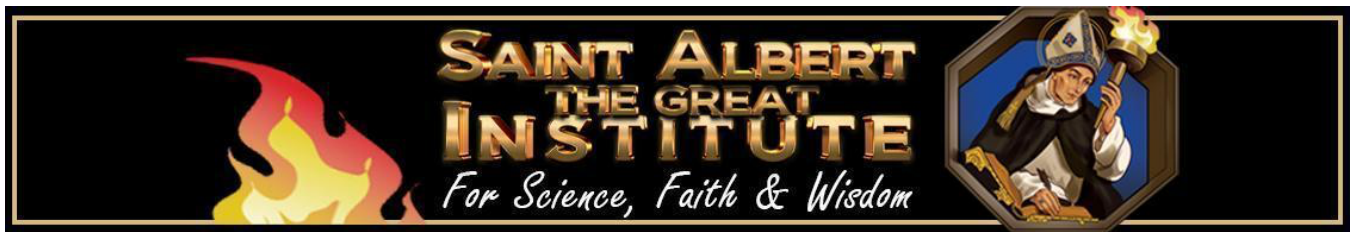




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CHRONICLE OF THE SAINT ALBERT THE GREAT INSTITUTE



Thematic Issue (Inspiring Faith)

SAGI: The Greatest Experiment

St. Hildegard von Bingen – Abbess & Scientist

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Words of Wisdom: In the lives of the saints, we may easily find inspiring and admirable examples of men and women who shared similar states of life, professions, or interests with ourselves. Canonized scientists of the past, such as St. Hildegard (d. 1179) and St. Albert the Great (d. 1280), exemplify the harmony which may exist between a holy life and the pursuit of scientific understanding. Although certainly not all persons are meant to embrace the cloistered life of St. Hildegard or the mendicant and episcopal life of St. Albert, nevertheless, both these saints demonstrate a theocentric approach to science that is imitable by Catholic scientists of all states of life.

THE REALITY OF THINGS: NATURAL & SUPERNATURAL

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 1.5.175-176).(1) Hamlet's assessment of the reality of things, both natural and supernatural, which exceed the comprehension of man, appropriately expresses the limits of human knowledge. Indeed, Sacred Scripture poses the questions:

Who hath numbered the sand of the sea, and the drops of rain, and the days of the world? Who hath measured the height of heaven, and the breadth of the earth, and the depth of the abyss? Who hath searched out the wisdom of God that goeth before all things? (Ecclus. 1:2-3 [D-R])(2)

Although the mysteries of the natural world and the mysteries of the supernatural are beyond human comprehension, this certainly does not prevent us from making efforts to advance our understanding of both natural and supernatural truths. St. Hildegard von Bingen, doubtlessly as intrigued about the mysteries of the natural world as any scientist may be, was additionally a saint, mystic, and theologian. As a Catholic scientist, she exemplifies the truth that the Catholic faith and right reason are by no means in opposition. This is a lesson for modern man, in an age so steeped in naturalism (the denial of the existence of the supernatural), for the one God is the Creator of all things.

STUDENT & BENEDICTINE NUN

At the beginning of the twelfth century, the glorious monastery of Disibodenberg stood mightily on German soil, nestled near the Nahe and Glan rivers. Its holy Irish founder and namesake, St. Disibod, had long ago planted the seeds of what became a flourishing community of Benedictine monks and the home of one of Germany's most renowned saints and mystics, St. Hildegard von Bingen.(3)

The tenth child of noble parents, Hildegard, at the age of eight years, was entrusted to the care and instruction of a young lady named Jutta, who occupied a small dwelling attached to the Disibodenberg monastery. Within this recluse's cell, in a rural atmosphere of monastic silence, Hildegard was given a modest education by her instructor: for example, she learned to read and recite the Psalms in Latin, and she was taught how to play the decachord, a ten-stringed musical instrument.(4)

When Hildegard came of age, she desired to remain at the monastery of Disibodenberg and become a nun within the small group of female religious which began to form an important part of the monastery. She received the habit of the Benedictine Order, and, despite her sickly constitution, she subjected herself as far as possible to the strictness of the Benedictine Rule, whose motto is *ora et labora* (pray and work).(5) Therefore, her days were characterized by the chanting of the Divine Office in choir, the application to manual labor and study, and the living in common with the other nuns.

ABBESS & FOUNDRRESS

After the death of Jutta in 1136, Hildegard, being about forty years old, was elected abbess of the monastery—doubtless owing both to her sanctity as well as her natural aptitudes.(6) Hildegard governed her nuns with great maternal care, seeing to their progress in the virtues of religion. Although her responsibilities as superioress were numerous, Hildegard “seemed still to live always in the presence of God, always united to God, always conversing interiorly with God,”(7) while at the same time attending with prudence to the spiritual and physical needs of the souls under her charge.

As Hildegard's community continued to grow under her direction, she decided to move her nuns from the monastery of Disibodenberg to a new establishment: the convent of Rupertsberg near Bingen. Such an exploit met with numerous difficulties, but God granted the establishment of the new convent, which was located approximately fifteen miles from Disibodenberg.(8)

MYSTIC & PROPHETESS

From a young age, Hildegard was a prophetess and visionary. Her most well-known writing of mysticism is *Scivias*, which was the work of ten years. In this book, Hildegard recounts her visions of heaven and earth and records many of her prophecies, a considerable number of which have an eschatological character.(9)

The “*Scivias*” represents God on His Holy Mountain with mankind at its base; tells of the original condition of man, his fall and redemption, the human soul and its struggles, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the times to come, the son of perdition [the Antichrist] and the end of the world. The visions are interspersed with salutary admonitions to live in the fear of the Lord.(10)

Notably, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a celebrated Benedictine reformer and contemporary of Hildegard, undertook an investigation of Hildegard's spirit of prophecy; he, among others, became convinced of its divine origin.(11) Hildegard herself gave a description of the gift of prophecy she received and how, when a child, she was surprised that others were not endowed with the same gift:

...I saw much, and related some of the things seen to others, who would inquire with astonishment, whence such things might come. I also wondered and during my sickness I asked one of my nurses whether she also saw similar things. When she answered no, a great fear befell me. Frequently, in

my conversation, I would relate future things, which I saw as if present, but, noting the amazement of my listeners, I became more reticent.(12)

ADVISOR, SCHOLAR & SCIENTIST

The collection of Hildegard's letters is as extensive as it is varied; she kept correspondence with both religious and secular dignitaries: "[T]he Wiesbaden manuscript contains letters to and from [Popes] Eugene III, Anastasius IV, Adrian IV, and Alexander III"(13) as well as correspondence with figures such as Emperor Frederick Barbarosa and King Conrad III. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, numerous bishops, superiors of monasteries, and priests and religious of all ranks likewise corresponded with Hildegard.(14)

Hildegard is known not only for her spiritual wisdom and sound advice, but also for her wide range of scientific and other academic interests, as expressed in her many writings. In *Physica*, a book she wrote about the natural sciences, Hildegard treats of numerous subjects including medicine, zoology, mineralogy, botany, and entomology. Further, as historian Régine Pernoud observes, "Only two medical works are known that are written in the West in the twelfth century: both are works of Hildegard. She compiled a veritable encyclopedia of her age's knowledge in Germany, in the field of natural sciences on the one hand, and in that of medicine on the other."(15)

Among Hildegard's other writings, we may mention biographies of Sts. Disibod and Rupert, as well as a commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict. She even developed a secret language known as *lingua ignota* for use among her nuns. Hildegard also cherished an especial love for music and singing: a collection of seventy of her Latin hymns and musical compositions is extant.(16) These musical works may be heard today on classical radio stations, and they are also available in various media formats, such as CDs and MP3 files.

THE DEATH & LEGACY OF HILDEGARD

After a long life of much labor in the service of God, Hildegard died peacefully in the presence of her spiritual daughters on September 17th, 1179, at the age of eighty-two years. Although, regrettably, many of the details of her death had not been recorded, an account has been preserved of several miracles of healing that occurred at Hildegard's tomb through her intercession.(17)

St. Hildegard, like a subsequent holy German scientist, St. Albert the Great, demonstrates the value and importance of directing our studies, knowledge, and talents toward the One from Whom we have received all things: God. St. Hildegard's life remains a great source of encouragement for Catholic students and scholars everywhere who strive to make generous efforts toward sanctity in their respective states of life, and who thus offer their application to study and academics for the greater glory of God.

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