‘An arduous and worrisome duty’:
Hildegard and monastic leadership

Julie Hotchin

In the final decade of her life, Hildegard received a letter seeking her counsel and guidance from the abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Maulbronn. He addresses Hildegard as his ‘spiritual mother and venerable sister’, emphasizing the shared monastic bonds between himself and the visionary, and his respect for her spiritual teaching. ‘We have heard good things about you’, he proceeds, ‘therefore, since I have some hope that I will be heard, whatever my condition, I send this letter to you and request the singular support of your prayers.’ Anticipating Hildegard’s intercession, he moves to the heart of his request: ‘for I have an arduous and worrisome duty, that is the governance of souls, and so I request, I beseech, I implore help from the Lord, through you.’ The abbot concluded with an eloquent expression of the solace he hoped his missive would elicit from the visionary: ‘I trust that it will not be too burdensome or trivial for you to write back to me so that my body and soul might be instructed, comforted and consoled.’

On this occasion Hildegard’s response – if indeed she did respond – has not survived. If this beleaguered abbot did hear from her, it probably contained a mix of admonition and encouragement conveyed in the imagery characteristic of the visionary’s oblique style found in the scores of other epistolary exchanges that constitute her extant correspondence. Hildegard’s visions and prophecies created a public persona in which she was widely understood to be a mediator between divine and human needs. She was perceived as a stable and reliable spiritual authority, a source of consolation for people experiencing uncertainty. In another illustrative example, an abbot from Averbode (in modern-day Belgium) alluded to her growing reputation, or fama, declaring that: ‘your name has been diffused far and wide like a delicious fragrance, not only throughout Germany but also in other regions’. He refers to the impact of her teaching, likening her to an ‘unmovable and unshaken column in the middle of the Church, so that among


2 The abbot may have received a reply from Hildegard that has not survived, or one of the ‘form’ letters that were sent in response to the many requests for a word from the visionary. John van Engen critically appraises the methodological problems in reconstructing the correspondence in ‘Letters and the Public Persona of Hildegard’, in Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld, ed. by Alfred Haverkamp (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2000), pp. 375-417 (pp. 376-79), with references to further literature.

3 Van Engen, ‘Letters and the Public Persona’.
the lamentable crises of this world, [the Lord’s] people may learn through you what they ought to seek and what they ought to avoid.4 By far the largest proportion of letters sent to Hildegard was from men and women in monastic office, from superiors, who, like these abbots, were struggling to meet the demands of leadership. They identified with Hildegard as a monastic leader like them, as a ‘spiritual mother’ and a privileged intercessor from whom they could hope to receive spiritual consolation (consolatio) and wisdom as if from a divine oracle.5

Hildegard’s correspondence with her counterparts offers valuable insight into aspects of her thought about the role and responsibilities of monastic leaders. As scholars have observed, her epistolary exchanges provide an unusually rich source for understanding the psychological concerns of her contemporaries and how she performed as a monastic leader who dispensed spiritual care on a broader stage beyond the walls of her cloister.6 Importantly, Hildegard’s correspondence includes many letters between the seer and other female superiors, offering a rare opportunity to examine how a woman counseled other women as well as men about the challenges of leadership and how to negotiate its personal demands.7

Hildegard’s teaching stresses the ethical role of a religious leader within a complex religious, social and political climate characterized by calls for spiritual and moral renewal. She crafted her persona as a prophet through her writings in which she expounded on the moral responsibilities of those in positions of influence within the Church.8 Hildegard used her correspondence to promote her reformist cause and to challenge ecclesiastic leaders, exhorting them to alter their ways so as to provide a model of and direction for the spiritual regeneration of Christian society. Examination of her correspondence with other superiors demonstrates how she interpreted and

---

5 Van Engen explores the spiritual resonance of these requests for consolation that speak to an array of anxiety producing circumstances and the expectation, new in this environment in the twelfth century, and that the petitioners wrote with the expectation of receiving consolatio from Hildegard; ‘Letters and the Public Persona’, pp. 406-7.
7 Hildegard was not the only religious woman who was approached for advice. Her younger contemporary Elisabeth of Schönau also counseled her monastic counterparts through her correspondence. Only a few letters survive, but they demonstrate that she also provided counselled other superiors who sought her guidance on the challenges of office and spiritual consolation. Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works, trans. by Anne L. Clark. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), pp. 235-54.
impressed these expectations upon monastic leaders, female as well as male. She exhorted her counterparts to fulfill the responsibilities enjoined on them as monastic superiors to care for their flocks in body and soul, and most of all, to instruct and guide them in the path of salvation. Attuned to nuances of power and the influence of a leader upon a wider community, in her counsel to superiors she draws attention to the responsibility of monastic leaders to lead by example, through which they positively influence the behaviour of others. These epistolary exchanges reveal how Hildegard’s notions of monastic governance were expressed within a pastoral context, as she adapted and translated the familiar imagery and themes from her longer visionary writings to address immediate, human needs through her letters. Hildegard’s central concerns about the ethical dimension of leadership, how to exercise power and rule over others with compassion and integrity, and crucially, her emphasis on self-knowledge as a vital element of an individual’s capacity to lead others, continue to offer instructive parallels for leaders today.

**Letters and spiritual leadership**

The twelfth century was a period of political and religious upheaval, as schism, the emergence of heterodox groups, and reformers’ urgent critique of perceived abuses, such lay interference in spiritual matters, simony, and clerical laxity, contributed to a climate of uncertainty about trusted sources of spiritual authority. Hildegard referred to her age as a ‘womanish time’ because churchmen failed to fulfill their responsibility as spiritual leaders, thus enabling a woman to claim divine authority to call for an end to clerical corruption and to urge prelates to promote divine will.9 Critiques of religious life and the transformations of the period imposed strain on religious institutions and the people within them as they adapted to the diverse spiritual needs of a changing social and economic world.10 A deep-seated desire for a trusted authority, for a source of certainty in an anxious world contributed to the reception of Hildegard’s visionary *persona* as a prophet and intimate of the divine, one who promised access to spiritual consolation. The questions men and women directed to Hildegard present a lens into the challenges faced by monastic leaders in this uncertain climate, such as internal disruption, crises of confidence, weariness, or a yearning to be free of the burdens of responsibility in preference for a life of solitude. The letters to Hildegard from monastic leaders offer a personal – sometimes intimate – perspective into the difficulties individual leaders faced. Hildegard, in turn, used the opportunity

---

created through her correspondence to promote her views about the moral responsibility of
spiritual leaders to a wider audience of her monastic counterparts.

People approached Hildegard as a visionary and she often addressed them in the voice of the
‘Living Light’, but her voice in the letters is that of a monastic superior, entrusted with the
spiritual care of others in body and soul. Her experience and insight were developed through
more than four decades leading women in religious community. Hildegard was offered to the
religious life by her parents in 1105, when she was in her eighth year. She was placed with Jutta,
daughter of the Count of Sponheim, a girl who when in her early teens rejected marriage for a life
of prayer. Jutta, Hildegard, and two others were enclosed at Disibodenberg on 1 November 1112,
when Hildegard was only 14.  A small community of religious women developed around Jutta,
and after her death in 1136 Hildegard was elected to lead the nuns as magistra. She continued in
this role until c. 1150 when she removed her nuns from Disibodenberg to establish a new
monastery at Rupertsberg. During this period she grew in stature from a magistra responsible for
a small community, under the supervision of the abbot of Disibodenberg, to the superior of her
own monastery and from 1165, a daughter-house at Eibingen, amounting to 80 women in total.

The practical experience and confidence she acquired as a monastic leader provided an important
grounding for her conception and exercise of authority in the world beyond her monastery. As
John van Engen has observed, it is difficult to distinguish Hildegard’s self-understanding as a
ruler and teacher of religious life in her capacity as superior from that she exercised more broadly
through her claims to speak as the ‘Living Light’.

Hildegard’s epistolary exchanges with monks and nuns represent an extension of traditional
practices of spiritual advice. In her own leader and teacher, Jutta, Hildegard observed the example
of how a gifted woman could create a broader role and audience for her spiritual talents. At
Disibodenberg the young Hildegard would have witnessed the stream of visitors who journeyed
to the monastery to seek counsel from the elder woman. The author of Jutta’s vita describes how

---

11 The dating of Hildegard’s entry into religious life has been much debated. See now Franz Felten, ‘What
do we know about the Life of Jutta and Hildegard at Disibodenberg and Rupertsberg?’, in A Companion to
Hildegard of Bingen, ed. by Beverley Mayne Kienzle, George Ferzoco and Debra L. Stoudt (Leiden: Brill,

1100 – c. 1500, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden. Brepols Essays in European Culture 1
(Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 343-69 (p. 354). Hildegard technically remained a magistra (teacher/ruler)
when she established her own monastery at Rupertsberg because she was still subject to the ecclesiastic
oversight of the abbots of Disibodenberg. Although she never acquired the legal status of an abbess, in her
conception of her role as leader and her public activities she performed all aspects of this office.

her reputation as a pious woman attracted people to seek her counsel or spiritual intercession, both in person and through letters. After assuming the leadership of the female community at Disibodenberg, Hildegard too became a focal point for visitors, a trend that continued when she moved the community to Rupertsberg.

Most of what we know of Hildegard’s practice of providing spiritual counsel is based on her extant correspondence, which comprises more than 500 letters, of which approximately 140 were directed to her. The letters document her activities over three decades; the earliest concern the public authorization of her visionary authority in the late 1140s and the subsequent correspondence documents aspects of her public engagement until the end of her life. The broad geographic coverage of the letters attests to the spread of her reputation; her correspondents were concentrated in the Empire, but also included petitions from England, France and Jerusalem. Hildegard famously wrote to emperors, popes and ecclesiastics, yet the greatest proportion of her correspondence was directed to professed religious, primarily monastic superiors, but also individual monks, nuns and priests.

These hundreds of letters were instrumental in shaping Hildegard’s public persona. In the twelfth century letters were an important cultural and political medium. They were not personal missives as we understand them today, but contained content of relevance to a wider audience that was commonly shared by being read aloud. As with other public figures of the age – such as Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter the Venerable – Hildegard used letters to craft her public image and authority, and to promote her teaching and reformist aims. In the preface to her second visionary work, the Book of the Rewards of Life (Liber Vitæ Meritorum, 1163), she claims the same visionary authority and significance for her correspondence as for her other works, specifically mentioning ‘the responses and admonitions for many people, lesser as well as greater [. . .] and letters with certain other explanations’ that emanated from the same ‘true

15 For discussion of the problems of enumerating the size of Hildegard’s extant correspondence see the comments of Baird and Ehrmann in their introduction to The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 4-6.
vision’ as her other writings. Hildegard’s provost and secretary Volmar and her nuns at Rupertsberg also recognised the importance of her correspondence for creating her prophetic persona. In 1170 when she was seriously ill, Volmar wrote a letter of consolation, ostensibly for Hildegard, but more for the benefit of the nuns, in which he expressed their imminent sense of loss when the seer was thought to be near to death. Volmar listed the many things that would be missed if she was to leave them; at the top of the list he placed her ‘responses to all those enquiring about their various matters’.

In Hildegard’s final years, Volmar – and after his death, the Cistercian monk Guibert of Gembloux – revised and organized her letters into the ‘official’ collection that survives today. Volmar must have worked closely with Hildegard, certainly with her approval, in redacting the letters for this collection. Questions remain about the historicity of the letters, given the layers of editing and emendation in selecting and compiling the collection, nevertheless the surviving epistolary pairings inform us about how people perceived her and what they sought from her spiritual gifts, and how she in return responded to and crafted her image through these exchanges. The collection portrays Hildegard as a divine teacher, a mouthpiece of God’s advice. As the letters were preserved for spiritual edification, they contain little practical detail. As a source for monastic life, therefore, the letters are light on the particulars of institutional aspects, and offer little evidence about the specific circumstances that prompted superiors to seek her counsel. They do, however, offer a many-faceted window into the psychological dimensions of how people experienced contemporary monastic problems. Hildegard’s responses in turn illustrate how she adapted her teachings on the moral responsibilities of leaders into personal spiritual counsel.

Hildegard’s correspondence contains more than 80 letters between the seer and other female superiors, affording a rare chance to explore how women wrote to one another about their roles as leaders and their experience of its pressures and potential rewards. Rapid growth in the numbers of people seeking a religious life from the end of the eleventh century led to the expansion of

---

19 Van Engen provides a cogent overview of the transmission of the letters and Volmar’s role in Van Engen, ‘Letters and the Public Persona’, pp. 376-79.
20 It was common practice for letters to be crafted with an eye to style or a wider readership, leaving practical matters to be delivered orally by the messenger. See Niskanen, Letter Collections, pp. 58-60. Hildegard did, on occasion, offer shrewd practical advice – such as her advice to an unnamed abbess about a process to remove a troublesome subprioress from office; Ep. 268, 91B, ed. by Van Acker, pp. 18-19; Letters, trans. by Baird and Ehrmann, vol. 3, pp. 63-4.
existing and the creation of new religious orders, particularly for women. Hildegard and the numerous women who wrote seeking her counsel reflect the expanded opportunities for women in religious life, and of female participation in debates about how to realise a vision of renewed spiritual fervour.21 Hildegard’s female correspondents seem to have taken comfort and pride in the fact that a woman was blessed with such spiritual gifts. An abbess from Bamberg wrote that ‘with all our hearts we rejoice in Christ’ because ‘He not only foresaw and predestined you, a woman, for this purpose, but also that His grace has illumined many through your teaching.’22

The exercise of authority for women in the monastic sphere could be a site of tension, even contest. Religious women relied upon clerics to provide them with spiritual and administrative services, and women’s religious communities were increasingly subject to clerical supervision.23 Hildegard’s struggle with the abbots of Disibodenberg over the relocation of her small community – and their endowments - to Rupertsberg illustrates the institutional constraints women could experience in pursuing their vocation and ideal of religious life.24 As religious women relied upon clerics for their spiritual and economical wellbeing, we might expect female superiors to mention issues concerning these interactions in their petitions to the seer. Hildegard’s correspondence with other women, however, is silent on this subject. If female superiors sought her advice about how to handle difficulties with the priests who were entrusted with their spiritual care the evidence has not survived.25 Her epistolary exchanges direct our view to different questions. The letters from female superiors offer evidence of how individual women, like men, grappled with the personal challenges of exercising authority within their community and their

22 Ep. 61, ed. by Van Acker, CCCM 91, pp. 139-40; no. 61, Letters, trans. by Baird and Ehrmann, vol. 1, p. 139. See also Ferrante, ‘Correspondent’, pp. 105-6.
25 It is likely that concerns about the relationships between nuns and their priests would have been discussed in person, or through a messenger, rather than documented in letters. An unidentified female superior refers to matters concerning a priest in a letter, although the precise nature of his role and relationship to the nuns are unclear; Ep. 268. Interestingly, Hildegard writes to two clerics urging them to tend carefully to women’s pastoral needs; see Ep. 264 to an unidentified prelate and Ep. 280 to an unnamed teacher in which she counsels a tolerant approach regarding his ministry to a group of women.
responsibility for the care of souls, rather than how they negotiated authority within the constraints of ecclesiastical structures. Hildegard’s responses in turn enable us to see how her teaching about a leader’s responsibility for spiritual governance and care was similar for women as well as men.

**Leaders as teachers and rulers of souls**

Hildegard’s writings show her to have been a religious superior with a deep understanding of the nature and realities of monastic life. Her ideas of spiritual leadership were profoundly shaped by the expectations of the superior laid down in the *Rule of Benedict*, in particular the requirement in Chapter 2.6 that the superior would have to account for the state of the souls in his charge. An autobiographical passage preserved in her *Vita* provides insight into her self-understanding as a monastic leader and how she responded to the interpersonal challenges of leading a community:

‘I took care of my daughters’ necessities in both body and soul [...] I was most concerned when I beheld in true vision that the spirits of the air were fighting against us, and saw moreover, that those same spirits had entangled some of my noble-born daughters as in a net with an array of vain thoughts. So, through the revelation of God, I made this known to them and fortified and armed them with the words of Holy Scripture and with the discipline of the Rule and with the monastic way of life.’

Reflecting in this passage on the early, difficult years at Rupertsberg, Hildegard describes how she was faced with dissent among her nuns and from her critics. She attributes her understanding of the conflict to her visionary gift and so sought to discipline and guide her community through her understanding of Scripture and monastic precept, and by imposing a stricter adherence to the *Rule*. She referred to Benedict as a ‘second Moses’ and likened his *Rule* to a ‘law’ that, if followed, provided all things to secure salvation. A religious superior was required to instruct their charges, which usually involved providing a commentary or exposition on the meaning of scripture and the *Rule* to their community in Chapter. Hildegard added that some of her nuns railed against her stricter discipline, ‘glaring’ at her with ‘glowering eyes’ and ‘tearing me to

---

27 *Ep*. 95.
pieces behind my back’, declaring that they could not endure this ‘insufferable hammering away at the discipline of the Rule.’ Hildegard found comfort in other ‘good and wise sisters who stood by me in all my sufferings’. Acknowledging that she ‘was worn out with trials of this kind’, Hildegard echoes the sense of fatigue and strain at leading people in community that is a common theme in the letters she received from other monastic superiors.

Hildegard understood the practice of teaching, of imbuing her charges with the knowledge of Scripture, as defensive. Her instruction created a wall around the sisters to protect them from vice. It was the superior’s role to inspire her sisters to listen to her words. Hildegard advised abbess Sophie of Kitzingen that the person who could do this well, ‘to bear up heaven by her knowledge’ had received ‘a mighty and powerful gift from God.’ It was then a superior’s duty to perform this gift diligently. Hildegard acknowledged that this could be a heavy burden, but one that can be ‘good for you, as long as your sheep are willing to hear God’s admonition through your governance.’

She also imagined teaching as nurturing; for example she employed the image of a child nursing at their mother’s breast to depict the relationship between the superior and her nuns at Rupertsberg in a letter to them written late in her life.

Hildegard was unusual in that as a woman she was asked to comment on aspects of the Rule to people outside her community, including male religious. She explained various practical aspects of the Rule in a letter to a community of Augustinian canons, in which she stressed how the virtues of moderation and discretion were to inform decisions about aspects of life not otherwise covered by the Rule’s precepts. In contrast to Heloise, who famously critiqued the application of certain of its requirements for monastic women, Hildegard’s commentary on the Rule counseled others on how to interpret and apply its precepts in daily life. But her spiritual understanding of the Rule, and in particular her expectations of the behaviour and role of those charged with the care of souls, is expounded in more detail in her visionary writings where her ideas about monastic leadership are imbued with deeper spiritual import. Hildegard’s autobiographical reflections, her letters and her commentary on the Benedictine Rule all show her to have been a

29 Ep. 150r; Letters, p. 95.
31 The canons refer to themselves as Hunniense, which has not been identified. Constable leans towards canons at Hönningen in the diocese of Worms; Giles Constable, ‘Hildegard’s Explanation of the Rule of Benedict’, in Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld, pp. 163 - 188 (p. 166).
compassionate, patient and empathetic leader who exercised her authority with a sensitive appreciation of individual needs.

Hildegard elaborates her ideas of religious leadership towards the end of the Book of the Rewards of Life. This is a work of ethical instruction in which she gives form and voice to the vices and virtues so as to illustrate the path of moral discernment and right action. In what is in effect a commentary on the role of the abbot as set out in the second chapter of the Rule of Benedict, her exposition expresses the core themes of religious leadership that recur throughout her writings, and in particular that informs the counsel she offers in her letters. In the final book of The Book of the Rewards of Life she emphasises the superior’s role to teach and rule. This work concludes with visions of different groups of the blessed rejoicing in heaven, among them spiritual leaders, described as those masters and prelates ‘who, through divine inspiration, became ‘teachers and rulers’ of souls. Her concern here is with the role of the superior as a ‘master of souls’ who in guiding his charges was to ‘consider the strength and weakness and quality of the souls of his subordinates’ and treat them accordingly. Hildegard stresses the combination of benevolence and firmness characteristic of a good leader, who should ‘hold a correcting rod in his hand for restraining his disciples’, but to those ‘who shine with a little light, he will speak softly because if he surrounds them with bitterness, they will be destroyed completely and will become even more evil than they were before.’ Good masters, she concludes, ‘are similar to the pure ether [of the upper world], because they rule their followers with discretion and good judgment.’ Hildegard stressed Benedict’s teaching that a leader should adapt to the abilities of each member of their flock, using discretion to nurture individual spiritual capacities.

Hildegard used the masculine term, magister, to refer to the office of a teacher and ruler. She herself was a magistra, a female teacher and ruler, and she expected both men and women to fulfill the responsibilities of teaching and governance. In an exhortatory letter to an abbess of Altena Hildegard’s address conveyed a reminder of the abbess’ authority and the responsibility vested in her office through the Rule: ‘O you who are a leader in the brilliant, springing waters of the fountain, that is to say, as Christ’s representative.’ In evoking an image of Christ as a fountain, Hildegard at once offers a source of inspiration to the troubled abbess and reminds her of the Benedictine precept that the superior exercised authority over and responsibility for their

34 Liber vite meritorum, pp. 255 - 56.
flock akin to a divine representative on earth. Hildegard understood women to act equally as Christ’s representative through the authority conferred upon them as superior. An abess was equally responsible for the souls entrusted to her care as an abbot.

As spiritual authority was gendered masculine, women were required to overcome the perceived limitations of their gender in order to exercise the authority of their office effectively. Hildegard imagined the religious superior as a warrior battling against vice, clad in the armour of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. Writing to an abbess in Metz, she urged her to ‘Gird yourself lest you are wounded by vices, and rise up and conquer them by strenuous war like a stalwart knight, so that you may live forever.’ The abbess is presented as a virile woman, armed with virtue, who overcomes the vices in herself and thereby creates an example for her community. Hildegard famously described herself as a virile woman, claiming that as she lived in an effeminate age God had chosen her, a weak woman, as his mouthpiece for justice. A spiritual leader should promote God’s justice, and Hildegard exhorted individuals, irrespective of their gender, to struggle valiantly in this spiritual battle like ‘virile knights’.

**Hildegard’s ministry to monastic leaders**

The ideal of leadership embodied in Hildegard’s visionary writings proved a tough challenge for frail humans to live up to in practice. Hildegard associated monastic superiors with the ‘greenness’ or *viriditas* of the life giving energy of body and spirit, drawing on imagery from the natural world to express this central element of her thought. A recurring motif that she used to convey the role of a spiritual leader is that of the person who cultivates a field, an image that underlines a superior’s responsibility for the spiritual fruitfulness and fecundity of the souls of their flock. She warned an abbess in Bamberg that ‘a person who does not till a fertile field and

---

36 *RB*, chapter 2.6.
39 There are close parallels in this imagery to how Hildegard envisions the virtue of *Victoria* as an armoured female figure who defeats the devil in *Scivias*, III, iii and in the *OrdoVirtutum. Hildegard of Bingen Scivias*, translated by Mother Columba Hart. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 349-51.
40 See note 9 above.
41 Examples where Hildegard uses similar imagery to men include *Ep*. 205; *Letters*, II, p. 186 to the monk Dietzelinus and *Ep*. 144r; *Letters*, I, p. 83, to the abbot of Kaisheim.
make it fruitful is letting it run to seed, because he is not working for the good of the master [...]
O daughter of God, be aware that you are this field, because you hold the people in the embrace of your good will [...] so do not refuse to toil, and do not abandon them merely because you long for leisure, for frequently harmful weeds grow in idleness." This image of the leader cultivating the souls of her charges suggests the careful attention to individual needs and the quality of relationships that a superior was expected to nurture within their communities.

Hildegard imagined the superior as the bountiful soil which sustained the spiritual growth of her nuns. For example, she enjoined an abbess from Cologne to attend carefully to the ‘plot of land within you so that it will not wither, deprived of fruitful utility for your children’. She encouraged her to ‘be fertile soil so that you may console your daughters when they weep, and reproach them when they rise up in wrath. And when they become savage you may lead them to submit to the discipline of the Rule.’

Hildegard also used metaphors of moisture to convey her understanding of the nurturing potential of compassion. In a letter to an abbess of Neuss who was in conflict with her community, she recommend that she act with compassion towards the nuns ‘just as seasonable rain falls on the grass and brings forth luxurious vegetation.’ ‘Penitence and compassion’, Hildegard advised, is the wiser path to healing discord than discipline. The challenge of leading community required a flourishing superior who could blend discipline with mercy, correction with compassion, so as to ensure that an appropriate blend of both informed a superior’s interactions with all members of their community.

Moderation was essential for good governance, of one’s self and most importantly of others. Time and again in her letters Hildegard advised people that moderate nourishment of the body encouraged good habits, whereas excessive behaviour, particularly abstinence or fasting, or emotional excess, weakened the body, drying it, and contributed to patterns of thought that risked anxiety or depression. She understood excessive physical practices as leading to a loss of psychological equilibrium, as the person who afflicted their body with ‘immoderate abstinence always walks in anger.’ She had first-hand experience of the effects of excessively rigorous ascetic practices in her teacher, Jutta, and it is notable that Hildegard promoted a middle path, avoiding the elder woman’s extreme approach. Guibert of Gembloux, who visited Hildegard at Rupertsberg late in her life, and later stayed there with her nuns, described her rule over her nuns

42 Ep. 61r; Letters, I, p. 140.
43 Ep. 156; Letters, II, p. 102.
44 Ep. 177r, Letters, II, p. 139.
45 Ep. 156r, II, p. 103, to abbess of Cologne.
46 Felten, ‘Jutta and Hildegard’.
as informed by the Benedictine ideal of \textit{discretio}. He recalls how the visionary tempered her punishment, when it was warranted, ‘with great love’ and ‘motherly sweet affection’.\footnote{\textit{Jutta and Hildegard}, trans. Silvas, p. 162.} Hildegard encouraged people whom she sensed tried too hard, or worried too much, to put their situation into perspective. She warned a prioress who claimed that she could no longer manage her community against behaviour that could ‘kill her body with afflictions’. Perceiving that the woman’s impassioned and anxious response was affecting her mental state, Hildegard offered practical advice: ‘Daughter, remember that you are not able to create a person. Therefore, meekly pray God to give you a better life. For this is more acceptable to God than to beseech Him with too much sadness.’\footnote{Exchange with the prioress of Ilbenstadt; \textit{Ep.} 140 and 140r; \textit{Letters}, II, pp. 79-80.}

Hildegard was a keen observer of the relationships within a community and was acutely aware of the dynamic between leaders and those whom they led. She perceived the difficulties a wayward community could generate for its superior as a form of trial and spiritual growth for the superior too. In her counsel to an abbess Hildegard exhorted her to stand firm in her role for ‘a governor (\textit{gubernator}) is cleansed by his subordinates, and the subordinates by the governor.’ Warning her against being afraid of her sisters, which in turn can lead to further problems, Hildegard observed that the problem may lie less in the community than within the woman herself: ‘For many flee from the tedium of the labour, more than from the fact that they cannot control their subordinates’.\footnote{\textit{Ep.} 174r; \textit{Letters}, II, p. 134 to an abbess of Metz. I have translated \textit{gubernator} as ‘governor’ rather than ‘administrator’ used by Baird and Ehrmann.} On another occasion Hildegard referred to the superior’s role as a ‘martyrdom’, one in which leaders experience ‘tribulation and fear and grief in the tumult of life.’ Once again she counseled inner strength and hope, reminding her correspondent that ‘in this way many saints, like martyrs, come to God [. . . and] He will not desert you.’\footnote{\textit{Ep.} 237r; \textit{Letters}, III, p. 36.} Similarly, to an abbess in Regensburg who was ‘so weary that day-to-day existence beats you down’, Hildegard drew on the concept of life on this earth as an exile from eternal life to inspire patience and perseverance.\footnote{\textit{Ep.} 185r, \textit{Letters}, II, p. 149.} Hildegard’s teaching that a leader’s responsibility was to minister to the spiritual and practical well-being of their community, to exercise active care without complaint was consistent with that of other leading monastic figures in the twelfth century. Bernard of Clairvaux
and Anselm of Canterbury also provided similar counsel to superiors who wrote to them to seek advice on how to reconcile themselves to the demands that leading a community could entail.\(^{52}\)

One of the most common problems for which monastic superiors sought Hildegard’s counsel was whether to resign their office. The austerity and rigour of some forms of religious life at the time held great appeal to many religious in traditional Benedictine communities, and it is evident from their letters that some of Hildegard’s correspondents were drawn to ascetic practices or desired a solitary life. Hildegard was uniformly skeptical of this impulse. In one of her best known and elegant letters she warns abbess Hazzecha of Krauftal, who wanted to leave her office and retire to a hermitage with two companions, against this action, eloquently reminding her to cultivate the virtue of moderation: ‘Daughter of God [. . .] learn to have discretion, which in heavenly things and earthly, is the mother of us all, since by this the soul is directed, and the body nurtured in appropriate restraint. [. . .] a person who toils more than her body can bear is rendered useless in her spirit by ill-judged toil and ill-judged abstinence.’\(^{53}\)

In another example, an abbess from Metz wrote to the seer lamenting that she was insufficient to meet the challenge of ruling souls and sought her counsel as to whether she should continue in office. Hildegard’s answer is a predictable negative, but as so often in her responses to men and women who felt unable to continue in their roles, she offers a lengthy exhortation on the role of a superior in which she expounds on several themes central to her thought. She likens the abbess to Mt Sion, which ‘is high, and its shadow, stretching into the valleys, shows its great height.[. . .] Prelates and teachers, who are the firmament of the Church, are signified by the height of Sion and the other mountains, and their disciples are called the ‘daughters of Sion’. It would be a great shame if this mountain should fall or if the others destroyed it.’ For this reason, she continues, anyone who ‘holds the reins of governance’ should remain in their position to direct the spiritual lives of their community. ‘Therefore, as long as he can offer words of doctrine, let no one who is a teacher/ruler (\(\textit{in magisterio}\)) cast aside the rod of correction’. She draws a parallel between the abbess and the prelates and teachers who stand among the blessed towards the end of the \(\textit{Book of}

---


the Rewards of Life, for it through leaders such as her, who ‘through their learning and their power to command obedience that God grants them’ defend their flocks from vice.⁵⁴

Superiors could feel overwhelmed or unable to fulfill the demands of leadership for many reasons. An abbot of Zwettl wanted to resign his office because he considered that he lacked the knowledge to properly instruct his flock and to fulfill his pastoral responsibility. He lamented that ‘it is difficult and laborious for me to bear this duty to the end, because I am not endowed with any special merits of my life for so great a task, nor do I possess any suitable wisdom or learning’, although he concluded with the acknowledgement that ‘it is just as perilous to lay it down.’⁵⁵ Others struggled to find the fortitude or lacked the ability to effectively maintain discipline within the community. A prioress of Ilbenstadt ‘beseeched’ Hildegard for advice on how to deal with her ‘intolerable burden’, that is her ‘duty to correct the waywardness of my sisters – and this despite the fact that I can scarce fight off the [unspecified] dangers that surround me on every side.’⁵⁶ Old age or infirmity also prompted letters to the seer. In one striking example Richard (d. c. 1163), prior of the regular Augustinian community at Springiersbach, head of an influential congregation of Augustinian monasteries and brother of Tenxwind, who criticized the unusual customs of Hildegard’s nuns at Rupertsberg, wrote to Hildegard lamenting that although he had been appointed to ‘manage and oversee in my pastoral position’ he was now ‘almost completely bereft of strength, both of mind and body’ and thus unfit for the responsibility. He sought her aid as a divine intermediary to consult God about his desire to resign his office.⁵⁷ Hildegard’s response has not survived. It was highly unusual for a leading male reformer to share his inner doubts about whether he should continue in office to a woman, even one thought to be guided by divine inspiration like Hildegard.

Hildegard’s counsel to all who sought her advice about whether to resign their office was the same – remain, persist, have strength. On one sole occasion she conceded that the aged and infirm abbot of Haina, who was by his own account ‘dull-witted and absent minded’, could resign his office if he was unable to fulfill its demands. Consistent with her teaching, however, she advised against this action, and recommended that it was better for him to be anxious about the welfare of his monks, even if he was frail, rather than to give up and to submit to the rule of someone else.

Her advice may seem harsh to modern readers, but it is less surprising that she insisted that superiors persevere in office when we consider that Hildegard understood herself to be compelled to fulfill the roles of visionary and superior despite difficulty and ill-health. Anxiety, hostility and challenge were to be borne steadfastly because each superior had a dual responsibility to God as his chosen steward and to the congregation as their spiritual leader, protector, and provider.

**Conclusion**

Hildegard’s correspondence reveals how she performed the role of spiritual guide for troubled souls, in particular for monastic leaders who appear to have confided in her in ways that may not have been available to them in other relationships. This is striking when we consider that these men and women, who in Benedictine teaching had been elected as representatives of Christ to govern their monasteries, were prepared to reveal their doubts and inner turmoil about how to fulfill their role to the visionary. Hildegard referred to herself as *homo*, a human being, and her concern in all her writings was to guide people to salvation rather than with gendered distinctions. Letters provided her with one method of communicating her broader message about salvation history and the pressing themes about the moral responsibility of leaders in the battle of virtue over vice. In her letters to monastic leaders, Hildegard variously urged restraint on some or recommended greater discipline to others, using exegesis, natural imagery and parables to convey her message. Her correspondence with her counterparts illustrates how she imagined the moral responsibility of leadership – the governance of souls – as fundamentally the same for women as well as for men, although her counsel was conditioned differently depending on gender, circumstance and the psychological needs of the individual.

Research into the experience of monastic women in the medieval period has tended to focus on the differences between men and women, noting in particular how monastic arrangements for women tended to limit women’s authority by subjecting them to clerical oversight and limiting their movement. These approaches enhance our knowledge of the very real ways through which gendered assumptions shaped female monastic life, this focus can tend to highlight opposition

---

58 Beverley Mayne Kienzle, ‘Hildegard of Bingen’s Teaching in her *Expositiones evangeliorum* and *Ordo Virtutum*’, in *Medieval Monastic Education*, ed. by George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), pp. 72-86 (p. 75). Kienzle observes that Hildegard does distinguish her message for nuns, focusing on virginity as a theme in her writings for women.

59 For the analysis of spatial arrangements for religious women in England see Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture. The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London: Routledge, 1994) ; and for analyses of relationships between religious women and the clerics who ministered to them see *Partners in Spirit*, ed. by Griffith and Hotchin.
and tensions in relationships, rather than exploring questions about the ways in which men and women may have experienced aspects of religious life in similar ways. Hildegard’s correspondence, on other hand, offers evidence for exploring similarities experienced by monastic leaders. The motivations that prompted monastic superiors to contact Hildegard necessarily arose from different circumstances and needs, nevertheless their letters demonstrate how the challenge of leading people in a community could engender similar spiritual concerns in women as for men. Hildegard’s correspondence with her female counterparts offers suggestive insights into how women negotiated aspects of their roles as teachers and rulers within their communities, contributing to a more complete understanding of women’s monastic leadership.

In looking to figures such as Hildegard as a source of certainty in an uncertain world men and women sought trusted sources of spiritual authority to address their need for strength and reassurance. As sociological studies have shown, the longing for certainty thought to be provided by leaders is most often felt when apprehension about the future is pervasive and the challenges facing a society are thought to warrant a radical shift in approach.\textsuperscript{60} In these circumstances people often tend to seek a leader, a ‘father’ or ‘mother’ figure, who represents a means to alleviate uncertainty. The image of Hildegard as a spiritual mother and intimate of the divine who provided \textit{consolatio} to those who requested it reflected this deep need to access an authority perceived to exist beyond the turbulence of this world. Hildegard used her exchanges with her correspondents to shape and promote her public image and authority, and it is in the way she responded to the human needs presented to her that she expanded her reputation as a spiritually gifted ‘mother’ and ‘care-giver’.\textsuperscript{61}

Hildegard consistently encouraged her counterparts to persevere, to re-discover the light of divine inspiration within to be their guide. Her central message to monastic superiors is to first look within, to summon strength and purpose, as preparation for effectively leading others. Hildegard’s counsel to her petitioners to persist in their situation whilst also offering them hope of spiritual reward shares parallels with the current interest in resilience, especially the importance of this quality as an attribute in leaders. Studies of resilience based on psychology and neuroscience have shown how people with a resilient outlook exhibit greater capacity to respond to and bounce back from setback and adversity. Hildegard’s ideas about the balance

\textsuperscript{60} Amanda Sinclair, \textit{Leadership for the Disillusioned} (Crow’s Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2007) and for a similar analytic approach to the Middle Ages see Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, \textit{Poets, Saints and Visionaries of the Great Schism, 1378-1417} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{61} Van Engen, ‘Abbess’. 
between body and spirit as essential for good health – as expressed in her organic image of the superior as ‘a fertile field moistened with dew’ – conveys similar ideas about the role of self-knowledge and self-care as the foundation for effective leadership. Leaders, then and now, are urged to first take stock of themselves and find that point of centering and balance before they can be fully able to direct and respond to the needs of others. Hildegard’s sensitive attention to how a leader manages oneself and relates to others, on how this influences their ability to guide a group in service of a higher purpose or deeper meaning offers instructive parallels with contemporary thought about the skills required to effectively lead through complexity. Despite the vast disparities in time and place, Hildegard’s message continues to convey deep insight and wisdom about the human condition with continued relevance for leaders today.