

Homily for Hildegard Celebration in St. Catherine's Chapel September 16, 2016 - Carol Coston, OP

Who is Hildegard? What do we know about her? How can a 12th century nun help us today?

Maybe we knew she was an Abbess in charge of a monastery. Perhaps we heard her music, or saw some of the feminine images in paintings based on her visions, or heard about her use of healing herbs.

My path to Hildegard was through art, music, and herbs.

In the 1970s Judy Chicago conceived "The Dinner Party," an artistic celebration of women of using a triangular shaped table with 13 places on each side. These 39 women of spirit and achievement included Hildegard and four other women religious.

While living in Washington, D.C., my mission group went to hear Hildegard's *Ordo Virtutum*, a liturgical morality play performed at the Washington Cathedral. The original production in the 12th century was probably at the Rupertsburg monastery, with the nuns playing the virtues, and perhaps Volmar the monk playing the Devil. (Volmar was assigned to be Hildegard's teacher and became her friend and supporter.)

(Rosemary Ruether was at the same performance and she felt that the Devil had the most interesting part.)

The book, Hildegard of Bingen's *Medicine* written by two German medical doctors was published in 1988. Many of the healing recommendations included herbs we can still use today.

Hildegard was indeed multi-talented.

Just as the women in the Gospel today freely gave of their own resources as they followed Jesus, so Hildegard gave her whole life and multiple gifts to God, the Living Light of her visions.

Hildegard was born in 1098, the last child of a noble family who decided to dedicate her to the church. At 8 years old, Hildegard was put in the care of Jutta, an anchoress connected to a monastery in Disibod, Germany. Jutta became her teacher and spiritual guide and later was the first person with whom Hildegard was able to share the visions that she had experienced since childhood.

Embarrassed by the visions when she discovered that not every one else had them, Jutta advised her to also tell Volmar, the monk assigned as her teacher. He told her to write them down.

One biographer called this her "double vision," a vision of the visible and invisible, which she finally, after five years of doubt, firmly believed the Living Light commanded her to share.

At the same time that she was sensing, hearing, or seeing the Living Light, transported at times into another realm, she was also involved in the cotidiano, the daily life, as Abbess of a monastery, caring for the nuns, composing music, observing nature, creating herbal healing, living the Benedictine rule, offering hospitality, and corresponding with a wide range of people in over 400 letters.

One guiding image throughout Hildegard's writings, which were voluminous, was the Latin word *Viriditas*, meaning greenness.

This was her synonym for all the life-giving qualities of God's Spirit in matter, both human and non-human.

Viriditas is a dynamically energized term and all sustaining. A garden in springtime is full of Viriditas, God breathed Viriditas in creating the world, the sun brings the life of Viriditas into the world. Viriditas is the power in seeds, the reproduction of cells, the power of regeneration.

Viriditas was in the power of land especially in Hildegard's time. Having land had some social prestige, but the real value was in agricultural cultivation and hunting. Sustainability depended on land for food, drink, clothing, building materials for housing, herbs for healing.

The Viriditas of Hildegard's healing art is preventative medicine. The most important principle is diet. She taught the vitality of certain plants and had many healing recipes still in use today.

She was most interested in what effect a food or drink had on our disposition. Did it make us happy or sad or have a negative psychic influence.

Her advice on foods good for humans puts spelt (an ancient grain) at the top of the list as the best grain. Spelt produces firm flesh and good blood, provides a happy mind and a joyful spirit. She also highly recommended chestnuts and fennel.

Hildegard wrote about the four elements — FIRE, AIR, WATER, EARTH — and their properties on all life.

“From fire they have the warmth of their bodies, from air they have their breath, from water they have their blood, and from earth their bodies...”

I was particularly struck by this quote in Hildegard's *Medicine*:

“When the elements fulfill their purpose correctly and orderly, so that warmth, dew, and rain come separately and in good measure and at the proper time, and maintain the earth and its fruits in good health, and thus bring bountiful harvests ... then the world will prosper.

“If they all come suddenly and at the same time, and not in their season, they would tear the earth apart and make it sick.”

Despite many illnesses, Hildegard lived a full life until the age of 81. She founded two monasteries, composed music and a liturgical morality play, *Ordo Virtutum*, gave advice to civic and church leaders, chiding or boldly criticizing if necessary.

In her late 60s and 70s she went on four preaching tours by boat along the Mainz River. Public preaching was unheard of for women, but she had the support of her Benedictine community, and the Living Light as her guide.

As contemplative Dominicans, how can we bring Viriditas to our own Earth Care, People Care and Fair Share?