Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Letters to St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Anastasius IV

Hildegard of Bingen was an extraordinary polymath—someone with an expertise in many diverse subjects. Thus, as mentioned in Chapter 5, it would not be inaccurate to say that the first “Renaissance man” was actually a medieval woman—Hildegard. In addition to her writings on theology, cosmology, botany, zoology, medicine, pharmacology, liturgy, and music, Hildegard has left us approximately 145 letters. These are not missives full of idle chit-chat written to inconsequential persons, but letters concerning major affairs of state and church sent to kings, princes, popes, archbishops, and abbots. While almost fawningly deferential in her opening lines—“I am the lowliest of the lowly, a woman”—she is nonetheless fearless in communicating her strongly held opinions. The first letter given here shows us the “meek and mild” side of Hildegard, as she humbly asks St. Bernard of Clairvaux for sanction to disseminate her spiritual visions, visions she has kept to herself up to this time. In the second letter, however, her epistle to Pope Anastasius IV, Hildegard reveals another temperament, as she castigates the pope for turning a blind eye to justice and “embracing evil.” After reading these letters, one comes away impressed with Hildegard’s sensitivity to the natural world—her metaphors almost always involve the beauty and verdure of nature—and the richness of her imagination. One also has the feeling that, although she professed to be full of feminine weakness, Hildegard was one tough cookie.

Letter to St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1147)

Hildegard’s earliest surviving letter was written in 1147 to Bernard of Clairvaux (St. Bernard), an enormously important theologian and biblical interpreter, and also the primary founder of the Cistercian monastic order. She reveals to him that she has been experiencing miraculous visions of the divine. The implicit purpose of this letter is to ask for Bernard’s encouragement to reveal to all the world her divine visions. In it she mentions that she has a reading and writing knowledge of Latin, gained through an exposure to the scriptures, but not of her native tongue, German. Notice that Hildegard’s writing, indeed her thinking, is not like that of a legal brief or a scientific article that we would construct today. Rather, it is more as if Hildegard is recording a steady stream of consciousness. Her concern is not to make a “logical” argument as we would understand it, but rather to engage in oral communication—that she happens to write down—of the visual images that come to her. What results is a sort of “wandering journey” that continually circles back on itself. The gist of what Hildegard wishes to say to St. Bernard involves no more than two or three sentences; the rest is all imagery and metaphor. This is a typically medieval approach to communication, or “information management.” Perhaps not coincidentally, Hildegard’s music likewise does not stay within the bounds of musical logic as it had been established for chant at that time.

In the spirit of the mysteries, I say to you, venerable father, you who are miraculously endowed with great honors in the virtues of God, how highly esteemed you are. With the banner of the Holy Cross and with a burning love of the Son of God, you fight against the stupidity of this world, galvanizing men into a Christian army to battle against the cruelty of the tyrants. How weighed down I am by these visions that appear
mysteriously to me because I actually don’t see them externally with my eyes. I am the lowliest of the lowly, a woman. From my youth I saw miraculous things that I would be unable to express verbally, had not the spirit of God taught me what to say. Wise and certain father, tell me by your goodness what to do, I who am unworthy to be a servant in your household, yet who has from infancy never lived with peace of mind. Give me permission by your pious, wise intellect, because you were taught by the Holy Spirit. . .

I know the intrinsic meaning of the Psalter, Evangel, and other volumes, that come to me in this vision, that touch my bosom and my soul like a burning flame, teaching me these things in the most profound way, yet not teaching me how to express them in writing in the German tongue. Yet, I only know simply how to read these [aforementioned] texts [in Latin] but not analyze them, because I am untaught. I am not learned in an external approach to such material, but only internally in my soul, from which I speak to you, being sure of your ability to offer me wise and pious counsel.

There are many divisions among men in this world, so I am told. [And thus] I have spoken of these things [her visions] only with one person, a monk who serves as my confessor [her scribe and assistant Volmar] and whom I have found trustworthy in the affairs of life. All of my secrets I have revealed to him, and this is a consolation for me, so that I am not overwhelmed with fear of them. I wish, father, that owing to divine love you will comfort me through your words.

Two years ago I saw you in my vision, as a man able to look into the sun, and not be afraid, but be emboldened, and I cried because I am such an embarrassment and am so weak. Mild and good father, extend your soul to me, pray for me, because great things are demanded of me owing to this vision, so that I can say what I see and what I hear. For a while, while I was silent about this vision, I became greatly ill and was prostrate in my bed, to the point that I could not rise. Thus I plead before you in such a pathetic way, for I am weak and my constitution easily crushed by the wood of the winepress—the very wood that was the source that rose up in Adam, who was cast out to wander the earth at the suggestion of the devil.

But now, however, I arise and come before you. You will bend but will not break under the press of the wood, and you are the victor in the battle within the soul. You will effect salvation not only of yourself but also other men. You are the eagle who can look directly into the sun. I now pray to you, o eternal father, and by the divine Word, by your sweet knowledge of right and wrong, namely the spirit of truth, and by the holy sound that resonates within all creatures, and by that Word that arose on earth, and by the celestial realm of the Father, which word was sent sweet fecundity into the womb of the Virgin, whence that song, and He was formed just as a honey comb is built—all this so that you may not be numb to my words. Rather, place all this in your heart in an unceasing way, through an opening into your soul that you see in God for me, because you yourself desire it. Farewell, farewell to your spirit, be strong in the certainty of God. Amen.

**Letter to Pope Anastasius IV (1153)**

Corrado di Suburra was nearly eighty years old when he became pope in 1153, taking the name Anastasius IV, and he sat on the throne of St. Peter for only a year. During this brief time he tried to make peace with Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I, to lessen the tension arising from ongoing issues of clerical investiture—who had the right to appoint churchmen to high positions: clerical authority (the pope) or civic authority (the emperor). In Hildegard’s view, Anastasius IV was a weak pope, one all too willing to cede religious authority to secular powers, and she pulls no punches as she pummels him with invective: the pope’s lofty age and position provided him no immunity from Hildegard’s verbal assault. But notice here, too, that Hildegard manages to work into this letter her belief that she is a seer, a visionary given the task of mediating between the celestial world and this earth.
O man whose eyesight has become so weak that he cannot see the worst sort of malignancy perpetrated by men, why do you not recall back to you these lost souls who can only by you be rescued from doing grave evil? And why do you not cut away the root of evil that suffocates all plants that grow good and useful, and that have a sweet odor and taste about them? You neglect Justice, the daughter of a king, supreme in all superior things, and who was entrusted to you. For you allow this kingly daughter to be thrown down to the ground, her crown and robe dashed by the crudest sort of men who bark like dogs and who make the inept sounds of crowing like roosters in the middle of the night. They are all impostors, who on the surface appear to be peaceful but in their hearts they grind their teeth, like a dog that wags his tail at the sight of friends then bites them, the warriors who fight for the Lord’s house. 

Thus you, o man, sit on the principal seat of the Lord, surrounded by evil that you not only do not reject, but embrace by tolerating depraved men. And consequently all the earth is in disarray owing to an ever-changing sea of error because man loves what God has destroyed. And you, o Rome, lie as if moribund. But you will be confounded, the very structure on which you stand will weaken because you do not burn with the love of the daughter of the king, namely Justice, but remain as if in the torpor of sleep. 

But he who is great and without blemish [God], raised up a little tent [Hildegard] so that it will see miracles and form unknown letters in an unknown language, and that these will sound a melody consonant to itself. And it was said to that tent, “In this language express those things shown to you from above, not in the form of any human tongue, because this common language was not given to you. But have the one with the file [likely referring to her secretary Volmar] transfer these into a sound that men can understand.” You, however, o man, who is supposed to be the shepherd, wake up and run quickly to Justice, so that you will not be accused by the great doctor [God] of failing to have cleansed your flock from filth or of failing to anoint it with oil. Therefore you, o man, walk in the path of righteousness, and God will save you, so that he may lead you back into the house of the elect and that you may live eternally.