

Daily Meditation 8-31-2026: Hildegard's Politics

Good morning.

This is an unusual daily meditation this morning, as far as you're receiving my video, which I always offer on Monday. But never before have I not written the essay on Monday. The reason for this tiny shift at this time, is that last week, as we all know, Dolly Parton died, and so I felt it was important that I write a daily meditation on her. And in doing so, I took one of GG's days, and he has been gifting us this past week with a series on Hildegard of Bingen. And he had this one final essay to offer, so we bumped it to Monday, and here I am.

And of course I'm happy to talk about Hildegard because I've written three books on her,. And well, not just on her, but one of her books we've translated: Hildegard's *Book of Divine Works* is her final book, and the most mature in many ways, I believe. And we published that book many years ago, along with 50 of her most important letters, including to popes and emperors and bishops and archbishops and so forth, and then 10 of her songs.

So, of course, the first book I did about her was about her paintings, what she called her *Illuminations*, her images that she received in an altered state of consciousness. And so that's my first book concerning her paintings. And then Hildegard's *Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, and then a very fine book by one of our students, Gabriele Uhlein. I did write the foreword to this, and Thomas Berry wrote a preface to this. But it's a wonderful edition of Hildegard's words, arranged in this order, of poetic order for sake of prayer and meditation.

But my most recent book is on Hildegard on being *A Saint for Our Times*. And there's a chapter there on feminism, a chapter on a world as Prophet to society and religion, a chapter on the wild woman and the shaman, and a chapter on science and meeting Albert Einstein, and the chapter putting her in the room with Howard Thurman, the God of Life and Light, as a saint from the God of Religion. And of course a chapter in the Cosmic Christ, where I put her in the room with Mary Oliver, a brilliant poem on creation, the Cosmic Christ.

So, what I'd like to do is draw from two of these books. First, the book with the divine works, letters, and songs. I want to emphasize the songs, because I think it was just two days ago that GG wrote about her music. There's an excellent introduction here by Brendan Doyle, who is on our faculty of the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality,

both in Chicago at Mundelein College, and later in Oakland at Holy Names College. And he taught courses on Hildegard, singing her music, for one thing, and he taught courses in other musicians, classical musicians, such as Mozart and Beethoven and Gustav Mahler and others on spirituality and music. But I think his one and a half page introduction here is really important about her songs. And he says,

Why befriend a 12th century composer? Because, he says, all music is a revelation. Music reveals; it wakes up new feelings and emotions that words can only hint at. And Hildegard knew this. She once said that singing words reveals their tuning directly to the soul through bodily vibrations. This demonstrates that her world view centers around an intimate relationship between the body, the mouth, the throat, the vocal cords, diaphragm, and lungs, and spirit: breath, breath, spirit. Even the angels eternally sing the praises of the Creator. The goal of creation for Hildegard is that all creatures sing with one voice, the same praises. She says that heaven is a place of singing.

And because he taught Hildegard's music, of course he experienced personally, but others too, singing Hildegard, he says, "Hildegard's compositions are incredibly physical." This makes sense, for you realize he was a physical scientist as well as a musician. And of course GG has been emphasizing that this week, this past week.

Singing her music brings you close to hyperventilation at times. When she writes about the spirit, you know she understands the spirit as wind, as breath, because you become the wind. When she writes about divine mysteries, you sing out the deepest space of your physical being, from the comfort of normal range to the extremes of your vocal potential. Music reveals that we too are divine mysteries, and living profoundly erotic.

Then he compares the modes of the Middle Ages to the modern times. *In the Middle Ages there were seven modes, and in modern times there are only two. They dropped five. We only have the major and the minor key today. But the medieval composition was written in one of these seven modes, one of them. But Hildegard's cosmos cannot be limited to one mode. That's typical of Hildegard. Her paintings run off the page; they run beyond the frame at times. So, in the course of her song, she's likely to jump ahead 500 years and move into another mode. And he gives an example in her poem "To the Holy Spirit." She begins in the Dorian mode to express the life-giving movement of Spirit. Then she switches to the Phrygian mode to sing of her cleansing and healing power. And we find in ourselves here in the music, a whole new world of feeling.*

Another vast leap that she offered in the 12th century in her music, is thematic development. In her hymns praising virgins and another in praise of Mary, both illustrate the very classical trait that you find in Haydn or in Mozart. She makes connections

through musical themes. These themes are like life; they enter or disappear, and they re-enter, and then are transformed through their relationship with other themes.

The concrete example he gives is her poem “Praising Virgins:” *The theme for Viriditas, greening power that you've heard about, re-enters to express the word "divinorum," which means "of the divine." As you sing her works, you'll find that many themes return like old friends, making connections with new expressions of faith.*

And he says, in singing her music and sharing it, he finds that *her melodies are as memorable to me as a melody of Mozart or Mahler, romantic in their wholeness and vast in their expansiveness. Her music is unique for its time.* And I am tempted to say for any time, so that is a very fine introduction to her music. It's found in back of my book here, introducing the 10 songs we present.

Now, in today's meditation. GG talks about the politics of Hildegard, and I have a chapter on Hildegard as Prophet to Society and Religion, chapter 8 in my most recent book on Hildegard. And I talk about how she critiques society's power elites. She wrote King Conrad III, who would be part of the Second Crusade, which ended in failure. And she said, *There are certain ways in which you are turning from God. The times in which you live are as frivolous as a gossiping woman. This is Hildegard talking. These times tend toward a hostile injustice, which strive to destroy the justice in the vineyard of the Lord. God, who knows all these things, speaks to you, O King. When you hear this. O man, pull yourself together against your self-will and improve yourself, so you may come purified to the times in which you need no more to be ashamed of your days. Imitate the highest judge and ruler in the divine compassion.*

So she took on her aristocratic role in fighting the aristocrats of her times. She wrote four letters to Barbarossa, crowned emperor in 1152, criticizing him, and called him “an infant and a madman” in one of her letters to him, And she thundered after politicians who were trying to steal power, if you will, from the church. *When the greedy do not get what they want, they fall into depression from which they are not lightly lifted,* she says. *And the hard-hearted ones, she saw in a vision, are surrounded by dense smoke and have very large black eyes, and say, "Why should I do any work for others? Why should I wear myself out? Why should I worry about compassion? I will take care of myself. Let others take care of themselves."* That kind of politics is still with us today, obviously. She says, *No one is able to be satisfied by abundance. You are only bored by it. Hard heartedness,* she says, *is a worse sin because it shows no mercy, nor does it indulge in charity, nor does it do any good works. Hard heartedness is strong in tyrants,* she says, *strong in tyrants.*

Now, I'm running out of time, but just one note in her letter to Pope Anastasius: *Why do you tolerate the evil ways of people, when the darkness of foolishness draw everything harmful to themselves? They are like hens who make noise during the night and terrify themselves.* She's criticizing the Curia that surrounds the Pope and telling the Pope to kick them out. So yes, Hildegard was many things, and she speaks to us still today.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.