Hildegard of Bingen: Revitalizing the Ordinary Traits of an Extraordinary Person

Wendy McGrath

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The recognition of St. Hildegard of Bingen not only as an extraordinary figure in Christian theology but as a woman with ordinary human characteristics provides a valuable opportunity to recapture some of the finer details of the life of someone who is typically only examined in an ecclesiastical perspective. First, her physical frailty and chronic illnesses were the key to her being such a renowned visionary with a reputation as a prophet. Second, Hildegard's tendency toward behaviors revolving around materialism and attachment indicates that despite being a revered abbess in the Catholic Church, she was not immune to human weaknesses that servants of God were theoretically supposed to be without. Third, the manner in which Hildegard conducted her interpersonal relationships shows that she was capable of the full range of human emotions, from the pure goodwill befitting the Catholic virginal

archetype to the scornfulness of one who is capable of holding a grudge for decades. There is an invaluable benefit to recognizing any historical figure as someone who, in life, had human traits the same as anyone else. To see Hildegard of Bingen in such a way reminds readers that even those we hold in the highest light were once just like us.

Hildegard of Bingen lived from 1098 to 1179. Born in the town of Gandersheim near the Rhine, she was given by her parents to the joined monastery and convent at Disibodenberg when she was eight years old. From then until 1136 she was entrusted to the care of Jutta, an anchoress, who gave Hildegard a rudimentary education in Latin and taught the latter everything she knew. When Jutta died, the Disibodenberg nuns elected Hildegard as their new abbess and in 1141, when she was forty-two years old, she had what she would call her first real, significant *visio*.[1] She described the vision as thus:

> Heaven was open and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and enflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the Scriptures.[2]

It was not the first divine experience of Hildegard's, but it was certainly the one that left the greatest impression on her, and she embarked on a quest to write down and describe her visions exactly as the voice of God Himself had shown her. Around 1150, Hildegard and her most loyal nuns made their way to start a new convent, as God had instructed her to do, and she became abbess of the convent at Rupertsberg. Hildegard's career and texts have been studied at great length, but there is one particular area where historiography and hagiography do

[1] Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-4.
[2] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 59.

not do her justice: we know who Hildegard the saint was, so who, exactly, was Hildegard the human?

Hildegard and Illness

When one examines the works of Hildegard, perhaps the most glaring glimpse into her personal life is that in each work, she takes care to mention at least once the recurrence of a cripplingly painful illness that inflicted her throughout her life. Without a doubt Hildegard must have believed her overbearing, physical pain was a direct result of her bond with God. An interesting perspective; why, after all, would a woman who has dedicated her life to her religion not want a powerful physical link with He whom no one else would ever have the same relationship? In the *Scivias*, her first visionary work, she states that she fell ill when, out of feminine humility, she refused to write down what she saw in her visions, and that when she finally began to write she miraculously recovered.[3] She also explains in her *Vita*, her hagiographical work dictated to several secretaries at the end of her life, that when Abbot Kuno of Disibodenberg refused to allow her to move to Rupertsberg, she was bedridden until he acquiesced.[4] With countless other expressions over the years of her physical illness, and despite numerous preaching tours that she went on in her later years, it is clear that Hildegard's life in many ways revolved around her frequent periods of ill health.

So what, from our modern perspective, was the nature of Hildegard's illness? The overwhelming consensus in historiography settles comfortably on chronic migraine. Practically every scholarly look at Hildegard's personal life

[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 6; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete*" (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 200. Dronke somewhat comically refers to Hildegard's spontaneous recovery after the Abbot Kuno problem as her going on strike.

recounts the story of how scientific historian Charles Singer first diagnosed Hildegard with migraine based on the reoccurrence in her *Scivias* illuminations of shimmering lights and distorted shapes that, to him, resembled the phenomenon of 'scintillating scotoma,' a type of migraine aura.[5] Sabina Flanagan notes that one might be skeptical of a migraine diagnosis, as Hildegard never specifically notes head pain, but this is easily excusable when one considers that Hildegard's focus was never on herself, but on her role as God's mouthpiece.[6] Barbara Newman notes that Hildegard's migraine may have been linked with the Rhineland weather, and Hildegard herself suggests this at the end of her *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of Divine Works), her third visionary work.[7] Here, in the voice of God, she describes herself:

> For she is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a life of service. She derives her bodily makeup from the air. And thus illness is stamped on her from this airy sphere by rain, wind, and every change in the weather to such a degree that she has no stability of body.[8]

There seem to be countless other indications of what could have possibly been a migraine in Hildegard's works. Sabina Flanagan points out that as Hildegard reached middle age – also, perhaps not coincidentally, when she

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[5] Katherine Foxhall, "Making Modern Migraine Medieval: Men of Science, Hildegard of Bingen, and the Life of a Retrospective Diagnosis," *Medical History* 58 (2014), accessed December 15, 2015, doi: 10.1017. The issue of whether or not Hildegard herself actually designed the illuminations herself or whether she described them to someone else is a debate on its own. For more information, see Richard K. Emmerson, "The Representation of Antichrist in Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias*: Image, Word, Commentary, and Visionary Experience," *Gesta* 41(2002): 95.
[6] Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 191.
[7] Barbara Newman, "Hildgard of Bingen: Visions and Validation," *Church History* 54 (1985): 167.
[8] Matthew Fox, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen's Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear & Company, 1987), 265.

began having truly significant visions – her migraines changed somewhat.[9] This readily falls into what is known about migraines. That someone who had migraines from childhood, and that that person's migraines changed when they reached middle age (namely, menopause) is not at all uncommon. Similarly, it is interesting to note that a particularly common migraine symptom is sensitivity to light; one cannot help but wonder if this sensitivity is partially explanatory of the predominance of bright lights in most, if not all, of her visions. On the other hand, the light itself was the central link, as she saw it, between her and God, so to trivialize this vital visionary trait is to trivialize Hildegard's perception of her visions' importance, and this would be a great disrespect to her. Even so, there is something very enticing about trying to imagine Hildegard's visions from a strictly secular, scientific perspective, and doing so without a doubt reminds us that someone who could feel so much physical pain (and, indeed, reminds us of it at every turn) is also an extremely human figure with human weaknesses.[10]

Besides migraines, there is much evidence to support the occurrence of other significant illnesses that grew to characterize Hildegard. Considering the frequency of periods in which Hildegard was bedridden for months (migraine headaches generally only last for a maximum of a few hours or days at a time), and considering the incredible age that Hildegard lived to despite being chronically ill for her entire life, it is easy to accept that Hildegard must have had other illnesses less linked to her visionary experience. While one might first consider epilepsy because of the evidence of Hildegard's aura, Sabina Flanagan

[9] Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen,* 196.
[10] See Foxhall, "Making Modern Migraine Medieval," for an introduction to the debate in scholarly fields about the value of retrospective diagnoses. I feel that historians should have a right to relate to their subjects in whatever ways they see fit, and that even if Hildegard would have objected it is particularly intriguing to imagine the scientific aspects of her illness while keeping in mind that in her own time, Hildegard believed entirely that her visions were from God Himself.

points out that scintillating scotoma has not been seen in modern day epilepsy patients.[11] Furthermore, victims of epileptic seizures cannot typically remember the event of the seizure itself, whereas Hildegard frequently describes being fully aware during each of her experiences.[12] Additionally, there is one other illness we might suppose Hildegard had if we take literally her statement to St. Bernard of Clairvaux that she "has never, from [my] earliest childhood, lived one hour free from anxiety."[13] It is true that there is not particularly much evidence to suppose that Hildegard is speaking of anything more than the fear of God that all Catholics were supposed to live with, but it is also true that mental illnesses such as anxiety disorders are often as common as they are untreated, and to assume that Hildegard suffered from a mental illness of any kind is perhaps the most humanizing of any retroactive diagnosis we could possibly give to her.

One does have to wonder if part of the reason that Hildegard's story as a frail, weak woman who was given a unique gift from God was not in some way cemented by her suffering. Just as Eve brought on suffering and inferiority to the female sex, so too must Hildegard have suffered in order to be as close with God as she possibly could. Similarly, and for the sake of humanizing Hildegard further, one has to wonder if Hildegard would have felt that the intense physical suffering she endured was worth the experience of being so closely and intimately linked with God. Another question that bears asking is, would

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[11] Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen,* 9, 193. Page 6 of this text notes that Hildegard, when Abbot Kuno refused her permission to move the convent, was rigid and could not be physically turned from side to side. This itself is could to a certain degree be considered as a signifier of epilepsy, and it is not impossible that Hildegard had it as a secondary infliction, but it is clear that epilepsy was not the medical source of her visions. It is important to note that the term "epilepsy" continues in common use, although increasingly the term "seizure disorder" has become preferred due to the past stigma attached to those experiencing seizures.

[12] For example, she states this in her letter to Guibert of Gembloux in Letter 103r in Baird and Ehrman, *Letters* vol. I, 23.

[13] Letter 1 in Baird and Ehrman, *Letters* vol. II, 27-28.

Hildegard been as active (and to go even further, would she have been remembered at all) if not for her chronic illness? These are questions that cannot be answered, but they do serve to emphasize that she was certainly in the right place at the right time, and that in other circumstances she could very possibly have been prosecuted by the Catholic Church for heretical experiences.

Weakness and Vulnerability

Around 1150, when Hildegard had just established the abbey at Rupertsberg, she received a letter from a Canoness named Tengswich of Andernach that, despite its humble language, had a strict undertone of disapproval.[14] Between words appraising the saintliness of Hildegard, who clearly was already well-known even before her first major work, *Scivias,* had been completed, Tengswich refers to the confusion of her sisters regarding the way Hildegard conducted her abbey. Citing that on feast days Hildegard allowed her nuns to wear their hair loose with white silk veils, adorned with gold rings and crowns, and that only wealthy, high-born girls were accepted into Rupertsberg, Tengswich refers Hildegard to different biblical passages that emphasize female humility and respect for the impoverished. In the voice of God, Hildegard responds. Likening virginity to spring and marriage to winter, she states that those scriptures that Tengswich had mentioned only applied to sullied wives of men and not to virgins, the most pure of all God's creations. Furthermore, Hildegard likens the mixing of social classes as putting different species of farm animals in the same enclosure: a combination sure to lead to slaughter.[15]

[14] Given the nature of Hildegard's *Vita* as a hagiography and not a biography, most of the dates regarding Hildegard's precise movements and affairs are estimated between a few years and should not be taken as exact.
[15] Letters 52 and 52r in *Ibid.*, 127-130.

Hildegard's reply to the canoness reveals very interesting peculiarities about her character. For one, she did not subscribe to the notion that those who dedicate themselves completely to God must relinquish all material possessions. This very likely comes from her past of being an eight-year-old oblate from a family who had chosen the life of a nun for her. There is, to be sure, no doubt of Hildegard's devout faith in God, but it is key that she did not choose her fate for herself. That Hildegard, therefore, did not feel any obligation to relinquish material possessions, nor did she force her daughters to do so, shows how unique the nuns at Rupertsberg must have been. Further, that Hildegard had what were essentially, to borrow an anachronistic term, classist tendencies likely originated from her being born into a sufficiently wealthy family. To be fair to Hildegard, it is not unusual that someone born to such a family would hold onto notions that they had learned in childhood, but it is interesting to have it so clearly demonstrated that someone as famous and saintly as Hildegard of Bingen could be suspect to human flaws like materialism and classism.

Comparatively, these human flaws are slight next to the vulnerability that Hildegard shows in what could be considered her greatest weakness: Richardis of Stade. Daughter of a wealthy marchioness and sister of an archbishop, Richardis was a nun who for years provided help during Hildegard's illness, gave moral support when it was needed, and accompanied her abbess in the move to Rupertsberg. In 1151, Hildegard discovered that Richardis had been chosen to fill the position of abbess in a convent far north in Bremen, the diocese held by the latter's brother Hartwig.[16] Because of Hildegard's obvious affection for Richardis, it is no surprise that this news came at a great shock, but the struggle that arose from this revelation provides perhaps the most revealing look into Hildgard's personal life.

[16] Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen,* 173.

The Richardis affair and Hildgard's desperate fight to get her beloved nun to stay at Rupertsberg are chronicled in a series of letters from 1151. First we have Heinrich, Archbishop of Mainz (where Rupertsberg and Disibodenberg were located) to Hildegard, commanding her to release Richardis; Hildegard's response, actually relaying the voice of God from a visionary experience, is both a refusal and a lecture, a daring move from a humble abbess to her superior.[17] The next letter, from Hildegard to Richardis's brother, Hartwig, was written after Richardis had already settled into her new convent, and is nothing short of a plea for Hartwig to return his biological sister and Hildegard's spiritual one back to Rupertsberg.[18] Following this, we have a letter from Pope Eugenius III to Hildegard, a response to a letter of hers that has unfortunately been lost. The tone of this letter, only the last paragraph of which acknowledges Hildegard's request for him to send Richardis back to her, seems chillingly impersonal as he tells her he is deferring the matter back to Archbishop Heinrich to settle once and for all.[19] Given Hildegard's earlier, contentious response to the archbishop's command to her and her outright refusal to obey, it can be assumed that Hildegard must have known at this point that there was little chance Richardis would be returned to Rupertsberg.

Hildegard's final attempt, then, was a heartfelt but accepting plea to Richardis herself:

> Daughter, listen to me, your mother, speaking to you in the spirit: my grief flies up to heaven. My sorrow is destroying the great confidence and consolation that I once had in mankind . . . Now let all who have grief like mine mourn with me, all who, in the love of

[17] Letters 18 and 18r in Baird and Ehrman, Letters vol. I, 69-70. In this instance, Hildegard refers to God's voice in her vision as the Bright Fountain, only one of her many allegorical names for the same thing. Other examples include another description of a fountain or, most often, the Living Light.
[18] Letter 12 in *Ibid.*, 48-49.
[19] Letter 4 in *Ibid.*, 34-35.

> God, have had such great love in their hearts and minds for a person – as I had for you – but who was snatched away from them in an instant, as you were from me. But, all the same, may the angel of God go before you, may the Son of God protect you, and may his mother watch over you. Be mindful of your poor desolate mother, Hildegard, so that your happiness may not fade.[20]

It is no small testament to Hildegard that, despite making it clear that Richardis's acceptance of her new position of abbess had broken the visionary's heart, she ultimately gives Richardis her blessing and wishes her the protection of God. Ultimately, as a twist of fate would have it, one year later Hildegard received a letter from Hartwig telling her of Richardis's death. The letter tells of how Richardis, in her last days, had expressed the desire to return to Hildegard at Rupertsberg, and asking Hildegard to love Richardis as much as Richardis had loved Hildegard. In another response that would give great credit to Hildegard's strength of character, she responded with forgiveness for Hartwig and blessed him in God's name.[21]

There is no small amount of implications from this trying time in Hildegard's life. One thing is clearly certain; Hildegard's feelings toward Richardis and toward those seeking to keep her spiritual daughter away from her show that Hildegard had passionate emotions that were capable of overcoming her in the most human way possible. There are two prominent sides to Hildegard that we see in this struggle. The first, is the loving spiritual mother of Richardis, who Sabina Flanagan estimates must have been in her late twenties when she left Rupertsberg – an age that notably, could have been the age of a biological daughter if Hildegard had had one.[22] On the other hand, we also see Hildegard as someone who is scornful of those who oppose her, who is not

[20] Letter 64 in *Ibid.*, 143-144.
[21] Letter 13 and 13r in *Ibid.*, 49-51.
[22] Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen,* 173.

afraid to go to extreme lengths to try to keep her dear daughter with her. This second side is shown particularly in her first letter to Hartwig, where she refers to Abbot Kuno of Disibodenberg (the same abbot who had opposed her move to Rupertsberg only a few years before) as a "certain horrible man" who "has trampled underfoot my desire and will", and who was guilty of wanting power for himself more than he wanted to fulfill the will of God.[23] These two opposing sides to Hildegard's feelings about the Richardis conflict demonstrate perfectly the range of emotion and the conflict of one's conscience, and remind us that even those as renowned and holy as Hildegard are capable all these human emotions.

Further, we must consider the implications of Hildegard's exceedingly desperate attempt to keep Richardis, as well as the extent to which she placed the blame on various parties. As mentioned above, she evidently blamed Archbishop Heinrich for "gratifying his own perverted will" rather than following that of God – in other words, the will that Hildegard testified to be God's own.[24] She also favored accusing others of simony, insinuating that Richardis only achieved her position as an abbess because either she, her brother, her mother the marchioness, or perhaps Heinrich himself bought that position for her. Indeed, there is a suspicious amount of possibility to this suggestion, because as Peter Dronke points out, around the same time of Richardis's election another nun from Rupertsberg was also elected as an abbess elsewhere: Adelheid, Richardis's mother's granddaughter. Dronke adds that Adelheid could not have been older than a teenager, and may not have even had time to take her vows; given the wealth and influence of the von Stade family in the northern German lands, therefore, it is not altogether unlikely that Hildegard's accusations may reflect

[23] Letter 12 in Baird and Ehrman, *Letters* vol. I, 28-29.
[24] Letter 18r in *Ibid.*, 70.

some of the truth.[25] Even so, one has to wonder whether or not the one Hildegard actually blamed was herself. Perhaps she believed she had not done enough for Richardis to want to stay with her; perhaps she felt guilt so heavy that she needed to place the blame on others in order to protect herself from even more heartbreak; perhaps she felt that God was punishing her for something. This last point, however, seems the least likely, because there is no evidence to suppose that Hildegard had anything less than complete faith in God's will, to which she was privy at all times. Still, because Hildegard *was* only human, it is not impossible that someone as clearly vulnerable as she would be immune to the pressures of guilt and self-doubt.

There is one final point regarding the Richardis conflict that must be discussed, which is the expression in the letters of Hildegard's personal feelings versus her expression of God's will. It is very important to note that her letter to Heinrich is the only instance in this affair in which she uses God's voice to convey her message. It is possible that the letter from Hildegard to Pope Eugenius, which was lost, may too have been from the perspective of the Bright Fountain or the Living Light. However, the letters about this matter that we do have never indicate that she is speaking God's words instead of her own. This is in stark contrast to the vast majority of not only Hildegard's other letters but her entire works as a whole. In almost all instances, she uses her visionary powers to

[25] Dronke, *Women Writers,* 155-156.

speak through God's will when writing to anyone in her correspondences.[26] Although she insists that God's will is that Richardis returns to her, she does not take advantage of her visionary powers to prove it. Instead, she speaks from her own heart and soul, a better demonstration of Hildegard's human vulnerability and human emotion than any other part of her documented life.

Interpersonal Relationships

Just as the letters circulated in the Richardis affair show the different aspects of Hildegard's humanity, so too does her correspondence with other members of the Catholic faith. The available collections of Hildegard's letters, of which there are hundreds, contain only or at least mostly, letters between her and other members of the clergy, rather than from the laity. It is difficult to say whether or not she corresponded with others outside the Church. It is also impossible to recreate Hildegard's interactions with every group or category of people given the large amount of people with whom she exchanged letters.

[26] The fact that Hildegard only speaks using God's voice in the letters to Heinrich brings up an interesting question to which there is no answer: Did Hildegard ever take advantage of her reputation as a visionary to convince others – or, even, herself – that what she experienced was the word of God when actually it did not come from a vision? This suggestion is not meant to detract from Hildegard's significance as a powerful figure in Catholic theology, because without a doubt Hildegard absolutely believed that her gift from God was real, which is all that truly matters. What I am suggesting, however, is that there are many instances in which the occurrence of a real vision seems unlikely given the context. For example, in Letter 49r in Baird and Ehrman, *Letters* vol. I, 123, Hildegard responds in words from the fountain in a brief, impersonal note to an abbess who claimed to have met Hildegard in person in the past. Despite that she speaks in God's words to this abbess, if we assume that Hildegard's visions were related to migraines it seems unlikely that she would have anything visionary to say to someone who she does not seem to know or have interest in. This matter, however, is more related to faith than evidence or logic. What I am sure of is that Hildegard sincerely believed she was privy the will of God Himself and in most cases did not treat her gift lightly. Whether she ever invented or exaggerated the will of God is up to personal interpretation.

Accordingly, I will examine only a select few of interactions which reveal something particular about Hildegard's personality.

To relate this first back to the Richardis conflict, we can examine a selection of interactions between some who opposed Hildegard in this. An interesting example is Abbot Kuno, with whom she had a difficult relationship ever since he had fought her departure from Disibodenberg. In a letter, an unknown amount of time before his death, Kuno apparently seeks to reconcile his and Hildegard's differences and asks her to tell his brothers if she has learned anything of their patron St. Disibod through her visions. Hildegard's revealing response may seem particularly surprising coming from someone who was so forgiving of Hartwig years before despite so much pain. Her opening line immediately accuses him of getting into the private affairs of others and being foolish, and in the end advises him that he should be more like her if he hopes to find happiness in death for all of eternity.[27] Years later, in 1170, when Kuno's successor Abbot Helengerus sent to Hildegard, now in her seventies, a letter confessing his sinfulness and asking for consolation, Hildegard responded instead with a harsh, biting letter, speaking from a vision:

> Now, listen and learn so that in the inwardness of your soul you will be ashamed [. . .] I sometimes have chosen people of unstable disposition like you so that I might hear the sound of their intellect [. . .] But when they were found to be of no use, they also fell.[28]

Though from the context of these letters we do not know what could have created such a rift between Kuno's successor and Hildegard, her attitude toward Helengerus and her previous disposition toward Kuno before, during, and after the Richardis affair suggests that Hildegard may be guilty of holding a grudge against the abbots of Disibodenberg. Though this may seem a radical proposition

[27] Letters 74 and 74r in *Ibid.*, 158-162.
[28] Letter 76r in *Ibid.*, 164-165.

for a woman that was and is depicted in such a positive light, what we have seen of her so far demonstrates that the suggestion of Hildegard holding grudges would befit her character.[29]

On more positive, or perhaps sanctifying, note, Hildegard also shows herself to be generous in her advice and interested in the spirituality of others. This is in no way true of her visionary works, especially the *Scivias*, which is rich with advice on how to live a pious life to the approval of God. But on a more personal note, Hildegard offers what could be seen as motherly advice to Elisabeth of Schönau, a fellow mystic and visionary of her time. Elisabeth had written to Hildegard seeking guidance on what path to take: whether she should conceal her visions to avoid the risk of being deemed a heretic, or to pronounce them publically as God and his angels have bidden her. Hildegard in her response, this time from the Serene Light, related to Elisabeth's insecurity, saying "I too cower in the puniness of my mind, and am greatly wearied by anxiety and fear. Yet from time to time I resound a little, like the dim light sound of a trumpet from the Living Light."[30] It is not unlike Hildegard to emphasize her weakness and frailty – indeed, that was the way of being a mystic and nun in the Middle Ages. But in this correspondence, rather than being frank and distant, she seems to relate to Elisabeth perhaps more personally than any others she met through letters, especially because of Elisabeth's plight of not being sure whether she should share her visions or not; Hildegard had been in that same situation barely

[29] It should also be mentioned that Hildegard seems to have similarly held a grudge against Heinrich, at least in regards to Richardis: one year after Richardis's death, Hildegard wrote Heinrich to tell him, in part, that his days were limited. Indeed, part of the text itself is interesting enough to be quoted directly: "Ach! you piece of dust, why are you not ashamed at exalting yourself to the heights when you ought to be in the muck? Now, therefore, let madmen blush. But as for you, rise up, and abandon your curse by fleeing from it." It is significant that she once again here uses the word of God Himself to say this to him. Letter 19 in Baird and Ehrman, *Letters*, 71.
[30] Letters 201 and 201r in Baird and Ehrman, *Letters* vol. II, 176-181.

a decade before this correspondence. It is refreshing to see that even after the heartbreak and disappointment of the previous few years (these letters to Elisabeth are dated sometime between 1152 and 1156) she still managed to retain her very human sense of goodwill and loving.

Finally, there is an interesting characteristic of Hildegard's, whenever she received a letter from an abbot or abbess who expressed either weariness about their position or a desire to step down, Hildegard would reply with strict advice not to do so. For example, one abbess, Sophia, wrote to her in a tone of exhaustion, expressing a wish to retire from being an abbess and live a simpler life. In Hildegard's response, she warned the abbess that stepping down would lead to greater instability in life than she already had, and that she needed to continue being holy and faithful to God and remain in her position.[31] Similarly, when an unnamed abbess expressed the desire to leave her own convent and join Hildegard at Rupertsberg, Hildegard (notably not using the voice of God as her own) gave her a talk on responsibility, metaphorically telling the woman that God has given her her position and that she should endure all trials that come to her.[32] There are two possible suggestions why Hildegard speaks to these abbesses in this way. First, perhaps Hildegard felt more fulfilled in her position as abbess than she had before she had been elected one, and wished for other women to know the same contentment in their position that she did in hers. Second, the intensity with which she suggests they stay in their positions might remind one of the passion with which she opposed the Richardis situation. Perhaps Hildegard wanted to protect them and the sisters at their respective convents from the pain of heartbreak she felt when her beloved daughter left her. Or perhaps not, but it would be quite like the Hildegard we have seen, to try to

[31] Letters 50 and 50r in Baird and Ehrman, *Letters* vol. I, 123-124.
[32] Letter 61r in *Ibid.*, 140.

keep what one might consider families under God from splintering the way Richardis and Adelheid had. Regardless of the explanation, one thing is sure: Hildegard was a woman of great passion despite her public facade as the humble servant of God. Though, of course, what is there to say she could not be both?

Conclusion

In reviewing Hildegard of Bingen's life and her accomplishments, to say that she was important in Christian theology and a thousand years of history would be an understatement. That a woman, and indeed frail and weak a woman as she constantly reminds us she was, could receive what she believed to be divine messages from God – that others believed her by only her descriptions, and that the Church and the pope himself (or, more accurately, several popes) even approved and promoted her is no small feat for any female Christian in twelfth-century Europe. Hildegard's works are impressive on their own, but they are even more so when one considers the person, the woman, the *human* that created them.

There is no shortage of benefits to humanizing any historical figure. These are people who seem, sometimes, more fiction than fact. They are figures from a past so distant that we can never possibly know what they looked or sounded like. Yet, to reconstruct their personality through their published works and their letters reminds us that, had any of us been born some thousand years earlier, we might have known these people, talked with them, and gotten to know their opinions, their thoughts, their small quirks – the things that make someone a human being. Hildegard may have been saintly in her day, and certainly is saintly in our memory of her, but seeing a vulnerable woman who

had chronic illness, who held grudges, and who could not let go of someone she loved reminds us that every historical figure that we study from an impersonal, scholarly perspective was really just a person the same as any of us.

Figure 3. ***Hildegard von Bingen receiving a divine inspiration and relating it to her scribe.*** **From a scan of the Rupertsberg manuscript of Hildegard von Bingen,** ***Scivias*** **(1141). Public Domain.**