

# 50 WOMEN Every Christian Should Know

LEARNING FROM HEROINES OF THE FAITH

MICHELLE DERUSHA



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To my mother, Maureen—  
my own personal heroine of the faith

And in memory of my grandmothers,  
Elizabeth and Eileen



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## Acknowledgments

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And finally, to the fifty women featured in this book. You are my sisters in faith, women of valor, heroines all. Thank you for your courage, your inspiration, your determination. Thank you for paving the way. *Eshet Chayil!*

## Introduction

**B**efore I started to write this book, I had already set each of these fifty women on a pedestal, in a place of honor and respect. I admired them, even revered them. Their names alone left me a little bit awestruck. But would I relate to them? I wondered. Would they speak to me personally? Would their stories resonate with me right now, here in the middle of my everyday, ordinary life? I assumed no. I assumed this was merely history, not applicable to me.

And I was wrong.

I knew the life stories of the following fifty women would be fascinating and inspiring, but I didn't expect their stories to impact my personal twenty-first-century life. I didn't expect to relate to these women as real people. After all, as the subtitle states, the fifty women included in this book are *heroines* of the Christian faith. These women saved lives. They founded new denominations. They walked new paths. They advocated for the poor, the sick, the dying, and the neglected. Some even died for their faith. Their stories and contributions span nine hundred years of Christian history. They were missionaries, preachers, writers, abolitionists, doctors, educators, and activists—true leaders in every sense of the word. They are women who are known far and wide and whose very lives are a testament to the Christian faith: Teresa of Ávila. Florence Nightingale. Catherine Booth. Amy Carmichael. Harriet Tubman. Corrie ten Boom. Dorothy Day. We know their names.

As I researched each of these women, my preconceived assumptions were dismantled one by one. I assumed these spiritual giants never struggled in their faith, but Lottie Moon, Mother Teresa, Madeleine L'Engle, and several others proved me wrong. I assumed these women were never swayed by earthly temptations or materialistic desires, but Teresa of Ávila and Elizabeth Fry set me straight. I assumed these Christian heroines never questioned their God-given calling, but Hannah More, Ruth Bell Graham, and Ida Scudder turned that notion on its head. I assumed these leaders were all born and bred die-hard Christians from the start, but Edith Stein, Pandita Ramabai, and Simone Weil demonstrated that age and history are no match for God's transformative power. I assumed each of these women was virtually flawless and morally spotless, yet every one of them turned out to be fallible, just like me.

What I discovered in researching and writing this book is that the stories of these fifty women are our stories too. True, many of them lived centuries ago, in places, times, and circumstances far removed from our own. But their battles are our battles. Their grief is our grief. Their doubts and questions are our doubts and questions. We walk similar valleys. We scale similar mountains. We weep the same tears of anguish and triumph in similar moments of joy. Their love for God mirrors our own. Behind the long list of accomplishments and contributions are real women with fears, struggles, challenges, distractions, and sorrows much like ours.

While we have never suffered through the atrocities of life in a concentration camp, we can understand something of Corrie ten Boom's anguish and loss. Although we haven't forged an unmarked path as the first ordained female minister, we can relate to the insecurity and fear Antoinette Brown Blackwell faced along the way. While most of us haven't founded a mission or preached to thousands worldwide, we might identify with Catherine Booth's unrelenting determination.

In the end, I was surprised by how well I related to many of the women included in this book. The fact that they lived decades or even centuries ago didn't matter. The fact that their vocations and

## Introduction

their callings varied dramatically from mine was irrelevant. The fact that many of their names are known and esteemed was not important. In short, I observed my own struggles, flaws, desires, and joys reflected in their stories and in their lives. I finally understood that these women are not only our heroines, they are also our sisters in faith.



# 1

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## Hildegard of Bingen

*“Say and Write What You See and Hear”*

(1098–1179)



**A**t first she ignored it entirely. Although she had heard the message loud and clear, she didn't pay any attention. After all, the order was a radical one. *Say and write what you see and hear*, he had said. But she ignored him. What was she—a nun sequestered in a German convent, a woman living in the twelfth century—supposed to do with that message? How could she follow a command so counter-cultural, so revolutionary? Not knowing how to respond, she ignored God's call . . . until the day came when she could ignore it no longer.

### **“Say and Write What You See and Hear”**

As her parents' tenth child, Hildegard was dedicated to the church as a tithe when she was eight years old. At age sixteen she officially “took the veil” and entered the convent of Disibodenberg, near Bingen,

Germany, as a Benedictine nun. Hildegard was elected abbess of the convent in 1136, and it was around this time that the visions she had experienced since she was a young child began to intensify and were clearly revealed to her as interpretations of the Scriptures.

“And it came to pass in the eleven hundred and forty-first year of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, Son of God, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain,” wrote Hildegard in the preface of her first major visionary work, *Scivias*. “And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming. . . . And suddenly I understood the meaning of the expositions of the books, that is to say of the Psalter, the evangelists and other catholic books of the Old and New Testaments.”<sup>1</sup>

Not long after this vision, Hildegard received a more specific communication from God, encouraging her to take up the pen: “O fragile one, ash of ash and corruption of corruption, say and write what you see and hear.”<sup>2</sup> And just so there was no mistaking the command, this particular vision was repeated three more times to Hildegard on three separate occasions. Initially she resisted, and you can imagine why. God seemed to be instructing Hildegard to do what virtually no other woman was doing at the time. As a woman and a nun living during a time in which most women were illiterate and certainly not encouraged to write or preach, she was terrified and overwhelmed by the directive.

Hildegard did her best to ignore God’s command until finally he made it impossible for her to do so any longer. She succumbed to illness, an illness she believed was a direct result of her disobedience: “Although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and a low opinion (of myself) and because of the diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time the call to write, not out of stubbornness, but out of humility, until weighed down by the scourge of God, I fell onto a bed of sickness.”<sup>3</sup>

Hildegard overcame two major obstacles in order to produce the great volume of writing for which she is remembered. First, there

was the fact of her gender, a significant barrier. Second was the extent of her education. Male theologians in the twelfth century benefited from years of a classical education, including a practical and theoretical understanding of Latin, as well as music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, theology, and sometimes even law and medicine. Although she learned to read and write in German and Latin, Hildegard's education was rudimentary at best. As biographer Sabina Flanagan writes, "For someone to write on theology who lacked such a background and was also a woman was a bold step indeed."<sup>4</sup>

Yet try as she might to ignore the call to write, she couldn't suppress God's persistent command. Finally, desperate and ill, Hildegard reached out to her friend and confidant Bernard, the Abbot of Clairvaux, for advice. Not only did the abbot reassure her, he was also instrumental in gaining Pope Eugenius's official sanction of her writing. And with that, Hildegard was free to record the visions that would eventually comprise three comprehensive theological works: *Scivias* (*Know the Ways*), *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (*The Book of Life's Merits*), and *Liber Divinorum Operum* (*The Book of Divine Works*).

## **Sin, Sex, Science, and Everything In Between**

Hildegard wrote the six-hundred-page *Scivias* over a period of ten years, juggling the writing and editing with her many duties as head of the convent. *Scivias* is divided into three books, with each book following a similar format: a description of the visions and then the explanation that Hildegard received from God. Vacillating between concrete and abstract language, *Scivias* covers a wide range of topics, including creation, the fall of Lucifer and Adam, the church and its sacraments, and redemption, concluding with an apocalyptic ending of the last judgment and the creation of the new heaven and earth.

Hildegard's *Liber Vitae Meritorum* (*The Book of Life's Merits*) was written between 1158 and 1163 and is primarily concerned with the vices that plague humans over the course of their lives. The book is comprised of six visions encompassing thirty-five sins, with a

corresponding punishment and penance for each. Because of this emphasis on punishment, some critics view this work as a preface to the development of the theology of purgatory that would become more prevalent later in the Middle Ages.

Part three of her theological trilogy, *Liber Divinorum Operum* (*The Book of Divine Works*), is considered her most mature and impressive achievement. The book is comprised of ten visions, with the central part of the work focused on the opening chapter of the Gospel of John.

Hildegard didn't limit herself to theological writings, and in some ways, her medical and scientific writings are even more intriguing than her theological works. Because they are not written in her typical visionary format, don't contain any reference to a divine source, and are written in a mix of Latin and German, some scholars question whether Hildegard is even the author of these works, which include *Physica* (*Natural History*) and *Causae et Curae* (*Causes and Cures*). Many also question whether they were based on her actual medical experience and observations or were simply a compilation of ancient practices and local medical lore.

*Physica* includes two hundred short chapters on plants, followed by sections about the elements, jewels and precious stones, fish, birds, mammals, and reptiles. Throughout the book Hildegard gives practical medical, dietary, and other advice mixed with bits of local color. For instance, she tells us that the peach tree was more useful for medicine than for food, with its bark, leaves, and kernels used in remedies for skin infections, bad breath, and headaches. Cherry seeds, on the other hand, when pounded and mixed with bear fat, were used to treat skin disorders and, when ingested without the bear fat, to kill intestinal worms.

*Causae et Curae* differs from *Physica* in its discussion of more than two hundred specific diseases and maladies—including baldness, migraines, asthma, nosebleeds, epilepsy, and sterility—and their cures. Rather than avoiding the topic of human sexuality altogether, Hildegard approached it both pragmatically and poetically, without a hint of prudishness. Not only did she describe sexual intercourse

and conception, she also included a rare account of the nature of sexual pleasure from the woman's point of view. The result was that *Causae et Curae* addressed the topic of human sexuality more comprehensively than any writings by her contemporaries.

While she worked on *Liber Divinorum Operum*, Hildegard also wrote a number of musical works, poetry, dozens of letters, and a play, *Ordo Virtutum (Play of Virtues)*, which was performed at her convent. During this time she also traveled to monastic communities in Wurzburg and Kitzingen to preach and, in 1160, to Trier, where she preached in public, a highly unusual act for a woman at that time. She traveled twice more to preach—to Cologne and Werden around 1163 and, in 1170, to Zwiefalten.

## Listening and Obeying

The visions Hildegard received from God impacted not only her writing but her life and the lives of the nuns she managed as well. While she was writing *Scivias*, Hildegard suddenly announced one day that she had received a command from God to relocate her convent from Disibodenberg to Rupertsberg, about nineteen miles away. The monks strongly opposed this proposal, as did many of the parents of the young nuns in her convent. They couldn't fathom why Hildegard would want to move her nuns from relative comfort amid lush vineyards and rolling hills to a hardscrabble, bare-bones existence with fewer amenities. They also accused her of suffering from delusions.

Faced with such strong opposition and accusation, Hildegard collapsed into illness again. When an abbot saw the extent of her suffering, he deemed her illness a divine intervention, and Hildegard was granted permission to move the convent. She purchased the site, and she and twenty of her nuns traveled on foot over a day's journey from the well-established, stone-built monastery to the dilapidated quarters at Rupertsberg.

"They said, 'What is the point of this, that noble and wealthy nuns should move from a place where they wanted for nothing to such

great poverty?” wrote Hildegard later. “But we were awaiting the grace of God, who showed us this place, to come to our aid. After the burden of these troubles God rained grace upon us.”<sup>5</sup>

Toward the end of her life, when Hildegard was in her eighties, she received word from God allowing her to bury an excommunicated nobleman at the convent. Hildegard defied her superiors by hiding the grave when they ordered that the body be exhumed, and as a result, the entire convent community was excommunicated, and—most disturbing to Hildegard—banned from singing. While she complied with the punishment and avoided singing and communion, she ignored the order to exhume the corpse. Instead, Hildegard appealed to higher church authorities and succeeded in having the punishment lifted just six months before her death in 1179.

### **Feminist, Saint, or Both?**

Hildegard von Bingen was a writer, composer, naturalist, theologian, abbess, and visionary. She founded a convent; traveled the countryside as a preacher; corresponded and interacted with the pope, bishops, and other ecclesiastical leaders; and produced a body of written work that far exceeded most of her male contemporaries. While her list of accomplishments may read like an accomplished twenty-first-century résumé, the reality is that she was born more than nine hundred years ago, during a time when most women could neither read nor write. Today Hildegard of Bingen is celebrated by many as a feminist.

Although the Roman Catholic Church recognized Hildegard as a “prophetess,” she was not officially made a saint in the church until May 2012, when Pope Benedict XVI ordered her name inscribed in the “catalogue of saints.” In October 2012, Pope Benedict also named Hildegard a Doctor of the Church (meaning her teachings are recommended doctrine), making her one of only four women—including Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Siena, and Thérèse of Lisieux—to be so honored.

## Hildegard of Bingen

Whether you consider her a feminist, a saint, or a little bit of both, one thing is certain: Hildegard of Bingen serves us well as a woman of faith, even today, more than nine centuries after her death. She is an example of courage, perseverance, and trust in the face of daunting obstacles and against steep odds. When Hildegard heard the voice of God, she listened and obeyed in faith.<sup>6</sup>