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# Brides of Christ: an examination of female sainthood

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**Brides of Christ: An Examination of Female Sainthood**

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**Departmental Thesis**

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## **Introduction**

The history of women within the Catholic Church is a controversial subject. The Church's view on women, influenced as it was by early writers such as Saint Jerome, has rarely been positive and women were excluded from the higher offices of the Church. Despite such limitations, however, some women were able to climb to positions of power that equaled, and in some instances surpassed, that of the pope himself. The vehicle some of these women used in their ascent was a claimed mystical connection to God that superseded temporal authority and gave these mystics the confidence to actively engage in the politics and doctrine of the Church.

This thesis will explore two contrasting examples of female saints who successfully walked this mystical road to towering heights of influence and respect. The first of these is Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179 AD), a German Benedictine nun and visionary. Her legacy included three books recounting her visions, a sizable body of music, and hundreds of letters to and from Popes, kings, and theologians. In addition, she was given special dispensation to preach personally in a time when male priests alone had this right and she founded her own monastic community at Rupertsberg despite her abbot's disapproval.

The other saint to be examined is St. Catherine Benincasa of Siena (1347-1380 AD) a tertiary member of the Order of St. Dominic. Catherine, though from a middle class family, abandoned her relatively comfortable life and devoted herself to Christ after she experienced a powerful vision during her childhood. This experience

led her to live a life of discipline, fasting, and self-inflicted physical suffering. She was instrumental in securing the return of the papacy to Rome and ending the so-called “Babylonian Captivity” of the Avignon papacy. She was a theologian and correspondent in the same vein as Hildegard had been and over three hundred of her letters survive to this day.

Both of these women were examples of the power that mystical visions could grant to a woman within the Church. While Hildegard was not the first Christian mystic, nor Catherine the last, these two women were both exceptional in their own times. These two saints were selected for this paper due to their importance as women reformers and their similar mystical experiences, despite being so far removed in space, time, and culture. These vast differences in their lives and times further reinforced the immense influence that visions granted, provided those visions were accepted. Though separated by almost one hundred and seventy years and two totally different cultures, these women were propelled upward by their mystical experiences, bypassing the traditional hierarchy entirely and achieving startling reforms within the Church.

This paper will argue that both of these women, though different in their backgrounds, utilized the mystical experience for the same end: to reform the Church. The word “reform” must be understood in their context for neither wished to replace elements within the faith. For both Hildegard and Catherine “reform” meant simply to aid the Church in returning to its “correct” path. This desire for reform is one of the largest unifying factors between the two saints and they used their mysticism in

similar ways to achieve this end.

This paper shall be divided in the following manner: in the first portion there will be a review of the historiography for both saints. The second portion will provide a background relating to the monastic life, mysticism, and the role of the Church. Part three will contain biographical information on Hildegard and Catherine and the fourth portion will be the analysis and conclusion.

## I. Historiographical Review

### Introduction

The historiography of both Catherine and Hildegard contains difficulties for the historian. Both were written about during their lifetimes and both shared a measure of popular fame and recollection. Up until the last several decades their historiography was inextricably linked to their hagiography and this has led to a conflict between what religious officials proclaimed and what academics have researched. With new interest in both, and better texts and translations available, more and more has been written about these women as real people, rather than as examples of piety and saintly life.

### Hildegard of Bingen

When looking into the historiographical record of Hildegard, her *Vita* is the first work that should be considered.<sup>1</sup> The *Vita* was started before her death and it was, and is, a source of importance relating to her life. It was hagiographical in nature, however, as most biographies of saints were, and more focused on presenting her in a holy light and less as a factual biography. This is not to say that it should be discounted, it was from this work, along with a few other contemporary sources, that scholars were able to reconstruct her life. It also is the starting point for trying to understand who Hildegard herself was. Her visions were strange and difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> Gottfried and Theoderic, *The Life of Holy Hildegard* trans. Adelgundis Führkötter and James McGrath (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995),

interpret, her letters metaphysical and assertive, but her *Vita* was pointed and clear and is still instructive today.

Until the 1980s Hildegard was a relatively obscure figure and it was only as the nine hundredth anniversary of her birth came closer that greater scholarly work was devoted to her. In studying Hildegard the work of Barbara Newman clearly stands out as one of the most important in current times for the saint. Her books *Sister of Wisdom*<sup>2</sup> and *Voice of the Living Light*,<sup>3</sup> published 1987 and 1998 respectively, were powerful introductions to the world of Hildegard and Newman has continued to write upon the subject in a large number of articles. The thrust of her work focused upon placing Hildegard as a woman saint, not merely a saint who is a woman. The emphasis on Hildegard's femininity is a consistent thread throughout her works.<sup>4</sup>

*Sister of Wisdom* is the seminal work and it had a direct focus on the feminine as a part of Hildegard's overarching theology and as contained within her visions. The characters of "Ecclesia," the personification of "Mother Church," and "Sophia," "Holy Wisdom," both female, figure heavily within Hildegard's works and Newman argued that this essentially female nature to both bespoke Hildegard's theology of the importance of women within the faith.<sup>5</sup> As Newman herself wrote in the preface to *Sister of Wisdom*: "We may boldly claim Hildegard as the first Christian writer to

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Newman et al. *Voice of Living Light* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Helen J. John, "Hildegard of Bingen: A New Twelfth Century Philosopher?" *Hypatia* 7 (1992): 117.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Head, "Review of Sister of Wisdom," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57 (1989), 218.

deal seriously and positively with the feminine as such, not merely with the challenges posed by and for women..."<sup>6</sup> This work, written in 1989, was one of the first wave of books published that expanded upon her theology and made her works accessible to the public.<sup>7</sup>

While dealing with the wild imagery that characterized Hildegard's visions, Newman did not push for a feminist interpretation of Hildegard's writing but rather attempted to untangle the seemingly contradictory messages of female power and the masculinity of God.<sup>8</sup> According to Newman, for Hildegard the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ into human form was the point at which the female aspect, lost by Eve in the Garden of Eden, was redeemed through the Virgin Mary.<sup>9</sup>

While dealing with this aspect, Newman uncovered one of the paradoxes inherent to Hildegard and to scholarship of her works: her view of women themselves. Though Hildegard defined the Church as being the virgin Ecclesia she was categorically against the notion of female priests. What exactly were her views on women? Newman proffered the answer that the ordering of the male and female within Hildegard's mind was based on the idea of sex and the physical corruption of menstruation which were tied by this point to sin.<sup>10</sup> While women certainly had a role within the Church it was, in Hildegard's eyes, not as priests.

The essential nature of Hildegard's works was allegorical, and Newman dealt

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<sup>6</sup> Newman, *Sister*, xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Glenn Olsen, "Review of Sister of Wisdom," *Speculum* 74 (1999), 801.

<sup>8</sup> Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 178.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

with a wide range of the mystical visions Hildegard experienced, including incisive commentary to help unpack the meanings hidden within simile and metaphor.<sup>11</sup> While dealing with these visions, Newman did her best to emphasize that there was a distinct point and purpose to them and to dissuade any attempts at appropriating such visions to serve theological, or philosophical, ends that were not already embedded in the text.<sup>12</sup> This book has been the starting point for most of the researchers into the present day and the accessibility of Hildegard's work has been increased by it. *Sister of Wisdom* was primarily on the saint's writing and mystical experiences and, though it does contain biographical history, the track of it follows Hildegard's mystical experience and focuses on it.

While still the starting point for a student of Hildegard, *Sister of Wisdom* has been expanded upon by a number of other authors, including Newman herself. It was followed upon most importantly by the edited work *Voice of the Living Light* which took a much more in depth look at Hildegard's life and expanded the study of her to include musical theory, medical science, and poetry where previous works had been content mainly to consider her visions.<sup>13</sup>

In *Voice of the Living Light*, Newman both contributed to the book and edited it and she broke down the life of Hildegard into discrete parts: Poet, Reformer, Abbess, and other such titles. Each chapter was written by an expert in that particular

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, xviii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 265-270.

<sup>13</sup> Newman, *Voice*.

area, with Newman herself adding two chapters.<sup>14</sup> This gives the book a very specialized feel and each chapter adds to the other as they slowly build up what Hildegard's life and experiences would have been like. The book's organization also served to highlight the variety of different sources that one might draw upon to understand Hildegard.<sup>15</sup>

The purpose of *Voice of Living Light* was to build an image of Hildegard in the context of her times and in this it succeeds. The chapters written by Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, titled "Prophet and Reformer"<sup>16</sup>, and the "Correspondent" chapter by Joan Ferrante<sup>17</sup>, each give a sense of the scale of Hildegard's fame and her determination to reform the church. In the section titled "Artist" Madeline Caviness deals with the strange illuminations that accompany Hildegard's works *Scivias* and *The Book of Divine Works*.<sup>18</sup> Her stance on these illuminations is important as she asserts that these illuminations, while not created by Hildegard's own hand, were directed by her specifically.<sup>19</sup>

The section dealing with Hildegard's music, written by Margot Fassler, has deep insights into the word choice within her songs as aspects of her belief in the incarnational aspect of music itself.<sup>20</sup> And in a chapter by Newman, Hildegard is looked at as a poet and the great departure from traditional poetry and musical writing

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1-176.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Holsinger, "Review of Voice of Living Light," *The Journal of Religion* 81 (2001), 351-352.

<sup>16</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 112-113..

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 155.

which characterized Hildegard's *Symphonia*.<sup>21</sup> Each chapter builds on the previous to form a synthesis out of divergent disciplines to explain not only the context of Hildegard's life but also provide a strong introduction into these individual aspects of her life. Like *Sister of Wisdom, Voice of Living Light* expanded the way in which study of the saint was conducted by taking a much more multi-faceted approach to Hildegard than had previously been the case.

Some articles had been written on her from differing angles after *Sister of Wisdom* was published but *Voice of Living Light* added another layer of the analytical to the subject. The inclusion of such varying experts elevated the argument about Hildegard away from such varied types as new age mystics, creation centered theologians, and feminists. *Sister of Wisdom* provided the framework for the study of Hildegard but *Voice of Living Light* has provided a much needed update to the area of study.

Newman's works, while incredibly useful, were written with a focus on Hildegard's visions and the female nature of them. A less technical and more linear biography of Hildegard is Flanagan's *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*.<sup>22</sup> This work was meant as a general introduction to the world of Hildegard and her life and it lacks the specialized knowledge of Newman's *Sister of Wisdom* or the expert treatment of *Voice of Living Light*.<sup>23</sup> The main criticism of this book, its generality, can also be seen as a strength, however. It is much more readable and approachable

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 181-182.

<sup>22</sup> Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, (New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Henrietta Leyser, "Review of Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life," *The English Historical Review* 107 (1992), 984-985.

than Newman's work while still being informative. As Flanagan stated in the introduction: "My intention, then, is to provide a comprehensive introduction to Hildegard, in light of the current scholarship, from which readers may be inspired."<sup>24</sup> This work was not intended to supplant Newman's work but to build upon it and to focus more on Hildegard's works and how she created them.<sup>25</sup>

An interesting new idea in the study of Hildegard, and a divisive one, is the suggestion by Flanagan that the visions that Hildegard described could have been partially influenced by migraines.<sup>26</sup> The evidence of this rests on Hildegard's own words describing her visions being accompanied by pain and that they were a constant thing, not an occasional trance experience. This idea, however intriguing, was not demonstrable and some reviewers of Flanagan's work pointed this out as a significant flaw in an otherwise good introductory work.<sup>27</sup>

An interesting point raised by Flanagan was whether Hildegard's visions were conscious attempts by her to gain admittance into the powerful circle of the learned and the elite among the Church.<sup>28</sup> While this was, and is, a question worth asking, Flanagan does not make up her mind on the subject and this may be due in part to her attributing a great part of Hildegard's actions to cultural and sociological reasons.<sup>29</sup> As was noted by one reviewer, Flanagan's decision to emphasize these conditions erodes the accomplishments of Hildegard to some extent by attributing her successes

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<sup>24</sup> Flanagan, *Hildegard*, xi.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>27</sup> Leyser, "Review," 985.

<sup>28</sup> Flanagan, *Hildegard*, 183-184.

<sup>29</sup> John, "A New Twelfth Century Philosopher?" 120.

to factors surrounding Hildegard rather than to Hildegard herself.<sup>30</sup>

The current state of the study of Hildegard has largely settled around these works and the scholarly outgrowth from them. While Newman still remains the starting point for study new work there has been an increase in other interpretations of Hildegard's work, as Flanagan's work indicates. The visions of Hildegard have gained more popular attention with the elevation of the saint to the status of Doctor of the Church in 2012 and translations of *Scivias*<sup>31</sup> and *The Book of Divine Works*<sup>32</sup>, along with her other works, have been translated and distributed widely.

The focus, however, remained upon Hildegard as a woman, Hildegard as a mystic, and Hildegard as a theologian. This paper, in examining the power that she attained due to her visions, builds on the strong foundation that Newman and others created and expands the field by approaching Hildegard as a mystic with a purpose. Yes, many books and articles mention her goal as reformation of the Church, but the thrust is upon this reformation, not the means by which she attempted to achieve it. Usually the focus is either on her visions or her life, not on the purpose behind her visions and the driving force of her life. Hildegard was a reformer in the same vein as Bernard of Clairvaux, an influential abbot and founder of the Cistercian order in the twelfth century, but the means she used to further her goal was her mystical experience. This was picked up on in *Voice of the Living Light* where Kathryn Kerby-Fulton deals with Hildegard's political visions and how they were linked with the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* trans. Columba Hart et al. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works* ed. Matthew Fox, (Rochester: Bear & Company, 1987).

Gregorian Reforms of the eleventh century.<sup>33</sup>

In considering these selected works it is clear that the scope of Hildegard's work has been a challenge for historians to work through comprehensively. The contrasting portions of her life, mystical visionary, practical herbalist, sickly abbess, and confident reformer are all material for books by themselves. Over-emphasis placed upon her female nature has proven to be a trap as it has encouraged readers to interpret her works in a way that they were never intended to be by the writer herself.<sup>34</sup> She was not seeking to force the Church to change; she was trying to renew it. What is clear is that the visions she experienced, real or not, were the unifying force within her life and her mystical experience is the common lens through which she viewed her own life.

### Catherine of Siena

The works relating to Catherine of Siena are more diverse than those for Hildegard but there are several which stand out and serve as the starting point for any researcher. The original biography of Catherine came from Raymond of Capua, a friend and correspondent who wrote it over a period of ten years from 1384-1395.<sup>35</sup> This work, like Hildegard's *Vita*, was a hagiographical text that emphasized the saint's miraculous qualities and her piety. It has served as the basis for much of the research on Catherine as Raymond was her spiritual guardian for several years. He

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<sup>33</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 74-75.

<sup>34</sup> Newman, *Sister*, 265-267.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of Saint Catherine* trans. Conleth Kearns (Wilmington: Michael Glazier Inc, 1980).

was also a reformer in his own right who assisted Catherine in her attempts to return the popes to Rome.<sup>36</sup>

A better attempt at a biography was made in 1951 with Sigrid Undset's *Catherine of Siena*, which expanded upon the earlier hagiographical works and attempted to add greater historical context even though the book remained hagiographical in nature.<sup>37</sup> Undset based her work off of Raymond's but also delved into Catherine's letters frequently. Special attention was given to Catherine's journey to Avignon and the return to Rome by the Papacy. While useful, however, this work was cut from the same cloth as Raymond's and portrayed Catherine in a very sympathetic and uncritical light.<sup>38</sup>

The modern study of Catherine, while based on these works, has advanced considerably due to the work of Suzanne Noffke whose translations of Catherine's letters provide valuable insight into the life of the young saint and are a vast improvement on the older translations.<sup>39</sup> This work has been compiled by Noffke in several volumes<sup>40</sup> and she has arranged them in order utilizing a new method for dating them.<sup>41</sup> She did this by a careful reading of the letters and matching up references of scripture or holy days within the letters to more precisely place them in time. This gives the reader the ability to more accurately trace both the events of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Sigrid Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, trans. Kate Austin-Lund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Suzanne Noffke, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena Volume 1* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Suzanne Noffke, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena Volume 3* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Suzanne Noffke, *The Letters of Catherine of Siena Volume 4* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008).

Catherine's life and her growth as a powerful force within the Church.<sup>42</sup> These letters are now the best source for Catherine's correspondence.

Many recent biographical works have drawn from these newer translations to enrich their content, and of the almost four hundred letters of Catherine surviving the first two volumes contain two hundred and twelve which allows the reader unparalleled access into the Catherine's correspondence. These two volumes contain letters which date to the war between the Pope and the Italian city states and so are among the most important of Catherine's life as she was actively involved in attempting to reconcile the factions during the War of Eight Saints between the Papal States and Milan, Siena, and Florence.<sup>43</sup> These letters were filled with the powerful imagery of Catherine's visions and conviction. She advocated for another crusade, she argued for the Pope's return to Rome, and she addressed her correspondents with an endearing mix of the personal and the jocular. The depth of these letters is only added to by Noffke's notes, which are incredibly useful works of scholarship in their own right, and the inclusion of Catherine's *Dialogue* and *Prayers*.

One of the best recent works was F. Thomas Luongo's work *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena*, which dealt with the turbulent political and social situations in Catherine's life and directly addresses her own political motives. The life of Catherine has been largely based upon the writings of Raymond of Capua and so this work, drawn as it was from the archives of Tuscany and other sources, provides a

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<sup>42</sup> William R. Cook, "Review of the Letters of Catherine of Siena Vol. 1-2," *Speculum* 77 (2002), 892.

<sup>43</sup> Noffke, *Letters Volume 1*.

wider view of the saint's life.<sup>44</sup>

While examining her life through a different lens Luongo argued very persuasively for the political motives of Catherine that previous chroniclers had glossed over. His approach was based in the conditions of the times and how a young woman of importance might be both used by the various sides and use them for her own ends. He pointed out that this idea of Catherine as a politically savvy young woman has not been explored in great detail before.<sup>45</sup> The difficulty with this is, as pointed out by several reviewers, that it has been dealt with at some level by earlier authors but Luongo's contribution was much more focused on this aspect.<sup>46</sup>

Despite this, Luongo has made a powerful and instructive argument that orients the reader in the essentially tumultuous the time that Catherine lived in. Luongo also downplayed Catherine's visions and writing by attributing purely political motives to her actions and this serves to unbalance his work as he was not able to situate her within the life of the spirit and the temporal endeavors that certainly concerned her. Overall *The Sainly Politics* was too analytical and too embroiled in the political arena of Siena, Florence, and the Papal States.

While Catherine was certainly involved in these events she was not the cause, she was only one among many involved in it and not necessarily the most important.<sup>47</sup> This work is important within the historiography in that it took a very

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas F. Luongo, *The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>46</sup> E. Ann Matter, "Review of The Sainly Politics of Catherine of Siena," *Speculum* 83 (2008), 211.

<sup>47</sup> Luongo, *Sainly Politics*, 16.

hard line with regard to Catherine. The departure from the traditional hagiography or biographical treatments of Catherine makes this a solid addition to the study of Catherine even if the book is difficult to follow and speaks more to Italian politics than to Catherine. The emphasis on the political has been very important in writing this paper, as it dovetails with the idea of Catherine attaining power politically through her visions.

The latest biography of Catherine by Don Brophy has added to the study of the saint by humanizing her.<sup>48</sup> Unlike Lungo's political Catherine or Raymond's hagiography Brophy has taken great pains to explain the world of Catherine and how it shaped her which has made the work helpful as well as accessible. Brophy constructed Catherine's life from the ground up, starting with her youthful vision of Christ smiling down at her and blessing her. He used both old and new sources to give depth to her life and help trace her development from a young joyful child into a devoted tertiary and finally into a powerful advocate for the return of the Papacy to Rome. While doing so Brophy also relied heavily upon the translations of Suzanne Noffke, the same ones mentioned above, and this further enhanced his work as they give the reader a chance to hear Catherine in her own words.<sup>49</sup>

For a better understanding of Catherine as a writer Jane Tylus' *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Legacy, and the Signs of Others* was a great contribution

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<sup>48</sup> Don Brophy, *Catherine of Siena: A Passionate Life*, (New York: Bluebridge, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 247.

to the historiography.<sup>50</sup> Tylus placed Catherine beside Dante as one of the first important authors of the new Italian literary culture.<sup>51</sup> This is an important claim as it elevated Catherine into the same bracket as Hildegard in that her works were valued enough to be preserved. Due to her shorter life Catherine was a less prolific writer than Hildegard and her biographers were therefore forced to search for accounts written by those around her for modern research. The argument by Tylus that she did indeed master writing adds a new dimension to the study of the saint as she has been portrayed by some sources as being illiterate and dependent upon others as scribes.<sup>52</sup> By dealing with the question of Catherine's literacy and spotlighting her writing it has expanded the argument about Catherine. As a Doctor of the Church, like Hildegard, the question of her literacy is very relevant as is the quality of her works and her readership.

Another resource in understanding Catherine of Siena was Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* which is the seminal work on the relationship between religious women and food.<sup>53</sup> For Catherine, focused as she was on physical discipline and fasting, this work provided the background of female self-denial of food and the context of spiritual women, both mystical and not, starving themselves in order to achieve a closer union with Christ. They did so by empathizing with his suffering and attempting, in differing ways, to emulate it. Food also provided a means

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<sup>50</sup> Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1987).

of control over themselves which allowed them to mortify the flesh and, through suffering, purify their bodies.<sup>54</sup>

Within both Catherine's and Hildegard's historiographies' the emphasis has been on their own words in translation and so it is worth mentioning the source of these translations directly. As mentioned above Suzanne Noffke's translations of Catherine's letters has formed the basis for the examination of Catherine's life. For Hildegard, Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman translated her correspondence in *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*<sup>55</sup> and Robert Carver's and Barbara Newman's translations within *Mystical Writings*<sup>56</sup> and *Sister of Wisdom* have been of use in untangling the mystical visions of the saint.

When considering the state of the research on Catherine and on Hildegard there are a lot of commonalities. Arguments typically center around these figures' letters and their mystical experience. From these starting points authors have attempted to broaden understanding of the subject by interpreting their works or have tried to advance their own viewpoints using the mystical writings.

In this paper the attempt has been to hold as closely as possible to each woman's own works and to analyze them against the context provided by authors such as Newman and Flanagan. Hildegard's mystical experience is so varied and touches upon so many areas that objectivity and impartial consideration of her words has been of paramount importance.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 4-8.

<sup>55</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen Volume 1* trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>56</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Mystical Writings* trans. Robert Carver, (New York: Spiritual Classics, 1990).

For Catherine, by contrast, the main difficulty has been in trying not to treat her with too great a degree of skepticism. As Luongo's work showed she has been viewed as a clever and self-aware political figure. The temptation to discount her as a manipulative charlatan with an eating disorder has been strong, but against that must be set her own biography. From Raymond of Capua to Brophy the narrative of her life has shown her to be a deeply spiritual person from a young age and, though she was a political figure later in life, this was preceded by years of self-inflicted discipline and personal reflection, not by rabble rousing. This paper, therefore, explores these two exemplars of mystical sainthood and adds to the field by examining how they used their visions for reforming the Church.

### III. Background

#### Introduction

Before delving into either Hildegard's or Catherine's life it is necessary to briefly examine the forces that shaped their worlds and to place their actions within the context of their times. There were three major factors which affected both women as they rose to prominence: the monastic lifestyle, mysticism, and the role of the Church itself. Each of these had a great impact on these women and their experiences and shall be explored in due course below.

#### Monastic Life

Monasticism for women started in earnest in the sixth century with the foundation of Saint-Jean in modern day Arles around 503 AD.<sup>57</sup> While there had been other houses dedicated to religious women before this they were prototypes. Monasticism in earnest, that is women devoted to a religious rule and living a cloistered life, only developed in the fifth century in Marseille but very little is known about this monastery.<sup>58</sup> For the most part, the life of a woman wishing to dedicate herself to the service of God was a private thing and took place within the home rather than within an established community.<sup>59</sup>

It was at Saint-Jean that the first known rule for how a community of religious

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<sup>57</sup> Sudan Marti, *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries* eds. Jeffrey F Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 14-15.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

should be run was enforced, and this was written by the abbess's brother Caesarius, the Bishop of Arles. This rule contained many of the strictures that would later be carried over to other female monasteries. The women were to renounce all claims to personal property and live a common life. In addition, they were to be obedient to their abbess and she, in turn, to her Bishop and the term of their service within the monastery would be their entire life. Most importantly the rule called for absolute enclosure of the women.<sup>60</sup>

Enclosure, wherein a member of a religious order would be separated from the world and restricted to their monastery, was a hallmark of female monasticism. While early Christian fathers, Pope Gregory the Great (R. 590-604 AD) among them, stressed the power of a woman's prayers and pointed out that Christ had first appeared to a woman, Mary Magdalene, women were by this time seen increasingly as ritually unclean, tainted by their female nature to the point that they were to be excluded from the higher mysteries of the church.<sup>61</sup> This dichotomy, on the one hand revering women and on the other discounting them from active duties within the Church, led to the idea of enclosure to be seen as the correct way to order any female spiritual group. The women would be protected from the outside world, their prayers would be offered daily for the benefit of all, and yet they would be neatly removed from any position of authority over the wider faith and would be dependant, to some extent, on the men of the Church.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 13-14.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 15.

This tradition of monastic life lived behind sheltering walls continued for centuries with some changes, but in 816, at the Synod of Aachen, King Louis the Pious enforced the *Rule of St. Benedict* on all monks within the kingdom of the Franks which comprised modern-day France, Northern Italy, and most of Germany and Switzerland. At the same time a special rule for women, based heavily on the work of Caesarius of Arles, was compiled and, although it was not immediately put into place, it provided a framework for how communities of religious women could be set up in the future.<sup>63</sup> The Benedictine Rule, while initially being largely ignored by women, would come to have growing influence over monastic life in Europe.

The system of monastic life was heavily dependent upon the nobility as these houses for women were supported by massive endowments that were given to the community by the family of a new sister. This made monasteries centers of wealth and learning and provided them with a level of prestige. Such prestige in turn led to more applicants and so the power of abbeys and monasteries grew. This power was very attractive to certain rulers and they would use the family connections within the monasteries, male and female, to further their political ends.<sup>64</sup> One example of this was the power struggle over the nun Ricardis who one of Hildegard's confidants. She was made an abbess of a different monastery in 1151 to further the political ends of her brother Hartwig in his conflict with Henry the Lion.<sup>65</sup>

In the eleventh century this system of powerful monasteries and even more

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 17-18.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

<sup>65</sup> Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 173.

powerful abbots and abbesses came under attack, in particular the compilation of rules for women's houses that had been established at Aachen. The issue centered on the increasing wealth and independence of the monasteries and the desire of the papacy to both bring them back under papal control and to enforce rules of service and poverty that had all but gone by the way side in some cases. The riches of larger monasteries were deemed "unapostolic" and led to a series of reforms within the monastic communities that stressed the virtues of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and other rules of equal, or greater, strictness.<sup>66</sup>

These reforms established the context for the type of monastery in which Hildegard of Bingen lived and prayed in during the twelfth century. While still places of learning and certainly still wealthy, the monastic system more and more placed women behind the scenes by this time. The monastery of St. Disibod, for example, where Hildegard lived for many years until founding her own monastery at Rupertsberg, was one of the newer "double monasteries" which housed both men and women.<sup>67</sup> St. Disibod was under the Benedictine rule, which included prayers that the women sang daily. The Benedictine motto of *Ora et Labora*, Pray and Work, was to be seen in the daily lives of the monks and nuns. While still wealthy in their collective endowments, the women were more under the control of the men of the Church. The "dowries" which came from their families went to the community as a whole and the men would control it. This in particular upset many of the abbesses and Hildegard herself wrote bitinglly about the bitter fight she had with the monks of St.

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<sup>66</sup> Marti, *Crown and Veil*, 22-23.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

Disibod when trying to use these funds to establish her own monastery.<sup>68</sup>

Yet for all the political and financial concerns, life within a female monastery could provide a harmonious environment. The women were largely separated from the outside world but they also were able to receive an education that other women, and for that matter men, would not have had access to. They were also allowed a certain degree of self governance, as the women would choose their own leader from among their number and she would be responsible for enforcing the Benedictine Rule upon her sisters.

The Rule itself had very clear indications of what a good abbess should be and it placed an emphasis on the financial duties she had: “And let the Abbess be sure that any lack of profit the master of the house may find in the sheep will be laid to the blame of the shepherd. On the other hand, if the shepherd has bestowed all her pastoral diligence on a restless, unruly flock and tried every remedy for their unhealthy behavior, then she will be acquitted at the Lord's Judgment.”<sup>69</sup> Hildegard echoed this sentiment of female stewardship when she attempted to move her community of nuns to Rupertsberg.

In addition to this, the women were also left largely to themselves with only the abbot or the prior being allowed within the women's section and then only with several witnesses. The reasons for an abbot's visit were usually related to the administration of the sacraments of communion or confession to the nuns.

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<sup>68</sup> Hildegard, *Mystical Writings*, 21-22.

<sup>69</sup> “Rule of St. Benedict,” Order of St. Benedict, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.osb.org/rb/text/rbejms1.html#1>.

Furthermore, the women spoke through a grille that prevented them coming into contact with outsiders. While this practice was not uniform across all abbeys it was the aim of the monasteries to create such a cloistered environment and women who routinely left their convents were frowned upon.<sup>70</sup> This left the women largely to their own devices and under their own direction.

By the fourteenth century, the female monastic tradition had evolved considerably. The Dominican Order, founded by Dominic de Guzman as the Friar Preachers, were a mendicant order established in southern France and they offered women opportunities to live a semi-cloistered life.<sup>71</sup> The Dominicans, along with other mendicant orders, permitted women to become what was known as “tertiaries.” The term refers to a man or woman who, while associated with the lifestyle of the order, did not live within a community of the order and were not as strictly bound to the rule of that order.<sup>72</sup>

This desire to be associated with an order but not enclosed goes back to the Beguines (women who lived in community but were not cloistered) in the thirteenth century and to the Mendicants as well as the Poor Clares, an out-cropping of the Franciscan order. The Dominican order, established by Dominic de Guzman (1170-1221), had founded women’s convents starting as early as 1206 which were more in line with the traditional cloistered model. In fact these cloistered women were under even harsher restrictions than those of the Benedictines of Hildegard’s time. They

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<sup>70</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, “Art, Enclosure, and the *Curia Monialium*: Prolegomena in the Guise of a Postscript,” *Gesta* 31 No. 2 (1992): 109.

<sup>71</sup> Marti, *Crown and Veil*, 42-43.

<sup>72</sup> Don Brophy, *Catherine of Siena: A Passionate Life* (New York: Blubridge,2010), 31-32.

could not leave their monastery except either to found a new house or as a result of some disaster. Even in death the women attached to this model had to be buried within the walls.<sup>73</sup>

It was, therefore, no surprise that, faced with such limitations, many women in Italy chose the path of the tertiary instead of life behind the walls of a cloister. Catherine, when she made her decision to enter a religious life fully, chose this life for the freedom it offered. Just as the Poor Clares had tried to follow the Mendicant ideals of poverty and good works, the young Catherine saw an opportunity to interact with the world instead of being locked away from it.<sup>74</sup>

### Mysticism

In the lives of both Hildegard and Catherine, the core of their experience comes back to their mystical encounters or visions. It would be no exaggeration to say that their mystical experiences were among the most, if not the most, important and formative forces of their lives. But what constituted a mystic and were they all of the same stripe?

In its simplest terms a mystic was a person with a connection to the divine that could manifest itself in a variety of ways including prophecy, insight, and secret knowledge. This could be an ecstatic state, in which the mystic would go into a trance or seizure, and speak cryptic phrases from which some meaning could be gleaned. An obvious example of this would be the Oracle of Delphi in classical Greece who would

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<sup>73</sup> Marti, *Crown and Veil*, 123-124.

<sup>74</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 31-32.

receive inspiration from Apollo and whose words would be interpreted by the priests who attended her.<sup>75</sup>

Mysticism within the Church goes back all the way to John the Baptist and was inextricably intertwined with asceticism and monasticism within Christianity. The desire to seek after the deeper nature of reality caused many to give up prosperous lives and to instead take up extreme modes of existence that taxed the body even as it sought to uplift the mind and spirit. The solitary environment of the monastic lent itself well to the initial stages of mysticism.<sup>76</sup>

In the context of the Middle Ages, a mystic still had this connection with the divine and, certainly, there were some who suffered fits and trances, but the idea of mysticism had grown within medieval Christianity to contain several distinct characteristics. First, the mystics were known to see and hear using a spiritual sight, an inner eye, or the soul itself as the sensory organ. While normal men and women perceived the world through their traditional sensory organs a mystic would see it in a far different way. They would see the world without the filter of the physical to impede this inner sight.<sup>77</sup>

The next, and perhaps most obvious, criteria for a mystic was that they be connected to the divine. Time and again mystical men and women expressed an awareness of, and a connection to, light or fire or other archetypes associated with the godhead. This was important as the person would draw from this inner light to

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Smith, *The Way of the Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1978), 11-12.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 4.

experience their visions.<sup>78</sup>

The mystics also had to purify themselves from their self. There were deep roots within Christianity that spoke of the sinfulness of the flesh and that to truly touch the divine necessitated a level of asceticism and self-denial that was part and parcel of the monastic life. It was for this reason that mysticism was, from early on, associated with hermits, ascetics, and the rigorous life within a monastery. The rules of an order provided this requirement easily. A cloistered man or woman had already surrendered themselves to the higher rule of the Church and so the next logical step was to surrender one's self to God.<sup>79</sup>

Last, and most important, was the idea that this connection to God was facilitated by love. Through the vehicle of love the mystic would touch the mind of God and would receive fulfillment and power from the experience. It comes as no surprise that this idea of love as the channel for mystical experiences made mysticism an easier path for women than for men.<sup>80</sup>

These ideas for a Christian mystic were also shaped by how people of faith within Europe viewed miracles. The line between the miraculous and the ordinary was a thin one but St. Augustine's view on miracles was one of the best summations of the theory of the miraculous. To Augustine, writing in the sixth century, God would cause miracles in specific ways and for specific purposes. There were supernatural miracles, such as parting the Red Sea, that were moments when God

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 1-5.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

would invoke his power as creator and cause nature to change to his will. While impressive, these miracles were rare. More commonly God would be seen as drawing out goodness from within the world so as either to amaze the ignorant or to be seen by the wise as signs of his goodness. Thus, miracles were sources of awe and wonder for all and a reminder of God's presence and omnibenevolence.<sup>81</sup>

By the High Middle Ages this concept of the miraculous had changed subtly and certain individuals of great perceived holiness were thought to be able to "request" miracles from God. An example of this was the convent that, due to remaining cloistered, was miraculously protected from fire. The power of popular piety and the belief in the miraculous gave individuals who demonstrated a link to the divine, through visions or signs, an immense amount of influence. This influence could draw pilgrims to a location, as Hildegard and her mentor Jutta drew them to St. Disibod, and it could even be used to put pressure on the authorities of the Church, as in the case of Catherine of Siena.

Posthumous miracles were particularly important as they would confirm the individual as a saint and the expression of miracles during their life would become a part of their hagiographical record.<sup>82</sup> This glorification of the individual for the miracles performed around them was similar to the experience of a mystic as they were both merely channels for the divine. The visions or insight of the mystic were seen as miracles in their own right.

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<sup>81</sup> Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 3-5.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 168-172.

The visions of Hildegard were not an outward manifestation in the manner of a supernatural miracle but rather a steady flow of insight that could be almost overwhelming in its strangeness. Using the rubric above, we can track Hildegard's actualization into a mystical woman. There were her own words that the visions she saw came from a "Living Light" and that this light was within her. She also lived an ascetic and regimented life and suffered many physical illnesses that only further focused her on the spiritual. This Living Light also filled with calm and revitalized her, filling her with a feeling of love.<sup>83</sup>

In a similar way Catherine experienced her visions, and her earliest one was of Christ looking down on her from above, smiling and blessing her. This vision was one of the causes of her desire to retire to a life of physical denial and personal spirituality wedded, metaphorically, to Christ.<sup>84</sup> These two women, while coming from very different lives, both followed the same footsteps that would lead them to a mystical life. They both felt the touch of it from an early age, but only after years of wrestling with the visions and coming into an ascetic life. Either voluntarily or as a result of being placed within a monastery, their visions were fully unlocked and given expression only after becoming a part of a cloistered life.

### The Role of the Church and Sainthood

The process by which a man or woman might become a saint in medieval

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<sup>83</sup> Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 1992), 26-29.

<sup>84</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 16.

Christianity is worth discussing here as it fed into the notions of holiness and authority that both Hildegard and Catherine had to utilize in order to both be accepted and exercise whatever temporal powers they acquired as a result of their visions. Both women lived in times that were turbulent for the Church. Hildegard was writing her works during a period in which papal wealth and spiritual lassitude was under sharp criticism from many sources. The institution had fallen into the hands of powerful Roman families and was constantly sparring with Holy Roman Emperors on matters ranging from the investiture of bishops, and the corresponding simony that was an inevitable part of it, to the emperors actually dismissing unfriendly popes.<sup>85</sup> This period was known as the Investiture Controversy and it shaped the development of Hildegard.

Catherine grew up with the Popes absent from Rome and resident in Avignon for several decades in what was known as the “Babylonian Captivity” and the friction that resulted over what was seen as French control of the papacy. This, and French Cardinals attempting to expand the Papal holdings in Italy, prompted many to call for the return of the Popes to their traditional seat of power within Rome. Both Catherine and Hildegard thought of themselves as reformers: each sought to bring the Church back into its proper role.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries a rumble of dissent and calls for reform could be heard from groups as diverse as the Manicheans and the well-known as Peter Abelard. The climate in which Hildegard grew up was also the time in which

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<sup>85</sup> Kathleen G. Cushing, *Reform and the Papacy in the Eleventh Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 60-8.

one of the greatest spokesmen for the Church lived, St. Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>86</sup> Bernard, to whom Hildegard wrote asking for his advice concerning her visions, was a man possessed of strength of will and utterly devoted to reforming the faith from the level of the monasteries on up to the papacy. He wrote biting attacks against those he viewed as heretics, including Abelard,<sup>87</sup> and actually taught Pope Eugenius III before his ascension to the papal throne in 1145. This was a part of a larger movement towards reform that Hildegard herself would play a role.

For Hildegard, and Bernard, at the core of their reformist ideology, or theology, was a desire to end schisms and to return the Church to a more rigorous form. When she wrote of Henry VI of Germany naming him a “Worshiper of Baal,” for example, she was invoking the same language that Bernard used to denounce Peter Abelard in his 1140 letter to Pope Innocent. The ideas of both Hildegard and Bernard utilized arcane symbols and meanings from the Old and New Testaments but both spoke against those who were seen as threatening the power of the Church, both from without and also from within.<sup>88</sup> This fixation on the proper position of the church was a complicated view. On the one hand both Hildegard and Bernard resisted and detested any attempts from political forces like the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI to claim power to control the workings of the Church. To Hildegard the use of monasteries and churchmen (and women) as political pieces amounted to simony and she would sternly rebuke even kings for support of “antipopes” or for manipulating

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<sup>86</sup> Tertullian et al, *Heresy and Authority in Medieval Europe* ed Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980), 60-2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 87-90.

<sup>88</sup> Newman, *Living Light*, 73-76.

officially religious matters for personal gain.

It was during this time that the idea of how a saint was to be recognized was falling more and more firmly into the purview of the Pope as the supreme head of the Church as a means of bringing more uniformity within the faith and also asserting the Pope's power and authority. From the time of Eugenius III forward popes increasingly reserved the right to investigate and control the process by which an individual would be named a saint.<sup>89</sup> This affected Hildegard, who was venerated as a saint but the canonizations she went through never ended in her being acknowledged as a saint until Benedict XVI did so in 2012.<sup>90</sup>

For Catherine the late fourteenth century was a very different place from the twelfth century of Hildegard. The papacy had been uprooted from Rome and settled in Avignon. This upheaval was labeled the "Babylonian Captivity" and calls for the return of the papacy began to reach a crescendo around 1370 after the death of Urban V who had returned briefly and then died.<sup>91</sup> That the papacy was largely a creature of France, or at least was perceived to be so, encouraged Florence and several other city-states to declare against the new Pope Gregory XI in 1376. This caused the city of Florence to be placed under interdict by the Pope in April of 1376. Catherine, deeply concerned for both Florence's potential ruin and also hoping to convince the Pope to return to Rome, made a journey to Avignon that year. This encounter greatly

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<sup>89</sup> Andre Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* trans Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 23-24.

<sup>90</sup> "Vatican explains equivalent canonization" Catholic World News, accessed April 2013, <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=14287>

<sup>91</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 85.

influenced Pope Gregory to return at last to Rome in 1377 to the jubilation of the Roman populace.<sup>92</sup>

Catherine's work on the political scene in many ways parallels Hildegard's as both came from relative obscurity to have major influence on their supposed superiors. While they were fighting for reform on different issues, the key point is that both were fighting for reform of a system that could, and did, condemn people for crossing a line. Without their acknowledged connection to God by the powers of the Church both would have been robbed of both ability to propound their ideas and also of the license to do so.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 159.

## IV. Biographical Information

### Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard was born in 1098 to Hildebert and Mechthild of Bermersheim, a town on the Rhine in southern Germany, and was the youngest of ten children. According to her *Vita*, her father was moderately wealthy and a member of the lower nobility. Other than that, and the obvious fecundity of her mother, little is known about Hildegard's parents.<sup>93</sup> More is known about her siblings as the family was definitely willing to give their children over to a life within the Church. One of her brothers was a cantor, the other a canon, and a sister of hers would eventually join her in her monastery of St. Disibod.<sup>94</sup>

More important to her future was another family, that of Count Stephen of Sponheim and his wife Sophia. The pair were of a higher class of nobility but, nonetheless, were linked with Hildebert and his family. The two families were distant relations and came from a similar social class.<sup>95</sup> They too had a young daughter, Jutta, who was born in 1092, and the two girls' fates were joined from a very young age.

As a teenager Jutta decided to enter the religious life after an illness she contracted at age twelve. She swore that if she were healed she would forsake marriage and children and take up the habit of a nun. Jutta was, indeed, healed and

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<sup>93</sup> Gottfried and Theoderic, *The Life of Holy Hildegard* trans. Adelgundis Führkötter and James McGrath (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 35-36.

<sup>94</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 4

<sup>95</sup> Barbara Newman et al., *Voice of Living Light* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 4.

she kept her word. She refused all potential husbands, much to her family's discomfort, and she guarded her chastity with devout fervor.<sup>96</sup> Hildebert, perhaps to further strengthen the bond with the more powerful Sponheim family, decided to give his daughter over to a religious life as well.

So it was that Jutta, and possibly Hildegard, entered in 1106 the household of a Lady Uda, a widow in a nearby town, to live a religious life within the monastery, albeit without taking the formal vows. This arrangement only lasted until Uda's death approximately six years later, at which point Jutta declared an intention to go on pilgrimage. Her family, in particular her brother, objected to that plan and instead convinced her, and Hildegard, to enter into the monastery of St. Disibod. The pair took their vows before Bishop Otto of Bamberg on November 1, 1112, and their lives as normal women ended and their new life as recluses behind the monastery's walls began. Hildegard was then only fourteen years old.<sup>97</sup>

Once within the enclosure her life began to change immensely. She put aside the traditional roles of wife and mother and took up new ones based on virginity and prayer. She learned to read and write simple Latin, the language of the church and also of scholars, first from Jutta and later from a monk named Volmar. It was he to whom she would confess, and later, it was to him that she would entrust her visions.<sup>98</sup> Her physical existence in St. Disibod was surrounded by noise at first as the old monastery was being refurbished on the orders of the Archbishop of Mainz. While

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 4-5

<sup>97</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Newman, *Sister*, 4.

she learned Latin she was also exposed to music and the voices of the Benedictine brothers would have been audible at all hours as they went through the various masses.<sup>99</sup> Her exact living conditions, however, remain largely unknown.<sup>100</sup>

One difference between the two women stands out and might help to explain the reason for Hildegard's fame and Jutta's relative obscurity. Jutta was an extreme ascetic who would fast, go without rest, expose herself to the elements, and even mortify her body with hairshirt and iron chain. She refused to eat meat for eight years despite her abbot strongly urging her to consent to nourish herself.<sup>101</sup> This self-inflicted torment may very well have contributed to Jutta's death at forty-four, while Hildegard lived an impressive eighty-one years. This is not to say that Hildegard was a lover of luxury. On the contrary, she was noted for being moderate in her own consumption of food and drink, she wore the same plain clothes that her sisters did, and she suffered illness all throughout her life.<sup>102</sup>

What is clear is that her mentor Jutta's life in some ways portended Hildegard's own and the connection between them was very strong in several particulars. One of these was that Jutta exhibited the same gift that would one day lead to Hildegard being named the "Sybil of the Rhine." Jutta was a mystic and touched by visions of God.<sup>103</sup> These types of visions were not unknown to Hildegard, and she would later write that she had personally been experiencing similar visions

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<sup>99</sup> Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 28-32.

<sup>100</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 6.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7

<sup>102</sup> Gottfried and Theoderic, *Life*, 37.

<sup>103</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 7-8.

since the age of five.<sup>104</sup> As a young child she had a vision of an unborn calf and correctly predicted its coloration which astounded her nurse. All through her early years she continued to have these types of visions.<sup>105</sup> She was not certain that these visions came from God, only that they were a constant force in her life.<sup>106</sup> She would keep her visions secret for many years though and only with the death of Jutta would she fully unseal her tongue to the wonders that her soul experienced daily.

Jutta, her teacher and mentor, died in 1136 and quickly it was decided that Hildegard, first among her students, should succeed her as the *magistra*, a Latin term meaning teacher, of St. Disibod.<sup>107</sup> She was thirty-eight at the time and had only just begun to confide her visions to the monk Volmer who urged her strenuously to make her visions known. Hildegard was fearful of ridicule, however, and unsure as to the exact source of her insight. All she knew was that it came from “a Living Light,” and so was incredibly reticent to dictate any of her visions. It took the constant support of Volmer and the reserved approval of Bishop Kuno before she finally began to do so.<sup>108</sup> Once she did, however, she unlocked a tidal wave of mystical imagery, music, and theology that would not dry up until her death.

The Living Light, the source of Hildegard’s visions and insight, was a strange connection that requires some explanation. Unlike other mystics who would go into a trance or were gripped by some sort of ecstatic seizure, Hildegard claimed that the

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<sup>104</sup> Newman, *Sister*, 7-8

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 8-9.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*.7-9.

<sup>107</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 7-8.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

Living Light was always present to her. It was simply the way that she saw the world. Regardless of how bizarre or metaphorical her visions seemed they were very real and very personal to her. Time and again, when faced with difficulties she would look to this Light to find her answers. This constant connection with the divine, rather than an intermittent one, touches all of her works from letters to illuminations of her books to the music she composed. From her perspective she was merely a channel, a trumpet in her own words, for the Light.<sup>109</sup>

In 1141 Hildegard had a vision that would at last settle her mind on the source of her insights and at last convince her to let Volmer take down her words as she dictated them. This vision, included as part of the introduction to her work *Scivias*-the name is a play off of the Latin phrase *Scito Vias Domini*, or, Know the Ways of the Lord-was accompanied with pain and illness. She claimed that this was due to her refusal to transmit her visions to others.<sup>110</sup> The *Scivias* is an immense work, taking from 1141 until 1151 to complete, and was primarily concerned with doctrine.<sup>111</sup> Though this was its focus, the work was by no means dull as her visions are fantastical. The main focus of the work was on two of the most important concepts of Hildegard's own understanding of the Gospels and the church's traditions: the Incarnation of Christ and the necessity for spiritual vigilance and effort against sin.<sup>112</sup>

One of her visions in particular is instructive, that of Divine Wisdom. In it

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>110</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Mystical Writings* ed. Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies (New York: Spiritual Classics, 1990), 70.

<sup>111</sup> Newman, *Sister*, 15-17.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 16.

Hildegard describes Wisdom as a “Figure of great beauty sitting on the top of this floor.”<sup>113</sup> and, more importantly she paints this virtue as female:

...This virtue was in the Father ‘before all creation’, arranging in his judgement all the materials of creation in heaven and on earth. She herself, it is clear, shines in him as a great adornment, being the broadest step amongst the steps of the other virtues in him. She is joined to him in dance, in the sweetest embrace of blazing love. Wisdom looks towards the people on the earth. For she always rules and defends with her protection those who try to follow her, loving them greatly because they are steadfast in her. For that same figure signifies the Wisdom of God: since, through her, all things were created and ruled by God.<sup>114</sup>

She goes on to describe the virtue and to articulate Wisdom’s unassailable force, “Her head shines like lightning: with such brightness that you cannot have your fill of gazing upon it...Wisdom rests her hands reverently upon her breast. this signifies the power of Wisdom, which she wisely restrains, so that she directs every work of hers in such a way that no one can resist her, either in prudence or in power.”<sup>115</sup>

Statements emphasizing female virtues such as “Ecclesia” and “Sophia” were an important part of Hildegard’s work as they were based in her theology that rebalanced the male and the female. Her theology did not place women over men. Instead, Hildegard was seeking to reorient the Church back to its correct position. She spoke of God and Christ in traditionally male terms and yet she also emphasized the Incarnation of Christ through Mary.

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<sup>113</sup> Hildegard, *Mystical Writings*, 81.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*

There was a duality implicit in her theology that was based on each gender following their correct roles.

The purpose of Hildegard's writing was her desire to reform the Church and set it back onto what she perceived to be its true course. Hildegard was disgusted by what she saw and as early as 1151 she bemoaned that the world lived in a "feminine" age, one that was flighty and fractious as the prelates abandoning the Church's traditional virtues.<sup>116</sup> It was her duty, she felt, to speak against the corruption and lassitude that she saw.

While in the process of writing the *Scivias* Hildegard also sought out official sanction for her visions from two of the most important men in Christendom, Pope Eugenius and the formidable Bernard of Clairvaux. Her letter to Bernard was both self-assured when speaking about her visions and yet also humble. She beseeches him for counsel and comfort saying, "...father, for the love of God, I seek consolation from you, that I might be assured. More than two years ago, indeed, I saw you in a vision, like a man looking straight into the sun, bold and unafraid. And I wept, because I myself am so timid and fearful."<sup>117</sup>

What is as impressive as Hildegard's writing to Bernard in the first place is that he answered with moderate approval of her visions. After the traditional exchange of modest pleasantries he offered her the consolation she

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<sup>116</sup> Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 239.

<sup>117</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters of Hildegard of Bingen vol 1* trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27-28.

asked for in her letter “We rejoice in the grace of God which is in you. And, further, we most earnestly urge and beseech you to recognize this gift as grace and to respond eagerly to it with all humility and devotion...”<sup>118</sup> Bernard’s approval was of great help as it came from a man who had just helped to preach the second crusade in 1147 and was widely viewed as one of the most influential religious figures in Europe. It further aided her in receiving official sanction from the Pope, who had been a disciple of Bernard’s who placed great weight on his mentor’s opinions.<sup>119</sup>

During the Synod of Trier, which took place from November 1147 until February 1148, Pope Eugenius III dispatched a special commission to investigate the portion of the *Scivias* that she had completed and to inform him on the contents. Eugenius was in the process of dealing with growing challenges to papal power, in particular from German aristocrats putting their own loyal priests into positions of authority. This conflict of investiture, the appointment of a priest to a specific church or position, was one of the issues that troubled Hildegard and had been an issue for decades since the Investiture Conflict during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. To her it was nothing short of simony.<sup>120</sup>

The pope’s commission approved of Hildegard’s works, which were especially important because of the pope’s desire to reconstitute his power

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>119</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 11.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

base and owing to his wariness of any potential heresy. This commission forwarded some of the *Scivias* to Eugenius who was so impressed by it that he actually read portions of it to the assembled churchmen at Trier. Not only did he read her words out but he wrote to her to encourage her to continue her writings and gave her the Church's official continence for her visions.<sup>121</sup>

Also worth considering is the correspondence exchanged between Hildegard and Pope Eugenius. Hildegard's first letter to the pontiff, written some time in 1148, was of the same type as the one she sent to Bernard: meek, humble, and yet still evidencing a sense of purpose and power that belies her position within the church and her station as a woman. She wrote to him saying "O radiant father, through your representatives you have come to us, as God foreordained, and you have seen some of the writings of truthful visions which I received from the Living Light, and you have listened to these visions in the embraces of your heart. A part of these writings has now been completed. But still that same Light has not left me..."<sup>122</sup>

The letter shows again her insecurity and the sense that she was not in control of these visions but rather their channel. She would refer to herself as a "trumpet" later in life for the visions which she received from the Living Light. Time and again she refers to the source of her visions as the "Living Light" and associates fire with the Holy Spirit. Indeed, in her cosmology there are only four elements, two celestial and two terrestrial, and fire is associated

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Hildegard, *Letters*, 32.

with the celestial.<sup>123</sup> In her *Book of Divine Works*, the creator is seen as a being of fire as well. “I, the highest fiery power, have kindled every living spark and I have breathed out nothing that can die...I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; in the sun, the moon, and the stars, I burn.”<sup>124</sup>

This connection with the light, blinding and yet revealing, is a common thread for many Christian visionaries: the Light touched many. In Hildegard’s own lifetime other women were known for their visions. Her own mentor had been known for them and, towards the end of her life, Hildegard would mentor a younger girl visionary, Elizabeth of Schönau.<sup>125</sup> The primary difference between these women and Hildegard was that hers was not an ecstatic experience. There were no trances and no convulsions; the world simply was seen in a different light and she was merely a “Trumpet” that God spoke through.<sup>126</sup>

In contrast to her previous letter was another letter sent to Pope Eugenius III, dated between 1148 and 1153 (the exact date is unknown).<sup>127</sup> There was a marked shift in her address and tone towards the man who had only recently given her license to write about her visions. She showed none of the self-depreciation or overly humble deference. Instead she spoke as to a

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<sup>123</sup> Hildegard, *Mystical Writings*, 108.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>125</sup> Newman, *Living Light*, 71-72.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 33-34.

student who has made a grave error. “Now you who sit as Christ’s representative on the throne of the Church choose the better part so that you may be the eagle who overcomes the bear; in this way you may adorn the halls of the Church with those souls entrusted to you. Thus you may snatch yourself from this world and enter the regions above in your golden slippers.”<sup>128</sup>

This letter was written around 1153 and the allegorical language refers possibly to the conflict between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope. Hildegard, though speaking harshly, was attempting to exhort her superior to great action in resisting the emperor and maintaining the independence of the Papacy.<sup>129</sup> Though a reformer herself Hildegard was as opposed to secular influence over the Church as Catherine was to be during the Avignon Papacy decades later. To both Hildegard and Catherine the Church was paramount and meant to be in a position of power over the politics of the day rather than the playthings of powerful nobles.

An additional letter, written in 1153 to two cardinals who had been sent by the Pope to negotiate, shows her attitude for reform in clear terms.

The Fountain of Waters cries out to you, his followers: In my powerful and eternal name, chastise and correct those wicked traitors and furtive opponents who have been turned into lead through their twisted sins, those who are scattered from the north through the iniquities of the devil, and who maliciously strike out at their superiors through their great wickedness. For even though certain prelates walk in darkness because of the instability of their ways, it is still not proper

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<sup>128</sup> Hildegard, *Letters*, 34.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

for them to be cast down by subordinates.<sup>130</sup>

Hildegard's letter here shows her concern over the growing influence that the Holy Roman Emperor Barbarossa had over the appointments of clerical offices and his habit of removing bishops who disagreed with him. Barbarossa's actions were simony as far as Hildegard was concerned and she consistently writes against it.<sup>131</sup> This was a large part of her desire for reforming the Church: freeing it from the grasp of temporal authorities. The Emperor might have power but for Hildegard, and for many of the reformers, this was only power over men and women's bodies. The Church had been given a duty and power over souls -- seen, by some, to be a higher level of authority.

This was an old argument even by Hildegard's time but it was by no means settled. Both Hildegard and Catherine came down heavily on the side of the Papacy against monarchical control of the Church. Their mystical experience, seen by them as a direct connection to God, emboldened them to write bitingly against the attempts of powerful kings to manipulate or control the Church. This is a central feature of both Hildegard's and Catherine's efforts at reforming the Church. They were not rebuilding it anew; they were trying to remove the creeping vines of the temporal world that threatened to choke the life out of the institution.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

What underpinned this shift was a power struggle within the walls of St. Disibod between Hildegard and the monks. The Pope had granted his official sanction to her visions, by his acceptance of them during the synod of Trier in 1148, and word of her fame attracted pilgrims to the monastery. At the same time the community of women within the monastery had grown to between eighteen and twenty and their large dowries, combined with the increased wealth that first Jutta, and later Hildegard attracted, went into the pockets of the abbot rather than remaining in the hands of the women who had brought it in the first place.<sup>132</sup> This issue was further exacerbated by a vision Hildegard had in 1148 that called for the women to abandon their lives at St. Disibod and make a new house elsewhere.<sup>133</sup>

Abbot Kuno, naturally perhaps, was disinclined to give up so much material wealth and he, along with other patrons, sought to keep the nuns at St. Disibod.<sup>134</sup> This resistance only grew more intense when Hildegard fell ill. Her *Vita* ascribed this to her not being allowed to carry out a direct command from God. The blame is at first laid at the feet of one monk named Arnold who turned the others against her.<sup>135</sup> It was at this point that, suddenly, strange occurrences began. Hildegard, and those surrounding her, took these for the manifestations of God's displeasure. The monk Arnold was struck down by some mysterious force and "his body began to shake so violently that he

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<sup>132</sup> Newman, *Voice*, 11-12.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>135</sup> Gottfried and Theoderic, *Life*, 40.

thought he was going to die, and his tongue swelled so severely that he could not open his mouth.”<sup>136</sup> When he managed to indicate that he had changed his mind on the matter and was willing to let Hildegard depart, he was immediately restored to health.<sup>137</sup>

Hildegard herself was confined to her bed even after this event until, at last, Abbot Kuno himself came to her and gave his approval for her departure. Hearing his assent she, like Arnold, rose in perfect health and set about making the preparations for the move.<sup>138</sup> The transition from reticent visionary to assertive mystic is evident both in this account and also in Hildegard’s agitating for a move from St. Disibod to Rupertsberg.

I said to the Father Abbot: “The serene light says: You shall be father to our provost, and the father of the souls of the daughters of my mystic garden. But their alms do not belong to you or to your brothers...If some of you, unworthy ones, said to yourselves: Let’s take some of their freeholds away- than I WHO AM say: You are the worst of robbers...you are the sons of Belial, and in this you do not look to the justice of God. So that same justice will destroy you.”<sup>139</sup>

It is small wonder that with such absolute conviction, and with the apparent backing of God made manifest through miracles, that she was at last allowed to move to Rupertsberg. It was not the last time that she would have stern words for her supposed superiors.

The language of this rebuke was couched in terms that make it clear that it was not Hildegard but God himself who was calling for this move. As

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 40-41.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 41-42.

<sup>139</sup> Hildegard, *Mystical Writings*, 21-22.

Hildegard gained in influence and reputation she would adopt an ever more assertive tone. The cause of this change in posture is impossible to determine but it was certainly heavily influenced by Hildegard's growing maturity, both as a person and as a visionary, and also by the growing conviction that she did, in fact, speak for the Living Light.

This victory helped to establish Hildegard as a prophetess and this, along with the official recognition by the Pope at the Synod of Trier, bolstered her in temporal estimation as well as conferred legitimacy upon her visions that would allow her not only to continue her work but grow into a full-fledged authority in her own right.<sup>140</sup> Her abbey at Rupertsberg received many pilgrims and Hildegard herself became a well-known figure. In addition to her theological works she also was knowledgeable about medicine and healing, writing two works, *Physica*<sup>141</sup> and *Causes and Cures*<sup>142</sup>, during her life after the move to Rupertsberg between 1151 and 1158. These two books were compiled using the available medical knowledge of the day and were hailed in their own time as being of excellent quality.<sup>143</sup>

It was also after this move to Rupertsberg that Hildegard went on a series of preaching tours. Starting in 1158 and repeated for the next several years she travelled across Germany and preached to the laity of the church in a wide range of cities including at Mainz, Metz, and even at Trier, the place that

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<sup>140</sup> Flanagan, *Hildegard*, 172-173.

<sup>141</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Physica* trans. Pricilla Throop, (Rochester: Healing Arts Press, 1998).

<sup>142</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *On Natural Philosophy and Medicine* trans. Margret Berger, (Berlin: BOYE6, 1999).

<sup>143</sup> Newman, *Light*, 128-132.

over a decade previously her visions had been given the Church's official blessing. This was very unusual, it was not allowed for women to preach to the masses, and it further underscores Hildegard's growing influence and acceptance by the powers within the Church.<sup>144</sup>

In addition to her busy schedule as *magistra*, medical expert, correspondent, and prophet, Hildegard also composed works of music. Her music was a part of her visions and, though it is highly unlikely that she wrote the music down herself, she insisted that they came note for note from the Living Light.<sup>145</sup> For Hildegard music was one of the most powerful of all forms of worship or expression and her melodies were praised for their haunting and beautiful qualities.<sup>146</sup> To her music was within all things, it was the constant manifestation of God within people. To sin and be cast away from God was to be without music.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, in her morality play, *Ordo Virtutum*, the only non-singing role is that of the Devil, he who lost his music when he fell from heaven.<sup>148</sup>

Within her music there is beautiful imagery and praise along with a more complicated musical structure than traditional chant. Her works include antiphons sung for St. Disibod, St Rupert, St. John, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity itself. She continually links God with music. "To the Trinity be praise!

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<sup>144</sup> Gottfried and Theoderic, *Life*, 109-110.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>146</sup> Hildegard, *Symphonia* ed. and trans. Barbara Newman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 17-19.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>148</sup> "Ordo Virtutum," Oxford Girls Choir, accessed, February 3, 2014, <http://www.oxfordgirlschoir.co.uk/hildegard/ordovirtutumtext.html>.

God is music, God is life that nurtures every creature of its kind.”<sup>149</sup> A large portion of her work deals with the virgin Mary and the significance of her carrying Christ to redeem the world to reverse Eve causing the evil of death. “Because it was a woman who built a house for death so a shining girl tore it down. So now when you ask for blessings seek the supreme one in the form of a woman surpassing all that God made since in her.”<sup>150</sup>

As in her letters she mentions *Sophia*, the angel of wisdom, and one of her songs is focused on her. “Sophia! You of the whirling wings circling encompassing energy of God: you quicken the world in your clasp. One wing soars in heaven one wing sweeps the earth and the third flies all around us. Praise Sophia! Let all the earth praise her!”<sup>151</sup> The obvious metaphor for this strange, three-winged, angel is that of the Trinity once more. Sophia, as divine wisdom, also has ties to nature, another important theme Hildegard touched on frequently.<sup>152</sup> The term *Veriditas*, usually translated as “Green” or “Greening,” is to be found within many of Hildegard’s songs. With this song Sophia can be tied back the idea of Nature and Wisdom being interrelated.<sup>153</sup>

Yet for all her notoriety and insight she was by no means irresistible in her demands, as was shown in the unfortunate affair of Richardis, a nun who had helped her immensely up until 1151. Richardis had been one of

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<sup>149</sup> Hildegard, *Symphonia*, 143.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, 268.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*.

Hildegard's closest friends and confidantes along with Volmer, and, indeed, had assisted Hildegard in writing the *Scivias* as both a supporter and a secretary.<sup>154</sup> The two were very close and the following incident makes it clear that Hildegard greatly valued her company. In 1151 Richardis was elected abbess of a different monastery (Bassum in the diocese of Breman, a high honor) and it was her desire to accept it. Hildegard exploded in response to this loss. To her mind this was not of God on high but rather the machinations of men on earth that had connived to draw her friend away. Hartwig, Richardis' brother, was in conflict with Henry the Lion and Bassum was close enough to Breman that a political motive for the election was not outside the realm of possibility.<sup>155</sup>

To Hildegard the whole situation was intolerable. She first tried personal appeals, to the archbishop and to Richardis' own mother. Her tone in her letter to the nun's mother was pleading, almost frantic, and, most importantly, written in Hildegard's own voice rather than as that of a channel. She strongly urged both the archbishop and the girl's mother not to do this as it was against the will of God and bordered on, and possibly crossed over into, simony.<sup>156</sup> The archbishop's response is nothing short of threatening. "If you do this you will feel our pleasure...If not, however, we will demand it again more strongly and will not cease until you accord with our wishes in this

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<sup>154</sup> Flanagan, *Hildegard*, 173.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 173-174.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, 174-175.

matter.”<sup>157</sup>

In the end Richardis did, in fact, leave and Hildegard, for all her letters and prophecy, was left with a feeling she had known for most of her early years: doubt. She questioned her visions. If they came from God, how could she possibly be mistaken that the election of her friend was not the will of the almighty? It took time for her to see things in a different light that perhaps this was a lesson taught to her by God instead of anything sinister. She came to believe that this was an indication that she must renounce the material ever more completely and focus instead on the transcendent power of God.<sup>158</sup> This reaffirmation of her connection to the divine only ended up increasing Hildegard’s sense of unity with God’s will. Time and again she would wade into direct conflict with the Pope, with other church officials, and even with temporal authorities themselves.

Examples of Hildegard’s confrontations extended into the international sphere many times within her life and she was always quick to make the will of the “Living Light” known to those who had gone astray. In 1159, for example, she chastised Henry II of England for his support of the “antipope”, Victor IV, who had claimed the title despite Alexander III being duly elected pope in 1159, with pointed words: “To a certain man who holds a certain office, the Lord says ‘yours are the gifts of giving: it is by ruling and defending, protecting and providing, that you may reach heaven.’ But a bird,

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 175-176.

as black as can be, comes to you from the North and says: 'You have the power to do whatever you want...it does not profit you to regard Justice.'<sup>159</sup>

To her she was merely speaking the will of God, a prophet in the Old Testament sense, and no matter the station of her correspondent she would speak with the conviction that only connection with the divine can provide.

As befitted a prophetess Hildegard wrote to encourage others to virtue, not merely to chastise wickedness. Her correspondence was replete with letters of encouragement and advice. She wrote to Heinrich, the Bishop of Liège, in 1153 exhorting him to greater efforts so that he might bring back "lost pearls" to the mountain of God. "O Heinrich, be a shepherd good and noble in your character. And just as the eagle looks to the sun, so give thought and consider how you can restore the slothful and the prodigal to their homeland and how you can bestow light on that mountain so that your soul may live."<sup>160</sup>

It was always a part of her calling with the light to bring about a restoration of the spirit in those around her. Time and again she encouraged and counseled her supporters and enemies alike to open their hearts and minds to the will of God, as expressed through her by the Living Light. Restoration of the spirit was a part of her attempts at reformation as well as her letters of rebuke usually imply that the individual has been led astray by the devil or the "north wind." As she felt herself to be speaking as a channel for God so too

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<sup>159</sup> Hildegard, *Mystical Writings*, 140.

<sup>160</sup> Hildegard, *Letters*, 105.

did she see others as being misled by the snares of the devil. Only by breaking free of these snares could the Church truly be reformed and so her letters contain hope and rebuke alongside each other.

This sense of personal understanding of the workings and wishes of God was to cause an incident at the end of her life was to prove the most challenging and difficult of her life since she first was allowed to write her visions down. The matter centered around a man who had previously been cast out of the church and excommunicated. He came to Rupertsberg in 1178 with an illness and Hildegard attempted to heal him to no avail. The man died soon after arriving and the sisters, who had been told that the excommunication had been lifted earlier in the man's life, gave him a proper Christian burial in the consecrated ground of the graveyard.<sup>161</sup> Soon after they received word from Mainz, the seat of the diocese, that the man was still under the ban of the church and that they must dig up his body and rebury it outside of the graveyard.<sup>162</sup>

The sisters, led by Hildegard, not only refused, but they actively removed the man's gravestone so that his body could not be found by anyone. Hildegard wrote to the priests of Mainz, telling them that this was against the will of God himself. The man in question had been excommunicated previously but he had been reinstated. He had come to them and received the last rights of the church and as such he deserved the burial he had been given.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>162</sup> Newman, *Living Light*, 27.

To remove him from his grave would be nothing short of desecration in her eyes.<sup>163</sup> If she obeyed it would “Threaten our home with great danger, like a vast blackness- it would envelop us like a dark cloud that looms before tempests and thunderstorms.”<sup>164</sup>

The response from Mainz was as swift as it was brutal. For disobeying the orders of their titular superiors and burying the man the abbey of Rupertsberg was placed under interdict.<sup>165</sup> An interdict was one of the heaviest weapons of the Church as it barred those under it from receiving the sacraments and from any other priestly actions. Importantly for a community tied so closely to the music of the divine office the nuns of Rupertsberg were barred from signing their daily prayers. This weighed heavily on Hildegard, as one might expect, and she wrote to the priests of Mainz but neither her words nor her visions would sway them. The worst blow was the loss of the music of the liturgy of the hours. As mentioned earlier, music was to Hildegard of paramount importance and her letter to Mainz emphasizes this point.<sup>166</sup>

For six months the nuns lived in a very unfamiliar world until, at last, the temporal world came to redress the inequities of the spiritual. Hildegard’s friend Philip, the Archbishop of Cologne, produced witnesses who had been present when the man in question had been reinstated into the faith. Faced with this evidence the interdict on Rupertsberg was lifted by Archbishop

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Hildegard, *Mystical Writings*, 149.

<sup>165</sup> Newman, *Living Light*, 27.

<sup>166</sup> Hildegard, *Mystical Writings*, 150-151.

Philip and the nuns were free to sing their praises to God again.<sup>167</sup>

It was not long after this traumatic event that Hildegard was called to return to the source of her visions. On September 17, 1179 she died peacefully at the age of eighty-one.<sup>168</sup> At the end of her life this “trumpet” of God had channeled much more than a few unintelligible visions. Her divine insight had led a “poor weak woman” to take on, and best, men and women from every station of life. Her visions were not merely an occasional event, rather they were her world, her very self. To her vision and reality were the same, she was seeing with both human eyes and celestial perception. Such a position was difficult for her. She questioned the source of the visions, the nature of them, and even if she was correctly interpreting them. While Hildegard was neither the first, nor the last, Christian mystic she was certainly one of the most important. Her body of work is staggering and multifaceted yet for her all things returned to the “Living Light” which both inspired her and emboldened her.

Her mystical experience, though a varied one, was focused on reformation however. She was a part of an age of reformation within the Church and her writings were meant to instruct and enlighten the faithful. She contested with abbots, bishops, emperors, and Popes and the only means for her to do this was by speaking as a channel for the divine. On a deeper level, intentionally or not, it was only because of her visions that she was able to

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>168</sup> Gottfried and Theoderic, *Life*, 112..

gain so much popular support and credibility. Her uniqueness was due to the combination of mysticism, active correspondence, and official support.

This last was particularly important because simply being a mystic was by no means a guarantee of authority or power. Hildegard, by going through Volmar, by writing to St. Bernard, by submitting to questioning by Papal representatives, and by circumspection (at least initially) in dealing with the Pope gained the support of influential members of the clergy. Without this support her visions, while interesting, would have been given far less attention. There was a political nature to her visions, just as her visions were meant to inspire changes within the politics of the Church. She was a reformer, but a reformer within the system. Once accepted by the hierarchy of the Church her visions could, and did, carry true weight.

### Catherine of Siena

Catherine di Benincasa, according to the hagiography by Raymond of Capua as well as other corroborating documents, was born in Siena Italy in 1347 to a middle class family of tradesmen. Her father, Giacomo, was a dyer and a member of the dyer's guild in the city and her mother, Lapa, was from another well-respected merchant family. Her mother had already given birth to over twenty children by the

time of Catherine's birth, though most had died in childhood, and the family comprised two older brothers, Benincasa and Bartolomeo, and several sisters. The birth itself was eventful as Catherine was born with a twin who died soon after birth.<sup>169</sup>

Siena was a powerful Italian city state at this time, independent and wealthy due to its mercantile ventures and banking. In particular wealth came from the cloth-making that Giacomo was associated with and the city's wealth was increased by its pilgrimage trade. This idyllic city life was destroyed the year after Catherine's birth in 1248 when the plague hit Siena. The death toll was catastrophic and the economic effects were staggering. The Benincasa family was put in difficult financial states along with their neighbors as more and more people, eventually half the population of the city, succumbed to the great mortality.<sup>170</sup>

While Catherine grew up in the aftermath of the plague it was not mentioned in Raymond of Capua's account of her life though its effects would very probably have shaped her growth. As Catherine grew up she was, by all accounts, a talkative and happy child who was on friendly terms with the Benincasa's many neighbors. She was so playful and joyful that she was given the nickname *Euphrosyne*, which meant lighthearted.<sup>171</sup> In addition she was very close with her older sister, Bonaventura, and her nephew Tommaso whose parents had died and had returned to

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<sup>169</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 8-9.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, 9-12.

<sup>171</sup> Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* trans. Conleth Kearns, (Wilmington: Michael Glazier Inc. 1980), 26.

live with his grandparents.<sup>172</sup>

It was also from an early age that she started to exhibit religious devotion. The household she grew up in was a conservative and religious one, her father was a member of the Franciscans as a tertiary and her older sister had become a Dominican tertiary while Tommaso, with whom she was particularly close, was focused on becoming a Dominican friar. According to Raymond of Capua she had learned the *Ave Maria* and would repeat it constantly while going up and down the stairs of her house, kneeling at each step.<sup>173</sup> Despite the early attempts of hagiographers to read her youthful devotion as a sign of a special connection with God there was nothing unusual in her piety. As noted Siena was a center of religious pilgrimage and, considering Catherine's family history of with monastic orders, she was surrounded from an early age by the influence of the Church.<sup>174</sup>

The truly defining moment for Catherine's life came in 1354. While she was travelling to her sister Bonaventura's home with her brother Stefano, Catherine had an experience that changed the course of her life. While the children were walking Catherine stopped and looked into the sky, transfixed by something in the clouds. Stefano called to her and then shook her until she turned to answer him saying, "Oh if you could see what I see you would not have disturbed me." She looked back to the sky but could not find what she had been gazing at before and burst into tears.<sup>175</sup>

What Catherine later claimed to see was a vision of Christ in the heavens with

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<sup>172</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 13.

<sup>173</sup> Raymond, *Catherine*, 28.

<sup>174</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 13-15.

<sup>175</sup> Raymond, *Catherine*, 29-30.

the Apostles Peter and Paul and John the Evangelist. As she watched Christ looked down upon her, smiling, and raised his fingers to bless her with the sign of the cross. When she turned back after being interrupted by Stefano the vision had vanished. Whatever the truth of what she saw it had a profound effect upon the six year old Catherine. She pointed to this moment as the time when her devotion to Christ changed from simple piety into something more.<sup>176</sup>

Like Hildegard before her Catherine's connection to the divine in youth and later in life was not an ecstatic seizure as this account indicates. She could "see" Christ with her eyes and later in her life would speak of her visions being "perceptible" by senses other than sight. These visions unfolded in her mind and before her eyes as if nothing more than another layer of reality revealed to her. Like the Living Light of Hildegard she would turn to this insight time and again for strength and confidence.<sup>177</sup>

This vision also marked the beginning of Catherine's feverish fixation of corporeal denial and suffering. It was her failing, she believed, in turning away from the vision of Christ that had led it to vanish and so she began to rigorously discipline her body and deny it food. She also whipped herself for her failings and resolved to be ever more focused on the spiritual. She secluded herself as much as she could during the day to Stefano's room when he was out and to the family wine cellar when he was not.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>177</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 17-18.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, 19.

As she cultivated her connection with the divine Catherine also had another mystical episode, again while walking through the city. She stopped to pray at a shrine to the Virgin Mary and, depending on the account, either levitated in the air or saw a vision of Mary. This event further cemented her desire to live a religious life and so, in 1355 at the age of seven, she secretly vowed to commit herself to a deeper union with Christ, a spiritual “Marriage,” that she continually referred to in her letters.<sup>179</sup>

The vow itself was recounted by her confessor Raymond of Capua in his account of her life. This hagiographical text painted the seven year old Catherine as a young girl "acting with the mature deliberation of a person ten times her age," and her decision as a very calmly thought out action.<sup>180</sup> His narrative of her life has her swearing to maintain her virginity so that "to no other spouse shall I ever give myself."<sup>181</sup> Her commitment to Christ was first and foremost within her mindset as recorded by Raymond but the idea of remaining perpetually virginal is mentioned as well: "I too will keep my virginity for ever spotless for him."<sup>182</sup>

While many early hagiographers, and some modern writers, term this a “Vow of Virginity” this is not fully supported by the source evidence. For Catherine this was definitely a marriage with virginity being only a natural consequence of her deeper connection, spiritual and physical, with Christ. She did not refer to her virginity often but she did use the concept of marriage and the image of herself as a

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<sup>179</sup> Sigard Undset, *Catherine of Siena* trans. Kate Austin-Lund, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) 16-17.

<sup>180</sup> Raymond, *Catherine*, 34.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

“Bride of Christ” with some frequency. This distinction is important as for most of her biographies the emphasis is placed upon her virginity.<sup>183</sup>

This vow and the desire for solitude and a spiritual life was, at first, not noticed or taken seriously by her family. This was understandable given the size of the Benincasa family but it soon rose to be an issue as Catherine grew from a spiritual child into a driven teenager. As she approached marriageable age she hid herself away from potential suitors as much as possible until her mother Lapa turned to her favorite sister Bonaventura for help. Bonaventura coaxed young Catherine into wearing fashionable clothes and dyeing her hair and for a short time it seemed as if, vow or no, Catherine would follow the traditional path for a woman of her station in Siena and marry.<sup>184</sup>

Tragedy struck, however, when Bonaventura died while in childbirth in 1362. The effect on Catherine was immense. She immediately returned to her physical devotions and denials with intensity. In addition she became even more adamant that she would not break her vow and marry. She was further encouraged in this by Tommaso who was by this time a priest. She confided in him about her vow and he suggested that she should cut off her long hair, one of the chief attractions of an unmarried woman. Taking this advice Catherine returned home and immediately cut her hair short and took to wearing a veil.<sup>185</sup>

This action was soon discovered by her mother and a fight ensued that was to

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<sup>183</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 22.

<sup>184</sup> Undset, *Catherine*, 19-21.

<sup>185</sup> Brophy, 27-28.

decide her future. On one side was the traditional expectation on the path of a young woman, on the other was Catherine's vow, her visions, and her determination to commit to a life outside of the norm. Her mother punished her by having her work for the family as a servant girl with no private room of her own and she continued to search for husbands for the teenager. Catherine bore the hard work stoically and with good cheer and this slowly began to shift the attitudes of her family.<sup>186</sup>

For weeks the battle raged until, at last, the family, led by her father Giacomo, gave in to her desire to remain without a husband and live a religious life. The question they, and she, faced was what form her commitment would take. For Catherine the choice was clear, she had fallen in love with the Dominican order and wanted to become a part of their community. She did not, however, want to become a cloistered nun. Fortunately for her there was a way she could associate with the Dominican order and also maintain a degree of autonomy: She could become a tertiary.<sup>187</sup>

A tertiary was a member of a religious order who, though a part of the larger religious community, was not under as strict of a rule as their fellows. This was a path that Giacomo, Catherine's father, and her older sister had both followed. For women this was an alternative to remarriage in the event of their husband's death and would allow them to maintain their residence rather than submitting to the regimented and ordered life within a convent.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Raymond, *Catherine*, 44-46.

<sup>187</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 31.

<sup>188</sup> Hamburger and Marti, *Crown and Veil*, 122-125.

Catherine was further encouraged in this path by a dream wherein she reportedly saw St. Dominic, the founder of the Dominicans, in which he spoke to her and encouraged her to don the black habit of the order. There was one difficulty, however, in that female tertiaries of the Dominican order were, traditionally, widows. Undaunted, Catherine continued to agitate that she be allowed to join the *Mantellate*, as the tertiaries were called, without delay. In the midst of this she was struck ill with an illness, possibly chicken pox, and told her mother that either she would either wear the mantle of St. Dominic or a burial shroud. Her mother, at last convinced, personally beseeched the prioress of the female Dominicans on behalf of her daughter and, at last, the prioress gave her consent. At some point between 1364 and 1365 Catherine was at last given the veil and clothing she had fought for, she was freed from worldly concerns and joined to the Church as a tertiary.<sup>189</sup>

With her newfound freedom to live a spiritual life Catherine spent the next three years in self-imposed solitude within the walls of her home. Her only contacts with the wider world were her family, other *Mantellate* and Dominicans, and Tommaso. She spent her time going to mass every morning, confessing to Tommaso, and, most importantly, learning to read. These were the outward actions during her time but equally noteworthy was the purpose of her solitude. During this time Catherine began focus on suffering and penance and she was zealous in her pursuit of a greater union with God. She fasted, went without rest, and beat her body repeatedly,

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<sup>189</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 35-36.

all to come closer spiritually to Christ.<sup>190</sup>

Her few activities outside of her room were no less extreme. When she received communion she would burst into tears and sob uncontrollably. She went her own way as far as her commitment to the *Mantellate* was concerned as well. While a looser member of the Dominican order Catherine was still expected to follow the rule of the Third Order. She had been instructed in this rule when she took her veil but she refused to follow parts of it. These conflicts within her chosen vocation caused several priests and nuns to treat her as an attention seeking child, totally unsuited to the lifestyle she had sworn herself to. An example of this was her treatment by priests during communion. Some refused to grant her the sacrament while others would “accidentally” kick her while she laid on the ground weeping.<sup>191</sup>

While Catherine struggled with her vocation her family, and all of Siena with it, was undergoing tumultuous events that would shape her future. The ruling elite fell from power in 1368 and there was a three-year struggle to fill the power vacuum until, in 1371, a new coalition formed to bring the city back into good order. During this period, Catherine is credited with protecting her brothers from a mob by walking before them in her veil. Soon after this event Catherine would forsake the total solitude of her room and enter into Tuscan politics and society.<sup>192</sup>

The unrest of Siena in the 1370s was matched in other Italian cities such as Florence as opposition to the ruling plutocrats and bankers grew. Florence was a

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid, 38-40.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 40-42.

<sup>192</sup> Thomas F. Luongo, *The Saintly Politics of Catherine of Siena* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 42-44.

strong ally of the Papacy but due to political intrigues there was some fear that the Pope was going to expand his influence in Italy and crowd out Florentine interests. While Pope Gregory XI denied any such intentions his Curia did have interests in Tuscany. While Gregory's goal was a return to Rome from Avignon in France the powerful French bishops and cardinals, several of whom were in charge of the Papal holdings in Italy, had a vested interest in keeping the Pope a virtual puppet of the Kingdom of France.<sup>193</sup>

The relationship between the Papacy and the Italian city-states was always a fractious one and the instability of the times only added to the tension. In 1374 these issues at last rose to a boil when Gerard du Pay, the vicar-general of Perugia, requested free passage through Sieneese and Florentine lands with an army. Ostensibly Gerard was headed towards Lombardy to aid other Papal armies but neither Siena nor Florence believed this. They were fearful of a potential seizure of their lands as Gerard had been suspected of supporting rebels in both cities. The city states not only did not grant the request for safe-passage, an insult of the diplomatic first order considering the ostensible good relations between the Papacy and Florence, but Florence also sent an army to defend against the Papal forces.<sup>194</sup>

It was against this backdrop of brewing war that Catherine stepped out of her solitude and into politics and controversy. Though she was ostensibly no longer a part of the world Catherine had, through introductions to certain individuals by her priests and fellow *Mantellate*, become embroiled in the city's concerns and, by extension, in

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 58-59.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, 59-61.

the wider struggle within Christendom over the Papacy. The network she was a part of included some of the highest classes of Sieneese society and they took the side of the Papacy in the War of Eight Saints where Florence, Siena and Milan all joined together against the Papacy.<sup>195</sup>

That war was building in 1374 when Catherine attended a general meeting of the Dominican Order in Florence. Her fame had grown both within Siena and also in the larger world. She had started corresponding with a variety of characters including the queen of Naples and her reputation as a holy woman was established enough to draw the attention of Pope Gregory XI. Unlike his predecessor Urban V, Gregory was deeply interested in the visions of mystics; he had placed considerable credence in the visions of Birgitta of Sweden, and he sent Brigitta's confessor to meet with Catherine shortly before the general meeting of the Dominicans. While the Pope was impressed by what he heard about her, other factions from within the Dominicans were not.<sup>196</sup>

The first group to oppose Catherine came from Siena itself. Several of the *Mantellate* and priests associated with them complained to their superiors about Catherine's willful independence, her claims of sanctity, and her taking disciples, several of them male. Others who opposed her were nothing more than skeptics, disbelieving that a young woman like Catherine was everything she was purported to be. The last faction that opposed her was also the largest and was comprised of those who looked down on her due to her gender. She was questioned, much like Christ, by those seeking to embarrass or discredit her. She dealt with all of this discord calmly,

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid, 63-67.

<sup>196</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 90-92.

patiently, and politely and, over time, more and more people accepted her despite her independence.<sup>197</sup>

The general meeting of the Dominicans was an opportunity for her to win over more members of her order, a chance for her also to spread her views about the necessity for reform within the Church. One of the most important outcomes of the meeting was the trust that was placed in her by the authorities within the order. She was given a new confessor at this meeting, Raymond of Capua who would write one of her many biographies, and in addition she was no longer to answer to the local Sienese clergy. This approval was an attempt to bind her more closely with the Dominican order and capitalize upon her growing influence and popularity.<sup>198</sup>

Her return to Siena was marked with tragedy, however, as the plague had broken out in the city. Catherine returned to aid the infected and help prepare the dead for burial, including her older sister Lisa and her husband Bartolomeo. This plague was also the starting point of miraculous healing being attributed to Catherine. Several of her disciples, though ill to the point of death, credited her with healing including her new spiritual guardian Raymond of Capua who fell ill and was, allegedly, healed by her while she prayed over him with her hand on his forehead.<sup>199</sup>

As the plague faded into memory in 1375 Catherine began working towards a new goal, to revive the old idea of a crusade and to travel with it to retake Jerusalem. She tried to enlist support for this idea from a variety of different sources, including

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, 94-97.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 97-98.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 101-102.

nobles and priests, and, importantly, to lay women and nuns. She spoke in public about the need for crusade and even Raymond of Capua lent his support to the idea. The Pope and events, however, had other ideas. Crusade was not a viable goal at the time, the plague had sapped Europe's population and the harvests had been poor for years. Despite her best efforts Catherine never saw the crusade she dreamed of.<sup>200</sup>

While the attempts at organizing a crusade were failing Catherine had another mystical experience that became a part of her legend. While she was praying the image of Christ appeared, blood dripping from the wounds in his hands, feet, and side. As she watched the blood seemed to shine towards her own hands and feet and this filled her with terrible pain. She collapsed and was carried back to her room by her disciples. She told them nothing of what had occurred but she did tell Raymond, her confessor.<sup>201</sup>

This vision of her being marked with the wounds of Christ became a part of her imagery and also a powerful part of her hagiography. The markings of Christ, *Stigmata*, were powerful images of a saint's piety and holiness that had only become a part of Christianity with Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. Catherine, by invoking this image, was both assuming a greater level of spiritual authority and tying herself closer to the union with Christ that she so desired.<sup>202</sup>

Part of Catherine's growth as a mystic in this time was her continual fasting and corporal mortification. She would fast for days and this has been suggested by

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 107-112.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 127-128.

several historians to be the cause of her visions. Food became a means of control for women; they could gain power over their bodies and also find meaning in the denial of it. Pain and penance were a prominent part of late medieval Christianity and Catherine was certainly a part of this. She would fast to gain even more union with Christ by mirroring his suffering.<sup>203</sup> This fasting took its toll, however, as it had with Hildegard's mentor Jutta back in the twelfth century when she died considerably earlier than Hildegard possibly as a result of her continually fasting.<sup>204</sup>

It was in 1376 that Catherine sent her first letters to Pope Gregory XI in Avignon. The earliest letter that survives was filled with rebukes of those surrounding the Pope in his court and even of the Pope himself for condoning their actions.

"Those who are in authority, I say, do evil when holy justice dies in them because of their selfish self-centeredness and their fear of incurring the displeasure of others."<sup>205</sup>

Like Hildegard before her she was empowered to speak in this manner due to her connection with God, an authority that superseded even the Pope. She wanted the Church to be purged of what she perceived as evil influences: "My dear *babbo!* This is why those in their care are all rotten, full of uncleanness and evil!" and she even invoked Gregory the Great in trying to stir up Gregory XI to action.<sup>206</sup> "Imitate that gentle Gregory, for it will be possible for you as it was for him."<sup>207</sup>

In referencing Gregory the Great Catherine is making a clear point for

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<sup>203</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid*, 208-210.

<sup>205</sup> Catherine di Benincasa, *Letters of Catherine of Siena vol I*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2000), 244-245.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 246.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid*, 247.

reforming the Church. Gregory XI was in a position where the sovereignty of the Church had been eroded by the location of the Papal court and the control that the French prelates had over the institution. In addressing those surrounding and advising Gregory XI in harsh terms and calling on the Pope to act with the authority of his namesake Catherine was being confrontational in the extreme. Yet, like Hildegard before her, Catherine was able not only to write such letters but to be listened to and agreed with, all due to the mystical experience she had and the severely virtuous life she lived.

While Catherine was growing into something of a celebrity, the clouds of war thickened. Florence's actions against Papal forces and their alliance with other city-states against Papal interests at last caused a war to break out and Catherine's home of Siena was pulled into a revolt against the Pope in 1376. This war, known as the War of Eight Saints, was a sordid affair and the outcome was never in doubt. The Pope had the wealth to hire mercenaries as well as the threat of interdiction to quell the fractious Italian cities. Pope Gregory did not hesitate to use this power and he quickly shut down the churches within the cities in revolt.<sup>208</sup>

When the interdict went into effect Catherine was in Florence still trying to win support for the crusade. She was deeply saddened by the war and the interdict and had written to Pope Gregory even before the news of the interdict urging him to be merciful to the Florentines. In a letter written in 1376 she urged him to pursue peace with the Florentines. "Do raise the standard of the most holy cross and you will see

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<sup>208</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 140-144.

the wolves become lambs. Peace! Peace! Peace!”<sup>209</sup> While she called for peace she continued her entreaties to have the Pope return to Rome in a series of letters. She warns not to listen to those counseling him to stay at Avignon: “They come from worldly people through the deceitful, malicious ministry of the devils, who want to prevent all the good that will follow from your going.”<sup>210</sup>

Finally, urged to action by her advisors and the situation in Italy, Catherine decided to go to Avignon and speak to the Pope in person. With several companions she took passage on a ship bound for the city and arrived in June of 1376. The pomp and circumstance of Avignon did not sit well with Catherine upon her arrival.<sup>211</sup> Raymond of Capua captured her displeasure when he wrote: “Where there ought to be a paradise of heavenly virtue, she found instead the stench of infernal vices.” When the Pope asked her how she was able to discern the lack of morality in his court she answered him: “even while I was in my native, I was more aware of the stench of the sins that are committed in the Roman curia than are those who committed them now on a daily basis.”<sup>212</sup>

The interaction between Catherine and Gregory was a unique one. Catherine viewed the Pope as not only the Vicar of Christ but Christ on earth, but she also believed that she spoke with the voice of God himself. She alternated from differential to authoritative in her tone with the Pope and even writes to him in a

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<sup>209</sup> Catherine di Benincasa, *Letters*, 204-206.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, 235-236.

<sup>211</sup> Blake Beattie et al. *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*, eds. C. Muessig, G. Ferzoco, and B.M. Kienzie (Boston: Brill, 2012), 82.

<sup>212</sup> Raymond, *Catherine*, 146-147.

playful manner, addressing him as *babbo* or “papa,” while at the same time taking very strong positions such as denouncing the immorality of the court or pressuring him to return to Rome. For his part Gregory seemed to be truly impressed with Catherine and gave her words serious consideration.<sup>213</sup>

The meeting at Avignon, though it did not have the desired effect of ending the war, did result in one of Catherine’s most treasured goals. After speaking with her, Gregory XI, already personally convinced that the return to Rome was necessary, finally took action. It would take until 1377 but he made the journey to Rome and took up residence there until his death the following year. Despite his death this was a truly momentous event, for the Papacy and for Catherine as well. Gregory’s death, however, was rife with consequences.<sup>214</sup>

After his death the cardinals gathered in conclave to decide on the next Pope. Fearful of the Roman populace the cardinals elected Bartolomeo Prignano who took the name Urban VI. The new Pope proved to be contentious and authoritative in equal measure and the cardinals soon left the city, declared his election invalid as it had occurred under duress, and elected a rival Pope, Clement VII. While Urban VI remained in Rome Clement VII returned to Avignon and the Church was divided by what came to be known as the Great Schism.<sup>215</sup>

Though the new Pope was an irascible man it was clear that he at least had Catherine’s support. She wrote to him in 1378, days before the antipope was elected

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<sup>213</sup> Beattie, *Companion*, 83.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*, 85-87.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid*, 88-89.

and the Great Schism sealed, offering encouragement and support: "By innocently suffering the blows of these wicked people who want to beat your holiness with the club of heresy, you will receive light."<sup>216</sup> She had affected her reform, Pope Urban VI would remain in Rome, and now she was working on healing the Church of the fracture that it was in the process of suffering. That said she remained adamant in her detestation of corruption: "Tolerate neither simony nor grand ceremonies nor entertainments, nor gambling with blood-for the blood of that poor and holy Church is being gambled away."<sup>217</sup>

For all that harshness, Catherine was deeply worried about the idea of Christians spilling their blood over the Schism and she repeatedly urged Urban VI to charity when dealing with the forces of the antipope. "So forward, most holy father! enter this battle fearlessly, because what is needed in battle is a defensive garment, the armor of divine charity."<sup>218</sup> It was not part of Catherine's desire for reform to have succeeded in bringing the Papacy back to Rome only for it to be split asunder and for the two sides to bitterly fight each other. The tenuous nature of Urban's position was even remarked on by Catherine as she feared that "For I know that these wicked people, lovers of the world and of themselves, are not sleeping but are maliciously and craftily seeing to take your life."<sup>219</sup>

The Schism was a source of great pain to Catherine, who remained in Rome, along with the reforms to the Church that she had wished to see and had now fallen

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<sup>216</sup> Catherine di Benincasa, *Letters of Catherine of Siena vol III*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 2007), 214.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, 285.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid*.

by the wayside. Her fasting and disciplining of her body increased and sapped her of her energy while she prayed for hours at a time. She was still active in politics but little by little her life was ebbing out of her. By 1379 she was a shadow of herself, weak, emaciated, and, and wasting away. Her physical decline was matched by an ever more feverish mystical experience, one that followed close on the heels of a stroke in September of 1340. The vision was prompted by her praying about the trials of the Church and what she could do in the midst of the turmoil. The answer she reportedly received was that she could offer her life for the Church.<sup>220</sup>

While she weakened she kept up her correspondence and continued to walk from her room to mass, but it was apparent to all that her health was getting worse and worse by the day. In February of 1380 she was walking back from the basilica of St. Peter and suddenly collapsed, unable to hold herself upright. She was bedridden for two months during which she drafted her final testament urging her followers to seek God fully and wholeheartedly in all things. On April 29th 1340, after repeatedly confessing her sinfulness and wickedness and being riddled with pain for days, she died. The news of her death spread quickly and a large crowd gathered to follow the body first to St. Dominic's Chapel and then to her grave for burial. At only thirty-three years old Catherine had found the union with God that she had so feverishly sought.<sup>221</sup>

Catherine's life, while brief, was a turbulent and storied one. She set the terms of her life from an early age and stayed true to her desires until her death. In helping

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<sup>220</sup> Brophy, *Catherine*, 215-223.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, 226-229.

to bring back the Popes to Rome she revitalized Italy as a whole and Rome in particular. While her fasting and discipline were very probably the cause of her early death they, along with her visions, allowed her to challenge the Pope and his curia to reform and drew supporters to her from every echelon of society. In contrast to the older Hildegard, who first dictated her visions at forty-one, Catherine was open and public about her mystical experience and this quickly gave her an authority that was very uncommon for such a young woman.

The difference in Catherine's efforts towards reform and Hildegard's were in the maturity that each woman grew into as channels for God. They both claimed to see visions but Hildegard's were a constant facet of her life since her youth while Catherine's were much more situational, tied to the consumption of the Eucharist or fasting. The commonality between the two was the sense of union with God that they both cite as the source of their authority. Their experiences, while different, both have elements of similar divine insight, a hallmark of the mystical experience.

This mystical component was the common ground for both woman and their use of it was the same: to affect change within the Church. Their other actions all can be tied back to this basic idea. Hildegard, when lamenting the loss of Ricardis, was doing so for personal reasons certainly, but also due to nepotism, she termed it simony, that had robbed her of her confidant. Catherine, when trying to deal with the Schism that Gregory XI's death had caused, wrote still of charity towards the wicked and was still pursuing the idea of a Crusade. These women's focus was on the propriety of the Church and maintaining its authority.

#### IV. Conclusion

The gulf between Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena is, on the face of it, a large one. These two women were far removed in terms of culture or time but they were bound together by their shared experiences as female mystics and reformers. Both found strength in a link to God that was beyond the ken of their peers and, as a result, both garnered power and authority that few others, men or women, could. Their power was spiritually based, not temporal, and their authority was dependent upon their acceptance by the very hierarchy they were trying to reform.

Hildegard was a woman who lived two lives, the first as a humble nun, the second as a prophetess. There is little to say about her before she began to record her visions but when she finally did she discarded the quiet life she had become accustomed to. Her mystical experience was, to her, her life and when it was accepted she flourished as a person. There is no doubt that experience of the Living Light gave her the confidence to challenge others. In her letters this emerging confidence is apparent, but she was challenging people to change and see things in a different light. Her frequent uses of the word *Veriditas*, meaning “greening,” implied a call for continual change and growth, a vital restoration of the spirit which she saw lacking in the world around her and the Church she answered to.

Catherine’s journey, though taken earlier than Hildegard’s, was no less divided. She too initially wished for peace and solitude. That desire was soon transformed into a calling to share her insight with those around her. She was a

reformer in the truest sense of the word in that she was continually writing to try and win people back to the Church. To her the Church was Christ on Earth and to fall away from it was to fall away from salvation itself. Her correspondence was filled with spiritual exhortations and encouragement, even her rebukes. Her willfulness as a child transformed into doggedness as a young woman and adult.

The commonalities these two women shared were numerous; however, the greatest was the immense sense of purpose that came from their mystical experience. Each in their turn came to understand their visions as something more than a delusion and, once they were able to, they gave themselves over to them. The visions drove them forward, emboldened them, and slowly removed their sense of self. They were defined by what they saw and they walked the world as channels of it. This was an incredibly powerful change for both and a difficult thing for others to accept. The supreme confidence of being privy to the intentions of God was grating to many within their lives and yet it also charmed people around them. The intensity of both women was palpable and an integral part of their success.

This is not to say that either Hildegard or Catherine were not free agents. Both were very self-assured and went their own ways in most matters. The loss of self can be seen as a clever manipulation by them, each using their visions to claim that their desires were, in fact, God's desire. It was a charge leveled against them during their own lifetimes and one that still has force today. To be sure, both utilized their considerable influences for personal goals and gains. Hildegard left St. Disibod to found her own abbey over the monks withholding the nun's dowries. Catherine

avoided marriage by claiming a mystical marriage with Christ. But these are small examples when set against the wider aims of these women.

The true goal of Catherine and Hildegard, though separated by almost one hundred and seventy years, was the same: the reformation of the Church. Whatever else they did or did not do this was made very clear in their own words and actions. Hildegard's books were meant to inform those who read them of a larger context and to cultivate a return to the "correct" ways within the Church. Catherine's legacy was as the woman who brought the Papacy back to Rome. Each accomplished something of their larger goal by their actions. There were many other factors behind the various reform movements but these women were truly exceptional due to their success and their notoriety. Gregory XI was attempting to return the Papacy to Rome on his own accord when Catherine was pleading for it and Hildegard was far from the only monastic preaching a reform.

That others were trying to affect the same end that these women were working towards only underscores the importance of their mystical experiences and how powerful they were both for them and for those around them. Without their visions it is extremely unlikely either Catherine or Hildegard would even be remembered, much less celebrated. Mysticism was, in the end, a tool and a strong one at that. Regardless of belief in the visions of either Catherine or Hildegard the effects were visible within their own lives.

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