

# St. Hildegard of Bingen

## 12th-Century Feminist

The pope emeritus described this Benedictine as brilliant and fearless. Joan Chittister, OSB, explains why.

BY ALICIA VON STAMWITZ

**H**ILDEGARD OF BINGEN, a powerful and prescient 12th-century Benedictine nun, was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012. He also recognized her as a doctor of the Church—one of only four women so named in Christian history. At the time, Pope Benedict described St. Hildegard as “a woman of brilliant intelligence, deep sensitivity, and recognized spiritual authority.” He also celebrated her “fearlessness, a feature of every prophet.”

So why, if Hildegard was such a luminous figure, did it take the Church over 800 years to recognize her sanctity? What facets of her life gave previous generations pause, and why did the Church decide to honor her in our time?

To explore these questions and examine Hildegard’s legacy, *St. Anthony Messenger* turned to one of the most influential Benedictine women in our own day: Sister Joan Chittister, OSB. Joan is a social psychologist with a doctorate in communications theory and a contemplative’s keen eye. Like Hildegard, Joan is brainy and bold—willing to enter the blistering debates on faith and modern science, faith and feminism, faith and politics. She’s a provocative speaker and a prolific author whose reputation extends far beyond her Erie, Pennsylvania, monastery. Like Hildegard, she’s also a born leader, having served as prioress of her Benedictine community and president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

Joan welcomed the opportunity to







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speak about a woman she's long admired, her sister in religious life, and spiritual soul mate: Hildegard of Bingen.

**Q: Hildegard was one of the greatest intellectuals and mystics of her day. Why do you think she was only recently made a doctor and a saint?**

**A:** Well, in the first place you have to understand why her holiness and gifts weren't recognized by the Church a thousand years ago. I mean, her recent canonization is grossly out of time. As wonderful as it is—and it is the perfect time as far as I'm concerned—at the same time you have to wonder why the original canonization process that began 54 years after her death was allowed to peter out, to disappear.

When you look at the profile of Hildegard of Bingen, you could pick her up from the middle of New York City in 2014 and she'd have no problem. People would be in awe of her natural brilliance. She would easily find a job, and she would be an international figure. As far as I'm concerned, that explains why it took almost a thousand years for the Church to get around to canonizing her. . . . This woman was simply bigger than life—too big to handle, and too big to understand.

**Q: Can you tell us about her intellect and influence?**

**A:** Fortunately, 400 of her letters are extant. She wrote to barons and kings, emperors and bishops, saying, "Get it right. Stop the nonsense.

(Above) The Benedictine Abbey of St. Hildegard was built by Prince Karl of Lowenstein, who wanted to celebrate Hildegard's spiritual legacy near the site of her original abbeys. About 50 nuns live here today.

(Left) This statue is in the Parish and Pilgrim Church of St. Hildegard, which is built on the same spot where Hildegard's second abbey once stood.



PHOTO BY CHRISTINE ERIN

Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, is animated when she talks about St. Hildegard of Bingen, a woman she's long admired, her sister in religious life, and spiritual soul mate.

“If a cloistered woman religious from the 12th century can take upon herself the learning, the authority, and the wisdom position that she did, then we’re all called to key roles in our Church.”

Shape up. This is what the Gospel demands in this situation.”

She also wrote the first medical encyclopedias in Germany. How do you ignore a woman who wrote the first encyclopedias in her region? How do you ignore someone who set out on speaking tours of the Rhine after she was 70? She’s a phenomenal figure, and she’s a woman’s woman. She’s a woman of the Church, too, by which I mean that she read the Church and its mission and ideals quite clearly, and then she insisted that the Church keep them.

She gathered disciples around her, and for many years they lived in an anchorage attached to a male monastery called Disibodenberg. But the monastery apparently never made any particular arrangements for this growing group of young women, so one day she got up and said, “I’m leaving. We’re going to go build our own house.” The abbot didn’t like that one bit because she had raised the profile of his monastery. People came from everywhere to visit her, and the dowries of the young women who joined her were a social security program for that monastery. But she picked up the women, the dowries, and everything they had, and she left because it was the right thing to do for her community. It took the world nine centuries to catch up with this woman, and it took the Church nine centuries to catch up with her sanctity, because she was a woman “writ large.”

**Q: Why do you think Pope Benedict XVI decided to canonize her [in 2012], at that moment in the Church’s life?**

**A:** That’s an even more interesting question. I’m not sure how much conscious thought might have gone into it before Hildegard’s canonization and installation as a doctor of the Church, but I do believe in the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit believes in women. I believe the women’s issue in the body of the Church is coming right out of the awareness of the Holy Spirit, and nowadays you simply cannot ignore strong women. You cannot substitute piety for integrity, strength, and an

ethical approach to the Church in the modern world: qualities that Hildegard epitomized. It’s a grand story that suddenly seems very contemporary.

**Q: If we take Hildegard seriously, especially women in the Church today, how will she change us?**

**A:** In the first place, I don’t know that she would change us. But she would confirm us. She’s clearly the confirmation of Christian feminism. She’s clearly the call to women to be everything they can be, to be the fullness of themselves, without an ounce of fear. She is the “open sesame” to a woman’s insight and a woman’s Gospel life.

**Q: As a Benedictine and a former prioress yourself, do you see any parallels between Hildegard’s experience and yours?**

**A:** Well, I’m a Benedictine, and she was a Benedictine. So one similarity would be our spirituality. Benedictinism is based on bringing the spiritual life, as well as the intellectual and social life of a person, to fullness. If anybody is a model of the fact that no woman is to come to religious life to be suppressed, to become invisible, or to be made mute, this woman is certainly the model of our place in the Church and in the world. In that she has a similarity to all of us. She is a model to women religious everywhere, of course, at one level.

But she is also a model for all women—laywomen, too—because if a cloistered woman religious from the 12th century can take upon herself the learning, the authority, and the wisdom position that she did, then we’re all called to key roles in our Church.

As for me personally, I wouldn’t make any particular association. But she was a cloistered woman in a public role, like Sts. Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, and none of them were wallflowers. Not one. All their voices have shaken this world. So Hildegard’s canonization and elevation to doctor of the Church is just another affirmation of the fact that women have a role to play in the Church. They have a key place to claim and an authority to bring to the issues of our time.



## Who Was St. Hildegard of Bingen?

Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bickelheim, Germany, the 10th child of noble parents. At age 8, her parents sent her to live with the Benedictine anchoress Jutta, whose cell—consisting of a few small rooms—was attached to the monastery of Mount St. Disibodenberg in the Rhine valley. Hildegard studied music, spinning, Latin, biblical history, herb lore, and prayer. At age 18, Hildegard decided to take on the Benedictine habit herself. When Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard was appointed to lead the community of 12 women.

At 42, Hildegard had a vision she believed to be an instruction from God, to “write down that which you see and hear.” Though she was hesitant at first—in her day it was forbidden for women to write books—the voice was insistent, and she eventually began work on an illustrated book she called *Scivias* (*Know the Ways*). Word spread of her practical and spiritual gifts, attracting more visitors and disciples. In 1142, Hildegard and her sisters left their cramped quarters in Disibodenberg to found a new monastery of their own.

Hildegard was hardly an ordinary abbess. Besides her spiritual influence, she was a gifted artist, musician, playwright, and scientist—a true Renaissance woman, some have said, well before that era. She was a courageous advocate for the oppressed and a fiery critic of the corrupt clergy of her day, making not a few enemies among the hierarchy.

Hildegard died on September 12, 1179, at the age of 80. Her body of creative work includes nine books on theology, medicine, science, and physiology, as well as 70 poems and an opera. She also left hundreds of letters addressed to emperors and popes, bishops and archbishops, nuns and nobility.

In 2012, Hildegard was at long last declared a saint

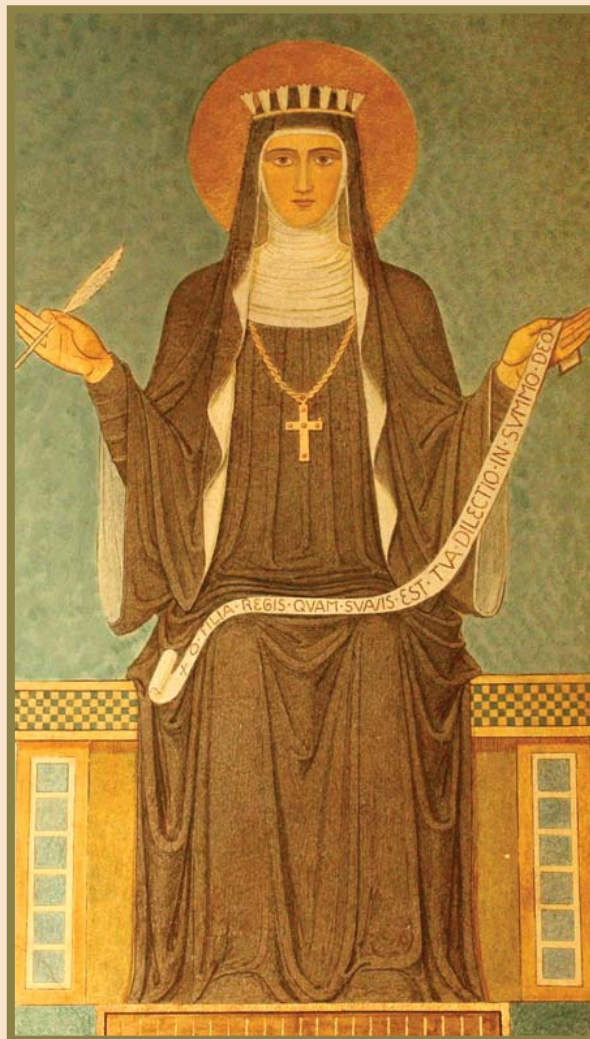


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and made a doctor of the Church. In his homily on October 2, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Hildegard’s prophetic spirit, brilliance, and love of creation. “Above all,” he affirmed, “she maintained a great and faithful love for Christ and his Church.”

**Q:** In his commentary on Hildegard at the time of her canonization, Pope Benedict XVI described Hildegard as advocating a radical reform of the Church, and he said that she was fearless, “a feature of every prophet.” How do you think that relates to women religious today?

**A:** I believe in our shared call, and I own it as a claim on our souls. There’s something about religious life, and there’s something about religious life for women that is yet to be completely understood. The role of religious life is

always to live the Gospel at the grass-roots, to be where the people are, and to be where the issues are. We are called to be more concerned about the Gospel on the streets of the world than about the custody of institutions.

The liturgy of the Church belongs to the Church itself, and the sacraments of the Church—those are priestly acts. But the whole notion of being a bridge between the streets and the sacristies, that’s the role of religious—to take the sacristy to the streets, and to bring the people in the streets to the sacristy.

That is our spirituality, and that’s what Hildegard did best. When she saw the people being confused by the scandals of the Church in that period, she went from palace to palace, dais to dais, and altar to altar, and she retaught and reimaged in her own life the call of the Gospel for that precise time and place.

**Q:** Speaking of “place,” I understand that Benedictines take a vow of stability.

**A:** Yes. I saw a poster some years ago

Murals in the abbey are done in the Beuron style, which originated in Germany, but draws on the influence of Egyptian art.



PHOTO BY BOB SESSIONS

that said, “Bloom where you are planted.” I’m an Erie Benedictine. I was a child in Erie. I grew up in this town. I came to this monastery, and this monastery grew out of the soil of this town, in this region, in this country. We have a responsibility, therefore, to be where we are, to remain rooted here.

When the murder rate began to rise in Erie, the Benedictine sisters began a street liturgy in this city called “Take Back the Site” to honor homicide victims and to “reconsecrate to life” the land where the bodies had been found. If your son was murdered on 9th and Ash, for example, the sisters went there with as many people as they could gather and held a prayer service, a “living liturgy” of psalms, hymns, and prayers for the family.

Now, hundreds of people come, and two other religious communities have joined us. Families look forward to it

people on the streets, it’s women religious who must stand up, call it out, and claim the work of binding and healing the divide.

**Q: Isn’t that hard to do, though, given the climate in the Church?**

**A:** It is hard, but people know the Church when they see it. People know when the Church is active in their midst—the way you live as a body, as a Benedictine monastery, as a religious community anywhere. The way you live and what you do speaks Church to the people and it speaks truth to the Church as well. That’s what Hildegard did! She didn’t leave the Church when things got tough. She was often upset by the way the Church was being administered, by the things that were being done, but she didn’t leave it.

**Q: Can you give us an example of St. Hildegard’s struggles within the Church?**

**A:** There’s a famous story of her burying in the monastic cemetery a man who had been censured by the local bishop. The man had been excommunicated, so the bishop demanded that she dig up the body and take it out of blessed ground. Instead, she led her community to the cemetery and they scraped off the tops of every grave with their walking sticks so that nobody would be able to tell where the new grave was. She refused—she absolutely refused!—to dig up that young man just because a bishop didn’t like him and had condemned him to hell.

[Hildegard’s] community suffered

[as a result]. That bishop put them under what the Church calls *interdict*, meaning that they couldn’t receive the sacraments, they couldn’t have Mass, and they couldn’t sing the Divine Office. But that community, all of them, hung together and went on living their religious life under those conditions. The people around them knew that the interdict was wrong, and when a new bishop came in, the interdict was lifted.

But it is that dogged determination to make the Gospel plain, even in the face of individuals claiming law over love, that is at the very heart of Hildegard’s story. When you get into these stories, you get into the very heart of the function of Church—both ecclesiastically and as a body.

**Q: Like Hildegard, you’ve been described as a prophet and a mystic. I wonder what you think of that.**

**A:** I believe that we’re all called to union with God, that we’re all called to speak the word of God in ungodly places and to ungodly situations. So my answer is that we’re all called to be prophets and mystics. The important thing is that you know who you are at all times. Never let any words seduce you or confuse you. Put the center of your heart in the hands of God and you will be fine. **A**

Alicia von Stamwitz is a St. Louis-based freelance writer. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Sun*, *America*, and *The United Church Observer* (Canada), as well as publications in Australia, England, Ireland, and New Zealand.



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because it is publicly comforting to them in the face of their public humiliation and pain.

That’s the kind of thing that Hildegard must be understood to be about: she took the Church to the people and she took the Gospel to the Church itself. When there’s a rupture between the sacristies of the Church and the