The Book of Divine Works (Liber Divinorum Operum): Part I, Vision 1

by

St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

Hildegard's final and greatest visionary work was the *Liber Divinorum Operum* ("The Book of Divine Works"), written between 1163 and 1172, with final revisions completed by 1174. In an autobiographical passage included in the *Life of St. Hildegard* (II.16), the Visionary Doctor describes the genesis of the work in her meditations on the Prologue to the Gospel of John: "For it was the Word, which before all created things had no beginning, and after them shall have no end, which summoned all created things into being. (…) Therefore man is the work of God along with every creature. But man is also said to be the worker of the Divinity and a shadow of his mysteries, and should in all things reveal the Holy Trinity, for *God made him in his image and likeness* (Gn 1:26)."

Illustration of Liber Divinorum Operum I.1, from Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, MS 1942, fol. 1

The figure of *Caritas* or Divine Love is the central character in the opening vision below, the most prominent of the work's allegorical theophanies. Drawing inspiration from the declaration of the First Letter of John (4:8) that "God is love," Hildegard connects several biblical images—the Ancient of Days, the woman clothed with the sun (Rv 12:1), the Lamb of God, the wings of the seraph—to describe, in a whirl of symbols and ideas, the cosmic drama of creation and salvation. At center-stage of this drama is this figure of *Caritas*—Divine Love, the "supreme and fiery force" that both sparked and sustains creation, and at the same time reflects and sets alight the body, soul, and mind of each human being. This opening vision then narrates the arc of salvation history, from the creation and fall of the angels, through the creation and fall of humans, to their redemption, with the Virgin Mary singled out as the special matrix for the Redeemer's Incarnation.

Translation adapted from St. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of Divine Works*, trans. Nathaniel M. Campbell (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), pp. 33-45.

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1. *And I saw as if in the middle of the southern sky an image, beautiful and wonderful in the mystery of God, like a human in form. Her face was of such beauty and radiance that I could more easily look at the sun than at her; and a great circlet of golden color surrounded her head. Above that head, moreover, in the same circlet appeared another face as of an old man, whose chin and beard touched the crown of the [lower] head. And from each side of the figure's neck a single wing came forth, [both] rising up to join together above the aforementioned circlet. At the tip of the arc where the right wing curves back, I saw as if the head of an eagle that had eyes of fire, in which appeared the brilliance of the angels as in a mirror. But at the tip of the arc where the left wing curves back there was as if a human face that shined like the brilliance of the stars. And these faces were turned towards the east. Furthermore, from each shoulder of this image, a single wing stretched forth down to her knees. She was clothed with a robe like the brilliance of the sun, and in her hands she held a lamb, shining like the light of day. Moreover, she was treading with her feet a monster, dreadful in appearance and venomous and black in color, and also a serpent that had fixed its mouth upon the right ear of the monster and, wrapping the rest of its body around the monster's head, had stretched its tail along the monster's left side all the way to its feet.*

2. And this image spoke: "I am the supreme and fiery force, who sets all living sparks alight and breathes forth no mortal things, but judges them as they are. Flying around the circling circlet with my upper wings—with wisdom—I have ordered all things rightly.[1] But I am also the fiery life of the essence of divinity; I flame above the beauty of the fields, and I shine in the waters, and I burn in the sun, the moon, and the stars. With the airy wind I quicken all things with some invisible life that sustains them all. For the air lives in viridity[2] and in the flowers, the waters flow as if alive, and the sun lives within its own light. When the moon has waned, it is rekindled by the sunlight to live as if anew, and the stars shine bright as if by living in their own light. I have established too the pillars that contain the whole circle of the earth—the winds. The stronger winds have wings set below them, which are the lighter winds, and these uphold the stronger winds with their lightness, lest they dangerously unleash themselves; in the same way the body covers and contains the soul, lest it should expire. Likewise, as the breath of the soul binds together the body by strengthening it so that it does not weaken, so the stronger winds also animate those subject to them, to fulfill their functions appropriately.

"Therefore I, the fiery force, lie hidden within these things, and they burn because of me, just as breath continually moves a human being and a flickering flame exists within the fire.[3] All these things live in their essences and were not found in death, because I am life. I am also

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[1] Cf. Sir 24.8(5); Wis 8.1; 1.4.11; and Hildegard's antiphon, *O virtus Sapientie*: "O Wisdom's energy! Whirling, you encircle and everything embrace in the single way of life."

[2] "viridity": *viriditas*. This key term in Hildegard's symbolic vocabulary literally means, "greenness," but its depth of meaning extends beyond a simple color to encompass notions of freshness, fertility, and fruitfulness. For Hildegard, viridity was the fundamental marker of the abundant, fecund, holy life that creation, the "work of God," receives from its Creator. It often makes an appearance in her organic analogies for the Trinity, especially in connection with the Holy Spirit, denoting God's creative fertility, the maternal goodness that gives birth to and nurtures the whole world. In the *LDO*, the term plays a particularly fruitful role in the symbiosis between the fertility of the physical world and that of the virtuous soul—physical viridity is a vehicle of the divine power that bursts spiritual viridity into bud, while spiritual aridity dries out the physical world around it in some of Hildegard's most celebrated ecological passages depicting the impact of human sin on the environment.

[3] These are Trinitarian images: cf. *Explanatio Symboli Sancti Athanasii*, ed. C. P. Evans, in CCCM 226, pp. 116-7.

rationality, possessing the breath of the resounding Word through which every created thing was made; and into all these things I blew, so that none of them is mortal in its nature, because I am life.

"I am life indeed pure and whole, which was not hewn from stones, and it neither blossomed from branches nor took root from man's sexual power;[4] but every living thing has taken root in me. For rationality is the root, and the resounding Word flourishes within it.

"And so, because God is rational, how could it possibly be that he would not actively work, since his every work flourishes through humankind, whom he made in his image and likeness (Gn 1:26) and in whom he marked out all created things according to their measure? For it was always determined from eternity that God would will his work—humankind—to come into being; and when he perfected this work, he gave all creation to them so that they might do their work with it, in the same way that God himself had made his work, that is, humankind.

"But I also fulfill my function, since all living things are set ablaze from me; and I am uniform life in eternity, which neither begins nor ends. God is this life, self-moving and active, yet one life in three energies.[5] Therefore, Eternity is called the Father, the Word is called the Son, and the breath connecting these two is called the Holy Spirit, just as God is signified in human beings, in whom are body, soul, and rationality.[6] Moreover, the fact that 'I flame above the beauty of the fields,' this signifies the earth, which is that material from which God made Man. And the fact that 'I shine in the waters,' this accords with the soul, since, just as water floods the whole earth, so the soul permeates the whole body. But the fact that 'I burn in the sun and in the moon,' this signifies rationality, and the stars are the countless words of rationality. And when 'with the airy wind I quicken all things with some invisible life that sustains them all,' this is because by the air and wind subsist living things as they grow, moved out of nothingness into existence."[7]

3. And again I heard a voice from heaven saying to me: God, who created all things, made humankind in his image and likeness, and in them he signified both the higher and the lower creatures. He held them in such loving affection that he destined them for that place from which the falling angel was cast out, and he ordained them for the glory and honor that that angel in his blessedness had lost.[8] This is what this vision that you see demonstrates.

For when you see *as if in the middle of the southern sky an image, beautiful and wonderful in the mystery of God, like a human in form*, this is because Divine Love is beautiful because of her election in the strength of unfailing divinity, and wonderful in the gifts of the heavenly Father's mysteries: and thus Divine Love reveals humankind. For when the Son of God put on flesh, he

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[4] "from man's sexual power": *de uirili ui*; cf. Hildegard, *Explanatio Symboli Sancti Athanasii*: Christ "is indeed fully God in the wholeness of eternity, and fully human with a rational soul and pure flesh and without the male sexual commingling of human nature" (*Ipse etenim plenus Deus est in integritate eternitatis plenusque homo cum racionali anima et carne munda et absque ulla uirili commixtione humane nature*; in CCCM 226, p. 125).
[5] "energies": *uiribus;* so trans. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, p. 67; cf. *LVM* 1.65(78).
[6] Cf. Hildegard, *Explanatio Symboli Sancti Athanasii*, pp. 120-6.
[7] *uegetata . . . a nihilo remota in id quod sunt*. Newman (*Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 67-68) correlates this self-explication of Love's ontological function (both creative and sustaining) to the concept of the *anima mundi,* succinctly summarized so in a manuscript of Honorius Augustodunensis's *Clavis Physicae:* "Vegetable in trees, sensible in beasts, rational in human beings."
[8] This refers to the notion that redeemed humanity shall refill the tenth choir of angels that had been emptied by the fall of Lucifer and his companions; cf. c. 9 below, and *Scivias* III.2.19.

redeemed fallen humankind through the service of Love. Thus *her face is of such beauty and radiance that you could more easily look at the sun than at her*: for the abundance of Love is of so great an excellence in the flashing gleam of her gifts, that she surpasses all human understanding and the faculty of knowledge by which humans are able to understand various things in the soul—so much so that humans cannot in any way grasp Love with the senses. But this shows symbolically that through her, he is recognized in faith who is not seen visibly with the visible eyes.

4. *And a great circlet of golden color surrounds her head*, because the catholic faith, spread throughout the whole world and rising in the first dawn of exceptional brilliance,[9] embraces the excellence of true Love's abundance with every devotion, as when God redeemed humankind in his Son's humanity and strengthened them by pouring the Holy Spirit into them. So one God is understood in Trinity, who without temporal beginning before the ages was God in divinity. And when *above that head in the same circlet appears another face as of an old man*, this means that the all-surpassing goodness of divinity, which is without beginning and end, brings aid and comfort to the faithful, so that *this face's chin and beard touch the crown of the [lower] head*. For divinity holds fast the lofty reaches of supreme Love by arranging and protecting all things, as when the Son of God in his humanity led lost humankind back to heavenly things.

And from each side of the figure's neck a single wing comes forth, [both] rising up to join together above the aforementioned circlet. For love of God and love of neighbor are not to be separated from each other, for they proceed through the power of Divine Love in the unity of faith and embrace that faith between them through supreme desire.[10] For holy divinity keeps the countless splendor of its glory hidden from humans, so long as they dwell in the shadow of death, devoid of the heavenly robe that they lost because of Adam.[11]

5. *At the tip of the arc where the right wing curves back, you see as if the head of an eagle that has eyes of fire, in which appear the multitude of the angels as in a mirror*. For when in the soaring heights of triumphant submission, someone makes himself subject to God and overcomes the devil, he is made lofty in the blessedness of divine protection. And when, set on fire by the Holy Spirit, he lifts up his mind and fixes his attention on God, the blessed spirits clearly appear in it and offer to God the devotion of that person's heart. For in the eagle are signified those spiritual people who, with the heart's every devotion and in contemplation, gaze often upon God as do the angels. For this reason the blessed spirits, gazing intently upon God, rejoice because of the good works of the just and show forth these works in themselves, and so they continue in their praise of God and never grow weary, for they can never reach the end of his praise. For truly, who can count the numberless wonders that God does in the power of his ability? No one. Indeed, there is present to the angels a many-mirrored flash in which they see that none can act and none has such power as God: there is none like him, for he has no temporality.

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[9] The dawn is one of Hildegard's favorite metaphors for the apostolic church and, more broadly, the irruption of divinity into time; in her liturgical poetry, she associates the dawn light most closely with the Virgin's womb. See Nathaniel M. Campbell, "*Imago expandit splendorem suum*: Hildegard of Bingen's Visio-Theological Designs in the Rupertsberg *Scivias* Manuscript," *Eikón / Imago* 4 (2013, Vol. 2, No. 2), pp. 1-68, esp. pp. 51-5.

[10] "love of God and love of neighbor": *dilectio Dei et proximi*; "through the power of Divine Love": *per virtutem caritatis*.

[11] Cf. chs. 14 and 15 below; *LVM* 6.33(55); and *Gospel Homilies* 26-27, on Lk 15.22 (pp. 120 and 124).

6. All things indeed that God has worked, he held in his foreknowledge before the beginning of time. For in the pure and holy divinity, all things visible and invisible appeared without movement and outside of time, before the ages, just as trees or other creatures near water are seen in the water, for although they are not physically in it, their every shape appears in it. For when God said, "Let there be!" (Gn 1:3 etc.), immediately they were clothed with form, as his foreknowledge saw them before the ages when they did not yet have physical bodies. For as all things shine in the mirror before which they stand, so in the holy divinity all his works appeared outside of the passage of time. And how could God lack the work he foreknew, since his every work, after it is clothed with a body, fulfills the task appointed for it, because the holy divinity foreknew how to be present in knowing, understanding, and serving? For just as a ray of light reveals the particular shape of a created thing through its shadow, so God's pure foreknowledge looked upon the form of every created thing before it was embodied. For the work that God would make gleamed in his foreknowledge according to its likeness before it was embodied, just as one sees the sun's splendor before one is able to look upon its substance. And as the sun's splendor points to the sun itself, so too the angels reveal God by their praising; and as it is not possible for the sun to be without its light, so neither can the Divinity be without the angels' praise. God's foreknowledge both preceded and followed his work; and if God's foreknowledge had not existed first, his work would not have appeared. For if a person's face cannot be seen, his body cannot be recognized; but when a person's face is seen, his body can be praised. Thus God's foreknowledge and his work exist within him.

7. There was, however, a numberless multitude of angels who wished to exist on their own, for when they saw their own radiance, great and glorious in its flashing brilliance, they forgot their Creator. And even before they began to praise him, they were calculating among themselves that their honor's brilliance was so great that none could resist hem; so too they wished to vilify God. For when they saw that they could never reach the end of his wonders, they hated him; and though they ought to have praised him, with a foolish thought they declared that in their great splendor they would choose another god. Thus they fell into darkness, reduced to such impotence that they could do nothing to any creature except inasmuch as it was allowed them by their Creator. For because God had adorned the first angel, who was called Lucifer, with all of the ornaments of creation that he would give to every created thing, so that the whole rank [of angels] received its splendor from him, so, when he rebelled, he was made more horrifying than every horror, for the holy divinity in its zeal cast him out into the place that is without light.

8. *But at the tip of the arc where the left wing curves back there is as if a human face that shines like the brilliance of the stars*. This is because in the summit of conquering humiliation, when humans crush with humility the earthly circumstances that stand in their way—as if on the left—and turn themselves to their Creator's protection, they will come to possess their human countenance, for it is not according to herd animals but according to what human nature teaches them that they begin to live in moral integrity.[12] Thus, in their righteous works, too, they show that the good intention of their hearts shines as an outstanding splendor.

9. For when God said, "Let there be light!" (Gn 1:3), there arose a rational light—the angels,[13] both those who remained with God in truth and those who fell into the outer darkness

[12] Cf. 3.3.2 and 3.5.4; and Hildegard, *Explanatio Symboli Sancti Athanasii*, pp. 127-8.
[13] Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 11.9.

without any light,[14] because they denied that the True Light, which existed in brilliance without beginning before the ages, was God, and because they wanted to be like him in a way that was impossible. Then God caused another life, which he contained within a body, to arise, and this is humankind. To them he gave the place and the glory of the lost angel, to complete in the praise of God what the latter had refused to do. Moreover, in that human face are signified those people who, though given to the world in body, yet serve God continually in spirit and do not, on account of this body that remains in and of the world, forget what is of the spirit in the service of God. *And these faces are turned towards the east*, for both spiritual and secular people who desire to serve God and keep their souls in life ought to convert themselves to the dawn of a holy way of life and blessedness.

10. *Furthermore, from each shoulder of this image, a single wing stretches forth down to her knees*, for in the strength of [Divine] Love, God's Son brought to himself the righteous and the sinners and lifted them both by the shoulders—because they had lived rightly—and by the knees—because he had recalled them from the way of injustice—and made them consorts of the citizens of heaven, as too one lifts the things one carries with both the knees and the shoulders. For in the knowledge of Love, humankind has been led in soul and body to the fullness of pure integrity, though they are very often moved away from an upright and steadfast posture. When the gifts of the Holy Spirit pour forth upon them from above in pure and holy abundance, they teach them many things about heavenly and spiritual matters. They also instruct humans in a different way about earthly concerns for the necessary use of the body—though humans understand that in these matters they are weak and infirm and mortal, despite being defended by these manifold gifts.

11. Moreover, *she is clothed with a robe like the brilliance of the sun*. This is because with Love, the Son of God put on a human body without any spot of sin, in the likeness of the sun's beauty. For as the sun shines before the rest of creation at so great a height that no person can touch it, so too no human knowledge is able to grasp the humanity of God's Son and how it came to be, except by believing. And in her hands she holds a lamb, shining like the light of day, for in the works of the Son of God, Love offered the gentleness of true faith, shining above all things, when he chose from among the tax collectors and sinners his martyrs, confessors, and penitents, and when out of the wicked he made the righteous, as when he made Paul from Saul, so that they might fly upon the wings of the winds (Ps 17:11[18:20]), that is, upon the heavenly harmony. Thus, Love completed her work deliberately, one small and distinct piece at a time, so that in it there would be no weakness but rather all fullness. Humans cannot do this, for when they have even the slightest potential of doing something, they can barely keep at it long enough to bring it to completion so that others can see it. A person should think upon these things within himself, for the little bird, when it first hatches from the egg and does not yet have feathers, does not hurry to fly; but after it has received its feathers, it flies to the place it sees as most fitting for itself.

12. *Moreover, she is treading with her feet a monster, dreadful in appearance and venomous and black in color, and also a serpent*. This means that true Love, through the footsteps of God's Son, bruises discord's injury, which is misshapen by its excessive vices and horrifying because of its many perversities, and poisonous in deception and black in perdition. Likewise, she bruises the

[14] Cf. Mt 8.12, 22.13, and 25.30.

ancient serpent as he lays traps for the faithful, for upon the cross the Son of God reduced him to nothing. *The serpent fixes its mouth upon the right ear of the monster and, wrapping the rest of its body around the monster's head, stretches its tail along the monster's left side all the way to its feet*. For the devil, while pretending to act benignly, sows his deceit and discord, and lightly littering every type of vice here and there at their beginning, in their end he shows himself to possess the perversity of discord's worst fulfillment. For the serpent, who in his trickery is more cunning than other worms (Gn 3:1), destroys in that cunning everything he can and turns it to himself in the worst possible way, which the various colors of his skin also signify. Satan, too, acted this way, for when he recognized his own beauty, he wished that he could be like his Creator. This is also what he whispered to Man as if through the head of the serpent, and he will not stop doing so until the end of time, as signified by his tail.

13. And so Love is in the wheel of eternity outside of time,[15] just as heat is in fire. For God foreknew in eternity all his created beings, which he brought forth in the fullness of Love so that humans would lack in them no refreshment or service, for he joined them to humankind as flames are to fire. Moreover, God established the first angel with very many adornments, as described above, but when the latter saw himself, he looked upon his Lord with hatred and wished himself to be lord. But God cast him down into the well of the abyss. Then that transgressor introduced his evil plan to Man, and Man consented to it.

14. For when God created Man, he clothed him with heavenly clothing, to shine in great radiance. But the devil, seeing the woman, recognized that she would be the mother of a great world, and with the same malice by which he fell from God, he undertook to overcome God by the latter's own work—so he turned the work of God, which is humankind, into his own ally. Then the woman, sensing that in tasting of the fruit she had become something different, gave the fruit to her husband—and so both lost their heavenly clothing.[16]

15. But when God then said, "Adam, where are you?" (Gn. 3:9), he signified by this that he would remember that he had made Adam in his own image and likeness (Gn 1:26), and that he would draw him back to himself. When he sent Adam into exile, God's own ministry of service covered up Adam's nudity, so that in place of the shining vesture, he received an animal skin, just as he exchanged paradise for exile. Indeed, God joined woman to man by the oath of fidelity, so that this fidelity between them might never be destroyed, but that they should come together as one in mind, just as God joined them together into one, body and soul. Therefore, whoever should destroy this fidelity and thus remain impenitent and without correction, will be cast into the land of Babylon, into the land of confusion and drought, so to remain without the beautiful viridity of the field, that is, of God's blessing. And God's vengeance will fall upon him, even to the last line of descendants proceeding from his hot blood, because this sin touches that man.[17]

16. And as Adam is the father of the whole human race, so too through the Son of God, who was incarnate in virgin nature, has come forth a spiritual people, who will ascend as God promised

[15] See further *Book of Divine Works* 3.5.
[16] Cf. 3.4.7; *Letter* 223r (3:19); and *Cause et Cure* 2.90 (p. 78): "Before Adam and Eve had violated the divine precept, they gleamed like the sun in its brilliance, and that brilliance was for them like clothing. But when they transgressed God's precept, they gleamed no longer as they had before, but were darkened, and so in that darkness they endured."
[17] I.e., the adulterer's "hot blood" withers the holy viridity of marriage.

to Abraham through the angel, that his seed should be as the stars of heaven, as it is written: "'Look up to heaven and number the stars, if you can.' And he said to him: 'So shall your seed be.' Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (Gn 15:5-6) This is open to understanding thus: You, who worship and venerate God with a good will, look upon God's secrets and examine the reward of their merits who shine before God day and night—if this is even possible for a human being, who is burdened by the body's weight. For as long as humans taste of what is of the flesh, they will not be able fully to grasp what is of the spirit. And in true revelation it is said to that person who labors to worship God with the upright sighs of his heart: "In this way shall the seed of your heart be multiplied and enlightened, that what you have sown on good ground is watered by the Holy Spirit's grace. It shall rise up and shine many times over in blessed virtues before the supreme God, just as the stars twinkle in the firmament." Therefore, whoever should faithfully believe the divine promise and hold the lofty height of true faith in God, so that they despise all earthly things and reach out towards the heavenly, will be accounted righteous among the children of God, for they have loved the truth and have had no guile in their hearts.

17. For God also recognized that Abraham's spirit was without the serpent's guile, for he did his works to the injury of none. So God chose from his stock that sleeping earth that had no knowledge at all of the taste of that by which the ancient serpent deceived the first woman.[18] This earth was prefigured by Aaron's staff (Nm 17:8) to be the Virgin Mary, who in her great humility was the enclosed bedchamber of the King. For when she received from the throne the message that the Highest King wished to live in her enclosure, she looked upon that earth from which she was created and replied that she was the handmaid of God (Lk 1:38). The woman who was first deceived [i.e. Eve] did not do this, since she desired to have what she ought not to have had. But Abraham's obedience, in which God proved Abraham's faith when he showed him the ram caught in the thorns (Gn 22:13), prefigured the obedience of the Blessed Virgin, who, believing the word of God's messenger, wished that it should be done unto her according to that messenger's word (Lk 1:38). Thus, the Son of God, whom the ram hanging in the thorn-bushes had prefigured, put on the clothing of flesh in her. Furthermore, when God said that the race of Abraham would be multiplied according to the stars of heaven, he foresaw that this race should be reckoned as the full number of the celestial court. And since Abraham trusted faithfully in God in all things, so he is called the father of those who will be the heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And so all who fear and love God should lay open the devotion of their hearts to these words and know that they have been offered for the saving of humans in body and soul, not indeed by a human being, but by me, the One who am (Ex 3:14).[19]

[18] For the image of "sleeping earth," cf. 2.1.32, on Gn 1.9; and *Letter* 389 (3:186, 189-90).
[19] This formulaic exhortation closes each of Part I's four visions; the single vision of Part II has its own unique closing, while the five visions of Part III share an exhortation that, though modified, is similar to that of Part I. Similar exhortations close each vision in *Scivias* and *LVM*.