

SACRAMENTAL PENANCE AS EXISTENTIAL LIBERATION IN HILDEGARD VON BINGEN'S “LIBER VITAE MERITORUM”

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ABSTRACT: Proclaimed doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012, the 12th-century mystic Hildegard von Bingen remains relatively unknown to contemporary theologians. This note is an invitation to a more profound reception of her contribution to sacramental and moral theology. Through an analysis of key passages from Hildegard's principal ascetical work, the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, I show how the rich symbolic language of her visions helps her to firmly situate the moral life within the overall narrative of the economy of creation and salvation. This synthesis provides the necessary background for understanding her teaching on the sacrament of penance, which is the means by which the moral experience of the individual Christian makes contact with the global context of the divine plan.

KEYWORDS: confession, penance, Hildegard von Bingen, idolatry, mercy, ecology, Doctors of the Church.

RIASSUNTO: Proclamata dottore della Chiesa da Papa Benedetto XVI nel 2012, la mistica del XII secolo Idegarda di Bingen rimane relativamente sconosciuta ai teologi contemporanei. Questa nota è un invito ad una più profonda accoglienza del suo contributo alla teologia sacramentale e morale. Attraverso un'analisi dei passaggi chiave della principale opera ascetica di Ildegarda, il *Liber Vite Meritorum*, mostro come il ricco linguaggio simbolico delle sue visioni la aiuti a situare saldamente la vita morale all'interno della narrazione complessiva dell'economia della creazione e della salvezza. Questa sintesi fornisce lo sfondo necessario per comprendere il suo insegnamento sul sacramento della penitenza, che è il mezzo attraverso il quale l'esperienza morale del singolo cristiano entra in contatto con il contesto globale del disegno divino.

PAROLE CHIAVE: confessione, penitenza, Hildegard von Bingen, idolatria, perdono, ecologia, Dottori della Chiesa.

SUMMARY: I. *Cosmic Context: the music of God*. II. *Error Theory: The Lure of Idolatry*. III. *The Answer: Sacramental Penance*. IV. *Conclusion*.

The Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic* (514A-517C) lays out the essential outlines of the spiritual program of Greek philosophy.¹ The psychological, moral and social problems of humanity have their root in an endemic misuse of reason. Human beings are attached to the surface of things, like the prisoners watching the shadows on the wall, and habitually fail to grasp their deeper significance. Happiness, virtue and harmony can only be obtained by penetrating the world of appearances to reach the true reality that sustains them. This is a difficult process, which initially seems counterproductive, since someone who has spent all his life in the world of appearances will feel like he is walking into total darkness. But if he can somehow be wrenched out of the cave into the light, he will find true life – and be able to help the others find it as well. Philosophy in the Platonic tradition is nothing other than this new way of life, outside the cave, and philosophical discourse aims primarily at liberating those who are still trapped in the land of shadows.²

In this context, it is easy to understand why the first Christians frequently depicted Christ as a philosopher,³ and how the Fathers of the Church turn so readily to Platonic concepts in order to reflect on the dynamics of Christian life. In fact, the tradition of Israel leading up to Christ had come to the same basic insight as Plato, although with important differences in detail. The Biblical prophets describe the attachment to the surface in terms of idolatry. The idol provides an explanation for reality that one can see, touch, and manipulate, in place of the invisible and uncontrollable reality of God that truly underlies the cosmos. Like the philosopher, the prophet aims to set his people free from the imprisonment of idolatry, bringing them back to the deeper reality that makes true life possible. But the prophet does so in the name of a God who is personally invested in this project, and who grants the prophet a unique intimacy with Himself in order to carry it out. This

¹ Cfr. A. LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, 3–17.

² Cfr. P. HADOT, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1995, 56–61.

³ Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007, n. 6.

divine involvement makes the words of the prophet both more profound and more practical than the words of the philosopher, enabling him to catalyze conversion on a larger scale.

From the Patristic period onwards, Christian theology has proceeded through a constant dialogue between these two traditions, Plato and the prophets. The Platonic framework has the advantage of being more universal, free from explicit reference to a particular place, time or people. But for that very reason, it is also more limited in its ability to engage with the concrete reality of material existence, which is always bound by such conditions. Theology is kept alive and faithful to its roots by the constant renewal of the prophetic dimension: not only through waves of renewed attention to the Bible, but also through the appearance of new prophets who draw their inspiration directly from the same divine source.⁴ These prophets preserve theology from ossification by injecting a new perspective that is not directly derived from any preceding conceptual scheme.

In October 2012, Pope Benedict XVI underlined the contemporary urgency of such renewal by bestowing the title of Doctor of the Church on the 12th century visionary Hildegard von Bingen. Growing up as an oblate in the Benedictine Abbey of Disibodenberg, Hildegard was surrounded from an early age with the intellectual and spiritual vitality of high medieval monastic life. In 1106, the year she arrived at the abbey, the renowned archbishop Anselm was returning to Canterbury after his second period of exile, and his theological writings were generating excitement among his fellow Benedictines as far away as Hildegard's new home.⁵ Her future friend and supporter Bernard was still living the normal life of a sixteen-year-old aristocrat, oblivious to the labors of Robert of Molesme and Stephen Harding in Cîteaux that he would one day bring to fruition. Like Hildegard, Hugh of St.

⁴ Cfr. J. RATZINGER, *The Problem of Christian Prophecy*, available at <https://www.catholic-culture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=6439> (this interview with N.C. Hvidt appeared originally in the Italian journal «30 Giorni» 17/1 [1999] 83-93); U. KLEINE, *Visionäre, Exegeten und göttliche Orakel: Neue Horizonte der Prophetie im 12. Jahrhundert*, «Archiv für Kulturgeschichte» 97 (2015) 47–88.

⁵ C. MEWS, *Religious Thinker: "A Frail Human Being" on Fiery Life*, in B. NEWMAN (ed.), *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998, 55.

Victor and Peter Lombard were eight-year-old children, and had likely just begun their studies in their local cathedral schools. Very little is recorded about the early education of any of these luminaries, and it is unclear how seriously we are to take Hildegard's description of herself as *indocta* in comparison with her contemporaries.⁶ But by consistently refusing to ground the authority of her teaching on scholarly expertise, Hildegard is able to speak with prophetic originality, communicating a worldview that is in many ways more deeply biblical than that of the expert commentators.⁷

At the center of Hildegard's literary corpus lie three books of allegorical visions. She explains that these works are based on personal supernatural experiences, carefully organized and redacted over the course of many years.⁸ The first and most famous is the *Scivias*, which is a kind of visual "summa" of the entire Christian faith,⁹ completed in 1151. Seven years later, Hildegard began work on a second volume specifically focused on the moral life, the *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, which she finished in 1163. Although less studied than the *Scivias*, the *Liber's* distinctly practical focus sheds more light on the fruitful tension between the Platonic and prophetic strands of Christian thought. The aim of the present note is to present the spiritual force of this relatively obscure work to a wider audience, helping to unlock the untapped potential of the new Doctor's teaching.

The *Liber* provides a simple and definite recipe for liberation from humanity's endemic slavery to the "surface:" penance, mediated by confession to a priest. Like the *libri poenitentiales* of the seventh century,¹⁰ the text contains various lists of vices, along with the penance to be carried out for each one. But these lists make up only a small fraction

⁶ B. NEWMAN, "Sibyl of the Rhine": Hildegard's Life and Times, in NEWMAN (ed.), *Voice of the Living Light*, 6.

⁷ Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, Ap. Let. *Lux sui populi*, 7 October 2012, n. 4.

⁸ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *The Book of the Rewards of Life*, trans. B. W. Hozeski, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, 9.

⁹ Cfr. H. LIEBESCHÜTZ, *Das allegorische Weltbild der Heiligen Hildegard von Bingen*, Studien der Bibliothek Warburg 16, Leipzig 1930, 10.

¹⁰ Cfr. R. MEENS, *Penance in Medieval Europe, 600–1200*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

of Hildegard's book: the bulk of the exposition is dedicated to providing the full cosmic and anthropological setting that makes this solution intelligible. In the words of one contemporary Hildegard scholar, the *Liber* is really a "theology of repentance," where "penance is presented within the context of the entirety of theology and salvation history."¹¹ This "context" is nothing other than a sketch "really real" itself, which the mind and heart become capable of perceiving thanks to the liberating power of penance. In this way, the *Liber* proves itself a remarkably comprehensive and coherent work, describing the world as seen from both outside and inside the "cave" of Plato, along with the path to reach the former from the latter.

I. COSMIC CONTEXT: THE MUSIC OF GOD.

Hildegard starts by briefly summarizing the core content of her vision. The rest of the book is entirely comprised of successive layers of commentary on this succinct cosmological representation. This structure gives the book an impressive unity, allowing Hildegard to articulate an extremely intricate and organic theological psychology without losing the reader. Everything has its place in this central skeleton:

I saw a person who was so tall that he reached from the summit of the clouds of heaven right down to the abyss. From his shoulders on up he was in the serenest ether. From his shoulders down to his thighs he was under the clouds on another white cloud. From his thighs to his knees, he was in the earth's air. From his knees to the calves of his legs he was in the earth. And from his calves down to the soles of his feet he was in the waters of the abyss, standing upon the abyss. He had turned toward the East so that he looked East and South. His face, however, shone with such brightness that I could not look at him whole. There was also a white cloud by his mouth that looked like a trumpet and was full of all sounds sounding rapidly. As this person blew air into this white cloud, it sent out three winds. The first wind held up three clouds: a fiery one, a stormy one, and a light one. The other two winds, however, descended with their clouds down to his breast where they expanded their winds. But the wind that remained in front of his face expanded from the East to the South.¹²

¹¹ Cfr. S. RUGE, *The Theology of Repentance: Observations on the Liber Vitae Meritorum*, in B.M. KIENZLE, DEBRA L. STOUT, G. FERZOLO (eds.), *A companion to Hildegard of Bingen*, Brill, Leiden 2014, 226.

¹² HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 10.

One of the first things that would come to mind for the original readers of this text, people deeply immersed in Scripture, is the vision of King Nebuchadnezzar in the second chapter of the Book of Daniel. That vision also features a human form divided into five parts, enumerated vertically from the head to the feet. Daniel explains to the king that image represents a historical succession of five empires, followed by a radical transformation in the world order represented by the stone hewn by no human hand (Dan 2:36-45). This leads Hildegard's reader to immediately intuit that her vision somehow expresses a historical narrative. In the first cycle of commentary (para. 36-45), she will confirm this intuition, implicitly revealing that the vision of Nebuchadnezzar is really a microcosm of the global plan of salvation history. Hildegard's version spans the entire lifetime of the universe, with the time between creation (the head) and the eschaton (the feet) divided into three epochs according to the classic Christian periodization: before Christ, the coming of Christ, and after Christ.

The centrality of history is a crucial feature of Hildegard's anthropology. For her, human life only fully makes sense as part of this larger narrative. This is in stark contrast to the pre-Christian and non-Christian articulations of the Platonic quest, which are based on the presumption of the eternity of the universe.¹³ The Fathers of the Church had to invest significant effort in purifying this conceptual scheme and reconciling it with the Biblical perspective. Hildegard provides a powerful impetus for this continuing process of purification by placing Daniel's image of the cosmic drama at the beginning and center of her sketch of the really real.

This contrast becomes even sharper when Hildegard explains what the human figure as a whole represents in her vision: "For the person who was so tall that he reached from the summit of the clouds of heaven right down to the abyss stands for God who is rightly called man since every power and all things which live come from him."¹⁴ This interpretation initially comes as a shock, and seems like a crude anthropomorphism. But it in fact conceals a highly articulated commentary on the concept of man as the image of God. Hildegard thinks of man as a microcosm, summarizing in himself all the elements, material and spiritual, of the created

¹³ Cfr. LOUTH, *Origins*, 38–39.

¹⁴ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 19.

cosmos. In this way, he is also a “mirror,” collecting in himself all the creative power that flows from God and reflecting it back.¹⁵ By looking at the reflection in which “every power and all things which live” are summed up, we can glimpse the Archetype, who is therefore “rightly called man.”

But with this interpretation in place – that the central figure represents God – the vision manifests another distinctive dimension of Hildegard’s teaching. In contrast to the sublimely indifferent One of Plotinus, Hildegard shows us a God who is immersed in the cosmos, like a pillar extending from the top all the way through the bottom. The earth, the air and the heavens hang from his body, supported by his form, as he stands by his own power on the abyss of non-being. At the same time, he transcends the world, with his head sticking out above the highest heaven, and so bright that no creature can gaze upon it. Hildegard thus gives us a strikingly original image of the Biblical teaching on the contemplation of God through creation.

God’s involvement in history is further articulated through the three winds and the three clouds. These winds seem to represent the direct action of the Spirit of God, as distinct from the natural order. One of the winds stays before his face, representing the beatific vision as the first and fundamental gift of God in the order of intention. This gift is divided into three kinds, corresponding to angels, men, and the Incarnate Word, which each participate in the vision of God in different ways.¹⁶ The other two winds move down from the epoch of creation into the epoch of human history, manifesting the action of the Spirit in the events of the Old Testament.¹⁷ God is therefore not only the one who sustains the cosmic order, but also one who acts within it, providing the basic driving force of history.

Any pantheistic resonances in the claim that “God is rightly called man” are quickly ruled out by a more detailed description of the content of the cosmic drama. God’s creatures are sufficiently distinct from himself that they can turn against him, provoking a war of light against darkness that lasts until the end of time:

¹⁵ Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Lux sui populi*, n. 5.

¹⁶ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 28.

And the wind above which was the light cloud spread itself out with this cloud from East to North. But immense darkness that came from the West spread out to the light cloud with great density and horror. Yet it was unable to pass beyond the light cloud. And there was a lion in the sun and a capricorn in the moon. And the sun shone above heaven and in heaven and on earth and beneath the earth, and it thus proceeded by rising and returned by setting. But as the sun proceeded, the lion went with it and pillaged many things. As the sun returned, the lion returned with it and sent many back to joy. The moon with the capricorn in it gradually followed the sun by proceeding and returning with the capricorn. And that wind blew and said: "A woman will bear a newborn and the capricorn will fight against the seven stars of the Great Bear constellation."¹⁸

In this description, the darkness arises for the first time as a response to the "light cloud" of the Incarnation. This is consistent with the tradition by which the rebellion of the angels was triggered by the revelation of this mystery. In any case, this picture puts the Incarnation at the center of history, faithfully reflecting the cosmic vision of the Pauline prison epistles and the Johannine corpus.¹⁹ History is essentially the battle between the Incarnate Word and the forces of darkness, with the Word ultimately victorious.

The specific contours of this battle are expressed by the appearance of the sun and the moon within the light cloud. Hildegard later explains that the lion in the sun represents Jesus as the Son of Mary, in his concrete appearance in history,²⁰ while the capricorn in the moon represents the Church.²¹ The Church follows Jesus and reflects his divine light thanks to the regeneration of baptism. The identification of the Church with Christ is so intense that Hildegard can also speak of the Church herself as the sun that lights up the earth with its rays.²² But Christ remains the protagonist, constantly "pillaging" the fortresses of the devil and restoring joy to many souls through his own "violent" action.

It is here that the moral life of the Christian finds its place. The mysterious words at the end of the passage about the capricorn fighting

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 11.

¹⁹ Cfr. Col 1:15-20, Jn 1:1-18, Ap 12:1-16.

²⁰ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 33.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 34.

²² *Ibidem*, 33.

the Great Bear are taken by Hildegard to apply directly to the reader: “This means that through divine inspiration justice reveals that the Church wins a glorious victory over the devil through the good and holy works of its members. For every faithful person, renouncing himself and following in Christ’s footsteps, destroys the works of darkness and unites himself with God.”²³ The Great Bear constellation is located in the north, circling the north pole, and therefore naturally represents active demonic forces, which always come from the north in this vision, diametrically opposed to the warmth and fecundity of the south.²⁴ The Christian participates in the battle against these forces precisely as a member of the Church, who is the one who wins the victory in her members. From the very beginning, Hildegard thus places the moral life squarely in a cosmological context that is simultaneously ecclesial and Christological.²⁵ While Hildegard agrees with Plato about the need to break free from the imprisonment of appearances, her account of the soul’s ascent is as far as possible from Plotinus’ “flight of the alone to the Alone.”²⁶

All these dimensions of Hildegard’s anthropology are summed up in the metaphor of music. The man who represents God is blowing into a trumpet-shaped cloud, “since the divine and sweet order found in all things that the Divinity brings forth proceeds according to the divine will, like sound from a trumpet. The trumpet is full of all sounds sounding rapidly because all things, reasonable or unreasonable, obey the divine order in full subjection. They obey God out of honor and praise since he created them. For God is good and all things that come from him are good.” The whole cosmos in all its parts is like a melody played by God. As music, it is fundamentally bound up with the movement of time, expressing itself through the sequence of changing notes. Like the sound of a trumpet, it depends on the continuing activity of the musician at every moment of its existence. The musician is intimately involved with the melody, as its conscious author, but is clearly distinct

²³ *Ibidem*, 34–35.

²⁴ Cfr. *ibidem*, 11–12, 26.

²⁵ Cfr. RUGE, *Theology of Repentance*, 230.

²⁶ PLOTINUS, *The Enneads*, trans. S. MacKenna, Faber and Faber, London 1969, VI.9.11.

from it, transcending it as an artist transcends his work. Like any great piece of music, this one is driven forward by tension and conflict, which do not detract from its harmony and beauty, but rather highlight and deepen it.

II. ERROR THEORY: THE LURE OF IDOLATRY

After describing the glorious, dynamic harmony of the deeper reality, Hildegard turns to the main theme of the book: how we get trapped on the surface, in the dark “cave” of Plato, and how to return to the sunlight. For Hildegard, this drama of imprisonment and liberation is a central aspect of the larger story. She presents it as a further articulation of the primordial conflict between the “light cloud” and the darkness, which constitutes the tension of the cosmic melody:

Then I saw a cloud coming from the North that extended itself to the darkness. It had become parched of all joy and happiness since it had neither touched the sun nor shown itself to it. It was full of wicked spirits who wandered here and there. They planned out snares for people, but blushed when they thought about the person mentioned earlier. And I heard the ancient serpent say to himself: “I will prepare the powers of my strength as a fortification and will fight my enemies with all my strength.” And he spit out of his mouth a froth of many impurities and blemishes upon the people. He inflamed and mocked them, saying: “Yah! I will make those who call themselves the sun through works of light be repulsive and benighted and horrible in darkness.” And he spewed forth a most disgusting mist from his mouth, which covered the earth like the blackest of smoke. Then a very loud and disturbing thunder rumbled from the mist, saying: “No person should adore another God unless he sees and knows him. Why should anyone pay attention to someone he does not know?” I saw in this mist, however, the various images of various sins.²⁷

The vivid imagery of the parched cloud and the ancient serpent culminates in the voice of the mist, persuading men to voluntarily enclose themselves in the world of appearances, abandoning the invisible reality of God. In her commentary on this scene, Hildegard explicitly connects it to the Biblical theme of idolatry, citing the litany of the vanity of idols in Psalm 115.²⁸ The 35 images of various vices that constitute the bulk of the book all emerge from this mist with its thundering ar-

²⁷ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 12.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 37.

gument, graphically representing how all sin is really an expression of the basic posture of idolatry, which ignores or denies anything it cannot grasp and control. This attitude is incompatible with the divine transcendence: “Such evil persuasions turn man’s reason away from the true God who is invisible to human frailty in the brightness of his Divinity.”²⁹ Our imprisonment in the world of appearances is not a consequence of bodily existence, or of giving too much attention to the evidence of the senses. The invisibility of God derives directly from the “brightness of his Divinity,” by which he radically transcends the whole created order.

The first concrete manifestation of this idolatrous attitude is the image of “earthly love” projected from the mist:

The first image [...] had his arms around the base of a huge tree with many limbs and branches, all filled with many different kinds of flowers. He picked a lot of these flowers and held them in his hands while he said: “I hold all the world’s kingdoms with their greatness in my hands. Why should I be withered when I have all this greenness in my hands? Why should I be old when I could be young? Why should I lose my sight to blindness? If this happened, I would be embarrassed. I will hang onto the beauty of this world as long as I can. I do not understand words spoken about another life when I have never seen it.” But after he had said this, the root of the tree dried up and the tree fell into the darkness mentioned earlier. When the tree fell, this image also fell into the darkness with it.³⁰

The role of the tree in this temptation calls to mind the account of the first sin in the third chapter of Genesis. But the details are completely original, casting fresh light on the origin and content of this sin. At first glance, the man makes a convincing argument. “Greenness” is a profoundly positive theological category for Hildegard,³¹ part of her profound appreciation for the beauty of creation in its vitality and fecundity. The error of the tempter comes from the attitude of “grasping,” dramatically portrayed in his actions of hugging the tree and picking the flowers. His determination to “hang onto the beauty of this world as long as I can” makes him blind to the deeper beauty of the cosmic story, incapable of understanding “words spoken about another life.” The vision immediately shows why this attachment to the surface leads

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 32.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 12.

³¹ Cfr. MEWS, *Religious Thinker*, 57–8.

to misery by its own logic: when one picks the flowers to possess them more securely, they die and wither, since they are separated from their root. And even the tree itself, despite its longer lifespan, eventually withers and dies, as part of the cosmic rhythm of generation and corruption. The attempt to definitively possess the living reality of the material world contradicts its nature as a temporal process, and necessarily kills it.

The manifest futility of this first attempt at autonomous happiness launches a chain of further vices, eventually leading to anger, murder, and frivolous satisfaction. One particularly interesting stage in this journey is the vice of hard-heartedness, which shows Hildegard's appreciation for the appeal and destructiveness of individualism:

The fourth image looked like dense smoke rising up as high as a tall person. This image did not have any human members, except very large black eyes. It did not move up or down but remained motionless in the darkness mentioned earlier. It said: "I created nothing; I established nothing. Why, therefore, should I do any work? Why should I wear myself out? Nothing excites me except what benefits me directly. Let God who created all things take care of these things. For if I flatter someone and ask them about their work, what good will it do me? I am not going to do anything, good or evil. For if I am always busy being compassionate, what good will it do me? What kind of life will I have if I pay attention to all the happy and sad people? I will take care of myself. Let others take care of themselves."³²

Just as worldly love argued from the true theological premise of the beauty of creation, here hard-heartedness argues from the universality of God's providence. Since God created everything and takes care of everything, each individual is free to focus on himself, leaving the rest to the Creator. This is a sort of radical quietism, which has a certain theological plausibility to it, especially as a reaction to the anxious activism of those who think the salvation of the world depends on their own efforts. But the error lies in the initial movement of idolatry, by which man severs his relationship with God, excluding him from the realm of conscious attention. That primordial sin is what makes the speaker see God's providence as something totally external to himself, blinding him to the manifold ways in which all created things actively participate in this work of God.

³² HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 14.

The contrary virtue of mercy invites the hard-hearted to contemplate the participatory and relational dimension of providence, as it extends through the whole material cosmos:

From the storm cloud I again heard a voice answer this image: “O you of stone, what are you saying? Flowering herbs give out an aroma and a stone glitters; all creation shows its fullness in some way. All the creatures on the earth minister to humans and by doing this freely they accomplish good. You, however, are not even worthy enough to have the form of a human. Since you have no mercy you are like pungent black smoke. But I am like the sweetest plant growing in the air. I have moisture and I am green. My veins are so full that I can help others. For I came forth with the *Fiat* that made all creation for serving humans. But you are not like this. I think about what is needed and I do that. I help all the sick get healthy; my words are like salve for pain. But you are nothing but pungent smoke!”³³

The hard-hearted individualist is represented by a column of smoke because he has excluded himself from the logic of creation. He is “not even worthy enough to have the form of a human,” because he has broken his connection to the great cosmic web of giving and receiving.³⁴ It is only by inserting oneself into the flow of gift that one comes to participate in the “greenness” that worldly love desperately tried to grasp in the first scene.

III. THE ANSWER: SACRAMENTAL PENANCE

After describing the real reality in the sunlight, and accounting for our imprisonment in the cave of shadows, Hildegard provides a practical solution. Or rather, it is God himself who provides the solution, since he is personally invested in the victory over the darkness:

I saw that the man I mentioned earlier held a sword in his hand. It had three cutting edges and its hilt had been placed in a sheath. He then started swinging it around as if he were going to cut something. This gladiator said: “I have the greatest zeal possible against the North and everyone who dwells there. Who can conquer me? No one! For I have no material in my make-up; no man brought me forth from a woman. But I judge everyone’s works. God formed man from the slime of the earth when he completed all his works. But I see into man, just like looking into a mirror.”³⁵

³³ *Ibidem*, 14–15.

³⁴ Cfr. RUGE, *Theology of Repentance*, 236.

³⁵ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 17.

Hildegard explains this scene with another series of graphic images, depicting the punishments by which God slays each of the vices described previously. For example, hard-heartedness is punished in the following terrifying way:

Behold I saw a dry well that was wide and deep. Its bottom was seething pitch. The pitch has a wide hole in it through which fiery smoke and fiery worms rose up into the well from below. Sharp and fiery spikes were tossed around in the well, as if by the wind. The souls of those who had been hard-hearted and were without mercy while they had been alive sat on the bottom of the well. They were afraid that they would fall through the hole in the bottom of the well into the fire below. They suffered greatly from the smoke and worms and spikes. They sat on the bottom of the well in the seething pitch and were afraid that they would fall into the fire below because they had been unholy to others. They suffered from the smoke because they had fled from God in their wickedness. They were attacked by the worms because they had brought inhuman sorrows to others, and they were attacked by the fiery spikes because had been hard-hearted and showed no mercy. I saw and I knew these things.³⁶

For Hildegard, there is no contradiction between this unsettling vision and the mercy of God. On the contrary, these punishments are a consequence and manifestation of divine mercy, the “divine scourges of the merciful God”:

For the torments of these punishments cleanse these souls who, living in this changing world, have earned in a nonchanging way the cleansing of their sins through punishment. But these torments have not cleansed them from the death which comes to the body; these torments do not prevent them from being weighed in the world by the divine scourges of the merciful God. But these torments will cleanse them unless they are snatched away from these punishments by the labors of men or by the virtues of the holy ones which God works in those men when they call upon the piety of divine grace.³⁷

Hildegard constantly reiterates that the point of this punishment is “cleansing.” The warrior-God “slays” the vices by setting men free from them, removing them from the power of darkness and restoring them to the light of reality. Each vice has its own distinct punishment, in which each element of torment is both a consequence of some dimension of the sin, and a source of purification from that aspect. Some of these connections are obscure, but others are relatively obvious. For example,

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 53.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 47.

the illusory self-sufficiency of the hard-hearted person is cleansed by his precarious existence on the edge of the fiery hole, where he is unable to guarantee by his own power that he will not fall in. And his self-imposed shield of isolation from the rest of the world is penetrated by the fiery spikes, which can be seen as the painful first steps in re-establishing the broken relations.

But these terrors also serve another, more immediate purpose: as a motive for action implicating the reader here and now. The place of the punishments within Hildegard's vision lends them sufficient credibility to spark a decision, since they cohere so well with the whole picture. Far from being arbitrary declarations, they are natural consequences of the internal dynamism of each vice and of God's investment in the battle. These threats thus prepare the reader to respond personally to the concrete call to action:

Let men, however, who sweat in worldly love, if they want to overcome the wicked spirits who placed worldly love before them and if they are eager to flee from the punishments of the world that you see, punish themselves with sackcloth and scourges. And let them fast on plain bread and plain water according to the extent that they have sinned by choice, will, time and conversation, and according to the extent that their true teacher in his humanity made public repentance prescribed by priests. This is so because whoever wants to repent justly ought to be presented to his judge who will punish him in proportion to his sin. The judge, however, is the very priest who serves in the office of my son. For when the mind of men feels guilty, let it tell its sins to the priest, just as it was shown in the law when the lepers showed themselves to my servant Moses. For this reason, sins should be confessed to the priest since the mild fear of confession was revealed in the sweat of my son and repentance was revealed in the drops of his blood.³⁸

This invitation is a fascinating testimony to the development of sacramental theology, contemporary with the disputes of Peter Lombard and Peter Abelard over the place of penance in the sacramental economy,³⁹ and predating the Fourth Lateran Council's imposition of annual confession by more than 50 years. As with the other dimensions of Hildegard's thought, her view of penance is deeply permeated by the pro-

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 47–48.

³⁹ Cfr. P. ANCIAUX, *La théologie du sacrement de pénitence au XIIe siècle*, É. Nauwelaerts - J. Duculot, Louvain - Gembloux 1949.

phetic tradition of Israel. The solution proposed by the prophets to the slavery of idolatry is markedly distinct from the solution of the Greeks to the slavery of appearances. This is a consequence of the fundamental cosmological differences we saw earlier, and especially of God's direct involvement in the process of liberation. The Israelite or Christian who falls into idolatry has broken the terms of the covenant with God; he is not only spiritually sick, but has violated the order of justice. A properly judicial proceeding is required, by which the guilty party acknowledges the injustice, willingly takes on a punishment that manifests his conversion, and is restored to full participation in the people of God.⁴⁰ It is this judicial act that reopens the gates to divine illumination, flourishing of all the virtues, and victorious conquest over the "seven stars of the Great Bear."

The final sentence on the sweat of Christ in the garden takes this basic observation deeper, synthesizing it with the reflections of the Carolingian theologians on the value of the act of confession, and anticipating the Thomistic theory of the efficacy of absolution in converting the first steps of repentance into perfect contrition. The original Latin text reads, "Quia verecundus timor confessionis sudori filii mei adest, et penitentia guttis sanguinis ipsius."⁴¹ The expiatory dimension of the "verecundus timor" had been noted by Alcuin of York⁴² and further developed by the 10th-12th century author of *De vera et falsa poenitentia*.⁴³ Although the generic verb *adest* leaves open a wide variety of interpretations on the precise nature of the connection, Hildegard clearly sees the penitential embrace of this fear as intimately bound up with one of the most dramatic moments of Christ's passion, painting a new and rich image of how Confession is a true celebration of the paschal mys-

⁴⁰ Cfr. P. BOVATI, *Ristabilire la giustizia: procedure, vocabolario, orientamenti*, Ed. Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Roma 2005, 78–103.

⁴¹ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Liber vitae meritorum*, CCCM 90, 1995, 50.

⁴² Cfr. ALCUIN OF YORK, *De confessione peccatorum, ad pueros sancti Martini*: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, *Epistolarum*, IV (Karolini aevi, II), München 1978, especially 195,1-2 on the confession of sins as a "sacrifice" to God.

⁴³ *De vera et falsa poenitentia* 10, 25: PL 40, 1122: "Erubescencia enim ipsa partem habet remissionis [...] Multum enim satisfactionis obtulit, qui erubescenciae dominans, nihil eorum quae commisit, nuntio Dei denegavit [...] Et quoniam verecundia magna est poena, qui erubescit pro Christo, fit dignus misericordia."

tery.⁴⁴ Through the mediation of the priest, the penitent's fear is transformed into the very sweat of Christ shed in this crucial moment of prayer to his Father. And the sweat is thus transformed into blood, into the saving blood of Christ poured out for the salvation of many. The transformation of water into blood serves as a powerful image for the transformation of imperfect contrition into supernatural charity, which Thomas will argue is accomplished through contact with Christ in the sacrament.⁴⁵

IV. CONCLUSION

By situating sacramental penance within this ample theological and anthropological context, Hildegard provides a comprehensive manual for liberation from the cave of shadows. Her participation in the tradition of divinely inspired prophecy gives her access to important elements of this process that are absent or obscure in Plato's depiction of this quest, and that remain problematic for many Christian thinkers who rely on his theoretical framework. The overall structure of Hildegard's vision, anchored in the man who spans the cosmos, places the whole account in a deeply historical and incarnational key. The history of salvation is not an ad-hoc solution to an unfortunate mistake, but lies at the heart of God's original design. The material elements participate in this plan from the very beginning, and are charged with salvific meaning. The Church herself is a principal protagonist of the drama, inseparably united to the event of the Incarnation within the "light cloud" that confronts the darkness. Hildegard describes the psychology of the darkness in biblical language, casting the moral life essentially as a struggle against idolatry. In contrast to the illusion of idolatrous control, the true logic of the cosmos is characterized by divine mercy, in which all creatures actively participate. In this context, sacramental penance appears in its full theological splendor as re-insertion into the divine plan.

⁴⁴ Cfr. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 60, a. 3; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1085.

⁴⁵ Cfr. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 86, a. 4, ad 3; P. LÓPEZ-GONZÁLEZ, *Penitencia y reconciliación: Estudio histórico-teológico de la "Res et Sacramentum,"* EUNSA, Pamplona 1990, 160–186.

This brief overview of Hildegard's theology of penance confirms Pope Benedict's declaration on her particular relevance for contemporary man: "The teaching of the holy Benedictine nun stands as a beacon for *homo viator*. Her message appears extraordinarily timely in today's world, which is especially sensitive to the values that she proposed and lived."⁴⁶ Hildegard's prophetic charism enabled her to grasp and communicate the cosmovision of Christian faith and the place of the spiritual life within it, in a way that incorporated and interpreted the best available empirical knowledge of the natural world. In an age where the doctrines and practices of Christianity seem increasingly removed from the tangible realities of everyday existence, her *Liber vitae meritorum* appears as a uniquely powerful instrument "for the cleansing and saving of souls,"⁴⁷ whose full efficacy has yet to be unleashed.

⁴⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Lux sui populi*, n. 7.

⁴⁷ HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, *Rewards*, 49.