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A woman of love who humbly initiated change

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Nov. 12, 2010

Barbara Sukowa as Hildegard von Bingen and Heino Ferch as Br. Volmar in "Vision: From the Life of Hildegard of Bingen" (Zeitgeist Films)

Writer/director Margarethe Von Trotta?s new film, ?Vision: From the Life of Hildegard of Bingen,? is a filmed version of the life of a thoroughly ?renaissance? woman who was born and lived during the Middle Ages. Hildegard of Bingen was born near Worms, Germany, around the year 1098 and died in Bingen on the Rhine in 1179.

When Hildegard was 8, her parents, who were nobles, brought her to a monastery as a ?gift.? This was not unusual, since at that time women religious lived in convents attached, literally, to the monasteries of men. The abbot hands her over to a ?magistra,? a teacher, Jutta von Sponheim (Mareile Blendl), who tells the young girl that now she will be her mother.

Skip ahead 30 years. There are several nuns and novices in evidence as the bell tolls for the impending death of Magistra Jutta. The abbot wants to name Hildegard (Barbara Sukowa) to take Jutta?s place but she insists on an election by the sisters, who do choose her.

Hildegard?s love for books and learning, as well as her knowledge of medicinal herbs, is demonstrated through a series of vignettes. She teaches the sisters what she knows and writes music as well. She voices her disapproval of self-flagellation and bodily mortification.

Hildegard tells the chaplain, who is also her confessor, Brother Volmar (Heino Ferch), that she has been experiencing visions since early childhood but that recently God told her to write down what she saw and heard. Volmar asks the abbot for permission and then the bishop sends a tribunal to test Hildegard before she can write anything.

She eventually writes to the powerful Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, who has just called for a new crusade and ?is not known for liking women,? as Volmar explains. However, Bernard obtains permission from the pope at the Council of Trier for Hildegard to record her visions, and Volmar becomes her faithful scribe.

A 16-year-old girl, Richardis von Stade (Hannah Herzsprung) tells Hildegard she wants to join the nuns. At first

Hildegard is not impressed, but then gives Richardis a chance These events set up the rest of the film, which focuses on Hildegard?s gifts as a writer, mystic, teacher, healer and a powerful woman in her world -- as well as a person who must struggle with her humanity.

When a novice becomes pregnant by a monk, Hildegard sends her away. The novice takes poisonous herbs from the garden and dies. Hildegard presses for an independent monastery so that nuns can rule themselves and maintain virtue. She overcomes every obstacle, even from within the community.

By taking on the monastic establishment, as well as the hierarchy, Hildegard left an indelible mark on history.

Richardis? brother, whose parents bought him a bishopric, elicits his sister?s election as the magistra of a monastery in his diocese. This is perhaps the most difficult relationship in the film because Hildegard and Richardis have developed a bond well beyond superior and subject, or mother and daughter. Experienced women religious may recognize this as what was once called a ?special friendship,? and it becomes intense when Hildegard reacts emotionally to Richardis? decision to leave her. It is a believable scenario that establishes Hildegard?s flawed humanity and calls her to refocus her attention on God.

The film has a feminist spirit, although it adds little to our understanding of religious life in that era or the nature of Hildegard?s mystical experiences. It would be a rare film that could accomplish this.

Director Von Trotta felt free to suggest themes in the film that may put off some audiences today because Hildegard herself was a woman?s woman who was keenly respectful and observant of the world and life around her. She wrote freely about human sexuality (though one does wonder about her sources for the information as she sweetly and innocently explains conception in the film) in times yet untainted by Puritanism, with its skewed version of the human body and sexuality that persists even today.

It is not possible to cover every detail in a two-hour film, and so the filmmaker makes choices. For example, Von Trotta only hints that Hildegard traveled for about 13 years to preach and teach in monasteries and in cathedrals. Hildegard?s playwriting and acting were not always appreciated in her time, as is shown in one scene, but her music persists today. Several volumes of her writings and letters are in print.

What is unclear in the film is that Hildegard was, in fact, first an anchoress, as was the Magistra Jutta. An anchorite (male) or anchoress (female) withdrew from the world for religious reasons, to live locked in a solitary room next to a church in order to pray and be close to God. There was a window into the church and an opening for food and to empty the chamber pot. Many anchorites and anchoresses taught people from their cells.

In 1994 the BBC released ?Hildegard,? a one-hour dramatization starring Patricia Routledge (?Keeping Up Appearances?), Amanda Root (?Persuasion?) and Peter Vaughan (?Les Misérables,? 1998). In the BBC film, Hildegard is already considerably aged and Richardis? departure, while sad, is not devastating. It tells the story of Hildegard?s decision to see to it that an excommunicated man, missing from Von Trotta?s film, received the last rites and was buried. When Hildegard refused to reveal his burial place to ecclesiastical authorities, she and the sisters were excommunicated and not even allowed to sing. They complied and appealed until the interdict was lifted.

Sukowa, who plays the adult Hildegard in ?Vision,? frequently works with Von Trotta, and totally inhabits the character of Hildegard and her world. She presents a nuanced performance of a woman who was cultured before anyone ever considered such an idea.

Hildegard was a woman of love who obeyed even when she was smarter than the men in charge. She humbly acted and initiated change, with an enthusiasm for life and a profound love of God.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

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