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# Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and the Priesthood

AUGUSTINE THOMPSON, O. P.

Hildegard, the twelfth-century Benedictine abbess of Bingen, is best understood not as a mystic, but as a visionary prophetess.<sup>1</sup> The spectacular visions that introduce the sections of her three great works, the *Scivias*, the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, and the *Liber Divinorum Operum* have dazzled modern readers, but they are not the only or even the most important expressions of her prophetic inspiration. Her prophetic insight also allowed her to understand the figures of the Scriptures and relate them to contemporary theological and political questions. Nor can her visions, however central they are to her symbolic theology, be separated from her interpretations of them, her understanding of scriptural typology, or her role as a reforming prophetess.<sup>2</sup>

Her visions and her interpretations of them are not expressions of her personal experience of the deity, a kind of mystical communion. Rather, they are vehicles by which God communicates truths about Christian belief and practice. To these truths she ascribes an authority close to that of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> She understands them to possess a doctrinal consistency, like the Sacred

This essay is dedicated to the students of my seminar on the medieval mystics at the University of Oregon, winter term 1992.

1. For a brief introduction to Hildegard's life and works, see Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179): A Visionary Life* (London, 1989); Heinrich Schipperges, *Hildegard von Bingen: Ein Zeichen für unsere Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981); "Hildegard of Bingen" in Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe* (New York, 1989), pp. 3–19, especially pp. 13–15, which touches on the themes of this essay. Perhaps the best introduction to Hildegard's cosmology, theology, and ethics is Heinrich Schipperges, "Kosmologische Aspekte der Lebensordnung und Lebensführung bei Hildegard von Bingen," in *Kosmos und Mensch aus der Sicht Hildegards von Bingen*, ed. Adelgundis Führkötter (Trier, 1987), pp. 1–25.
2. Ernst Benz, *Die Vision: Erfahrungsformen und Bilderwelt* (Stuttgart, 1969), p. 160. A systematic attempt to place Hildegard's understanding of prophecy within the context of twelfth-century theology, biblical exegesis, and the Neoplatonic tradition going back to John Scotus Eriugena, which dispels notions of her "peculiarity," is found in Christel Meier, "Eriugena im Nonnenkloster? Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Prophetentum und Werkgestalt in der *Figmenta Prophetica* Hildegards von Bingen," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 19 (1985): 466–497. A call for greater attention to Hildegard's philosophical and theological ideas has been made by Helen John in "Hildegard of Bingen: A New Twelfth-Century Woman Philosopher?" *Hypatia* 7 (1992): 113–123.
3. Barbara Newman, "Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation," *Church History* 54 (1985): 166. This theme is further developed by M. Schmitt, "St. Hildegard of Bingen: A Prophetic Sign for her Times," *Cistercian Studies* 24 (1989): 69–88.

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Scriptures themselves, even if the means of expression, visions in particular, may occasionally present surface inconsistencies. The complexity of her symbolism does make her interpreters' task difficult, but their task is not impossible if each image and interpretation is understood in the context of her thought and symbolism as a whole.

Hildegard's symbolic language, in which all aspects of creation proclaim the wisdom and will of the Creator, allows the same types and images to function differently in different contexts. What remains identical in each context is the truth that she, or better God, intends to communicate. She herself accented the doctrinal integrity of her visions, warning her readers against underestimating the unity of her thought, interpreting any image in isolation, or setting aside any individual idea or image as unconnected to the whole.<sup>4</sup> The visions, she says, are interconnected and indivisible: God himself will punish those who reject any part of them.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay I shall examine one of Hildegard's teachings that has proved difficult for many modern scholars and admirers to integrate into the rest of her work, her rejection of the ordination of women. Some have found her attitude on this issue a relic of "cultural conservatism" or evidence of a deep inconsistency in her thought, where her "theological symbolism" (that is positive about the feminine) clashes with inherited "monastic theology" (that is negative about the feminine).<sup>6</sup> One scholar declared that her position on women's ordination showed that she was "unable to shake off the perceptions of her own social milieu."<sup>7</sup> Would she have wanted to? Is this conflict found in her thought itself, or is it really a conflict between the whole of her thought and some twentieth-century ideologies? Hildegard's rejection of the ordination of women is not evidence of any inconsistency in her thought; rather,

4. Barbara Newman, in her fine analysis of feminine imagery in Hildegard, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley, 1987), p. 250, warns against interpretations of Hildegard that do violence to the unity of her thought.
5. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, prologue; 3.13.16, ed. Adelgundis Führkötter and Angela Carlevaris, CCCM 43–43a (Turnholt, 1978), English in *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, 1990), p. 635–636; *Liber Divinorum Operum* [hereafter *LDO*], 3.10.38, *Patrologia Latina* vol. 197, col. 1038C. On these texts, see Newman, *Sister*, p. 171. On the defects of the Führkötter-Carlevaris edition of the *Scivias* and Hildegard's sources, see Peter Dronke, "Problemata Hildegardiana," *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch*, 16 (1989): 95–131; quotations from the *Scivias* follow the Hart-Bishop translation, but they have been adjusted when the original Latin suggested doing so. The translation of other passages from Hildegard are my own, unless otherwise noted.
6. This is the position of Kari Børresen, "Théologues au moyen âge," *Revue théologique du Louvain* 20 (1989): pp. 68–69, which draws on the analysis of Peter Dronke, "Hildegard of Bingen," in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of the Texts from Perpetua (d. 203) to Marguerite Porete (d. 1310)* (Cambridge, U. K., 1984), especially pp. 167–171, and that of Barbara Newman.
7. So B. W. Scholz, "Hildegard von Bingen on the Nature of Woman," *American Benedictine Review* 31 (1980): 369, 374; an otherwise very perceptive article.

this position is integrated elegantly into part of her overall understanding of God, creation, the sacraments, and gender.

Hildegard does use the common medieval rationale for excluding women priests (that women are subordinate to men, just as the moon is to the sun) but she places little stress on it.<sup>8</sup> Related to the subordination argument is her assertion that women should not be ordained “because they are an infirm and weak habitation, appointed to bear children and diligently nurture them.”<sup>9</sup> But throughout her work women’s dedication to child rearing receives little attention, probably because it had little resonance for her as a consecrated virgin and for the other monastic celibates and clergy for whom she wrote.

Hildegard, speaking with God’s voice, confronted the issue of gender and the sacramental priesthood head-on in the second book of the *Scivias*: “A woman conceives a child not by herself but through a man, just as the earth is plowed, not by itself but by a farmer. Therefore, just as the earth cannot plow itself, a woman must not be a priest and do the work of consecrating the Body and Blood of my Son; although she can sing the praise of her Creator, just as the earth can receive rain to water its fruits.”<sup>10</sup> What is remarkable about this passage is not its traditional doctrine on the priesthood but the complex of symbolic relations in which it is embedded. As often as not, Hildegard’s images of male and female do not fit easily into conventional stereotypes, medieval or modern.<sup>11</sup> We can best understand Hildegard’s treatments of the church and the priesthood by approaching them through the most important feminine symbols that dominate her thought. Of particular impor-

8. *LDO*, 1.4.64, *PL* vol. 197, col. 851C. It is interesting that the common modern argument that the maleness of the priesthood is founded on the maleness of Christ is absent from Hildegard, as it is generally in other medieval writers. On this, see John Hilary Martin, “The Injustice of Not Ordaining Women: A Problem for Medieval Theologians,” *Theological Studies*, 48 (1987): 303–316. The classical formulation of the argument from women’s subordination is found in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supp., Q. 39, a. 1, which is taken from his *Comm. in Sent.*, IV, d. 25, q. 2, a. 1, ad 4. On the subordination of women to men in Hildegard, see Scholz, “Hildegard von Bingen,” pp. 369–374.
9. *Scivias*, 2.6.76. But Hildegard has a remarkable ability to transform woman’s traditional “weakness” into a locus of spiritual power. On this, see Barbara Newman, “Divine Power Made Perfect in Weakness,” *Peace Weavers*, Cistercian Studies 72: Medieval Religious Women 2 (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1984), pp. 103–122.
10. *Scivias*, 2.6.76, p. 290 (Hart-Bishop, p. 278).
11. The contrasts between Hildegard’s biblical exegesis and that of the received patristic tradition have been briefly but effectively sketched in Elisabeth Gössmann, “Das Menschenbild der Hildegard von Bingen und Elisabeth von Schönau vor dem Hintergrund des fröhscholastischen Anthropologie,” in *Frauenmystik im Mittelalter*, ed. Peter Dinzelsbacher and Dieter R. Bauer (Ostfildern bei Stuttgart, 1985), pp. 26–33. But I do not find her conclusion, p. 34, “Die Frau-Christus-Parallel erscheint in Hildegards Werken unter verschiedenen Gesichtspunkten,” convincing. The evidence given (*LVM* 1.82.96, p. 44) parallels woman with the flesh, not with Christ. As we shall see, Hildegard avoids feminine symbols for Christ.

tance in this complex of feminine images is that of God the Father's "maternity" in the act of creation. Hildegard's references to the Father usually lack any specific gender reference, and God's masculinity comes to the fore when her focus is on his power or ruling authority. But when writing of God's giving forth creation or bestowing life she shifts, consciously I think, to feminine language.<sup>12</sup> This maternity of the Creator in association with the ministry of the Word, through whom creation occurred and who will be incarnate as Christ, will resonate with the maternity of the church, attended by the ministry of the priest, in bringing forth new life through Baptism and the Eucharist.

For her, the argument against the ordination of women which carries the greatest weight, and is explicit in the text cited above from the *Scivias*, is closely tied to her treatment of two great images in her thought, the earth and the church, and her understanding of the feminine itself.<sup>13</sup> Hildegard focuses intently on the fruitful femininity of the church. This feminine church is a primary symbol; like other feminine symbols in Hildegard, she is a divine self-manifestation. She is eternal. Male and female are distinct for Hildegard, both naturally and symbolically.<sup>14</sup> The priest is male; in Hildegard, the male principle acts once in time and need not, or cannot, repeat the act, as the farmer who plows once or the male who begets once.<sup>15</sup> In her medical treatment of human sexual intercourse, the first image she chooses is

12. The shift to maternal imagery in such cases is Biblical; see the womb of God image in Ps. 109:3 in the Vulgate version.
13. Newman, *Sister*, pp. 197, 214, is less perceptive than usual on Hildegard's ideas about women's ordination and the issues related to it. For example, she misses the point of the illustration for *Scivias*, 2.6, where the church is shown above catching the blood of Christ on the Cross and worshiping before the altar. Hildegard speaks of this image as "a betrothal" of the Woman and Christ. Newman identifies the Woman as a priestess because "there is no other priest in evidence" (p. 214). Yes, there is; he is Christ, her Bridegroom, who acts as Priest at every Mass; see *Scivias* 2.6.7 (Hart-Bishop, p. 241).
14. Difference of sex, for example, is to be expressed by clothing, *Scivias*, 2.6.77, p. 291 (Hart-Bishop, p. 278), and cross-dressing is forbidden, *LDO*, 3.9.14; God's law prescribes that a member of the opposite sex is the only licit sexual partner, *Scivias*, 2.6.78, p. 292 (Hart-Bishop, p. 279), and *Liber Vitae Meritorum per Simplicem Hominem a Vivente Luce Revelatorum* [hereafter *LVM*], 3.70–71, 79–82, ed. Jean-Baptiste Pitra, *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis* (Monte Cassino, 1882), pp. 88–89, 97–100, 138–139, 141–142. Hildegard's ideas on the physiological aspects of sexual differentiation and their role in the relationship between men and women have been discussed in P. Allen, "Hildegard of Bingen's Philosophy of Sex Identity," *Thought*, 64 (1989): 231–241.
15. On this contrast of feminine and masculine in Hildegard, see Newman, *Sister*, p. 45. The plow is a favorite image of Hildegard's. She also used it for the Mosaic Law, softening up humanity to receive the dew from heaven, which is Christ; see *LDO*, 3.7.9, *PL* vol. 197, col. 970D; *ibid.*, 3.11.12, *PL* vol. 197, col. 994–995. It also symbolizes the mind and its powers, which plows into the text of Scripture to bring forth understanding, e.g. *Epistola* 113r, *PL* vol. 197, col. 334A; and for spiritual discipline, which softens the dry ground of the heart, *Ep.* 115r, *PL* vol. 197, col. 335C–D. The identification of Christ with the plowman is ancient; see, e.g., Pseudo-Macarius (ca. 400), *Homily* 28: 8, *Patrologia Graeca* [PG] vol. 34, col. 713D–16A.

the agricultural one, where the woman is the earth and the male is the plow.<sup>16</sup> This contrast of masculine assistance (for farmers, priests, Christ, the Word, and men in general) and feminine fertility as an origin (for God the Father, the earth, the church, nuns, or women in general) runs as a constant refrain through Hildegard's writings.<sup>17</sup>

Drawing on ideas older than Christianity, Hildegard conceives of the earth as feminine, our mother, and her maternity expresses itself in her abundance. An especially striking use of this image is Hildegard's exegesis of Genesis 1 in the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, where she speaks of the earth as "the mother of all that springs up," words paralleling the naming of Eve, "the mother of all the living."<sup>18</sup> As humanity arose from the earth, so it is from the earth that humanity derives its continued strength and life. The virgin earth, like the Virgin Mary, parallels the virginal Creator, who gave birth to creation without needing a partner. The earth supplied the material for the creation of Adam, it gave flesh to the Virgin, and from her it provided the humanity of the incarnate Son of God.<sup>19</sup> From the earth come all good gifts.

For Hildegard, the earth in its fertility and fruitfulness provides a parallel for the souls of all human beings, both men and women.<sup>20</sup> The ages of human life—youth, maturity, and old age—parallel the earth's seasons of spring,

16. *Causae et Curae*, 2, ed. Paul Kaiser (Leipzig, 1903), p. 104. The plowing allows the male seed to enter and mix with the female blood, bringing about new life. On the defects of this edition of what is more properly called the *Book of Compound Medicine* and some corrections, see Paul Winterfeld, *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 29 (1904): 292–296. On this text, see Charles Singer, "The Scientific Views and Visions of St. Hildegard," *Studies in the History and Methods of Sciences*, 2nd ed. (London, 1955), 1: 1–55, and the reply in Hans Liebeschütz, *Das allegorische Weltbild der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen* (Leipzig, 1930): pp. 90 n. 1 and 130 n. 1. The authenticity of book six is debated. On the implications of Hildegard's natural science for her understanding of sexual differences, see Prudence Allen, "Two Medieval Views on Woman's Identity: Hildegard of Bingen and Thomas Aquinas," *Studies in Religion* 16 (1987): 21–27. See also Joan Cadden, "It Takes All Kinds: Sexuality and Gender Differences in Hildegard of Bingen's 'Book of Compound Medicine,'" *Traditio* 40 (1984): 149–179.
17. For some especially vivid examples, see *Ep.* 31r and 89r. On the other hand, the emphasis on male activity is not exclusive in Hildegard's metaphors for the priesthood. In *Ep.* 52r, *PL* vol. 197, col. 269–270 (her great prophetic denunciation of bad priests), for example, she sees the priest in his sacramental function as more a wet-nurse (*nutritius*) than a fertilizer.
18. See Gen. 3:20. *LDO*, 2.5.31, *PL* vol. 197, col. 927A. This is a splendid chapter where mother earth (*Materna Terra*) puts forth fruit in response to the command of God's Word.
19. Hildegard provides an extended meditation on the earth's maternity, which culminates in the maternity to the Incarnate Son, in *LVM*, 4.20–21.28–29. On the creation of Adam and Eve in Hildegard and patristic thought, see Scholz, "Hildegard von Bingen," pp. 367–368.
20. This parallel is developed in *LDO*, 1.4.78, *PL* vol. 197, col. 860B–D; and again in *LDO*, 2.5.45, *PL* vol. 197, col. 930. She extends this metaphor to the ages of salvation history as well; the Old Testament is winter, the New is summer, *LDO*, 3.10.18–19, *PL* vol. 197, col. 1021–1022.

summer, and winter.<sup>21</sup> Youth, like spring, is the season of planting. During youth one either sows the lusts of the flesh or the seeds of good works. If the soul accepts Christ's example of good works, she will blossom and rise shining before God. Otherwise, all that will be left is a sterile old age, devoid of the fruits of virtue. For both sexes, the locus of fertility is the soul (*anima*). Like the earth which raises up mountains, the soul must raise up a wall of humility to protect itself from the attacks of vice and to constrain the body.

Hildegard's parallel of the soul with the earth is unusual. A parallel of the body with the earth is much more common in medieval authors. That topos is canonized in the *Ordinary Gloss* on Genesis 1:1–2, where texts from both Bede and Alcuin identify the *terra* with what is carnal or bodily.<sup>22</sup> The interlinear gloss makes the point even more clearly, identifying *terra* with the flesh and corporeal substance. A similar common figure, again found in the *Ordinary Gloss* and in medieval commentators generally, parallels the earth of Adam's body with the feminine. But the association of the body with the earth means little for Hildegard, who emphatically associates the earthly element of Adam's creation with his toughness and masculinity, an association she also makes for men in general.<sup>23</sup> Hildegard's parallel of the soul with the earth is doubly satisfying because it links two words as symbolically feminine that are, unlike *corpus* and *terra*, both grammatically feminine, and because it highlights her positive attitude toward the earth as life-giving.

Although Hildegard's identification of the soul with the earth here applies to the soul of both men and women, the correspondence comes out most perfectly in the case of woman herself. Hildegard writes, "And as the earth brings forth all fruits, so in woman the fruit of every good work is perfected,"<sup>24</sup> and even more forcefully, "God created the element of earth, which sprouts forth through the power of the other elements, just as woman

21. On this medieval commonplace, see J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), especially chapter 1.
22. As is Eve, who is also usually identified with the senses or the flesh. There is, however, one allegorization of the Fall, found in, among others, Augustine, where Eve represents reason; this makes an interesting comparison with Hildegard's treatment of *terra* here. On this, see A. Kent Hieatt, "Eve as Reason in a Tradition of Allegorical Interpretation of the Fall," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 43 (1980): 221–222.
23. *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis Interlineari et Ordinaria* (Lyon, 1545), vol. 1, fol. 23v; *Causae et Curae*, 2: 47, 59. Their "earthly" nature is why men are, in contrast to women, strong, hard, and tough. A point missed in the analysis of Hildegard on creation by Elisabeth Gössmann, "*Ipsa enim quasi Domus Sapientiae*: The Philosophical Anthropology of Hildegard von Bingen," *Mystics Quarterly* 13 (1987): 148–150, who does make some interesting observations on the implications of the modes of creation for social roles: man's creation from earth suits him to agricultural work, woman's from flesh for domestic crafts. See Allen, "Two Medieval Views," pp. 22–23, on this. Hildegard does fall back on the earth-flesh parallel in *LDO*, 1.4.82, *PL* vol. 197, col. 862–863. But this image is clearly secondary to her earlier earth-soul parallelism.
24. *Scivias*, 2.6.76, p. 290 (Hart-Bishop, p. 278).

conceives through the power of man.”<sup>25</sup> Now this perfection, both of the earth and of woman, does not take place in isolation since, just as a woman does not conceive by herself, so the “earth cannot plow itself.” It is characteristic of Hildegard that the central act of salvation, the Incarnation, reversed this rule. Christ was born in the “unplowed field” of the Virgin Mary.<sup>26</sup> Hildegard herself explicitly relates the image of the earth to those who await the Word and the Spirit; that is, every Christian and, by extension, the church as a whole.<sup>27</sup> Recognizing their own earthliness allows them to respond properly to God and become fruitful. So she tells us that the Virgin Mary, who is symbolized by the earth, declared herself God’s handmaid because she looked upon herself and recognized the earth from which she was made.<sup>28</sup>

The church is likened to a field and the sacramental ministry to husbandry; as the gift of rain waters the field under the husbandman’s care, so God’s gift of grace waters the church under the care of the priest.<sup>29</sup> The “work of consecrating the Body and Blood” by the Holy Spirit occurs for the sake of those who receive it, as God sends down the rain for the sake of the parched earth. Just as the earth receives rain, she who receives the sacrament sings the praise of the Creator. The “watering” of rain and sacrament enables the earth and likewise the soul to bring forth much fruit. As a woman conceives a child through the man who is her spouse, the earth needs the attentions of another, the farmer, to bring forth fruit. In the field alone, however, that fruit comes to perfection.

For Hildegard, the earth in its fecundity is like the whole of creation, which was “created so that God’s name be known and glorified, that in it be seen not only the things that are visible and temporal, but the things that are invisible and eternal.”<sup>30</sup> Natural creation gives us a clue to both the reality of the human condition and the promise of its recreation in Christ. The field in its fruitfulness, then, parallels the woman and the church, our mothers in the material and spiritual orders. Hildegard sums up the marital, even sexual, relationship between the Creator and creation while commenting on the Song of Solomon. She says, “I would liken the Creator’s love for creation and that of creation for the Creator to the love and fidelity by which God unites a man and a woman so that offspring might arise from them. . . . Hence creation is drawn to the Creator, since she is conformed to him in all things,

25. *LDO*, 1.4.96, *PL* vol. 197, col. 874–875.

26. *Scivias*, 3.10.7 (Hart-Bishop, p. 478). With this one exception, Hildegard is emphatic that the earth is sterile unless it has been plowed. Without plowing it is dry, rocky, and brings forth only useless weeds: *Ep.* 98r, *PL* vol. 197, col. 319D–320A.

27. *Scivias*, 3.10.4, p. 549 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 474–475).

28. *LDO*, 1.1.17, *PL* vol. 197, col. 750D.

29. Hildegard is, not surprisingly, fond of the image of tending the field or vineyard as an apt symbol of the priestly office, e.g. in *Ep.* 85r, *PL* vol. 197, col. 306D–307A.

30. *Scivias*, 1.3.1 (Hart-Bishop, p. 94).



and the Creator is present to creation since he fills her with fertility and strength."<sup>31</sup> Creation seeks the Creator's kisses by obeying him; he bestows them on her when he gives her everything she needs for life and growth. These gifts make her beautiful, like the beloved of the Song of Solomon. The Creature loses her beauty only by hesitating in her duties.

Identifying creation with the spouse of the Creator in the Song of Solomon has other parallels in Hildegard that are significant for our topic. Perhaps because it is from her that all human life came to be, Eve, even more than the Virgin Mary, represents woman in Hildegard's thought.<sup>32</sup> In Hildegard's image world, Eve as mother is associated with the eternal theophany of God and with God's feminine aspect through her iconic attributes of the mirror, the garment, and the cloud, each of which are divine sapiential images.<sup>33</sup> Life is woman's doing and without her it could not come to be: "And Adam called his wife Eve, for *she* was the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). Adam, from whom the woman is created, also had a role to play in the creation of the human race, for to him fell the task of begetting children from Eve.<sup>34</sup> But it was the woman's fecundity that awoke the devil's envy. In her exegesis of Revelation 12, Hildegard explains the devil's hate for the woman who represents first Eve, then Mary and the church: "The ancient dragon, seeing that he had lost the place where he wanted to set up his throne . . . sharpened his wrath against the woman, because he recognized that her childbearing was the root of the whole human race. Hating her mightily, he said to himself that he would never cease to pursue her until he drowned her in the sea."<sup>35</sup> She was the one through whom life was to be given, and her descendants would replace the fallen angels and Satan himself.<sup>36</sup> So he originally plotted the temptation of the first parents out of envy.

The giving of life through Eve required her union with Adam, "who is the sower, as the woman is the recipient of the seed."<sup>37</sup> Hildegard again explicitly invokes the agricultural metaphor. Adam's role in procreation takes second place to the joining of both original parents to one another "so that in the union of love there might be a multiplication of the human race."

Her earlier agricultural simile links earth and its maternal qualities with woman herself, who will be especially represented by Eve in her procreative function. She writes, in one of her more striking examples: "The woman is subject to the man in that he sows his seed in her, as he works the earth to

31. *LVM*, 5.31.39, p. 197, a passage of exceptional beauty.

32. As noted by Newman, *Sister*, p. 249.

33. This association is sketched for us by Newman, *Sister*, pp. 93–107.

34. *Causae et Curae*, 2.136.

35. *LDO*, 2.5.16, *PL* vol. 197, col. 915C. See Newman, *Sister*, p. 113, for commentary and translation of this text, from which I have benefited. The same idea is also more briefly stated in *LDO*, 1.1.14, *PL* vol. 197, col. 749C.

36. Hildegard, *LDO*, 2.5.16, *PL* vol. 197, col. 915; cf. *Scivias*, 1.2.10 (Hart-Bishop, p. 77).

37. *Scivias*, 1.2.11 (Hart-Bishop, p. 77).

make it bear fruit. Does a man work the earth so that it may bring forth thorns and thistles? Never, but that it may give worthy fruit. So also this endeavor should be for the love of children and not for the wantonness of lust.”<sup>38</sup> The woman here simultaneously recalls Eve and, to a lesser extent, the Virgin Mary. And the fruits of all three are similar. As from Eve was born the human race, so from Mary (through an exception to the usual order) came the Savior, and so in the church is born the new humanity.<sup>39</sup> Hildegard employs wholly traditional images here; the God-fearing woman gathers good works as a virgin or she brings forth children as a mother.<sup>40</sup> She manifests her wisdom by the “Fear of the Lord that is the beginning of Wisdom” (Eccles. 1:16). The wife is to fear her husband as she fears God. Only the woman who practices the virtue of fear can collect all the other virtues in her bosom.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Hildegard does not underestimate the dignity of woman’s role. She is so emphatic that bringing forth children is a cooperative task between husband and wife that she even misquotes Saint Paul, 1 Cor. 11:9, to make the point, “Woman was created for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman.”<sup>42</sup> Each sex needs the other to be complete. She writes: “And so man and woman are joined to each other so that the work of one happens through the other; because the man would not be called man without woman, nor woman be called woman without man. For woman is necessary for man, and man is a sight of consolation for woman. Neither could exist without the other. Man signifies the Son of God’s Divinity, and woman his Humanity.”<sup>43</sup> The mutual dependence of the sexes extended also to the Virgin Mary, who needed a husband, lest she become proud, thinking that no man was worthy of her.<sup>44</sup> As the distinct roles of man and woman do not render either superfluous, so there would be no Incarna-

38. *Scivias*, 1.2.22 (Hart-Bishop, p. 84). The same parallel is made with Eve in *Scivias*, 1.2.11 (Hart-Bishop, p. 77), and again in *Scivias*, 2.1, *visio*, p. 112 (Hart-Bishop, p. 150) and in *Scivias*, 2.3.22 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 177–178).

39. Indeed, Eve in a mysterious way contained the whole human race, just as the church contains all Christians; see *Scivias*, 1.2.10 (Hart-Bishop, p. 77).

40. *LVM*, 1.82.96.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Scivias*, 1.2.12 (Hart-Bishop, p. 78); a misquote noted by Newman, *Sister*, p. 99. On the complementarity of men and women in Hildegard’s thought, see Scholz, “Hildegard von Bingen,” pp. 374–377.

43. *LDO*, 1.4.100, *PL* vol. 197, col. 885B–D. See Newman, *Sister*, p. 96, for commentary and translation of this text from which I have benefited. On this famous quotation see Caroline Bynum, “‘And Woman His Humanity’: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), pp. 151–179. And the same idea again, *LDO*, 2.5.43, *PL* vol. 197, col. 945D. Likewise, there can be no soul without the body, *LDO*, 1.4.105, *PL* vol. 197, col. 899C. On the importance of the complementarity of the sexes in Hildegard, see Allen, “Two Medieval Views,” pp. 31–34.

44. On this, see *Expositiones Quorundam Evangeliorum*, 1.1, ed. Jean-Baptiste Pitra, *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis* (Monte Cassino, 1882), p. 245.

tion without both the humanity and divinity of Christ. It is Christ's humanity, his feminine aspect, that Hildegard identifies with the church.<sup>45</sup>

In the church, however, the life is multiplied not by union with an earthly man, but by the reception of a heavenly Bridegroom or the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus mother church's marriage, like that of Mary, is virginal, and her fruitfulness is without the labor pains that Eve's descendants inherit from the Fall. "In this [giving birth to her children] that Mother suffers no hurt, for she remains forever in the wholeness of her virginity, that is the Catholic Faith; for she arose in the blood of the true Lamb, her intimate Bridegroom, who was born of the untouched Virgin."<sup>46</sup> No fewer than five visions in the *Scivias* depict the majestic image of the church, who is at once the bride, the virgin, and the mother of the faithful.<sup>47</sup> Like woman herself, the church is paralleled with the earth. Like the earth that was gathered together as a unity in the midst of the waters of creation, the church is gathered together as a unity out of the unbelievers. Hildegard renders this image more vivid by describing how the sleeping earth, which is the church, becomes fertile through being turned by the plow of faith.<sup>48</sup> This image of the living earth becomes an image of the church's womb giving birth to her various orders.<sup>49</sup>

The church, like Eve, is a fruitful mother, but she is, like Mary, pure virgin; both Mary and the church conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>50</sup> The church remains a virgin because her children's conception is more the work of the Spirit than of Christ. The complex relationship between Christ, the

45. *LDO*, 2.5.18, *PL* vol. 197, col. 918B–C. Hildegard's idea that the Virgin, who symbolizes the church, provided Christ's "materia," which is especially identified with his body, which is the church, is developed beautifully in M. Schmidt, "Maria, 'Materia Aurea' in der Kirche nach Hildegard von Bingen," *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 32 (1981): 16–32.
46. *Scivias*, 2.3.12 (Hart-Bishop, p. 173). For more on the theme of virginal maternity in Hildegard's thought, see P. Walter, "Virgo Filium Dei Portasti: Maria in den Gesängen der hl. Hildegard von Bingen," *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte* 29 (1977): 75–96.
47. The first of these, *Scivias*, 2.3. *visio*, (Hart-Bishop, p. 169), emphasizes the maternity of the church by having its personification call out, "I must conceive and give birth!" The individual soul is also Christ's bride, e.g., *LDO*, 1.4.87, *PL* vol. 197, col. 866A–C, but this nuptial theme is secondary in Hildegard.
48. *LDO*, 2.5.32, *PL* vol. 197, col. 928–929. Hildegard, later in the same passage, describes the gathered seas as symbolic of the church, paralleling it with the "sea of glass" in Rev. 4:6. In *LDO*, 2.5.40–41, *PL* vol. 197, col. 941–943, Hildegard will reconcile these images by explaining that the earth properly represents the secular married order bringing forth progeny, while the seas are those of the spiritual order who live in celibacy.
49. *LDO*, 2.5.33, *PL* vol. 197, col. 930C–D. In chapters 33 and following, Hildegard, in an extended metaphor, will identify the various "ornaments" of creation with various aspects of the church. There the agricultural image is lost and the clergy become the celestial lights and stars, as in *Expositio Evangeliorum*, 24.2. She then returns to the church-earth image in *LDO*, 2.5.44, *PL* vol. 197, col. 947.
50. The most systematic development of this theme is *Scivias*, 2.3.11–12 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 172–173).

Spirit, and the mother church is exemplified by Hildegard's image of the church giving birth in Baptism:

The church is the virginal mother of all Christians, since she conceives and bears them in secret by the Holy Spirit, offering them to God so that they are called the children of God. As the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Blessed Mother, so that she miraculously conceived and painlessly bore the Son of God and yet remained a virgin, so the Holy Spirit illumines the Church, the happy mother of believers, so that without corruption she conceives and bears children and yet remains a virgin.<sup>51</sup>

The water of Baptism moistens the church, as the rain does the earth—both the earth and the church need “watering” if they are to be fruitful. There is a clear trinitarian image here and it extends to Hildegard's vision of the Eucharist as well.

The virgin mother church, who bears Christ by the priest's words in the Eucharist, is above all parallel to the Virgin Mother Mary, who at the angel's word bore Christ in her womb.<sup>52</sup> Virgin Mary conceives, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit at the speaking of the angel's word; the Creator gives birth to creation, over which the Spirit hovers (Gen. 1:2), by the speaking of the Word (Gen. 1:3; compare John 1:1–3); likewise virgin church receives the Eucharist, through the action of the Holy Spirit, at the speaking of the priest's word. The Father says concerning the Eucharist, “I extend over this offering my ardent charity at the moment when the priest invokes me and remembers that my Son blessed bread and wine in the agony of his passion.” Her eucharistic theology here reflects the ancient Christian idea of prayer to the Father, by the Son, in the Holy Spirit.<sup>53</sup> The very association of the priest at the Eucharist with the Word at creation here requires, as we shall see, that he be male. But Hildegard underlines the masculinity of Christ and the priest even more directly in her second image of the Eucharist, in which Christ is represented as a spouse.

As the church's spouse, Christ plays a different though not contradictory role in her Eucharist. The feminine church has become Christ's own bodily members in accord with the nuptial image in Ephesians. But as the church, which is Christ's body, is also his spouse, he can also pray for her as

51. *Scivias*, 2.3.12 (Hart-Bishop, p. 173).

52. An idea developed at length in Hildegard's letter on the Eucharist to “a certain priest,” *Ep.* 43r, *PL* vol. 197, col. 213.

53. On this ancient form of prayer, see J. A. Jungmann, S.J., *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origin and Development*, trans. Francis Brunner (New York, 1951), 1:379–384. See *Scivias*, 2.6.36 (Hart-Bishop, p. 260), where this description of the consecration is directly paralleled with Christ's Incarnation and the hovering of the Spirit in Gen. 1 is alluded to. I thank Barbara Newman for calling this remarkable text, with its focus on the Holy Spirit at the consecration, to my attention.

something distinct from himself. She is his body by marriage.<sup>54</sup> Through this nuptial union the church is made fruitful. Her fertility, the marriage gift of Christ her spouse, is her regeneration by water and the Holy Spirit: "As a bride [receives from her spouse] the gift of fertility and a pact of love for procreating children, and educates them as to their inheritance, so too the church, joined to the Son of God in the exercise of humility and charity, receives from him the regeneration of the Spirit and water to save souls and restore life."<sup>55</sup>

The church, like the woman and the earth, exists to be fruitful. Speaking principally to her nuns, women who have themselves offered their virginity to Christ, Hildegard explains the fruitfulness of the consecrated virgin as the result of the consummation of a nuptial union, but it is a virginal union like that of Mary, where the virginal nun's spiritual fecundity is paralleled with both that of the Virgin and an unplowed field.<sup>56</sup> This is an image that especially applies to consecrated virgins, but Hildegard extends the nuptial image to all Christians in the union of Christ and the soul.<sup>57</sup> So, like Mary, the consecrated virgin, through the burning heat of Divinity, conceives Christ the God-man, and in so doing she collects for herself all the virtues of salvation history.<sup>58</sup> In her union with God she possesses the very riches that the church possesses in the Eucharist through the ministry of the altar: "A virgin betrothed to my Son will receive him as Bridegroom, for she has shut her body away from a physical husband; and in her Bridegroom she has the priesthood and all the ministry of my altar, and with him possesses all its riches." The church, Christ's spouse, is his body, but she is still distinct from him who is her head. In the same way she mysteriously participates in her Bridegroom's priesthood, its ministry, and its benefits, even though she does not hold Christ's priestly office herself. The consecrated virgin, married to Christ, likewise shares his priesthood. In Hildegard's thought, the church cannot be identified with the hierarchy, as the language of some medieval and many modern writers implies. Rather, the priesthood exists for the body of the church; or, as Hildegard at one point suggests, it exists to adorn the church with the sacramental ministry as with a garment.<sup>59</sup>

Christ, God's Word spoken in the beginning, is the Bridegroom of the consecrated virgin and of the church. He is therefore, for Hildegard, an emphatically masculine figure. Unlike contemporary male writers, such as

54. The imagery is Pauline, see Eph. 5:21–33. Hildegard elaborates this image when treating Christ's intercession for the church in *LDO*, 3.10.22–23, *PL* vol. 197, col. 1024–1025.

55. *Scivias*, 2.6.1 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 238–239).

56. *Scivias*, 3.10.7 (Hart-Bishop, p. 478).

57. For example, *LDO*, 3.10.9, *PL* vol. 197, col. 1009B.

58. A theme elaborated at length in *Ep.* 84r, in *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, CCCM 91, ed. L. van Acker (Turnholt, 1991), pp. 193–94.

59. *Scivias*, 2.3.3 (Hart-Bishop, p. 170).

Bernard of Clairvaux, she never attributes feminine traits or images to Jesus. This masculine imagery contrasts with the feminine symbols and attributes that she uses or implies when speaking of God generally.<sup>60</sup> She transfers feminine qualities or symbols often associated with Christ to the Virgin Mary. For example, Divine Mercy, at first personified in feminine terms and initially symbolic of Christ, is quickly assimilated to the Virgin and loses its relationship to Christ.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, the traditionally and grammatically feminine symbols Hildegard associates with Christ become masculine; her symbolism is thus not confined by grammatical gender. So, God's Grace becomes a male figure dressed in episcopal vestments. This odd male Grace of God makes perfect sense when it is later explicitly identified with "Christ, the Son of God, the High Priest."<sup>62</sup>

Hildegard attributes masculinity to the Deity, most strongly in the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, where she says, speaking of her first vision in that work: "The man of such great height that he reaches from the top of the clouds of heaven to the bottom of the abyss designates God. And God is rightly called a man (*vir*) because all strength (*vis*) and all things that live (*vivunt*) come through him."<sup>63</sup> This etymological connection of power, which she often conceives of as the power to rule, with masculinity is common in Hildegard's writing.<sup>64</sup> This power is above all identified with God's Word, who also represents divine power and authority. A word is what one uses to issue commands. The Word himself issues commands to his spouse, the church.<sup>65</sup> Hildegard explains that it was the first man's power to command, his "virility," that made him the image of the God who rules creation.<sup>66</sup> The highly masculine God in this vision from the *Liber Vitae Meritorum* must be identified with Christ, rather than God the Father; the Father usually appears as a "voice" (cf. Mt. 17:5) in her visions. The Word is the instrument *through* which all creation comes, a usage identifying him with the Word as an instrument of

60. High medieval attribution of feminine traits to God is surveyed in Bynum's "Jesus as Mother and Abbot as Mother: Some Themes in Twelfth-Century Cistercian Writing," in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 110–169. The authors presented there, like the later Julian of Norwich, *Showings* [long text], 58–62, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York, 1978), pp. 293–305, focus almost exclusively on the femininity or maternity of Jesus or the Word, and relatively rarely use such language of God. Newman, *Sister*, p. 234, has noted Hildegard's preference for divine and masculine titles for Christ.
61. *Scivias*, 3.3.8 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 348–349).
62. *Scivias*, 3.8.7–8 (Hart-Bishop, p. 428) and *Scivias*, 3.8.25 (Hart-Bishop, p. 447).
63. *LVM*, 1.10.32. The masculinity of God is also associated with his power to correct and punish, *LVM*, 3.24.32.
64. For example, *LVM*, 1.21.33.
65. *LDO*, 1.4.105, *PL* vol. 197, col. 890D; and especially *LDO*, 2.5.46, *PL* vol. 197, col. 948–949.
66. *LDO*, 2.5.46, *PL* vol. 197, col. 951–952. And again, contrasting *virilis* with *muliebris*, *LDO*, 3.10.8, *PL* vol. 197, col. 1006C–D and 3.10.10, *PL* vol. 197, col. 1012D.

creation in John 1:3 and reflecting both the plowman in her original agricultural image and the angel of the Annunciation.

Likewise, the uncompromising femininity of Christ's bride, the church, demands Hildegard's uncompromisingly masculine language for Christ, her Bridegroom. Hildegard's nuptial understanding of the union of Christ and his church requires that the priest's masculinity in his espousal and marriage to the church requires his celibacy as well.<sup>67</sup> The Bridegroom is for his spouse, the church, and for her alone. Christ and his minister are "men of one wife," and this wife is the church.<sup>68</sup>

But the church, as Christ's spouse, is also his sister, since he has taken on flesh from her Mother at his Incarnation.<sup>69</sup> This mother is identified with both Eve and the Virgin, but even more perfectly she is the Creator who gave both of them birth. When writing of God as the one who brings to life and nurtures, Hildegard moves easily from the image of maternity to one of the Father as creator and nurturer. This is a repeated and natural shift in her thought. "Chicks seek food from their mothers, and the earth draws all its growth from the air. Why is God called Father, save that his children call upon him?"<sup>70</sup> Understanding God as the merciful and compassionate, Hildegard asks who will show her the mercy of the Creator, who is her Mother as well as Christ's. Addressing Christ, she answers her own question: "You, the Bridegroom of the Church, You, whom I call my brother because of your Incarnation, and who sucks the [milk of] Mercy and Truth, that nourishes humanity, from the Divinity that is my Mother in creation, giving me life and growth."<sup>71</sup> It is a natural transition from the fraternity of Christ to the maternity of God. The pivotal symbol here is the church, who is simultaneously Christ's sister and spouse and the daughter of God. So Christ, by his familial relations, is shown to be the Son of God. Hildegard uses other images of the femininity of God, especially when personifying the Divine as Wisdom or Charity.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, it is God's feminine quality as Mother that plays

67. *Scivias*, 2.6.64 (Hart-Bishop, p. 272), and *Scivias*, 2.6.68 (Hart-Bishop, p. 274), where she says, "The Church is one, but she has many husbands, entering into marriage with the priests of my Son who are daily in his service; yet she remains an intact virgin."

68. 1 Tim. 3:2; *Scivias*, 2.6.68 (Hart-Bishop, p. 274).

69. The beloved being both sister and spouse would not seem odd to the medieval reader acquainted with Song of Solomon 4:10 and 8:1.

70. *LVM*, 4.12.17. This "maternal" aspect of the Father comes forward even more strongly in a letter of Hildegard to Bishop Eberhard of Bamberg, where she writes, *Ep.* 34r: "God is called Father because from him everything is born. . . . The paternity from which all things are born and which encompasses all things is brilliance, because they are from his power." This image is repeated in *Causae et Curae*, 1:2, where the birth-giving paternity is compared to the unity of a wheel, a central theme in *LDO*.

71. *Scivias*, 2.6.35 (Hart-Bishop, p. 259).

72. As Wisdom, *Scivias*, 3.9.25 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 465–66); as Charity, *Ep.* 30, *PL* vol. 179, col. 192–193, and in *LDO*, 3.8.2, *PL* vol. 197, col. 979–980.

the crucial role in Hildegard's reflections on the church, the Eucharist, and the priesthood.

We have already seen how Hildegard parallels the Eucharist with the Incarnation of Christ through the Virgin Mary. This identification allows her to focus on the Eucharist, even more than Baptism, as the locus of the church's conception. In a remarkable passage, she parallels the male's physical role in conception (in which he pours forth the blood and semen, not yet alive and informed, into the woman) with the words of the priest in the Eucharist. Neither act gives life in itself. In all three cases, it is the Spirit of God that gives life; the man, the angel of the Annunciation, and the priest merely minister at this event, and are almost bystanders.<sup>73</sup> She proclaims, "See, [Christ's] flesh and blood are consecrated on the altar in the sacrament, which exists not for the glory of the priest, but for that of my Only Begotten Son." The priest's word, like the Word at creation, is spoken, and from the church, as from God the Father, life comes to birth.

Like Eve, the church is the image of God as feminine Creator, who gives birth to life in abundance and nurtures it with care. Like the Virgin, she awaits being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit at the priest's word, which will allow her to bring forth the Son again in time. Hildegard writes in one of her letters: "When the priest repeats the words of God, the body of the incarnate Word of God is again conformed. Through the Word all creatures, which had not yet been manifested, came into being; and the same Word was incarnate of the Virgin Mary."<sup>74</sup> The priest speaks the divine "Word"; in his priestly function he, unlike the church, does not hear it or respond to it. The Word then takes root in the Virgin, by implication here the church, which becomes the fruitful mother.<sup>75</sup> The priest at the altar and the Word at creation, both masculine, are subordinated to the church and the Creator. They assist the two Mothers in bringing forth abundant fruit. It is a theological inversion of remarkable daring. The bride, like the woman and the earth, brings forth fruit at the descent of the Spirit or the rain. As the woman can become fertile because of the man and the earth because of the farmer, so the church does through the ministry of her High Priest. The minister of the altar, like the

73. *Scivias*, 2.6.43 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 262–263).

74. *Ep.* 47, *PL* vol. 197, col. 225B. The same parallel between the Incarnation and the consecration of the Eucharist also appears in *Scivias*, 2.4.15 (Hart-Bishop, p. 246), and *Scivias*, 2.6.36, pp. 264–265 (Hart-Bishop, p. 260).

75. *Scivias*, 2.6.15 (Hart-Bishop, p. 246); Newman, *Sister*, 194–195, misses the point of this passage by identifying the priest with the Virgin because both take a position of humility. This just does not fit: the priest and Gabriel speak; it is the church and the Virgin who become fertile. The Virgin's words, both in this *Scivias* passage and the letter quoted above, are "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." Hildegard herself explicitly speaks of priests in *Scivias*, 3.13.6 (Hart-Bishop, p. 528) as "imitators of that Most High Person," who, in context, can only be Christ the Second Person of the Trinity, not the Virgin.



farmer, must pass on; the fruitful bride remains to give forth life in abundance. The ministry of the altar exists for one reason: to allow the Bride to become fruitful.

We can now place Hildegard's understanding of the male priesthood within the wider context of her thought. As a sign, she tells us, the priest must be male, or better a virgin male, not because Christ is male, but because the body of the church conceives and is fruitful through his ministry; her femininity and his role demand that he be masculine. Indeed, for Hildegard, the bride's femininity is such a dominant image that it disallows using even traditional feminine symbols for Christ.<sup>76</sup> Such symbols might call into doubt his masculinity. But Christ's masculinity does not of itself claim either for him, or for his priests, a position of superiority to the church who is the mother and body of Christ. Rather, the priest's masculinity recalls that he is a minister who passes away, just as the farmer who plows and sows can take no responsibility for the abundance of harvest. Likewise the masculinity of the Word throws into relief his ministerial assistance to the Creator who is, in the abundance of creation, shown to be truly his and our Mother.<sup>77</sup>

76. I have been able to discover only one case where Hildegard associates a feminine image with Christ. This occurs when she parallels his Baptism with the sacrament of Baptism, *Scivias*, 2.3.32 (Hart-Bishop, pp. 182–183). In this complex passage, Hildegard parallels the words heard from the Father with the priest, the godfather with the Dove of the Spirit, and the godmother with Christ's flesh. But here it is Christ's flesh that is feminine (following the traditional parallel of the flesh with the feminine and the spirit with the masculine), not Christ himself.

77. On the Word of God as instrument of creation, see especially *LVM*, 6.32.52.