



17. September 2021
Memories of Paradise

Wis 8:1-6

Reading from the memorial of St. Hildegard of Bingen

“Strongly she reaches from one end of the world to the other and she governs the whole world for its good. Wisdom I loved and searched for from my youth; I resolved to have her as my bride, I fell in love with her beauty. She enhances her noble birth by sharing God's life, for the Master of All has always loved her. Indeed, she shares the secrets of God's knowledge, and she chooses what he will do. If in this life wealth is a desirable possession, what is more wealthy than Wisdom whose work is everywhere? Or if it be the intellect that is at work, who, more than she, designs whatever exists?”

Today we have the pleasure of talking about a saint whom we, as Harpa Dei, have come to know above all through her music. She is St. Hildegard of Bingen, Doctor of the Church and a very significant figure in the late Middle Ages.

To begin with, some biographical information about St. Hildegard:

She was born in the year 1098 in the Rhine Valley as the tenth child of the knight Hildebert of Bermersheim and his wife Mechthild. At the age of eight, Hildegard was given by her parents to the hermit Jutta of Sponheim for spiritual formation. In the monastery of Disibodenberg, little Hildegard was instructed in the chanting of the psalms. The young girl enjoyed the extensive training she received. At the age of 15, Hildegard took holy vows and became a Benedictine. At the age of 38 she was unanimously elected spiritual mother of the developing women's convent.

Hildegard had the grace of a supernatural understanding of God's ways. Through her visions, the deepest mysteries of the divine Scriptures were revealed to her. A commission established by the Pope examined and confirmed St. Hildegard of Bingen's gift of vision.

Hildegard became famous far beyond the borders of the monastery. Many people came to her for advice and help. It is also known that she corresponded extensively in letters with important political and church personalities. But Hildegard was also approached in writing by ordinary people seeking her advice. Her numerous letters, both to the people and to important figures, gave rise to her nickname “the Sibyl of

the Rhine” or “God's messenger”. The rich perspective of her visions can also be seen in her songs.

St. Hildegard died at the age of 81.

Many other things could be said about this saint: about her writings, her medicine, her extraordinary preaching ministry and so on. But we want to focus more on the sacred music she left us as a legacy; music that she, in her mystical experiences, had heard the angels sing and put into notes. Therefore, from among the many words she left us, we choose a phrase that has become very important to us in the mission that the Lord has entrusted to us. St. Hildegard says:

Music is **“the only memory, almost forgotten, of that primitive state which we lost when we lost Paradise.”**

In our daily meditations and in all our mission, sacred music has a very important place for us. From St. Augustine comes that marvellous phrase that sung prayer is double prayer.

Sacred music, which in the case of our Roman Catholic Church is in the first instance the Gregorian chorale, has almost disappeared from the Church in these times. It is replaced by less meaningful musical genres, and not infrequently by music that is banal or totally inappropriate for liturgical actions, but in this way what St. Hildegard called the “memory of Paradise” is being spoiled!

Indeed, when the Gregorian chorale is sung in a natural way - and the same applies to Byzantine music in the Eastern Church - it awakens in the soul a longing for heaven. The soul can deeply embrace this music and feel "at home" in it. Today, however, the mystery of these songs needs to be rediscovered, because the soul is hardly offered this spiritual nourishment. And so the Church also loses an important dimension of its identity.

The following example might help us to better understand what we are saying: Let us suppose that at Holy Mass the Word of God would no longer be proclaimed, but instead stories and tales would be told. If that were to happen, the soul would be deprived of the essential nourishment it receives in the words of Holy Scripture. Perhaps in time it will grow accustomed to this loss, but deep down there will be an emptiness. And only when one encounters the Word of God again will one realise what one has been missing.

The same can happen in the encounter with sacred music. In the soul the memory of Paradise, of its home, where it comes from and where God wants to take it back to,

awakens again. Only now does it realise what it had been missing and fall in love with its beauty, to put it in terms of today's reading. We can also apply to sacred music the phrase that follows in the text, because, in fact, divine wisdom has been infused into it: *"She enhances her noble birth by sharing God's life, for the Master of All has always loved her"*.

With her musical compositions, St. Hildegard has helped us to discover more deeply the beauty of the Gregorian chorale, and her chants, very similar to the Gregorian, also remind us of Paradise.

Thus, sacred music helps to rediscover essential aspects of our Church's identity, and offers souls the nourishment they deeply crave, because this music glorifies God, and there is no greater wisdom than to give glory to God!