

Aesthetics as the Connection between Spiritual Practice and the Cultivation of Virtue in Hildegard of Bingen's Theology of Music

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*Therefore, let everyone who understands God by faith faithfully offer Him tireless praise,
and with joyful devotion sing to Him without ceasing.*

– Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, III 13:15

Introduction

This opening quotation points the way towards a response to two central questions I wish to explore in this paper. The first is a question of virtue ethics: what is the purpose and end of human life? The second is a question of theological aesthetics: what moves the human heart?¹ Both questions are about conversion – the movement from who we are to whom we should become, and what it is that inspires the human heart on this transformative journey. Hildegard's response to both of these questions suggests the offering of ongoing praise to God through song, reflecting her approach to Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing." She would claim the experience of giving thanks and praise through liturgy and worship as that center.

An experience of beauty, whether in music or nature, can both delight and make the invisible visible. It is this revelatory capacity that makes beauty a vital subject for theology. Theological aesthetics recognizes a religious dimension in the experience of beauty, an occasion of understanding divine nature and activity. The question of what moves the human heart points to the center of the spiritual quest – a quest for holiness rooted in the capacity to know God and the transformation of the soul.

¹ Garcia-Rivera, Alejandro. *Community of the Beautiful: Theological Aesthetics*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999: 9.

The ultimate value that one perceives, often revealed through experiences of beauty, is lived out in particular ways. Spirituality's project of life-integration² brings together questions of how to create a way of life that adequately reflects this ultimate value, a way made up of particular practices and reflection on what is held to be good and true and beautiful. In the modern discourse on ethics, there has been a recent return to virtue ethics as a way of rooting the moral life in the concept of *telos*, or ultimate end.³ Ethics intersects with spirituality around *telos*.

The focus of Benedictine spirituality is on a particular way of life, centered around spiritual practices that orient the imagination towards development of a more virtuous character. One of the main practices that forms the structure of monastic life is the singing of the Divine Office. Hildegard of Bingen was a twelfth-century Benedictine nun who was abbess of her monastic community. Over her lifetime she composed a tremendous amount of music to be included in the singing of the Divine Office. At age eighty, she had a conflict with the prelates of Mainz over the burial of an excommunicated man at her monastery. Hildegard claimed that he had been reconciled formally to the church before his death, but the prelates wanted the body removed from the burial ground. When Hildegard refused to comply with their authority, they imposed an interdict forbidding her community to sing the Divine Office. Hildegard wrote a letter in response after enduring several months without music. This response represents her more formal reflection on aesthetics, particularly the central role of music in the daily spiritual,

² Schneiders, Sandra. "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline." *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6 (Spring 1998): 3.

³ Alisdair MacIntyre, a professor of philosophy, revived the conversation around the role of virtue ethics in his book *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). In it, he describes virtue as relying on the concepts of practice, narrative, and tradition. Many Christian ethicists have since taken his work and applied it to the field of Christian morality, and by examining the roles that spiritual practice, narrative, and tradition play in fostering the development of the virtues.

moral, and liturgical life of the monastery. I will demonstrate how her theory of music shows the fundamental connection between spiritual practice and the cultivation of virtue.

To understand the role of the virtues for Hildegard, it is essential to understand her larger theological vision of the cosmos and history. I begin this article focusing on two important facets of this vision that are essential to understanding her integration of music, spiritual practice, and the development of virtue: the drama of salvation history, and the harmony between body and soul. Then I will turn to her role as abbess of a Benedictine community, and the ways she lived this role out, particularly as spiritual guide, composer of music, and teacher of virtue.

I will then briefly introduce Alejandro Garcia-Rivera's understanding of theological aesthetics, particularly his central notions of glory and praise as revealing an ongoing dialectic of reception and response in the God-human relationship which finds its ultimate expression in the work of the liturgy.

Finally, I will turn to an understanding of Hildegard's theory of music using her famous letter in which she spells out her aesthetics explicitly, rooted again in a sense of history and harmony between body and soul.

Hildegard of Bingen and the Medieval World

*(B)y the one thousand and one hundredth year after the Incarnation of Christ, the teachings of the Apostles and the burning righteousness which He had established in Christians and in the spiritual, began to slacken and turn to wavering.
(Vita, Book Two)*

These are Hildegard's own words describing the context of the times in which she was born. While modern writings of the twelfth century portray it as a time of renaissance and renewal, Hildegard evokes a sense of decline. She described the time she lived in as "an 'effeminate age' in which the Scriptures were neglected, the clergy 'lukewarm and sluggish,' and

the Christian people ill-informed.”⁴ The time in which Hildegard lived was a period of transition and crisis. The unity of Christendom appeared to be threatened with impending disaster. The forces that posed a challenge to the old order included the rise of cities and commerce, the intellectual challenge to authority of Peter Abelard, and the doctrinal challenge posed by a rampant spread of heresies.

Hildegard was interested in eschatology and her explication of theology in her visions reveals the way in which she locates her own birth and prophetic calling in the broad sweep of salvation history. She was not seeking radical change in the church; rather she challenged the abuse of authority. She remained entirely orthodox in her theology, vigorously defended classical monasticism, supported the aristocratic privileges of her nuns, and was not sympathetic to the newer spiritual movements of her time.⁵ She claimed her authority in response to God, whom she called the ‘Living Light.’ The fact that God would have to call a woman to take care of what the clergy had failed to do (that is, to teach the scriptures and proclaim God’s justice) was a sign to Hildegard of just how bad things had become.

Hildegard and the Drama of Salvation

But Paradise is the place of delight, which blooms with the freshness of flowers and grass and the charms of spices, full of fine odors and dowered with the joy of blessed souls, giving invigorating moisture to the dry ground; it supplies strong force to the earth, as the soul gives strength to the body, for Paradise is not darkened by shadow or the perdition of sinners.
(*Scivias* I 2:28)

In the opening Declaration of the *Scivias*, her famous first book of visions, Hildegard proclaims: “These are true visions flowing from God.” She received these visions from the time she was a young child and they survey the course of salvation history from creation and paradise

⁴ Newman, Barbara. “Introduction,” *Scivias*. Mother Columba Hart, trans. New York: Paulist Press, 1990: 12.

⁵ Sheldrake, Philip, S.J. *Spirituality and History*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998: 81.

to the final judgement. She describes two forms of seeing: the first is “the reflection of the living Light,” in which she perceives human forms and architectural models, and then interprets them with a voice from heaven. The world she sees is symbolic and allegorical, with everything in creation having some deeper significance. It appears to her in order to instruct and to teach, so that her visions might be made visible and audible to all. The second is “the living Light” itself in which all sorrow and anguish leaves her. She perceives her visions with inner eyes and ears so that the invisible realm becomes visible to her inner spirit. She describes the visible and temporal as a manifestation of the invisible and eternal.

Hildegard’s vision is of a primordial paradise from which Adam and Eve fell, and from which the whole history of salvation gains its reason and impetus. The first book of her visions, *Scivias*, centers on the Creator and Creation, beginning with the creation and fall. She describes the fall of Lucifer and his angels and the fall of humankind. Adam and Eve are cast out of Paradise where they were sinless. It was the devil who “cast out Adam and Eve by his deception from the seat of blessedness and thrust them into the darkness of deception.”⁶ Human disobedience causes all of creation to rebel and destroys the original harmony that existed. The universe is presented as a cosmic egg which has a symbolic layered structure, in which God sustains powerfully contesting forces in a delicate balance. God also set angels and archangels, Powers and Principalities, and Virtues in place for the assistance and help of human beings.

The second book of *Scivias* focuses on the Redeemer and Redemption. She transforms the Genesis narrative by describing a flower that Adam was supposed to pick, rather than the forbidden fruit he was supposed to avoid. In this way she focuses on obedience as a positive good that Adam rejected through the Devil’s counsel. She describes Redemption as proceeding

⁶ *Scivias* I 2:10.

in gradual stages – beginning with the night of sin illuminated by the patriarchs, then the prophets, John the Baptist, and finally Christ bringing the radiance of dawn. Christ’s passion and resurrection redeem Adam.

The third book describes the history of salvation which is symbolized by a building in her visions. This edifice represents the course of salvation history, as well as the doctrines and virtues that every Christian must believe in to be saved. She then describes the last days, the fall of the Antichrist and the last judgement in which a new heaven and new earth are created. She concludes this vision and the *Scivias* with a Symphony of Praise that forms an early version of some of her musical compositions and her morality play.

The drama of salvation has two perspectives: the first is set in time and focuses on the soul’s exile in a fallen world and the struggle of the elect against evil. The second is the inherent structures of latent goodness of the natural world and of life itself. Her visions point to instruction in how to work towards the final restoration of the harmony of divine order in which Christ and the virtues play a central role.

Hildegard’s Vision of Body and Soul

But a person has within himself three paths. What are they? The soul, the body and the senses; and all human life is led in these. How? The soul vivifies the body and conveys the breath of life to the senses; the body draws the soul to itself and opens the senses; and the senses touch the soul and draw the body.

(Scivias I 4:18)

As did many medieval writers, Hildegard celebrates harmony in the different aspects of her work. For her, this harmony extends all the way to the relationship between the soul and the body with its five senses, which for many in medieval times, was an inherently antagonistic relationship. However, her visions reveal an understanding of how the integration of the body

and the soul is total, yet still holds tension. In addition, they reveal the body and the senses as inherently good and offer the human creature the capacity to receive divine beauty and recognize God, while the senses can also be seduced by evil.⁷ Like her medieval contemporaries, she condemns acts of the flesh which put a love of the world and flesh above love for God. Body and soul can be at odds with each other and weaken a person's faith. Despite the denigration of the flesh and its desires, Hildegard's writings are also filled with examples of the body and soul acting in unity.

In the celebration of the sacrament of communion, she describes the integration of both the visible and invisible aspects of the human being:

The human soul, which is invisible, invisibly receives the sacrament, which exists invisibly in that oblation, while the human body, which is visible, visibly receives the oblation that visibly embodies that sacrament. But the two are one, just as Christ is God and Man, and the rational soul and mortal flesh make up one human being.⁸

The two are one; body and soul are interdependent. The soul laments over the body's struggles, its "filth, licentiousness and wantonness of conduct," but also recognizes its life-giving link to the body: "I am the living breath in a human being placed in a tabernacle of marrow, veins, bones and flesh, giving it vitality and supporting its every movement."⁹ The problem of sin is not inherent in the body or the senses, but in how they are used. In this sense she has a very positive anthropology, believing that human beings were created with the ability to choose God freely. The Fall was the result of a transgression – the human person deceived by the Devil – perverting the five senses from their true purpose. "The Holy Spirit breathed on them (the five

⁷ Emerson, Jan S. "A Poetry of Science: Relating Body and Soul in the *Scivias*." *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays*. Maud Burnett McInerney, ed. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998: 77.

⁸ *Scivias* II 6:14.

⁹ *Scivias* I 4:4.

senses) for people's good; for with the five senses people can regard the height of Divinity and discern both good and evil."¹⁰ In another vision, she describes the five wounds of Christ as purifying the five senses.¹¹ Both the Holy Spirit and Christ play a significant role in sanctifying the senses, making them capable of goodness and working with the soul towards its proper goal.

Hildegard uses the image of sap flowing through a tree to describe the ways in which the soul rules the body by vivifying it. The self is redeemed through the body and soul working together in cooperation. Deeds were important for Hildegard; the cooperation of a person with their five senses and with the virtues results in the person who would "bear fruit."¹²

Hildegard as Abbess: Spiritual Guide, Composer of Music, Teacher of Virtue

Spiritual Guide and the Rule of St. Benedict

And I heard a voice from the true light saying to me: The Holy Spirit effected most brilliant gifts and mystic inspirations in St. Benedict, so that his mind glowed with the love of God, and by his virtues he shone like the dawn.
(Introduction, *Explanation of the Rule of St. Benedict*)

In her visions, Hildegard extols St. Benedict with highest praise: "For Benedict is like a second Moses. . . My servant Benedict by the sweetness of the Holy Spirit's inspiration made the plan of this order a separate and level path, which before him was an exceedingly hard way of life."¹³ His Rule provided a framework for monastic discipline and the structure and goals for her spiritual life. Her praises of his virtue lends insight into his significance for her. In the opening of the prologue to his Rule, Benedict begins with the command to "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart." Hildegard ends each vision in Book III of her *Scivias* with a similar command: "But let the one who has ears

¹⁰ *Scivias* III 2:22.

¹¹ *Scivias* I 6:3.

¹² *Scivias* III 3:3.

¹³ *Scivias* II 5:20.

sharp to hear inner meanings ardently love My reflection and pant after My words, and inscribe them in his soul and conscience. Amen.” At the heart of Benedictine spirituality is an obedience to the command to listen deeply to the Word of God and to allow what one hears to transform one’s heart and soul.

Hildegard wrote a commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict at the request of another Benedictine community, as she was a recognized Benedictine authority in her time. Her commentary focuses more on the dimensions of practice in the Rule than its theology. Her comment that “(n)othing is lacking in it (the Rule) because it was done and completed in the Holy Spirit”¹⁴ reflects the fullness of the Rule for Hildegard’s spiritual life and vision.

Hildegard was an extraordinary woman who has been described in a variety of roles: visionary and mystic, theologian, prophet, poet, artist, medical writer, correspondent, composer, and dramatist are all titles that can be aptly applied to her. We might understand the importance of the Rule in her life when we understand the central role she played: “Hildegard acted in her world fundamentally as an abbess. Though she spoke as the mouthpiece of the ‘Living Light,’ she understood herself as charged with the care of souls, in her own community and among Christians at large.”¹⁵ As abbess she acted in many capacities that helped her to fulfill her role as a divinely charged guide of her sisters in the school of virtue of the monastery. Two central roles I will focus on here on Hildegard as a composer of music and as a teacher of virtue.

¹⁴ Hildegard of Bingen. *Explanation of the Rule of Benedict*. Hugh Feiss, intro. and trans. Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co.1990: 18.

¹⁵ Van Engen, John. “Abbess: ‘Mother and Teacher’.” *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Barbara Newman, ed. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998: 30.

Composer of Music and the Divine Office

Thus, O human, you see the lucent sky, which symbolizes the brilliance of the joy of the citizens of Heaven; in which you hear different kinds of music, marvelously embodying all the meanings you heard before. You hear the joyous citizens of Heaven, steadfastly persevering in the ways of Truth, and laments calling people back to those praises and joys.
(*Scivias* III 13:10)

For Hildegard, the heavens were filled with an ongoing celestial concert. The making of music was a duty and the heart of praise and joy. One of the defining actions of monastic life was the communal singing of the Divine Office, providing the structure and focus for the nuns' daily lives. The sisters were immersed in scripture through the office. All one hundred and fifty psalms were sung each week through the regular performance of the eight offices as prescribed in the Benedictine Rule. To accomplish this, the memorization of the Psalter was a virtually universal monastic requirement. It was monastic commonplace that the office of singing pleases God. The monks and nuns join the choirs of angels who sing God's praise without ceasing:

But all these armies, as you hear, are singing with marvelous voices all kinds of music about the wonders that God works in blessed souls, by which God is magnificently glorified. For spirits blessed in the power of God make known in the heavenly places by indescribable sounds their great joy in the world of wonder that God perfects in His saints; by which the latter gloriously magnify God, seeking Him in the depth of sanctity and rejoicing in the joy of salvation.¹⁶

Hildegard contributed directly to the shape of this sung prayer by composing music, despite claiming to be untaught. She considered her music, like her visions, to be inspired by God. Singing was central to her understanding of what it meant to be a Benedictine. The office each day combined “the language of Scripture, the instruments of the body, and the breath of the spirit to instruct inwardly”¹⁷ so that the nuns might perceive the heavenly harmonies. The celebration of Mass depended on a priest, but the office belonged exclusively to the nuns.

¹⁶ *Scivias* I 6:11.

¹⁷ Van Engen, 47.

Through music, “the sluggish soul is aroused to watchfulness.”¹⁸ Music was thought to bring about a fundamental change, playing a central role in promoting *conversio*. Music performed the indispensable function of affecting the heart. In one of her visions, Hildegard writes: “For the song of rejoicing softens hard hearts, and draws forth tears of compunction, and invokes the Holy Spirit”¹⁹ – thus she provides an image of the ways in which music changes people by softening the hardness of hearts, invoking tears and the Spirit.

Hildegard’s sacred songs fall into two large categories. One is the *Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations*, which is her cycle of all extant liturgical pieces. The second is her morality play, the *Ordo Virtutum*. She does not compose much for the mass, but mainly antiphons, responsories, and hymns for the office.²⁰ Margot Fassler notes that the final responsories Hildegard composed were the most elaborate pieces. It was customary for the abbess to intone these – reinforcing her liturgical role as head of the community.²¹

In the final vision of the *Scivias*, Hildegard incorporates music to end her work in a symphony of the blessed, a triumphant chorus of praise proclaiming the power of music to move the human heart.²² Following the symphony in her *Scivias* is an early version of her morality play, the *Ordo Virtutum*. In it, the queen of the virtues is Humility, reflecting the emphasis of Benedict’s Rule. The play depicts the microcosmic struggle of the soul, the process of falling into sin, and conversion to the virtuous life. It is set entirely to music, except for the devil’s

¹⁸ *Scivias* III 13:13.

¹⁹ *Scivias* III 13:14.

²⁰ The genre most fully represented in her musical work is the antiphon (well over half of her compositions) related to the practice of psalmody. In standard medieval usage, the antiphon is sung before and after each psalm in the office. The psalms are chanted alternately by two half-choirs, and the antiphons sung by the full choir.

²¹ Fassler, Margot. “Composer and Dramatist: ‘Melodious Singing and the Freshness of Remorse’.” *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Barbara Newman, ed. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998: 153.

²² These fourteen pieces include seven antiphons and seven responsories for the Virgin Mary, and the angels and hierarchy of heaven, which were later included in her *Symphonia*.

speeches since he is incapable of song as a spirit in opposition to harmony. On one level the play is a defense of monastic life and an expression of the importance of chastity to that life. On another level, it presents the challenges of sin faced by every soul. The virtues are the soul's guides; repentance and purity of heart matter for everyone, not just for nuns.²³ It is the celebration of Obedience following upon a period of the soul's revolt. In the play, the Anima returns to Queen Humility, with the shouted words of the Devil giving way to the chanted symphony of the Virtues and the returned soul.

Teacher of Virtue and the Monastery

*This is to say that in this tower, that is in the strength of the circumcision, there are five strong virtues; not that any virtue is a living form in itself, but a brilliant star given by God that shines forth in human deeds. For humanity is perfected by virtues, which are the deeds of people working in God.
(Scivias III 3:3)*

Within the drama of salvation history, God provided the "brilliant star" of virtue to be made manifest in the deeds of people. Hildegard saw the monastery as a school for virtue. The purpose of the virgin life and instruction in the Rule was to manifest the virtues in one's own living. Her role as spiritual guide was to direct souls toward virtue and a love for God. As abbess she would have been considered a teacher in the struggle against the seven vices. She had a realistic understanding of the waywardness of humans. She expected and saw in her sisters the testing of the will and desire that is a part of religious life.

In her visions, she provides an extensive treatment of the virtues personified, presenting a theology of the moral life. The Virtues present themselves in her *Scivias* as rooted in God: "We virtues are in God, and there we abide."²⁴ The Latin *virtus* means 'energy' or 'power' as well as

²³ Fassler, 169.

²⁴ *Scivias* III 13:9.

virtue. Hildegard sees virtue as a “divine quality that becomes operative in willing souls and fully incarnates itself in right action; it is a synthesis of grace and moral effort.”²⁵ Human cooperation is required for the Virtues to work. Hildegard believes the virtuous life is always a cooperation of God with human effort.

Theological Aesthetics

Antiphon for the Trinity

*To the Trinity be praise!
God is music, God is life
that nurtures every creature in its kind.
Our God is the song of the angel throng
and the splendor of the secret ways
hid from all humankind,
But God our life is the life of all.*

Beauty and the Beautiful

Alejandro Garcia-Rivera describes theological aesthetics as best understood in terms of a dialectical vision and process. It begins with the recognition of Beauty as the radiance that originates in God. This recognition prompts Hildegard to proclaim that “God is music, God is life” as well as “the splendor of the secret ways,” pointing to Beauty’s quality of mystery. It is this original Beauty that reveals what is invisible through the beautiful and unveils something of the divine nature. It also points to the relationship God shares with humankind and our capacity to know God. Beauty as a noun is the abstract quality of Beauty. The beautiful is the sensual quality of Beauty.

The mystery of Beauty resides not only in its absolute origins in a transcendent God, but also in the fact that this Beauty is forever reaching out to the finite human creature, desiring to be known and loved in intimate relationship. How can the finite creature name the nameless,

²⁵ Newman 1990, 37.

perceive the imperceptible, and make visible the invisible? Human life is seen as worthy in the human capacity to know God.²⁶

Glory and Praise

The dialectic of theological aesthetics is between the categories of glory and praise. There is an ongoing dialogue in the reception of the beautiful by the limited human heart, moved to awe and wonder, thanksgiving and praise. The returning of thanks is the ultimate aesthetics of human work that may be described as liturgy. Glory affirms Beauty's objectivity, its original radiance that cannot be contained. Praise is the human subjective response, moved by a power beyond oneself. Liturgy is the human art that receives glory and returns praise.

This understanding of glory and praise points to the dialectical nature of worship which begins with the initiation by God and results in the free response of persons. The human role in and for creation is the human capacity for praise. Garcia-Rivera describes redemption as "the fulfillment of Glory's demand, i.e., the entire creation participating in a liturgy of praise."²⁷ Theological aesthetics is rooted in a dynamic understanding of God's activity in the world, and conversion as an ongoing process. The heart's reception of Beauty moves it to praise, towards what the human person was created to be. Hildegard's own theology reflects this positive regard for the human being created with the capacity for God. Indeed, for her it is the heart and purpose of the drama of salvation for humans to be moved to an unending hymn of praise.

²⁶ Garcia-Rivera, 11.

Dimensions of Hildegard's Theory of Music

Song of the Virgin to Her Son

*O beloved son
whom I bore in my womb
by the might of the circling
wheel of the holy
God who created me
and formed all my limbs
and laid in my womb
all manner of music
in all the flowers of sound:
now a flock
of virgins follows
me and you:
help and save them,
dearest son.*

In 1178, at the age of eighty, Hildegard had permitted the burial of a nobleman who had once been excommunicated, in the consecrated ground at Mount St. Rupert. As a result, she would face one of the most bitter conflicts of her lifetime. The prelates of Mainz ordered the corpse exhumed and cast out of the cemetery, under threat of Hildegard's own excommunication. Joseph Baird describes the motives of the prelates as suspect however, because of the swiftness of their actions while the archbishop was away in Rome, and Hildegard's own ability to identify eyewitnesses who could confirm the nobleman's absolution before his death.²⁸ For Hildegard, to obey the prelates and violate the body that was buried in holy ground would have been to disobey God. In the 'protocol' of her canonization,²⁹ it is noted that she made the sign of the cross over the tomb with her staff, and all traces that would have identified the tomb's location disappeared.

²⁷ 19.

²⁸ Baird, Joseph, trans. *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen: Volume 1*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994: 79-80.

²⁹ Hildegard of Bingen was never formally canonized.

She received an interdict from the prelates, one of the heaviest penalties the church could impose, which specifically forbid the nuns to celebrate the sacraments or to sing the divine office (they were allowed to continue to *read* the office). The interdict had been in place for several months. During this long silencing of music, the first since her childhood, Hildegard received visions and reflected formally on the meaning of music and its place in the divine plan. She wrote a very stern letter to the prelates at Mainz, which is about three pages long in its English translation. Joseph Baird describes this as the most famous and intriguing of her letters, because of the development of her theory of music.³⁰ It is significant that, in her letter, she objects more vehemently to the silencing of chant, than to the loss of the sacrament of communion.

Peter Dronke, who offers one of the more substantial commentaries on this letter, emphasizes the public shame Hildegard and her community would have undergone because of the interdict. Hildegard's letters indicate that her reasons for enduring this humiliation were because the Living Light told her that to violate the body was to disobey God.³¹

She begins the letter by claiming divine authority; it is a question of the primacy of her conscience. She describes the vision she received of what would happen if she allowed the nobleman to be disinterred: "a terrible and lamentable danger would come upon us like a dark cloud before a threatening thunderstorm." She does not wish to be totally disobedient to her ecclesiastical superiors, so she had ceased the singing and reception of communion in her monastery. This resulted in making her and her nuns "greatly distressed and saddened."³²

³⁰ Baird, 76.

³¹ Dronke, Peter. "Hildegard of Bingen." *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984: 196.

³² Letter 23.

However, she receives another vision from God, describing the serious danger of following the interdict. This vision prompts her formal protestations to the prelates.

Hildegard charged that the silencing of her community's song threatened the stability and purpose of the nuns' lives. She also offers a prophetic warning that it threatened the very souls of the archbishop and his prelates because of their unjust actions. She implies that by depriving God of his just praise, the prelates were doing the devil's work. Those who unjustly prohibited God's singing and "despoiled God of His honor and glory will lose their place among the chorus of angels."³³ Dronke says of Hildegard: "What she will not tolerate is any affront to that symphony of the heavenly and the earthly which had become consubstantial to her way of grasping truth."³⁴ This letter offers striking proof of the central importance of singing for Hildegard and for her community.

Her letter goes beyond merely reprimanding the prelates for acting against God's desires. In the remainder of her letter she describes two primary and interrelated functions of music: as a way of understanding history; and as cosmic harmony between the visible and the invisible, in which humans beings can still incarnate heavenly beauty in an earthly mode.

Music as a Way of Understanding History

When we consider these things carefully, we recall that man needed the voice of the living Spirit, but Adam lost this divine voice through disobedience. For while he was still innocent, before his transgression, his voice blended fully with the voices of the angels in their praise of God. Angels are called spirits from that Spirit which is God, and thus they have such voices by virtue of their spiritual nature. But Adam lost that angelic voice which he had in paradise, for he fell asleep to that knowledge which he possessed before his sin, just as a person on waking up only dimly remembers what he had seen in his dreams.

(Letter 23)

³³ Letter 23.

³⁴ Dronke, 199.

Hildegard's theology of music was rooted in her understanding of history as the drama of salvation. Barbara Newman describes Hildegard's reflection on the fall of Adam as "her most original contribution to the theology of music."³⁵ In paradise, Adam had an angelic voice. The voice of fallen humanity is only a dim reflection: "For, before he sinned, his voice had the sweetness of all musical harmony. Indeed, if he had remained in his original state, the weakness of mortal man would not have been able to endure the power and the resonance with his voice." Satan drove man from the celestial harmony and is "terrified" at seeing humans sing through God's inspiration. The devil, by contrast, has no music in him at all; he is the ultimate unmusical spirit. He is always trying to confound "the sweet beauty of both divine praise and spiritual hymns." She claims that the devil can even work through "the mouth of the church itself,"³⁶ to thwart human efforts at music – a comment clearly directed at the prelates themselves. Hildegard saw music as "quintessentially human;"³⁷ we were never meant to live without it.

God restores souls by "infusing them with the light of truth." It is through God's outpouring of the prophetic spirit and interior illumination that humans are able to recapture a fraction of Adam's knowledge and voice before the Fall. Indeed, for Hildegard this was the calling of the prophets – to be inspired by the Spirit to compose psalms and canticles "by which the hearts of listeners would be inflamed."³⁸ Music could both express and awaken the prophetic spirit.

Hildegard also saw music as the supreme embodiment of joy and the way to re-integrate the lost human-heavenly connection. Music allows one to "recall to mind that divine melody of

³⁵ Newman, Barbara. "Introduction," *Symphonia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988: 25.

³⁶ *Letter 23*.

³⁷ Newman 1988, 25.

³⁸ *Letter 23*.

praise which Adam, in company with the angels, enjoyed in God before his fall.”³⁹ Hildegard describes music as “a reminiscence of Eden and a foretaste of heaven.”⁴⁰ To silence music was to create an artificial rift between heaven and earth.

Central to this re-integration of human and heavenly is the incarnation – Christ himself incarnates music. The incarnation is the embodiment of music itself, bringing together what never should have been separated. Her letter points to music as central to redemption – the beginning of salvation and the return to paradise. Christ’s role is made more explicit in the music she composed. Her hymns to Mary celebrate the celestial music contained in Mary’s womb. In her *Hymn to the Virgin*, she proclaims: “And your womb held joy when heaven’s / harmonies rang from you, / a maiden with child by God, / for in God your chastity blazed....Ecclesia, flush with rapture! Sing / for Mary’s sake, sing / for the maiden, sing / for God’s mother. Sing!” Similarly, in the *Song of the Virgin to Her Son*, Mary is singing in praise of God who “laid in my womb / all manner of music.” From the moment of conception, the Christ child embodied the heavenly harmony. In the *Antiphon for the Redeemer* Hildegard petitions: “O, life-blood of the maker, / scarlet music, salve our wounds.” Christ’s very blood is music that acts to heal human sinfulness. The mystery of the incarnation in the child of Mary is a foundational theme for Hildegard. What she celebrates in her music is “the mystery of God-become-man in the child of Mary.”⁴¹ It is in the act of singing that the incarnation is celebrated and experienced. This emphasis on the incarnation is deeply connected to Hildegard’s other emphasis on the role of music in her letter – the union of body and soul in praising God.

³⁹ *Letter 23*.

⁴⁰ Newman 1990, 28.

⁴¹ Newman 1988, 45.

The Symphony of Visible and Invisible, Internal and External

*And because sometimes a person sighs and groans at the sound of singing, remembering as it were, the nature of celestial harmony, the prophet, aware that the soul is symphonic and thoughtfully reflecting on the profound nature of the spirit, urges us in the psalm to confess to the Lord with the harp and to sing a psalm to Him with the ten-stringed psaltery. His meaning is that the harp, which is plucked from below, relates to the discipline of the body; the psaltery, which is plucked from above, pertains to the exertion of the spirit; the ten chords, to the fulfillment of the law.
(Letter 23)*

This passage speaks to Hildegard's understanding of human nature and our capacity for music as rooted in the symphonic nature of body and soul, reflecting the symphonic organization of nature. For Hildegard, the experience of the divine unfolded in the manner of music: "She saw the entire universe as one great celestial symphony from whose tones one could intuit divinity and life directions."⁴² The human symphony of voices reflected this reality, and directed heavenwards was a means of bringing the lost human-heavenly condition alive again. Music 'leaps up to God' – not by overcoming its physical components, but in the act of affirming them.⁴³

This points to the other important dimension of her aesthetics, which is the harmony between body and soul as central to making the invisible visible. In this relationship external, physical, sensual things can teach about internal ones. In referring to Psalm 150 commanding praise with trumpet and harp, Hildegard reflects: "These words use outward, visible things to teach us about inward things. Thus the material composition and the quality of these instruments instruct us in how we ought to give form to the praise of the Creator and turn all convictions of our inner being to the same."⁴⁴ Words and music unite to create an aesthetic whole and can form us in virtue. In her *Ordo Virtutum*, the virtues were personified and expressed themselves in

⁴² Emerson, 92.

⁴³ Dronke, 198-9.

song, the antithesis of the devil. In her visions she describes: “the words symbolize the body, and the jubilant music indicates the spirit; and the celestial harmony shows the Divinity, and the words the Humanity of the Son of God.”⁴⁵ Music uses the body and its senses to teach about the nature of the soul. Body and soul, when integrated, act toward their fitting end: “The body is the vestment of the spirit, which has a living voice, and so it is proper for the body, to be in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God.”⁴⁶ Vocal chords and musical instruments help to unite the body with the soul in the act of praise. In this way sensual reality can teach about the interior life, and art serves a didactic function. Unlike many patristic and Cistercian writers, Hildegard was untroubled by the sensual beauty of music. Barbara Newman describes Augustine’s attempts in his *Confessions*, to distinguish between the wholesome text of psalmody and the “dangerous seductive melody.” He was unable to separate the benefits of one from the perils of the other and eventually gave up his effort. Hildegard, however, never even tried.⁴⁷

Despite the passion and poetry of her words, the prelates persisted with their interdict. Upon receiving no resolution, Hildegard wrote a letter to Christian, the Archbishop of Mainz. He did finally reply in March of 1179, six months before Hildegard’s death. Writing from Rome, he allowed the interdict to be lifted. He turned it into a legalistic question, requiring Hildegard to procure witnesses to testify that the man had died in peace with the church. This relief did not come without his own chastisement of Hildegard’s actions. He claimed that because she “disregarded the outcry of the clergy and acted as if this would cause no scandal in the Church is a very dangerous act, since the statutes of the holy fathers are inviolable.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ *Letter 23*.

⁴⁵ *Scivias* III 13:12.

⁴⁶ *Letter 23*.

⁴⁷ Newman 1988, 27.

⁴⁸ *Letter 24r*.

Conclusion

We return now to the two questions with which we began: What is the purpose and end of human life? and What moves the human heart? Both questions are rooted in an understanding of conversion as the heart of the spiritual life – the moral movement from who we are to whom we should become, and the aesthetic movement of what it is that inspires the human heart towards this transformation. Conversion was central to the monastic life, as it continues to be. Hildegard’s vision of the soul as symphonic, created to praise God, integrates spiritual, moral, and aesthetic concerns. Our opening quotation from Hildegard suggests that the ongoing praise in song of the liturgy was her understanding of the whole of life as consummated in worship. The heart of the relationship between Creator and created is this dialectic of glory and praise, forming the human person in virtue.

Alisdair MacIntyre ends his work *After Virtue* by drawing some parallels between our own age in Europe and North America with the period in which the Roman empire declined into the Dark Ages. He claims that we have reached a similar turning point to the one that inspired the development of monasticism, in which we need to construct local forms of community to sustain the moral life in a “new dark ages.” His concluding statement is that we are waiting “for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.”⁴⁹ Yet, perhaps the Benedict we are searching for is not so different. In recent times, there has been a remarkable appropriation of Benedictine spirituality in contemporary life for lay people outside of a monastic setting. This is witnessed by a flourish of books published on the subject, monasteries are booked up months in advance by lay people seeking time for retreat. The practices of the monastic tradition are still vital both within and beyond the monastery walls. The framework provided by the Rule provides a model

⁴⁹ MacIntyre, 263.

of a way to center our lives on God in a secular world, integrating the experience of beauty in the Divine Office with the development of virtue.

This integrated vision of the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions is complemented by a holistic vision of the role of body and soul in spirituality. Hildegard provides us with insight into an incarnational spirituality that truly reflects the sensual and spiritual as unified in creating a way of life that moves us towards our *telos* of praising God.

The spiritual life is also seen as dynamic with its ongoing movements of glory and praise and relationship between the invisible and visible. Music has the power to evoke an expanded state of awareness beyond what seems most apparent, pointing to the importance of multiple modalities of Christian spiritual experience. Hildegard's spirituality reveals a God who wishes to be known and loved by human creation, a God who created us with the capacity to praise God. Hildegard invites us to re-imagine our lives in terms of our potential for beauty and goodness, "(h)er use of language reflects...her exultant sense of the beauty of the physical world, the beauty of music, the beauty that is possible in men and women."⁵⁰ She invites us to consummate our whole lives in prayer, to offer God "tireless praise, and with joyful devotion sing to Him without ceasing."

⁵⁰ Dronke, 200.