priests—as well as with many persons of no particular importance of all.

Hildegard died in 1179, at the age of eighty-one. By any measure, her life was extraordinary, and Baird poses the intriguing question: “How could this have happened?”

CHAPTER 1, “Reaching Out”, describes Hildegard's quest for the church's imprimatur, without which she couldn't have authority as a visionary. As Bernard of Clairvaux had been charged by Eusebius III to deal with the large number of heretics at the time, the first letter is from Hildegard to Bernard assuring him of her orthodoxy. The second is from Bernard to Hildegard, giving the imprimatur: “We rejoice in the grace of God which is in you. And, further, we most earnestly urge and beseech you to recognize this gift as grace and to respond eagerly to it with all humility and devotion.”

Chapter 2, “Criticism and Response”, shows the ways in which Christians can be their own worst enemies. The first letter is from Mistress Tengswich, who, without knowing the facts, asks Hildegard to confirm rumours of unusual practices in her community. The second is Hildegard's reply, which confirms the rumours and justifies the practices. Here, in Baird's words, Hildegard produces “what can only be called the highest paean of praise to womanhood that has come down to us from the Middle Ages, perhaps from any age”. Subsequent letters in the chapter, between Hildegard and monks in a community nearby, introduce the inevitable feelings of hostility whenever a female community asserts its independence from a male community that once had jurisdiction over it. Chapter 3, “Richardis von Stade”, contains several letters that record Hildegard's struggle to retain Richardis, a close companion, recently elected abbess of a distant monastery.

Chapter 4, “Hildegard's Spreading Reputation”,

includes one-third of the selected correspondence. As her fame spread, Hildegard received letters requesting information about departed loved ones, her commentary on the sinful state of the world, and her counsel about personal spiritual needs. Some letters hope for material gain through her mystical insight. Many are to and from ordinary lay persons; many are to and from clergy and religious. There's a famous letter from Frederick of Barbarossa, the Holy Roman Emperor, informing Hildegard that her earlier predictions had come to pass, while in a later letter she admonishes him for acting like a little boy and creating schism in the church.

Chapter 5, "Exorcism", reminds us of how, as in scripture, the medieval church understood demonic possessions; some were examples of what we now call psychiatric illness; others were caused by evil spirits. Chapter 6, "Family", teaches us that even saints have to deal with messy family matters. The first letter is from Hildegard's nephew, Arnold, writing to inform her of his election as archbishop of Trier. In his triumph, and full of hubris, Arnold can't resist making disparaging remarks about his brother, Wezelinus, who's still only a prior. The brothers may be competing for the affection of their famous aunt; at least Arnold is. The second is Hildegard's response to Arnold, congratulating and encouraging him. Perhaps she can see through his façade of humility, since she also exhorts him against the sin and sickness of pride.

Chapter 7, "A Fellow Visionary", distinguishes between different kinds of medieval visionary experience. Elizabeth of Schönau, a true mystic, received visions in a fit of ecstasy, losing all consciousness of the world and participating in her visions. Hildegard was always distanced from her visions, which she saw as a series of pictures projected on a kind of distant screen, and she always stressed that she saw things fully conscious. In the first letter, Elizabeth seeks to enlist Hildegard's assistance in quelling false rumours about her. In the second, Hildegard offers consolation, with a mild warning to always mirror God rather than self. Through this correspondence, Elizabeth becomes Hildegard's protégée, even though Hildegard always sought to distance herself from the method through which Elizabeth experienced her visions.

CHAPTER 8, "A Sermon", records Hildegard's third preaching tour, which took place in her mid-sixties. In the first letter, the dean and clerics of Cologne cathedral ask her to write down what she had preached, for they hold her to be and oracle of God. In Baird's words: "What greater acclaim could Hildegard have achieved: a woman

preaching to a male audience, castigating them, in no uncertain terms, for their sins—and making them like it!" The second letter is Hildegard's reply, which is essentially a transcript, through which she reminds her male audience of how they have sinned against and offended God in neglecting their pastoral duties.

Chapter 9, "The Provost Volmar", gives us another glimpse of sexual politics. Volmar had been Hildegard's provost for thirty years. His death left her community without a spiritual director. Hildegard petitioned her male superior to appoint the provost her community had elected, but he refused. The first letter, from Hildegard to Alexander III, begs the pope to protect her community's privileges. The second, from Alexander III to Wezelinus, an abbot in Cologne who is also Hildegard's nephew, is illuminating: "we mandate your discretion through apostolic writings that you call together both sides to your presence once you have made inquiry into this and have more clearly understood this matter of the election of the provost. Then decide the case with proper justice."

The last four chapters, which cover the final years of Hildegard's life, include miscellaneous letters and visions and meditations, through which Hildegard reveals her pastoral sensitivity and loyalty to the church, records the nature of her visions, and meditates poetically and lyrically on the Trinity and the Virgin.

Baird also includes letters recording her last controversy. At the age of eighty, Hildegard was caught up in an exceedingly bitter and acrimonious struggle. She had allowed the body of a certain nobleman to be buried in consecrated ground in her monastery. She knew he'd been excommunicated earlier in his life, but she also knew he'd been fully reconciled to the church before his death. No doubt because of political lobbying, the prelates of Mainz, speaking on behalf of their archbishop, away on official business in Rome, demanded she exhume the body and cast it out of holy ground. She refused to do so and went so far as to ensure the grave was so hidden it couldn't be disinterred without her knowledge. In an attempt to force Hildegard to comply, the prelates placed her monastery under interdict, which meant she and her nuns were forbidden to hear mass, receive the Eucharist, or even sing the divine office. Hildegard eventually won this contest of wills, by contacting the archbishop and producing witnesses of the man's absolution. The interdict was lifted a few months before her death.

This selection is the fruit of three decades of scholarship. Its success is due as much to what Baird left out as what he put in. The editing down of a magnum opus, to distil its message in an accessible manner for the widest possible readership, is no mean feat.