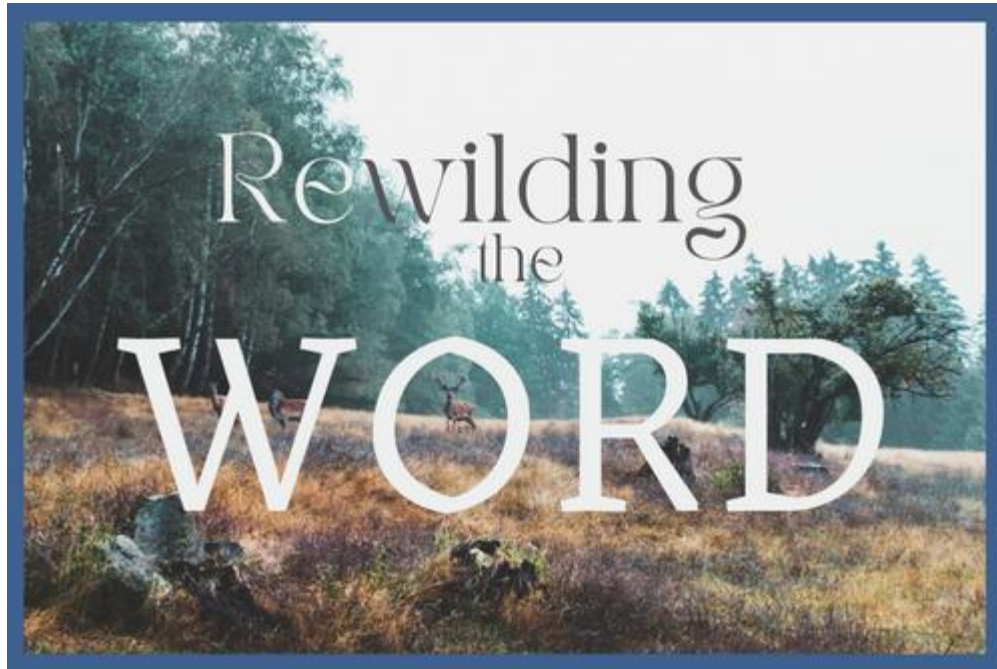


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## GANZ - #19 - REWILDING THE WORD (JUNE 2026)

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**Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)** is one of the most fascinating women of the medieval period. Not only was she the most significant woman author and musical composer of the Middle Ages; she was also an abbess, the founder of a monastery, a religious reformer, a natural scientist, a seer, and a great mystic. Her prophetic and visionary mysticism profoundly marked her age and earned her the epithets “Teutonic Prophetess” and “Sibyl of the Rhine”. Born in 1098 of a noble family in Bermersheim, near Alzey in RheinHessen, Hildegard began to have visions when she was only five years old.<sup>1</sup>

**Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter proclaiming Hildegard von Bingen a Doctor of the Church (7 October 2012):** “In her many writings Hildegard dedicated herself exclusively to explaining divine revelation and making God known in the clarity of his love. Hildegard’s teaching is considered eminent both for its depth, the correctness of

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey D. Egan, [“Hildegard of Bingen,”](#) in *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, Second Edition (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 197.

its interpretation, and the originality of its views. The texts she produced are refreshing in their authentic “intellectual charity” and emphasize the power of penetration and comprehensiveness of her contemplation of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, humanity and nature as God’s creation, to be appreciated and respected.”

### A Story

I and my two younger brothers, for the first time in our lives, went together on a vacation, in Europe, the main part of which was a cruise up the Rhine River from Basel, Switzerland to Amsterdam of the Netherlands. Not since we were boys growing up had we set aside time, just the three of us, to discover who each has become, to gain a refreshed “feel” for each other. What we sought to do was simply to love each other, to practice doing that, with simplicity and without agendas, while exploring the artifacts of ancient and medieval and current cultures. We did this well, while knowing how much our parents, long now among the Ancestors, would have loved that we had done this.

One day (it was May 11<sup>th</sup>) Mark and I were riding a gondola up from Rudesheim am Rhein (located across the Rhein River from the riverside town of Bingen am Rhein). Our brother Bill was hiking with a group through the vineyards below and then around to the east to explore the ruins of a medieval castle.

The wind was chilly on the gondola; the rain intermittent; the landscape below us decorated with rows of the Rheingau<sup>2</sup> grape vines as far as the eye could see. As Mark and I made our way through the fresh air, something at the farthest edge of my peripheral vision caught my attention. I looked to the west and saw rising over the shoulder of a hill, and with impressive solidity against the sky, the towers of the Monastery of St. Hildegard of Bingen.<sup>3</sup> (St. Hildegard had founded her original Benedictine monastery in the 12<sup>th</sup> century across the river from there, in Bingen am Rhein.)

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<sup>2</sup> Concerning the “**Rheingau**” from Google AI: “The Rheingau is a prestigious, 30-mile-long German wine region stretching along the Rhine River from Wiesbaden to Lorch. Famous as the spiritual home of Riesling, it features a sunny microclimate, historic castles, and centuries-old wine estates.”

<sup>3</sup> **Abtei St. Hildegard**, 65385 Rudesheim am Rhein, Hesse, Germany. See: <https://www.romantischer-rhein.de/en/a-st-hildegard-benedictine-abbey> - “The Benedictine Abbey of St. Hildegard above the town of Rudesheim am Rhein was built at the beginning of the last century. It directly traces its roots to the time of Saint Hildegard of Bingen, who founded the “predecessor monastery” of Eibingen, which was resettled in 1165 and secularized in 1803. To this day, the Benedictine Sisters at St. Hildegard live according to rule set over 1400 years ago, based on the teachings of St. Benedict – love of God, humanity, joy in faith, and a realistic, pragmatic view of humankind.”

Those towers seemed to peak at me; they were not a neutral presence – their gaze grabbing me and turning me toward them. Is it not in your experience that the holy Mystery sometimes does this, using a concrete something – why that particular thing? - to catch our attention? We turn, seeking what is seeking us through the medium of that object. It is as if it spoke saying, “Hello; I am looking at you. My gaze made you notice me.”

I turned and saw the towers, but what then entered my awareness marked me, leaving within me a strong impression of spiritual significance, something that I felt but still do not understand. I was and remain haunted by towers, by those towers.

C.S Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Chapter 3 – Long ago, before we were married, [Helen] was haunted all one morning as she went about her work with the obscure sense of God (so to speak) ‘at her elbow’, demanding her attention. And of course, not being a perfected saint, she had the feeling that it would be a question, as it usually is, of some unrepented sin or tedious duty. At last, she gave in – I know how one puts it off – and faced Him. But the message was, ‘I want to give you something’ and instantly she entered into joy.

But I have taken it to mean that an offer of friendship by St. Hildegard has been extended to me, an invitation offered me to go to her written works and music and to become her pupil for a time. This essay is my first step in that direction.

Sometimes it can be the towers of a church, seen from a swinging gondola, that God uses to introduce us to the people whom He wishes us to meet.

I recalled how Pope Benedict XVI (Josef Ratzinger) proclaimed Hildegard a Doctor of the Church (7 October 2012),<sup>4</sup> placing her among that very small number (only 38 of them) of the most eminent Teachers and Saints of the Church, and she one of the four women Doctors with St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Ávila, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

## Musical Compositions

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<sup>4</sup> See the full pronouncement on the Holy See website:  
[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20121007\\_ildegarda-bingen.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html).

St. Hildegard composed in *monophony* (a melody for a single voice, or for a group of voices singing in unison) not in *polyphony* (a melody decorated with harmonies)<sup>5</sup>. Her music is like Gregorian chant in this regard, though what she does with the melodies is where her genius lies.

Video – Hildegard of Bingen, Holy Spirit, the Quickener of Life -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYzPR0nwcMY>; Video - Chanticleer, “O

Frondens Virga” by Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) -

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGXXrUvNzec&list=RDQGXXrUvNzec&start\\_r](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGXXrUvNzec&list=RDQGXXrUvNzec&start_r)

[adio=1](#); Anonymous 4, *The Origin of Fire: Music and Visions of Hildegard von Bingen*

(2006).

**A Text – “An Antiphon for the Angels” by St. Hildegard of Bingen, translated by  
Barbara Newman<sup>6</sup>**

Spirited light! on the edge  
of the Presence your yearning  
burns in the secret darkness,  
O angels, insatiably  
into God's gaze.

Perversity  
could not touch your beauty;  
you are essential joy.  
But your lost companion,  
angel of the crooked  
wings – he sought the summit,  
shot down the depths of God  
and plummeted to hell,  
hissing counsels of ruin  
in the ears of God's new  
creation.

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<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **polyphony**” – **1.a.** – **1790** – *Music*. Harmony; esp. the simultaneous and harmonious combination of a number of individual melodic lines; the style of composition in which melodic lines are combined in this way; polyphonic composition, counterpoint.

<sup>6</sup> The Poetry Foundation - Hildegard of Bingen, “Antiphon for the Angels” from *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the “Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum,”* Second Edition, translated by Barbara Newman. Copyright © 1988, 1998 by Cornell University. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

## A Close Reading of the Text

“**Spirited light!**” – A name that she gives to Angels. Have you wondered about Angels enough through your experience of their presence to you or to others to be able to give them a name? But let us consider what she might mean by this name.

By “**spirited**” we assume (and probably correctly) that she understands that the mission of the Angels in our world is a direct extension of the work (the providential care) of the Holy Spirit:

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest,  
and make our hearts your place of rest;  
come with your grace and heav'nly aid,  
and fill the hearts which you have made.

...

Your light to ev'ry thought impart,  
and shed your love in ev'ry heart;  
the weakness of our mortal state  
with deathless might invigorate.<sup>7</sup>

In that second stanza we see described the holy work of Angels as mediators of the Holy Spirit.

But “spirited” can also mean as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes: “**2.a. – 1601** – Of a person: full of spirit; of a lively, animated, or energetic disposition; characterized by courageous, assertive, or determined behaviour. Also: energetic or enterprising in the pursuit of a particular course of action, occupation, etc.” And so, we recognize how Hildegard experiences the “flowing light” of God in the Angels as highly dynamic, bright with energy, joyful, playful, and perhaps filled with color. Spirited light!

By “**light**” Hildegard does not mean something like the Sun in the sky or like electric light bulbs that chase away the dark. She means *intellectual* light. It is what I saw, and loved to see, on the face of a student when suddenly he or she caught on to what I was trying to teach, or better, when he or she experienced his or her own insight into something. There was always a kind of “flash” of light on their faces, which was always accompanied by a smile of delight, of joy.

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<sup>7</sup> Two verses from this famous poem/hymn in Latin by Rabanus Maurus (c. 776-856). Here translated by Edward Caswall (1814-1878).

“yearning ... insatiable” – It is hard to understand how the Angels, who as she indicates always live so close to the Divine Presence – “on the edge of the Presence” – should be so intensely filled with yearning. Doesn’t it seem that we, who are (apparently) not nearly as close to that “edge”, would feel yearning far more than Angels, we having so much farther to go, if you will, to be with God?

C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces*, Book 1, Chapter 7 - ‘It was when I was happiest that I longed most. ... The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing ... to find the place where all the beauty came from.’

Hildegard understands that “insatiable yearning” is what *increases in intensity* the closer we get to the Divine Majesty. Why? Because in order to love God as God (in Himself, and not merely as God for us), we must be *likened* to God, to have our nature “raised” by sanctifying grace to being more proportionate to God. What Hildegard means is that to be more like God means to feel insatiable yearning, being given the grace to endure its enormous force in us.

### A Prayer

Hymn, “Come, Holy Ghost, Creator, come”

1. Come, Holy Ghost, Creator, come  
From Thy bright heav’nly throne;  
Come, take possession of our souls,  
And make them all Thine own.

2. Thou who art called the Paraclete,  
Best gift of God above,  
The living spring, the living fire,  
Sweet unction and true love.