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The Personal Correspondence of

Hildegard of Bingen

SELECTED LETTERS WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND COMMENTARY BY *Joseph L. Baird*

*The letters in this volume are selected from
The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen (3 vols.),
translated by Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman*

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*To my daughter Eve,
that other tough, spiritual lady*

by his serpentine guile, did great harm to that which was celestial in man, but God wanted to salvage that new thing.

It often happens thus when some inspiration comes forth from the Living Light, which is God, touching a person's spirit: If that person glories in it in a way other than he should, or if he climbs higher than he has the ability to do, the serpent laughs scornfully to himself about such a fool. Therefore, let those things which proceed from the truth be heard, and those things which come from lies be, mercifully, cast away, for no one has reached such perfection that he is not a liar in some way or other, just as David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says, "Every man is a liar" [Ps 115.11].

Guibert of Gembloux

XI

In 1175 Hildegard received a letter from the man, a monk of Gembloux, who was to become her last intimate associate and secretary. Having read her works and having reflected, as he says, upon the gifts bestowed upon her by the Holy Spirit, "gifts scarcely heard of through all the ages up to the present day," he writes in burning curiosity, seeking answers to certain questions he has about her divine inspiration: Does she give voice to her visions in German while someone else takes them down in Latin? Does she, "as is commonly said," forget her visions as soon as they are written down? Is she learned, or does her wisdom come wholly through inspiration? When Hildegard failed to answer this first letter, he wrote again, adding further questions: Does she receive her visions in dreams while asleep, or do they come in a state of ecstasy? Are her nuns' crowns dictated by divine inspiration, or are they merely for feminine ornamentation? Does the title of her book Scivias mean "Knowing the Ways," or is there a better translation? Has she written other books? Guibert becomes totally absorbed in his fascination with Hildegard and stubbornly insistent on answers to his questions. He was to write her in all some eight long and rather garrulous letters, letters filled with other questions that he kept pressing her to answer. Guibert was a persistent and dogged sort of monk! The following letter is Hildegard's long and quite detailed answers to most, though not all, of the

questions posed in Guibert's first two. The letter is very informative, giving details that we get nowhere else. Although, for instance, Hildegard refers constantly to the Living Light in all her writing, here, for the first and only time, we hear of a Shadow of the Living Light. The letter is too good to miss, an intimate and delightful portrait of the woman who in the grip of her divine inspiration forgets all her sorrow and pain and becomes "more like a young girl than an old woman."

Letter 70 ✠ to Guibert of Gembloux

The words I speak are not my own, nor any human being's. I merely report those things I received in a supernal vision. O servant of God, you gaze into the mirror of faith in order to know God, and through the formation of man in whom God established and sealed His miracles, you have become a son of God. For just as a mirror, which reflects all things, is set in its own container, so too the rational soul is placed in the fragile container of the body. In this way, the body is governed in its earthly life by the soul, and the soul contemplates heavenly things through faith. Hear, then, O son of God, what the unfailing Light says.

Man is both heavenly and earthly [cf. I Cor 15.47-49]: through the good knowledge of the rational soul, he is heavenly; and through the bad, fragile and full of darkness. And the more he recognizes the good in himself, the more he loves God. For if someone looks in a mirror and finds that his face is very dirty, he will want to wash it clean. So too, if he understands that he has sinned and been caught up in vain pursuits, let him groan and cry out with the Psalmist because his good knowledge makes him aware that he is polluted: "O daughter of Babylon, miserable" [Ps 136.8]. Here is the sense of this verse: human desire was tainted through the poison of the serpent. Thus it is impoverished and wretched, for despite the fact that it tastes the glory of eternal life through its good knowledge, it nevertheless fails to seek that glory from God with

true desire—for which reason it has a low reputation in philosophical thought. But blessed is he who understands that he has his life from God, and blessed is he whose knowledge teaches him that God created and redeemed him. For through this divinely given freedom, he breaks the evil habit of his sins, and poor as he is in celestial riches, he dashes his wretchedness upon the rock which is the foundation of beatitude. For when a person knows that he is filthy and cannot resist tasting sin whatsoever, black birds completely befoul him. But then also the rational soul, which he neither sees nor knows, leads him to put his faith in God by believing. Yet although he knows that this is his nature, and knows too that he will live forever, he still cannot keep himself from sinning over and over again. And so: O how lamentable is the fact that God makes such fragile vessels which cannot refrain from sin, save through the grace of God. And yet how wondrous that these same vessels are sometimes adorned with the stars of His miracles. For even Peter, who vowed vehemently that he would never deny the Son of God, was himself not safe [cf. Matt 26.33ff; Mark 14.29ff; Luke 22.33ff; John 13.37f]. The same was true of many other saints, who fell in their sins. Yet these were all, afterward, made more useful and more perfect than they would have been if they had not fallen.

O faithful servant, I—poor little woman that I am—say these words to you again in a true vision: If God were to raise my body as He does my spirit in this vision, my mind and heart would still not be free from fear, because, although I have been cloistered from childhood, I am fully aware that I am only human. For many wise men have been so miraculously inspired that they revealed many mysteries, and yet they fell, because in their vanity they ascribed all these miracles to their own power. On the other hand, those who have drunk deeply of God's wisdom in elevation of spirit while still regarding themselves as nothing—these have become the pillars of heaven. Paul was such a one, for although he was a far better preacher than all the other disciples, he still counted himself as nothing [cf. II Cor 12.11].

Likewise, the evangelist John was mild and humble, and therefore drank deeply of divine revelations [cf. Apoc 1.1-2].

And how could God work through me if I were not aware that I am but a poor little creature? God works His will for the glory of His name, not for the glory of any earthly person. Indeed I always tremble in fear, since I know that I cannot safely rely on my own innate capacity. But I stretch out my hands to God so that He might raise me up like a feather, which, having no weight of its own, flies on the wind. Still, I cannot fully understand those things I see, as long as I am an invisible spirit in a fleshly body, because man was injured in both these faculties.

I am now more than seventy years old. But even in my infancy, before my bones, muscles, and veins had reached their full strength, I was possessed of this visionary gift in my soul, and it abides with me still up to the present day. In these visions my spirit rises, as God wills, to the heights of heaven and into the shifting winds, and it ranges among various peoples, even those very far away. And since I see in such a fashion, my perception of things depends on the shifting of the clouds and other elements of creation. Still, I do not hear these things with bodily ears, nor do I perceive them with the cogitations of my heart or the evidence of my five senses. I see them only in my spirit, with my eyes wide open, and thus I never suffer the defect of ecstasy in these visions. And, fully awake, I continue to see them day and night. Yet my body suffers ceaselessly, and I am racked by such terrible pains that I am brought almost to the point of death. So far, however, God has sustained me.

The light that I see is not local and confined. It is far brighter than a lucent cloud through which the sun shines. And I can discern neither its height nor its length nor its breadth. This light I have named "the shadow of the Living Light," and just as the sun and moon and stars are reflected in water, so too are writings, words, virtues, and deeds of men reflected back to me from it.

Whatever I see or learn in this vision I retain for a long period of time, and store it away in my memory. And my seeing, hearing, and knowing are simultaneous, so that I learn and know at the same instant. But I have no knowledge of anything I do not see there, because I am unlearned. Thus the things I write are those that I see and hear in my vision, with no words of my own added. And these are expressed in unpolished Latin, for that is the way I hear them in my vision, since I am not taught in the vision to write the way philosophers do. Moreover, the words I see and hear in the vision are not like the words of human speech, but are like a blazing flame and a cloud that moves through clear air. I can by no means grasp the form of this light, any more than I can stare fully into the sun.

And sometimes, though not often, I see another light in that light, and this I have called "the Living Light." But I am even less able to explain how I see this light than I am the other one. Suffice it to say that when I do see it, all my sorrow and pain vanish from my memory and I become more like a young girl than an old woman.

But the constant infirmity I suffer sometimes makes me too weary to communicate the words and visions shown to me, but nevertheless when my spirit sees and tastes them, I am so transformed, as I said before, that I consign all my sorrow and tribulation to oblivion. And my spirit drinks up those things I see and hear in that vision, as from an inexhaustible fountain, which remains ever full.

Moreover, that first light I mentioned, the one called "the shadow of the Living Light" is always present to my spirit. And it has the appearance of the vault of heaven in a bright cloud on a starless night. In this light I see those things I frequently speak of, and from its brightness I hear the responses I give to those who make inquiry of me.

In a vision I also saw that my first book of visions was to be called *Scivias*, for it was brought forth by way of the Living Light

and not through any human instruction. I also had a vision about crowns. I saw that all the orders of the church have distinct emblems according to their celestial brightness, but that virginity has no such distinguishing emblem save the black veil and the sign of the cross. And I saw that a white veil to cover a virgin's head was to be the proper emblem of virginity. For this veil stands for the white garment which man once had, but subsequently lost, in Paradise. Furthermore, upon the virgin's head is to be set a circlet of three colors joined into one. For this circlet stands for the Holy Trinity. To this circlet four others are to be joined: the front bearing the Lamb of God; the right, a cherubim;¹ the left, an angel; and the one behind, man. For all of these are pendants to the Trinity. This sign given by God will bless God, for He once clothed the first man in the whiteness of light. All of this is fully described in the *Scivias*. And I wrote this *Scivias*, as well as other volumes, according to a true vision, and I continue my writing up to the present day.

Body and soul, I am totally ignorant, and I count myself as nothing. But I look to the living God and relinquish all these matters to Him, so that He, Who has neither beginning nor end, may preserve me from evil. And so pray for me, you who seek these words of mine, and all of you who long to hear them in faith—pray for me that I may remain God's servant in true happiness.

O child of God, you who faithfully seek salvation from the Lord, observe the eagle flying toward the clouds on two wings. If one of those wings is wounded, the eagle falls to earth and cannot rise, no matter how hard it tries. So too man flies with the two wings of rationality, that is to say, with the knowledge of good and evil. The right wing is good knowledge, and the left, evil. Evil knowledge serves the good, and good knowledge is kept in check by the evil, and is even made more discerning by it. Indeed the good is made wise in all things through the evil.

1. The plural *cherubim* used for the singular is a common medieval error.

Now, dear son of God, may the Lord raise the wings of your knowledge to straight paths so that although you come into contact with sin through the senses—since man's very nature makes it impossible not to sin—you nonetheless never willingly consent to sin. The heavenly choir sings praises to God for the person who acts in this way, because, although made from ashes, he loves God so much that, for His sake, he does not spare himself, but, totally despising the self, preserves himself from sinful works. O noble knight, be so valiant in the battle that you may take your place in the heavenly choir, so that God will say to you: "You are one of the sons of Israel, because in your great desire for heaven you direct the eyes of your mind to the lofty mountain."

As for all those you called my attention to in your letter, may they be guided by the Holy Spirit and inscribed in the Book of Life [cf. Apoc 20.12]. Moreover, O faithful servant of God, speak specifically to Lord Siger, and warn him not to turn from the right hand to the left [cf. Deut 5.32]. For if someone resists a vow that he has made, let him put on the breastplate of faith and the helmet of celestial desire [cf. Eph 6.14ff], and fight manfully. Then, he will successfully complete his journey. And let him consider the fact that when the first man obeyed the voice of his wife rather than the voice of God, he perished in his presumption [cf. Gen 3.17], because he consented to her. But if the tribulation appears to exceed their powers, let them remember the Scripture: "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that which you are able: but will make also with temptation issue, that you may be able to bear it" [I Cor 10.13]. Thus strengthened by this blessed promise, let him and his wife be of one mind, and let them follow whatever course of action is best, whether suggested by the husband or the wife. And let them not fall prey to that first deception, with the man accusing the woman, and the woman, the man. But let them settle this whole matter according to the will of God. I pray that the fire of the Holy Spirit so enkindle their hearts that they never withdraw from Him.

The following letter from the loquacious Guibert of Gembloux was included here with some little hesitation since it is so long, rambling, and discursive. Yet no one knows Hildegard better than Guibert, and no other letter supplies such detailed information about the enthusiastic acceptance of her as an inspired prophet of God by such a wide range of people. One has to make exception, of course, for the unrestrained enthusiasm of the excitable Guibert, but the picture he paints of the ardent reception by the assembled crowd has the ring of truth. Guibert is, to be sure, a fawning sort of personage, and gullible, one should probably add, but with the proper allowances being made he is worthy of our respect.

Letter 71 ✠ *from Guibert of Gembloux*

To the lady and mother, Hildegard, whom I will always receive with the most sincere affection, Guibert, her servant, with a prayer that she obtain lasting health of body and soul from the God of our salvation [cf. Ps 67.20].

In the first letter which I sent to you, blessed and worthy lady, I asked certain questions and made some personal observations, and thus quite naturally looked forward to a written response from you. In that letter, I also declared, unequivocally, that I had no hope of being able to come to see you—which, most certainly, I would not have done, if, at that time, I had had any notion or intention of seeking you out, lest my own words should convict me of trifling or of untrustworthiness. Still, I know—I am indeed certain—that things impossible for human beings are nonetheless possible with God [cf. Matt 19.26; Mark 10.27; Luke 18.27], to Whom immediately, whenever He wishes, things are possible [cf. Wisdom 12.18].

Moreover, I uttered those words of hesitation not out of any distrust of divine assistance (for it often gives comfort even to the ignorant), but because I am still uncertain whether it would be good for me to make this journey. For experience has taught me very well that God, in His great mercy, has frequently thwarted the ill-considered impulses of my foolish will. Yet, on the other hand, by

bringing certain arguments to bear, He has quickened the slothfulness of my soul and recalled me to better things, even when I was striving in precisely the opposite direction. And it is this latter, revered mother—I confess in my great joy—that has happened to me by His grace and by your merits. For although I was doing nothing about seeking you out, or even thinking about it, He, Who, in the abundance of His mercy, exceeds the desires and merits of our prayers, and sometimes even adds what our prayers do not presume to ask, He, I believe, planted the resolve in me and enkindled the desire, when an opportunity and means of visiting you came our way. And He did this, I believe, because He knew that it would be good for me.

Hear briefly the upshot of these matters. Our mutual friend, Lord Siger, a man of notable family, all the more notable for his very clear devotion to God, had delivered my second letter to you, and, having returned from your presence, saintly lady, had been home scarcely a single night before sending word to me. For, behold, the very next morning, he sent a horse for me by a young man I knew well, and summoned me into his presence. And although I did not find him at home when I arrived, his wife, Elizabeth, herself a very fervent worshipper of God, gave me the letter you had sent me through him, sweet lady, and I received it with reverence and joy. Suspecting that the letter contained something remarkable and magnificent (as indeed turned out to be true), I did not dare to read it until I had prayed. Indeed—if I may reveal the complete agitation of my soul—I was terribly afraid that divine wrath, angered at my sins, would pour some kind of destruction upon me through your mouth immediately, or would at least threaten it for the future.

Therefore, I entered the church next to the house and placed your letter upon the altar. Then, falling to my knees, I prayed the Holy Spirit to make me worthy to read it and to so strengthen the weakness of my heart that I could accept what I would read.

Moreover, if any danger lay in store on account of my sins, I asked Him to show me a way to avert it through the prayers of the saints. Then I took up your letter again and read it two or three times in silence. And in sheer wonder at the words, I was, as it were, completely changed and brought almost into ecstasy, for the things said there surpassed my poor powers, and seemed to be more the voice of the Spirit or the speech of angels than of a human being. And so from the bottom of my heart, I blessed the Father of lights [cf. James 1.17], Who spoke and caused light to shine in the darkness [cf. Gen 1.3ff], and Who has filled your spirit with such great brightness that (as you unerringly note in this letter) you are inundated with a double light, ineffable and unending. One of these is with you constantly, that is to say with no intervening fluctuation; the other, only at certain times. Truly, by a special privilege among the women of our time, the light of God's visage has been sealed upon you [cf. Ps 4.7], in order that He might diffuse a salvific joy in your heart.

Truly, in this respect, my lady, your glory is unique! Unique, excepting always, of course, that eminent woman from whom the Sun of Righteousness arose [cf. Mal 4.2], He Who in the radiance of the holy ones was born from the womb of the Father before Lucifer. As the mother of such a one, that woman is rightly called the gate of perpetual light and the resplendent star of the sea. With the exception of her, I say, no other woman in the history of the world save you has ever brought it about that the female sex, which brought the darkness of death into the world, has been marked with the privilege of a greater gift or suffused with such great brightness.

Moreover, I poured out my thanks to our munificent Savior for that other gift, bestowed on you by heaven, for He has poured such grace forth upon your lips that, irrigated in certain parts by the distillation of your words and doctrine, the soil of the Church rejoices, putting forth shoots and producing worthy fruit, through God's kindness. And so let the Church sing a hymn to His name

for this voluntary rain which God set apart for His heritage, for He has so magnified your name that your praise will never cease from the lips of men.

Finally, I am very grateful to you, sweet lady, commending you to God. For I have been granted my highest desire, since, as I gather from your words, you have deigned to give me a high place among your special friends, unworthy and undeserving though I am. Thus when you unlocked the chapel of your radiant heart to me, you made known to me the manner and quality of your enlightening more clearly than to anyone else so far, as may be inferred by those who have read your writings.

Assuredly, you have weighed my request and your generosity in your honest scales, judging it right to open the chamber of love to the eye of love and to make me a participant of that exultation, of that delightful secret, not as a spy but as one who takes delight in your joy. You willingly did this for me because the door is opened to the one who knocks [cf. Matt 7.7]. Why, therefore, should my heart not exult in the Lord, my mouth be filled with jubilation, my lips rejoice, since I was uttering with my mouth, proclaiming with my lips, and turning over in my heart those words that were sent out especially to me, words which you could not have learned from your own self, nor from any other human being, but which could only have come in a supernal vision?

Now, however—to turn from my expression of admiration for you to speak, for a moment, of myself—I was burning with no little embarrassment, and my heart was palpitating with fear when, in one part of your letter, the weakness of my conscience and the inconstancy of my character were laid bare, while, in another—with me reading these words in open public—you called me, variously, “servant of God” or “son of God” or “worthy knight.” Venerable mother, may almighty God have mercy on you! What kind of burden have you imposed on me, an inept and indolent creature? You will see in what spirit you have made such pronouncements.

Where, after all, do such qualities as these appear in me? If anyone but you were saying such things, I would reject them out of hand, accounting them as lies or mere flattery. Yet I do not dare to contradict your words, which flow, as you assert, from the supernal fountain. Still, I suffer some little agony of turmoil about myself within my being when I contrast what I hear from you with what I know to be true about myself. Nevertheless, because I believe that you are neither willing nor able to lie, let it be done to me according to thy word [cf. Luke 1.38], whatsoever my real condition. That is to say, with the Lord's help may I become a servant, serving with my whole heart, and a son in my devoted imitation of His Son. And, since the life of man on this earth is a state of war, may I become an approved knight of God, recovering from my weakness and made strong in battle, fighting manfully against vice and the demons that instigate vice. And so that I may not lack your aid also in this battle, pray to Him, Who "knoweth the high afar off" [Ps 137.6] and regards humble things up close, both in heaven and on earth, pray to Him that He not allow my heart to be destroyed by a calamitous outcome, on the one hand, nor, on the other, to exult when the battle goes my way. And pray that He keep my eyes from being lifted up in pride with a desire to walk among the mighty or meddle in things too high for me [cf. Ps 130.1], but may He make me humble and poor in spirit, trembling at His word [cf. Is 66.2], so that He may deign to gather me with the meek of the earth and regard me with compassion.

Meanwhile, when day was beginning to turn to evening, Lord Siger returned home, and when he saw me, smiled graciously and directed to me the greetings you had entrusted to him. And when he learned that I had read your letter, he said, "I pray that you will expound it to me in French, lest I be like the ass that carries the wine but does not taste it." And although he kept urging his request, with some little difficulty I got him to put the matter off until the next day, for it was already evening. Later, seeking to

fulfill his desire to the best of my ability, I attempted to satisfy him in this difficult matter, in the presence of a number of people, both clergy and laity. Then, awe seized everyone, and, filled with wonder, they all gave thanks to Wisdom, and to the Spirit that was speaking through its instrument, that is, your mouth. All of these people, of varying rank and age, kept insisting—indeed demanding—that I fulfill this difficult task of translation, unwilling though I was. Yet how gladly they listened to that letter of yours, how eagerly they had copies made, how enthusiastically they read and praised it—not just individual readers but almost the entire church!

Hence it is that when that letter was read to Lord Robert, former abbot of Val-Roi and a man of great reputation and learning, he sat quietly, shaking his head time and again. He was so moved that he burst out in a way that could scarcely have been anticipated, though still with dignity, and he testified that the words he had heard could have come from none other than the Holy Spirit. "I believe," he said, "that not even the greatest theologians in France today, however great their intelligence, could completely comprehend the power and depth of some of the words found in this letter, except through the revelation of that same Spirit which inspired them. They prattle with parched heart and blathering cheeks, reveling in questions and battles, from which quarrels arise. And, all the while, they don't have the slightest idea what they are talking about. Thus they enmesh themselves—and others—inextricably in the entangling coils of contention.² But this blessed lady, constantly disciplined, as I hear tell, by the whip of infirmity, and restrained by her own will, contemplates the one thing that is alone necessary, the glory of the Blessed Trinity, in the utmost simplicity of heart. Mild and gentle in heart, she drinks

2. Here, as in Volmar's letter, one can see the friction developing between the old monastic order and the new spirit developing in the universities, which will come to full flower in the age of scholasticism.

from that fullness within herself and pours it out of herself to relieve the thirst of those who thirst."

Another person³ added comments that quite agreed with this. "It is nothing new or unusual," he said, "for the souls of men to be illumined by the various gifts of the Holy Spirit. As the Apostle says, 'every one hath his proper gift from God; one after this manner, and another after that' [I Cor 7.7], and in another passage, 'now there are diversities of graces, but the same Spirit' [I Cor 12.4], 'dividing to every one according as he will' [I Cor 12.11]. A new sign of sanctification at length shone forth among our predecessors, about which we solemnly sing:

Today He has bestowed
upon Christ's apostles
a singular gift,
unheard of
in any generation.

This refers, of course, to the flickering tongues of fire sitting on each one of the apostles, from whose mouths came forth all manner of tongues [cf. Acts 2.3-4]. Just so, beyond doubt, this too is a new kind of illumination by which this lady is granted clear sight. And unlike others who see divine things in sleep, or in dreams, or in ecstasy, she perceives those things shown to her, wondrous to say, fully awake, irradiated, as she herself declares, in a certain eternal light, which she calls the shadow of the Living Light. And during such visions, she is always alert and self-controlled. Furthermore, if she sees certain things in enigmatic terms, there are many more that she observes with a pure, veracious understanding, with all mystic appearances removed, and she is so much at peace in either mode that she cannot be drawn away from the contemplation of inner things by noticing exterior things.

3. Critics believe that this is Guibert himself.

"Moreover, this gift of hers exceeds the illumination of all others, because the words which she hears in those visions have the double effect of fire in her: she both burns and shines in them. And, also, in that Light (by which she has been illumined from childhood, and which she still enjoys to this day) her spirit is exalted and expanded, since she not only gains an understanding of the Holy Scriptures, but is also made capable of seeing into certain (if not all) works of men, however far distant they are from her. The blessed Gregory testifies to the uniqueness of her gift by his evidence to the contrary, for he maintains that the spirit of prophecy does not always irradiate the minds of the prophets, citing two passages from the Scripture in proof: in one David asks Nathan about the building of the temple, and Nathan at one moment grants, at the next forbids it [cf. II Sam 7.2ff]. It is clear that he would not have done this if the spirit were continually present. In the other passage Elisha speaks to Giezi concerning the Sunamite: 'Let her alone for her soul is in anguish, and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me' [II Kings 4.27]. And since 'deep calleth on deep' [Ps 41.8] in the height of divine revelations, it follows that this illumination in her is totally new, and surpasses all others up to the present time. For on those rare occasions when she enters the mystery of the Living Light, as she herself testifies, she seems to herself to be completely transformed, as it is written 'thy youth shall be renewed like the eagle's' [Ps 102.5]. And just as she feels herself to be a young girl again, she completely forgets all troubles that have befallen her—infirmity, sadness, pain, and the feebleness of her advanced years—and carried away by the sweetness of the symphonic harmony, a delight inexpressible to her and inconceivable to us (since, although well-known to her, it surpasses our senses), she, mentally, grows quiet and sleeps in peace in that Light, while, physically, she is fully awake.

"Moreover, returning to ordinary life from the melody of that internal concert, she frequently takes delight in causing those sweet

melodies which she learns and remembers in that spiritual harmony to reverberate with the sound of voices, and, remembering God, she makes a feast day from what she remembers of that spiritual music. Furthermore, she composes hymns in praise of God and in honor of the saints, and has those melodies, far more pleasing than ordinary human music, publicly sung in church. Who has ever heard such things said about any other woman?

"And so what does it matter if she is ignorant of the liberal arts and grammar? And what does it matter if she does not know anything about the agreement of cases, inflections, genders, numbers, degrees, or anything else of that kind? She is, for all that, refulgent with such extraordinary learning, and possesses such a great understanding of the Scriptures that, as we read of St. Martin, she is ready to answer Biblical questions on the spot. And in ordinary conversation she is articulate and lucid, always ready to answer whatever is asked of her. Nor has it been her custom to do this impudently and petulantly, as one might, but, quite the contrary, when she has a ready answer, she pours forth what has been distilled to her without delay. If, however, she is not prepared to answer immediately, she prays, with seemly delay and humble devotion, for things which are unclear to her or of which she is ignorant to be opened up to her by the One Who reveals mysteries. And when she receives what she seeks from the largess of the One Who breathes where and when He will [cf. John 3.8], in absolute faith she imparts to those who question her the abundance of blessing she has received—without ill-will or refusal.

"This woman abundantly proves St. Gregory's dictum that 'the gift of the Holy Spirit is not constrained by law.' And rightly so, since she neither allows herself to be separated from the One because of the love of another, nor to be bound by the law by subjecting herself to the power of a man through marriage. Rather, called to freedom of spirit, she keeps the faith to that One alone, to Whom she has proved herself and Whom she desires to

please with a holy body and spirit. In this way, she surpasses other women, who bear the burdens of marriage.

"The Apostle does not allow a woman to teach in church [cf. I Tim 2.12], but, through the gift of the Spirit, this woman is absolved from that prohibition, and, having been taught by His instruction, she has come to know that Scripture very well in her heart: 'Blessed is the one whom thou shalt instruct, O Lord: and shalt teach out of thy law' [Ps 93.12]. And ignorant perhaps in word, but not in knowledge, she teaches many through her sound doctrine, pouring forth abundantly from her two breasts, as it were, the milk of consolation for the ignorant and the wine of correction for the strong. But although the divine anointing teaches her within about all things, and commands her, as we find in her writings, to disclose faithfully and openly for the instruction of her hearers what the Spirit intimates to her secretly, she nevertheless bears in mind her sex, her appropriate condition, and especially the Apostle's aforementioned prohibition. She is obedient to the Spirit, and does not contradict the Apostle sent by the Spirit, but, rather, she educates the Church with books and sermons wholly consonant throughout to the Catholic faith, teaching in the Church, but not after the fashion of those who are accustomed to harangue the people.

"The Apostle also commands women to cover their heads with veils [cf. I Cor 11.5ff], not only out of respect for discipline but also as a commendation either to some mystery or to the submission they are obliged to observe. Yet this woman is not obliged to wear the kind of veil that wives commonly wear, although some kind of veil is required. For in her great loftiness, she transcends the lowly condition of women. And she is to be compared to the most eminent of men, for 'beholding the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, she is transformed into the same image from brightness unto brightness, as by the Spirit of the Lord' [II Cor 3.18].

"How appropriate 'from brightness unto brightness' is for one whose spirit is always illuminated by the various shifts and welcome

approaches of that Light, which, as we said above, she has learned to call the shadow of the Living Light, and, carried off into that same Light of Life, she gives thanks to God, saying, 'Thou shalt fill me with joy with thy countenance' [Ps 15.11], and 'the light of thy countenance, O Lord, is signed upon us' [Ps 4.7], 'for with thee is the fountain of light; and in thy light I see light' [Ps 35.10]. When, on those rare occasions, she is inundated and carried off by the radiance of that Living Light, she is so totally, miraculously, changed, as her friends as well as her writings testify, that from the very gain in spiritual and bodily strength, one can tell to the minute when that fiery torrent flows into her, of which torrent it is written, 'suddenly there came a sound from heaven, and like a torrent of wind it filled the whole house' [Acts 2.2], and 'A divine fire came, a fire not burning but illuminating, blazing but not consuming, and it found the hearts of the disciples to be clean vessels, and it imparted to them the gifts of the spirit.' Then she becomes more lively in spirit, more spirited in expression, sharper in perception, readier with her words, and more agile in her body. Thus although at other times she never went anywhere without being assisted by one or two nuns, at that time, miraculously strengthened, she walks easily without any assistance whatsoever, to the great wonder and joy of those who are present.

"But why should one wonder if by that Majesty, by whose nod all things move, she is able to do that which, by herself, she is not able to do? Do not the words of that Lady, blessed above all women, apply here, if not literally, at least as a very clear sign? That Lady, through whom the restored human race rejoices, said while gestating our salvation in her womb, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, why do you marvel at me? This mystery which you see is divine.'

"Another miraculous thing is reported of her, which her friends, who have frequently witnessed it, assert to be true: sometimes she fails to obey a divine command to write something or to go out to other monasteries, far or near, in order to admonish the

faithful or, where necessary, to correct certain problems. And whether this failure of hers is due, God forbid, to sloth or obstinacy, or whether it is to be blamed on feminine dread or virginal shamefastness (lest it be said that she did it through presumption or through her own will), whatever the reason, she is immediately scourged doubly by the whip of illness, and by a clear sign she utterly closes up the mouths of those who speak evil of her [cf. Ps 62.12], for her body suddenly becomes so totally rigid that it appears not to be human flesh but unbending wood, and this rigidity is never relaxed until she fulfills those commands."

After your letter was read, and he saw the astonishment of those who heard it, he became not an envious, but a well-wishing preacher of your glories, reverend mother, and he spoke of grace divinely bestowed upon you, making those listeners even more fervent in praise of God and in admiration of you. Everyone agreed that that same God, Who is always marvelous in His saints [cf. Ps 67.36], was manifested in you. And by His gift and the glory of virginity, you shine unburnt in the middle of the Babylonian furnace [cf. Dan 3.19ff], and, having drunk of the fountain of life, you pour forth sweet honey and rich butter to us who hunger.

Now, concerning those things which many people say about you in our region, holy mother, this will suffice at present. For if I go beyond measure in this matter, someone who does not know my heart might think I am currying favor with you through flattering words, and you, either troubled by this praise or terrified by it, might become angry with me. Indeed, if I may speak the truth, it is better for you to be terrified than to be delighted, for it is certainly true that to wish to have a praiseworthy name without a praiseworthy life is certain damnation. That man of the highest perfection⁴ says, "I do not consider that I have achieved anything" [Phil 3.13] in any Christian battle. Also it is written, "when a man hath

4. That is, St. Paul.

done, then he begins" [Ecclus 18.6]. Moreover, as a certain wise man says, praise of a man, if true, is a proclamation, if false, a condemnation. Thus it follows that nobody, although conscious of no crime or sin in himself, should take pride, but should fear. And anyone in a good situation should desire and seek more earnestly to have good work than to have a good name, and he should not boast in himself to his ruin, but in the Lord to his benefit, for not the one who commends himself but the one whom God commends is worthy [cf. II Cor 10.18].

Farewell in Christ, venerable mother, and keep me and those who are mindful of you in your prayers.

The Last, Bitter Controversy

XII

In 1178, when she was eighty years old, with only one more year to live, Hildegard was caught up in an exceedingly bitter and acrimonious struggle, and, as a result, was forced to endure the greatest privation of her life. In that year she had allowed the body of a certain nobleman (whose name has not come down to us) to be buried in the consecrated grounds of Mount St. Rupert. At some point in his life, however, the man had been excommunicated, and, on this basis, the prelates of the archbishopric of Mainz demanded that Hildegard exhume the body and cast it out of holy ground. The Mainz prelates spoke for their archbishop, who was away in Rome at that time on official ecclesiastical business, and they went further, taking the extreme and excessive measure, in his name, of placing Mount St. Rupert under interdict until Hildegard complied with their order. Hildegard acknowledged that the man had indeed been excommunicated, but she argued (correctly and successfully, as it turned out) that he had been fully reconciled to the Church before his death. She went further than mere argument, however: she apparently went out and made sure that the grave was hidden so that she would not be taken unawares with the body being disinterred without her knowledge. The later, unsuccessful protocol for her canonization reports that she lifted her staff over the grave and, making the sign of the cross, caused it to disappear. Hildegard eventually won out in this contest of wills, by making contact with the archbishop and by