

Annual Catholic Daughters of the Americas Lecture

**“A Feather on the Breath of God”: Hildegard of Bingen’s Words of Wisdom
for Modern American Catholic Women**

**Helen Osman, Secretary of Communications, United States Conference of
Catholic Bishops**

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Catholic University of America

"Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honor. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground, and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus am I, a feather on the breath of God."

Allow me to start with a confession. I am not a scholar and researcher of Hildegard of Bingen. I have not read her master work, *Scivias*, which is where that quote is attributed. So if you were hoping for a scholarly presentation on her, you came to the wrong presentation.

However, what I do know about Hildegard resonates with what I know about some other great women of the Church. As I’ve read some of Hildegard’s work, and

what others have written about her, I realized that, despite an 800-year difference, she and I share a real sisterhood in the faith. I hope today's presentation offers you some touch points with Hildegard, too, and gives you some points to ponder in regards to your own faith journey.

For I believe, as Hildegard apparently did, that we are all called to a unique and particular walk with our God, a journey that no one else can make. At the same time, we choose our path based on what we learn from our family, our friends, our mentors and all the saints and sinners who go before us.

Hildegard was both a saint and a sinner. Even if she were our contemporary, her accomplishments would be astounding. For a woman of the 12th century, they are perhaps miraculous. We know the following are attributed to her:

- A massive theological summa, *Scavia*, or “Know the Ways of God,” on Christian doctrine and ethics
- An encyclopedia of medicine and natural science
- 400 pieces of correspondence with people from all walks of life, including popes and kings
- The first known morality play, *Ordo Virtutum* (Play of the Virtues)
- A body of music that is one of the largest collections remaining from medieval composers

- The invention of an alternative alphabet, based on Latin
- she conducted four preaching tours throughout what is modern-day Germany, speaking to clergy and laity, calling for reform. She wrote several times that her work would not be necessary, except for the “womanization” of the clergy.

She has been termed a reactionary, however, not a revolutionary, because she was not interested in challenging the church’s doctrine, but defending it. She was a champion of a celibate, male priesthood and insisted that the church’s teachings on sexuality were not only holy, but healthy.

Yet, if she was so orthodox and reactionary, some of her actions and writings strike me as odd. For instance, she strongly defends her decision not to have the women in her religious order wear simple garb and a dark veil. Instead, they wore jewelry and “crowns of gold filigree.” Nor did she allow women from lower classes to join the order, arguing that mixing up the classes causes discord and discontent. Later in her life she actually founded a second monastery to allow poor women to join the order, without confusing them with the nuns from upper class families. Finally, she had little difficulty with standing up, or down, to powerful men who held authority over her, such as abbots and popes.

She was born, as near as can be determined, in 1098. Her family was nobility and, as was the custom those days, gave their tenth child, Hildegard, as a tithe to the church, presenting her to a monastery at the young age of eight. There is scholarly disagreement as to exactly what this meant, although there is general consensus that she most likely had very little contact with her parents and was enclosed – literally walled off – from the world by 1112, when she was 14, with Jutta, a visionary and a young woman only seven years older than Hildegard.

There is no written record of the 24 years of Hildegard's life while she was in the convent together with Jutta. When Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard emerged as the new leader of a group of woman who had joined Jutta and Hildegard in monastic life.

After Jutta's death and her appointment as the abbess, Hildegard embarked on a career seemingly diametrically opposed from her sheltered life up to that point. She moved her nuns – not without controversy – to their own monastery in Rupertsberg, across the Nahe River from Bingen, at the junction of the Nahe and the Rhine rivers.

The male abbot of Disibodenberg, where Hildegard and her nuns were living, was opposed to their departure. Hildegard went over his head, to the local archbishop, Henry I of Mainz, but that didn't change Abbot Cuno's mind. His continued

refusal literally caused great physical pain for Hildegard. Witnesses say she was paralyzed, and it wasn't until after the abbot saw her paralyzed that he relented and decided that perhaps Hildegard's intention to move the nuns away from the male monastery property was, indeed, a directive from God.

Hildegard wrote that she experienced visions, what she called "The Shade of the Living Light," throughout her life, beginning at age three. She was reticent to share these visions, finally relenting when she received a vision in 1141, at age 42, in which God told her to "write down that which you see and hear." Still reluctant to put to words her experiences, she was again stricken physically. Some researchers suggest that she suffered from migraines throughout her life, which may have influenced the visions. Others, however, note that she was only one of several German mystics, almost all women, from that time, and that her visions, if studied seriously, seem more than just the effects of a physical malady. The visions, and her catechetical commentary on them, form the basis of *Scivias*. *Scivias* recounts 26 visions of Hildegard, as told to the monk Volmar, that explore the relations between God, humanity and creation, Redemption, and the Church.

Hildegard was recognized even when she was alive as a prophet and holy woman. Popes, kings, bishops and many others wrote and visited her, asking for prayers, advice and prophecies. Although many, including Pope Benedict XVI and Pope

John Paul II, call her a saint she has not been formally canonized. Some Italian media have reported that this October Pope Benedict XVI will appoint her as a Doctor of Church, only the fourth woman in the history of the church to be so named, although the Vatican has not officially confirmed that. Her feast day is Sept. 17, the day she died in 1179.

Her “rediscovery” in the 1970s coincided with numerous “movements” that found her work of interest – probably the main reason why she’s become popular. Feminists, ancient music enthusiasts, alternative medicine practitioners, and ecologists have all claimed her. I would guess she would find some of these devotees rather puzzling. It is clear from her writings that she considered herself a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, as revealed through his church. Her role was a “poor little woman,” a phrase she uses constantly in her writings, suggesting that the outpouring of visions and prophecies were not from her, but that she was a mere instrument being used by God.

In 1979, on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of her death, Pope John Paul II wrote to the cardinal of Mainz that St. Hildegard, “this teacher, full of God, clearly indicates that the world can be governed and administered with justice only if it is considered a creature of a loving and provident Father in heaven.”

So what can we, as “poor little women” ourselves, learn from this woman who lived and died more than 800 years ago, and called herself “a small feather on the breath of God?”

I’d like to start with quoting from Pope Benedict XVI. In 2006 he invited the priests of the local diocese, in Rome, to submit questions to him. In an unusual session, he met with the presbyterate and answered some of the questions.

In one answer, he referenced Hildegard. It’s a fairly long quote, so please bear with me.

... Thus, the Church has a great debt of gratitude to women. And you have correctly emphasized that at a charismatic level, women do so much, I would dare to say, for the government of the Church, starting with women Religious, with the Sisters of the great Fathers of the Church such as St Ambrose, to the great women of the Middle Ages - St Hildegard, St Catherine of Siena, then St Teresa of Avila - and lastly, Mother Teresa. I would say that this charismatic sector is undoubtedly distinguished by the ministerial sector in the strict sense of the term, but it is a true and deep participation in the government of the Church.

How could we imagine the government of the Church without this contribution, which sometimes becomes very visible, such as when St. Hildegard criticized the Bishops or when St. Bridget offered recommendations and St. Catherine of Siena obtained the return of the Popes to Rome? It has always been a crucial factor without which the Church cannot survive.

However, you rightly say: we also want to see women more visibly in the government of the Church.

He goes on to answer directly the original question about why priestly ordination is reserved to men only, but then concludes by saying,

However, it is right to ask whether in ministerial service - despite the fact that here Sacrament and charism are the two ways in which the Church fulfils herself - it might be possible to make more room, to give more offices of responsibility to women. (March 2, 2006)

In many ways, we have seen “more room” made for women in the church in the last few decades, just as women have moved into formal governance positions in universities, government, boards of directors, business and the military.

For instance, according to statistics gleaned from the Official Catholic Directory and the Center for the Applied Research in the Apostolate, as of 2006, in parish life women overwhelmingly fill most of the leadership positions: 88% of religious educators, 65% of music ministers, about half of the RCIA directors and overall 80% of all lay ecclesial ministers are women.

About one quarter of diocesan chancellors – the highest position available to a woman in the diocesan structure -- are women.

For comparison:

- About 40% of businesses are owned by women or majority of the owners are women
- In 2010, Business Ethics reported that women hold about 15% of Fortune 500 board seats
- Inside Higher Ed reports that 23% of university presidents were women in 2011
- Twelve percent of health care CEOs are women, according to a 2006 survey conducted by the American College of Healthcare Executives
- There have been exactly four female justices of the Supreme Court (two appointed in the last two years) and no female president.

The Church has some work to make “more room,” as Pope Benedict suggested, for women. But so do many other institutions within the United States, including our national government.

What I’d like to call the recent “tempest in a teapot” over whether Ann Romney understands a working mother’s challenges is just another indicator that we as a society aren’t really comfortable with how we understand parenting, motherhood and women in the workforce.

Pew Research Center’s Kim Parker took advantage of the mommy wars dust-up to present a sampler of Pew survey findings. Titled “Women, Work and Motherhood” and dated April 13, Ms. Parker’s samplers included these insights:

- In many ways a public consensus has developed around the changing role of women in society. Nearly three quarters of American adults (73%) say the trend toward more women in the workforce has been a change for the better. And 62% of adults believe that a marriage in which the husband and wife both have jobs and both take care of the house and children provides a more satisfying life than one in which the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the home.

- At the same time, when motherhood and children are brought into the debate, there is an ongoing ambivalence about what is best for society. Only 21% of adults say the trend toward more mothers of young children working outside the home has been a good thing for society. Some 37% say this has been a bad thing, and 38% say it hasn't made much difference. And women themselves report feeling stressed about balancing work and family. When asked in general how they feel about their time, 40% of working moms said they always feel rushed. This compares with 24% of the general public and 26% of stay-at-home moms. For their part working fathers don't seem to feel nearly as harried as working mothers. Only 25% of working dads said they always feel rushed.
- Most working mothers (62%) say that they would prefer to work part time, and only 37% say they prefer full-time work. By contrast, most working fathers (79%) would prefer to work full time, while only 21% say they would prefer working part time. The reality for today's working moms does not reflect their preferences: 74% work full time while only 26% work part time. Only about one-in-ten moms (12%) say having a mother who works full time is the ideal situation for a child.

- If you're a Democrat, you're more likely to think it's good to have women working. While majorities of Republicans, Democrats and independents say having more women in the workforce has been a change for the better, Democrats feel more positively about this trend: 82% of Democrats compared with 72% of independents and 68% of Republicans say this has been a change for the better. When asked specifically about the trend toward more mothers of young children working outside the home, Republicans and independents react much more negatively. Nearly half of Republicans (45%) and 42% of independents say this trend has been bad for society. Only 28% of Democrats agree.
- While the share of mothers in the workforce has risen significantly in recent decades, roughly three-in-ten mothers of children under age 18 still do not work outside the home. Ann Romney became the face of stay-at-home moms recently, but she doesn't fit the demographic profile of the average at-home mom. According to Census data, stay-at-home moms are on average less educated than their counterparts in the labor force (18% of stay-at-home moms lack a high school degree, compared with 7% of working moms). More than one-fourth (27%) of stay-at-home moms are Hispanic, compared with 15% of working moms. Stay-at-home moms also have markedly lower household incomes than their working mom counterparts.

I can only offer my own experience, which I'll admit is not typical. I grew up on a family farm, so my reality of a working father and a working mother meant I probably spent equal time with my parents: one in the dairy barn, the other in the canning kitchen.

My experience as a working mother is also probably atypical: Most of my paychecks are from the church. I started my career part time as a reporter/writer for the Catholic Spirit in Austin, Texas. I was also just starting my family, so I was a bit nervous asking if I could work from home. I had the fortune of a husband who not only supported me in this, but who also introduced me to this new machine called the personal computer, or PC, which would allow me to write my stories, save them on something called a floppy disk, and drive them into the office to give to the production manager. No need to have me take up a desk and typewriter in the office!

Even though I was nervous, I insisted I could do this, and the bosses at the Chancery said yes. Then when the editor of the newspaper, who was a single woman, got into one too many arguments with the bishop and left, I was offered the job. By that time I had just had my fourth child – literally I had just come home from the delivery room two days before getting the call regarding the job. I took a deep breath and said they'd have to pay me a certain salary, let me come home at 3

p.m. every day so I could meet the school-aged kids as they came off the bus, and I'd have to talk my neighbor friend into watching the other two babies. Amazing to me, it all fell into place, and for 15 years, I was never asked by my bishop to attend a meeting after 3 p.m.

Five years into this, the diocesan communication director retired, and I was asked to assume his responsibilities in addition to being editor of the newspaper. Of course, I would get a new title. But the Chancery officials weren't so keen on paying me more money. "Doesn't your husband make good money?" was the response to my request for a salary increase. Eventually, they came around, although I think we were quibbling about \$6,000 annual.

Over the years I've had both clergy and lay people berate me for being a working mother, even as I set up a small television and blanket in my office for sick children and interrupted ironing prom dresses to help a pastor with demonstrators and camera crews outside his church on a Saturday night. My children grew accustomed to eating dinner and hearing my side of long conversations with reporters during 2002, when the clergy sexual abuse crisis consumed my life. And for awhile my youngest daughter liked coming with me to cover parish events, because she thought she was hanging out with real pirates in the back of the

church. She was a little disappointed when she found out they were only Fourth Degree Knights of Columbus.

Yet, I think somehow my husband and I did something right. All four of them are still practicing Catholics; some months I would guess their average Mass attendance beats mine. They have also taught religious education, run youth ministry and young adult ministries, and staffed retreats. They all attended Catholic universities by their choice, and three have married Catholics. They tease me about my attempts to bring the Church into modern media, i.e., Facebook and Twitter, yet at the same time I think they are kind of proud of good ole' Mom.

Meanwhile, we'll enter into a new era with them, as we've been blessed with two beautiful granddaughters this past year and a grandson is on the way this summer. So far the two moms are still working outside the home and the expectant mother expects to do the same.

I hope that they allow me to be part of their discernment as they move through the world of working and parenting. Although I feel good about the parenting we gave them, unfortunately we weren't able to bestow great financial gifts to any of them, so my guess is that they will find that feeding and educating children means that both parents will have to work outside the home.

I hope my husband John and I can share with them honestly our own experiences of raising them, as well as how to make decisions on lifestyles and parenting based on our faith.

We can all learn from Hildegard – and the other men and women of faith – how to be a Christian today, indeed, how to live our vocation – lay, religious or ordained – in the world.

We have our own Abbot Cano, perhaps, the boss who doesn't understand that you're not trying to buck authority, you're just trying to get your work done as efficiently and effectively as possible while listening to God's voice of conscience.

We have our particular physical travails, or even perhaps folks whom we love who make our hearts ache. We may have visions that are clear as can be to us, but we're afraid to speak of them because we know we'd not only rock the boat, but perhaps get ourselves tossed out on the street.

What does Hildegard have to say to us in this regard?

- Take strength from who you are. Hildegard suffered from physical ailments and spent her childhood and young adult life limited in her exposure to the external world. But those two decades she spent in the walls of the Disibodenberg monastery gave her many hours of uninterrupted time to

study plants, to explore intellectual and spiritual questions and to participate in the liturgical life of the monastery. She could have just become another weak woman, literally blocked out of the mainstream of life. Instead she became one of the intellectual giants of her time.

■ Prayer is a relationship. Hildegard's prayer life was, to quote the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, "full, active and conscious participation." She was not only a woman who brought her life's worries, joys and questions to God in prayer, but actively listened for God's response. Even skeptical biographers, such as Fiona Maddocks, understand her visions as more than just complications from migraines. Hildegard wrestled with God, actively questioning the source of her visions and what they meant, not only to her, but to those who looked to her for guidance.

■ On perhaps the other side of the coin, Hildegard has that wonderful phrase which is the title of this presentation and which I quoted when I began. Hildegard had apparently a full relationship with God – understanding he was GOD. In other words, while she questioned, beseeched and struggled with understanding what God was asking of her, she also understood that, in the end, she was merely a feather on his breath, to be moved as he desired, with no indication to her of her final destination or even the actual path to that final destination. That marvelous image has captured my imagination

and resonates with my current, at least, understanding of God: One who has my ultimate salvation ready, if I but learn to float with his dreams for me.

Hildegard had her “Shade of the Living Light.” We each have our own vision of God’s dream for us. But we also have mentors to guide us.

Pope Benedict XVI put it so succinctly when he addressed young Catholics who gathered to meet him at Yonkers, New York, on April 19, 2008 – about five years ago:

“Friends, again I ask you, what about today? What are you seeking? What is God whispering to you? The hope which never disappoints is Jesus Christ. The saints show us the selfless love of his way.”

Saint Hildegard, pray for us!