

## **Elisabeth of Schönau**

(1129-1165)

Fr. Hugh Feiss, OSB

Although there are more manuscripts of Elisabeth of Schönau's Latin writings than there are manuscripts of the works of Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Julian of Norwich combined, she is far less known today than these other medieval mystics. One reason for this is that today mystics draw attention for what sets them apart as unique individuals. Elisabeth, by contrast, is very much a part of her landscape. She was a Benedictine nun, whose writings express the outlook of the community of which she was a part. We have no ancient biography of Elisabeth, but her brother, Abbot Ekbart, did write an account of her death.

Elisabeth became a Benedictine nun at the age of 12. Her family were prominent and pious. When she had her first visionary experience in 1152, she had already been a nun for 11 years. Her experiences began as she was coping with a severe bout of depression. The visions, which brought her contact with the Virgin Mary and the saints, and the prayers of her community healed her. Her visionary experiences, which were often preceded by periods of intense illness, are usually tied to the liturgy. At times in her trance-like visions she received answers to theological questions. As time went on, she uttered prophecies, and in this, as well as in her denunciations of abuses in the church and of the Cathar heretics, she resembles Hildegard of Bingen with whom she corresponded and visited. In her popular and highly romanticized version of the story of the martyr St. Ursula and her companions, Elisabeth turns them into a vast extended family, an idealized portrait of the church and of Elisabeth's own family, where included bishops, abbots and nuns.

Schönau had been established as a Benedictine monastery for men in 1114. It was dependent upon the abbey of Schaffhausen until 1125/6 when it became independent and a women's cloister was added. This combination of men's and women's communities was typical of the monastic movement connected with Hirsau, which also played a part in the foundation of the abbey of Engelberg. Elisabeth's brother Ekbart was a deacon working in Bonn. He became a priest and monk at Schönau in 1155, and later became abbot. By 1156 Elisabeth was mistress of the nun's community. At the bidding of the abbot, Ekbart became Elisabeth's secretary and editor. Elisabeth left behind a considerable body of writings: three books of visions, a short text about the Assumption of Mary, visions about the martyrdom of St. Ursula and her companions, The Book of the Ways of God, and some letters.

The Book of the Ways of God is one of her most interesting texts. It begins with an editorial introduction. "This is The Book of the Ways of God, which the angel of God most high announced to Elisabeth, handmaid of Christ and of the living God, in the 1156th year of the Lord's incarnation, in the fifth year of her visitations when the Spirit of the Lord visited her frequently for the salvation of all who receive the fatherly warnings of God with grateful praise." Elisabeth then speaks in the first person. The series of vision which form the basis of this book began just before the feast of Pentecost, June 3, 1156, and ended on August 22, 1157.

Around the feast of Pentecost she had a series of visions of a mountain with ten paths leading to the summit. On the top of the mountain (=celestial life) was a man whose face was shining like the sun (=Christ, cf. Rv 1.13-17). The paths, which are divided into three groups, represent ten categories within the church: (1) contemplatives (blue) , actives (green), martyrs (purple); (2) three orders of life in the church: married people, unmarried, chaste people (virgins, widows), leaders; (3) those who divided their days, first living legitimately in the world, then entering the ranks of the chaste (widows); hermits; young children who die before the age of seven; adolescents. Most of the paths have specific difficulties and advantages. Of all the paths, she favors the path of contemplation because she believes it is the one Jesus walks, and because the saints in heaven are engaged in contemplation. Nevertheless, though Christ "did not appear on all the paths," nevertheless, "He was on them all because they each represent the virtues through which the righteous people come to the mountain.... On all the paths of truth, God must be contemplated."

Later, Elisabeth had a vision of the communion of saints, people who followed the different paths and were now reigning with Christ. She then asks that her readers consider their own paths, and, if necessary, correct themselves with humility, charity and obedience. Elisabeth received a sermon for those on each of the paths. Each sermon is given on a particularly liturgical day and in some cases at a particular hour. First, she warns the contemplatives (clergy and religious) to avoid pride, avarice and lust. They have a duty to illumine the world by word and example. As she ponders the paths, she realizes that there are duplications and overlappings. For example, monastics are on the path of contemplation and on the path of chastity. She is told that there are also many on the path of chastity who are not on the path of contemplation, and many clerics who walk neither path.

Those on the path of action should fulfill their duties, act fairly, and love God and neighbor. They should venerate the sacraments, defend the defenseless. The angel admonished the married: "give honor to your order, which God has deigned to honor. Do not introduce breach or stain into your union.... Let there be one home, one table, a shared wealth, one bed, and one soul for you, and make room for the fear of the Lord in your midst." After warning about the need for continence even in marriage, the angel says: "With patience and compassion let the man support the frailties of the woman and the woman support the frailties of the man." In particular, the angel condemns layers of fancy cloths, which "consume what could be the bare necessities of the poor." In response to a question, the angel tells Elisabeth that the Cathars are wrong on many things, including the assertion that only two people who are virgins can lawfully marry. The sermon to unmarried chaste Christians includes a carefully drawn distinction between impulse/temptation, the choice to act (Intention), and the act itself.

She had hoped to receive the sermon for hermits and solitaries on the feast of the translation of St. Benedict, but her prayers were hindered that day by the presence of guests. The next day, after the chapter meeting, the angel appeared with a sermon urging discretion. The sermon for adolescents was received "on the fifth of August, in the morning, after Matins, while I was lying on my bed and had not yet begun to sleep." It contains admonitions for both young women and young men. The sermon for young children is mainly directed to their parents, urging them to

guide and discipline their children so that when they reach the age of personal responsibility at seven years, they will be on the right path.

When the series of sermons was completed, Elisabeth wrote a letter to the bishops of Trier, Mainz, and Cologne commanding them to preach the message of the book: "Read and hear the divine admonitions and receive them with a peaceful mind. Do not judge that they are the figments of women, because they are not. Rather, they are from God the omnipotent Father, who is the fount and source of all goodness."

#### Bibliography

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