

*Report from Washington, D.C.: Hildegard of Bingen Plays to Packed Houses
in Nation's Capital*

As if to demonstrate irrefutably her range and originality, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), made a major U.S. public debut in the unlikely setting of Washington, D.C., January 9-14. Amid the spires of the Washington Cathedral, Hildegard's works were read, discussed, enacted, performed, and appreciated. Called "A Celebration of Spirituality," the week-long series of events included presentations by scholars, theologians, medical experts, and ministers.

More festive than a conference, more spiritual than a convention, the Hildegard event celebrated this remarkable medieval woman who was, in the words of the program, a "twelfth-century Benedictine abbess, the first of the great German mystics and visionaries, scholar, preacher, and spiritual guide, author of books of philosophy, theology, medicine, and the first medieval morality play, the 'Ordo Virtutum'." There were talks on the medicinal value of Hildegard's herbs, on the music she composed to take advantage of the monastery chapel's design and of women's voices (and thus for the nuns of her monastery), and on her role in the power structure of the medieval church. Professor Barbara Newman, author of *Sister of Wisdom* (1987), lectured on "Hildegard and the Sophia Tradition: Locating the Feminine Divine." She read aloud from Hildegard's poetry and discussed issues of translation that emerged as she translated and edited Hildegard's song cycle, "Symphonia."

Among the most memorable events was a performance of Hildegard's morality play, the allegorical "Ordo Virtutum" ("Order of Virtues"), part of the compilation of her many extraordinary visions. Music for this two-hour presentation in the nave of the Cathedral was arranged and performed by the Folger Consort, the early music ensemble of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, with roles sung by members of the Five College Early Music Collegium, based in Massachusetts.

I attended most of the events of this unconventional celebration, as did one of my students, who also took part in the retreat. While academic medieval feminists might have disdained much of the experiential dimension, they would have savored Barbara Newman's lecture and poetry reading. And all in all, my student and I, convening at the end of the week, concluded that even in her most incredible visions Hildegard could never have foreseen that she would be transplanted to the U.S., translated into English, and transformed into palatable fare for the 1980's capital city denizens.

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