

Miraculous Womb, Radiant Flesh: Divine images in Hildegard's *O virga ac diadema*

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Hildegard's song for the Virgin are remarkable for the fact that they focus almost exclusively on the Virgin's role as royal consort, with very little about Mary, the human person, first century woman of courage and faith, and mother of Jesus of Nazareth. Hildegard's Virgin is more than human, with her miraculous womb and radiant flesh. In this paper I investigate the Divine images in Hildegard's song, "O virga ac diadema." Using Elizabeth Johnson's work, I propose that the attributes of the Virgin as exemplified in this song more appropriately belong to the Divine. By restoring the Virgin's attributes of life-giving mother, full of divine compassion and mercy, exercising the power of re-creating energy, and immanent in all creation, to the Divine, the dominant images of God as triumphant warrior, distant King and stern judge are decentred. Looking at Hildegard's songs through this lens it is clear that the Virgin she rhapsodies about in poetry and music is really an aspect of the Divine.

O Virga ac diadema is one of Hildegard of Bingen's sixteen songs celebrating the Virgin. It is interesting to note that it was regarded as her favourite. In the "Proceedings of the inquiry into the virtues and miracles of S. Hildegard," written after Hildegard's death in 1279 in preparation for her canonisation, Hedwig, a lay sister reports:

the blessed Hildegard was constantly sick in bed from the scourge of God, except when she was irradiated by the Holy Spirit. Then she would walk about the monastery singing that sequence inspired by the Holy Spirit which begins: 'O sceptre and diadem!' With this the cellarer and guardian agreed on oath (Silvas, 1998:263).¹

This story may be an imaginative looking back at this much-revered twelfth century *Magistra*, but since there was a sense of this song being highly regarded by Hildegard herself, then a close analysis might reveal something of what she wanted her predominantly female community to learn and experience in the words and music of *O Virga ac diadema*. I argue elsewhere that Hildegard's songs, together with her other works, formed a comprehensive educational program for her community.² In this paper, I link Hildegard's visions of the Divine and of the

virtuous life, expressed in Hildegard's theological, hagiographical, and medical works, to those expressed in the song, *O Virga ac diadema*. I suggest that the praise accorded to the Virgin in *O Virga ac diadema* belongs more appropriately to the Divine, and that seekers of more inclusive imagery for the Divine today, from within the Christian tradition, can find source material in Hildegard's songs. I do not suggest that Hildegard's twelfth century spirituality and contemporary spirituality are synonymous, but there are resonances which can nourish those pursuing the feminist theological project to re-imagine the Divine so that all humans are seen as being in the image of God.³

Table 1: The text

1a. O Virga ac diadema
purple regis,
que es in clausura tua
sicut lorica.

O branch [of the Jesse tree]
and diadem of royal purple
you are enclosed as
by a breast-plate.

1b. Tu frondens floruisti
in alia vicissitudine
quam Adam omne genus humanum
produceret.

You have flowered, your leaves unfolding
in another situation
than the one in which Adam brought forth
the whole human race.

2a. Ave, ave, de tuo ventre
alia vita processit
qua Adam filios suos
denudaverat.

Hail, hail, from your womb
came forth another life [eternal life]
which Adam had stripped
from his children.

2b. O flos, tu non germinasti de rore
nec de guttis pluvie,
nec aer desuper te volavit,
sed divina claritas
in nobilissima Virga te produxit.

O flower, you did not sprout from the dew
nor form drops of rain
nor did the wind blow over you
but Divine brightness [radiance]
generated itself within you, the most noble
branch.

3a. O Virga, floriditatem tuam
Deus in prima die
creature sue previderat.

O branch, God has foreseen
the manner of your flowering
on the first day of his creation.

3b. Et te Verbo suo auream materiam,
O laudabilis Virgo,
fecit.

And out of you,
O praiseworthy Virgin
he made the golden matter of his Word.

4a. O quam magnum est in viribus suis
latus viri de quo Deus
formam mulieris produxit,

O how great in its strength
is the flank of the man
from which God produced the form of the
woman.

quam fecit speculum
omnis ornamenti sui
et amplexionem omnis creature sue.

He made her the mirror of all his honour
and the [warm, loving, circling] embrace
of all his creation.

4b. Inde concinunt celestia organa

et miratur omnis terra,
O laudabilis Maria,
quia Deus te valde amavit.

From that time forth, heavenly musical
instruments
play in harmony and all the earth wonders
O praiseworthy Mary
For God has loved you intensely.

5a. [O] quam valde plangendum
et lugendum est quod tristitia in crimine
per consilium serpentis
in mulierem fluxit.

How right it is to weep and mourn intensely
because, through the serpent's counsel
sorrow for sin flowed
through a woman.

5b. Nam ipsa mulier
quam Deus matrem omnium posuit

viscera sua cum vulneribus ignorantie

decerpsit,

et plenum dolorem generi suo protulit.

For that woman
whom God established to be the mother of all
humans
injured her own innermost fleshly parts, her
womb
with the words of ignorance,
and brought consummate pain on her own kind.

6a. Sed, O Aurora,
de ventre tuo novus sol processit,
qui omnia crimina Eve abstersit
et maiorem benedictionem
per te protulit
quam Eva hominibus nocuisset.

But, O Dawn,
from your womb a new light has come forth
which has washed away all the sins of Eve
and brought through you a greater blessing,
than the one [the blessing]
which was ruined by Eve for humans.

6b. Unde, O Salvatrix,
que novum lumen

humano generi protulisti:
collige membra Filii tui
ad celestem armoniam.⁴

Whence, O Saviour
who brought forth the new light for
humankind
gather together
the members of your Son
into celestial harmony.

Latin (Newman, 1998:128-30) English translations: the author's.

At first reading, this song appears to celebrate the Virgin Mary, but what is notable in this song that although it is ostensibly about Mary, mother of Jesus, there is very little about this human woman's life. The Virgin, about whom Hildegard rhapsodises, is more like an immortal female Divine figure. This is also largely true of Hildegard's other Marian songs and her prose writings about the Virgin. Barbara Newman notes that "what seems most distinctive about this body of prose and song is the near-total absence of Mary as a person" (1987:187). She goes on to outline four aspects of the Virgin which she sees as preoccupying Hildegard's writings: first, she is a state of existence, an embodied Eden; secondly, she is the garden where God dwells; thirdly, she is all about beauty, joy, innocence and what Newman sees as asexual eros; and fourthly, her beauty is not in human form but the beauty of light, perfume, and music, all intangible essences (1987:187). These aspects are readily identifiable in *O virga ac diadema*, and all resonate more with the description of a Divine figure than the human person, Mary

of Nazareth. Hildegard's attitude towards the Virgin was in tune with Marian veneration in the twelfth century so it was not that she was introducing new concepts in her songs, but there is a creative weaving of these familiar images into fresh configurations.

Barbara Newman, discussing historical attitudes to the Virgin's role in the "holy family," notes that "Marian piety enjoyed its first great efflorescence among twelfth century monks, nuns, and canons" (1999:80). However, it did not stop at the door of the monastery, but "suffused and transformed the lay imagination as well" (1999:80). In a more recent article, Newman argues that twelfth century devotion to female Divine figures such as the Virgin was an important aspect to spiritual understanding and "deepened Christendom's concept of God" (2001:175). In texts such as Hildegard's poetic and evocative texts, figures like the Virgin, *Sapientia*, and various Virtues introduced "religious possibilities beyond the ambit of scholastic theology," bringing the Divine into close intimate relationship with the humanity (Newman, 2001:175). Newman argues that these "goddess figures" were not regarded as heretical, "nor did the ascription of goddess-like traits to the Virgin" alert authorities to possible worship of a female Divinity. She suggests that this leniency was accorded to "God's daughters" because "male God-language was taken literally and therefore carefully regulated, while female God-language was accepted as *figurata locutio* and granted some latitude" (2001:192). Newman's insights bring to our attention that two thousand years of Christianity has seen both an emphasis on the Divine gendered male, as well as eras where the unrelievedly male image of the Divine was broadened to include other genders, as well as models from the natural world. I do not argue for parallels between the twelfth and twenty-first centuries; however, there are rich resources to tap in the earlier era.

In the twenty-first century, Marian devotion has the potential to provide a source of images of the Divine that can be more nourishing for women, and Hildegard's songs such as *O virga ac diadema* provide a rich seam to mine from within the Christian tradition. However, there needs to be some distinctions made between the attributes of the Virgin and the qualities of Mary. In her 1989 article "Mary and the Female Face of God," Elizabeth Johnson proposes that "female images of God arguably necessary for the full expression of the mystery of God but suppressed from official formulations, have migrated to the figure of this woman" (1989:500). She suggests that "the retrieval of those elements in the Marian symbol which properly belong to Divine reality, and the direct attribution of them to God imaged as female" (1989:501) would go a long way towards redressing the injustice to women of a patriarchal God imagined as male, establishing ways of imaging the Divine which would resonate with women's reality and experience. This is a radical move in direct contrast to what centuries of Christian theologising has constructed around the Virgin. From the Gospel narratives about a young woman who bears a child out of wedlock, has been built a myth about the Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, immaculately conceived, impregnated by a spiritual breath, birthing mysteriously from a virgin womb, with the power to dispense salvation through her role as mediator and champion of humans. Now Johnson is

proposing that these mystical attributes be shifted to become attributes of the Divine, thus imaging the Divine as female as well as male. She says:

For this renewal of the doctrine of God, for the growth in human dignity of real women made in her image and likeness, and for a properly directed theology of Mary within a liberating community of disciples, it would be well to allow this imagery to disperse beyond Mary, in the direction of the reality of the holy mystery of God (1989:526).

Johnson's proposal goes to the heart of the twenty-first century feminist theological project, that of re-imaging the Divine in ways that allow women and other marginalized people to imagine themselves as reflecting this Divinity.

Johnson does not propose that all the attributes that have become attached to the Virgin are ones that could be rightfully appropriated as images of the Divine. She suggests that there are five images of the Divine which could be retrieved from Marian imagery: first, the image of God as mother; secondly, the idea of the Divine as mercifully compassionate; thirdly, the power and might of the Divine to protect and save, liberate and heal; fourthly, the concept of God as immanent in all creation; and fifthly, the Divine as source of re-creative energy (1989:520-25). These images suggest a Divine both transcendent and immanent, mighty in the power to save and heal, but personally and intimately involved in relating to humanity and all creation. Johnson's proposal does not "close the door" on the Virgin as does Marina Warner's claim. Warner suggests that what she calls the myths about the Virgin Mary, the constructions which have been erected around her legend, are bankrupt, and that "the moral code she affirms has been exhausted" (1976:338). Warner's rejection of all that has been woven around the Virgin over two millennia seems disrespectful, both to Mary of Nazareth, the historical woman of faith and discipleship, and to the millions of women and men who have found spiritual comfort and nourishment in Marian devotion over the past two millennia. Admittedly, some of this devotion has led to oppressive attitudes to women, but it has at least kept alive some vestiges of female Divine imagery. Johnson's proposal goes a long way towards ensuring that those attributes that worshippers have treasured, are able to be retrieved. However, the danger is that in the transfer, they will become submerged in patriarchal images of the Divine that have considerable residual power, and are supported consciously and unconsciously by Christian institutions. There is another problem, and that is in deciding which attributes to imagine as belonging to the Divine, and which attributes need to be de-emphasised.

Warner rightfully points out that the problem lies in the contradiction in the Marian myth that has been used to confuse and torment women. As exemplified in *O virga ac diadema*, Mary is both virgin and mother at the same time, a feat most often taken to be an impossibility. She is not sexually active, and yet is able to birth a child. She alone is able to become a mother without marriage, and escape the censure of the Church. Her virginal state is lauded as the ideal, but for most women that was and is neither achievable nor desirable. As Warner puts it:

Mary establishes the child as the destiny of woman, but escapes the sexual intercourse necessary for all other women to fulfill this destiny. Thus the very purpose of women established by the myth with one hand is slighted by the other (1976:336).

Cristina Traina, in discussing the sexual dimensions of maternal experience, agrees, pointing out that there are ways of imagining Mary that are “damaging,” such as imagining her as never having had a sexual experience (2000:398). Traina includes birthing and breast-feeding, and nurturing in this category, and she argues that if the stigma were removed from “the patently sexual experiences of childbirth and nursing, Mary need not be seen as having eschewed sexual contact either” (2000: 398). It is not essential, she argues, to see the virgin birth as “logically or theologically necessary to the doctrine of the incarnation” (2000:398). This perspective contributes to imagining Mary, first century woman of courage and faith, as a fully human woman, separate from the Virgin with Her miraculous womb and radiant flesh. In this paper I take seriously Johnson’s suggestion that we return Divine attributes “in the direction of the reality of the holy mystery of God.” However, I suggest that we need to exercise caution in choosing which attributes are to be directed to the Divine, which are to be re-defined or de-emphasised, and which are to be returned to Mary of the Gospels.

Examining Hildegard’s *O virga ac diadema*, it is apparent that many of the attributes of the Virgin, who is the subject of praise and prayer in this song, could more appropriately be regarded as attributes of the Divine. The following table (table 2) lists those attributes together with the references in the song, and then categorises them according to Johnson’s five attributes.

Table 2: Attributes of the Divine in *O virga ac diadema*

Attributes of the Divine...	...in <i>O virga ac diadema</i>...	...related to Johnson's five categories
Womb is the source of life	Womb is not like a human organ – dawn shines through it (6a); it has the power to heal the broken womb of Eve (2a, 6a); womb is like gold, valuable (3b); brilliant light shines from it (6a);	1. God as mother
Virgin as warm lover of all creation	Embraces all creation (4a); matter from which God manifests (3a); saves humanity (6b); listens to prayer (6b)	2. Divine compassion and mercy
Queen of Heaven	Virgin is saluted as crowned and in royal purple (1a); atop the Jesse tree, descended from the royal line of David (1a,b, 3a) beloved of God (4b); saluted in heaven and on earth with music and adoration (4b); mirror of the Divine (4a); with God from the beginning (3a)	3. Divine power and might
Jesse tree, flowering branch, sign of fecundity	Her flowering on the Jesse tree shows the Divine in the world, active and fecund, re-creating and regenerating (1a,b, 2a,b, 3a,b)	4. The Divine is immanent as well as transcendent 5. Source of re-creating energy
Brings new life to all creation	As Dawn she brings the new light which also cleanses the past (6a,b) (see also Jesse tree imagery above)	5. Source of re-creating energy

In this paper I am going to discuss only the first of these attributes.

God as Mother

In *O virga ac diadema*, Hildegard emphasises the supernatural qualities of the Virgin's miraculous womb. I suggest that this image points not so much to Mary's birthing of Jesus, but to the Divine as birthing Godself, incarnate in creation.⁵ When Hildegard exclaims "*Ave, ave, de tuo ventre alia vita processit qua Adam filios suos denudaverat*: Hail, hail, from your womb came forth another life which Adam had stripped from his children," she envisages a Divine womb which has the power to confer eternal life. In this sense, this miraculous, Divine womb is the source of life. In six of the sixteen songs dedicated to the Virgin, Hildegard gives considerable attention to the Virgin's womb. In table 3, these instances are set out together with the properties that she associates with this miraculous womb.

Table 3: The Virgin's womb ⁶

Instances in song	Images
<i>Ave generosa: venter and viscera</i>	Music is heard coming from her womb; moisture floods it; it is full of joy.
<i>O virga mediatrix: viscera and venter</i>	Flowers burst from the womb; light shines from it.
<i>O viridissima virga: viscera</i>	Wheat grows in the flooding moisture in the womb, and grows so high birds make their nests there.
<i>O virga ac diadema: venter and viscera</i>	New life arrives; the sun shines from the womb as if through the dawn; Eve wounds her womb with ignorance, but the Virgin's womb is the source of healing for these wounds; regeneration brings new hope.
<i>O quam preciosa: viscera and venter</i>	Her womb is flooded with warmth; it is a secret place where beautiful flowers grow; again the sun shines out of it, as through the dawn.
<i>O tu illustrata: venter</i>	Again her womb is flooded with moisture, and flowers grow from it; the Spirit sucks out Eve's infection, and there is healing; again the womb is a secret place where beauty is concealed for a time.

Hildegard has taken the microcosm of the human female's womb from where a child is birthed, and invested it with macrocosmic proportions as a place where

creation is generated and re-generated. Birthing from a womb is a uniquely female activity, so the connection she is making is between what women do, and what God does, imaging the Divine as Mother. The womb Hildegard celebrates in song is a place where the Divine becomes manifest, and from where Divine light and sound emanate.

In addition to her theological, musical and poetic works, Hildegard left extensive medical writings that show some of what she understood about the womb as an organ of the body. In her *Causa et Cura* she writes that the womb is a space under a woman's navel where a child is able to grow (Berger, 1999:62), and that a woman has a space in her skull which allows the child in the womb to "get air" (1999:43). Her knowledge of anatomy has been proven to be technically incorrect, but it is significant that she saw a woman's body as being permeable, and able to allow the ingress of "air," the breath of the Spirit, a critical attribute considering the work she envisaged the Spirit accomplishing in ensouling the newly formed foetus in the womb. In the *Scivias* 1:4 Hildegard describes seeing a vision in which a woman has a perfect little human person in her womb receiving its Divine spirit from the heavens, and she likens the infant's subsequent movements to the earth blossoming and the sap rising (Hart and Bishop, 1990:107). In a parallel to this, there is a lengthy description in the *Causa et Cura* of how the newly installed soul works in the now vivified foetus as it grows, travelling through every vein and bone: "So the soul settles in this figure and examines all the places with which it will perform works, because it feels that it is going to move this entire figure as a wheel makes the mill turn" (Berger, 1999:46). Berger considers that "Hildegard elaborated in greater detail than other writers the correspondences between macro- and microcosm" (1999:131). Her anatomical knowledge might have been less sophisticated than a twenty-first century understanding of human reproduction, but one can see that she saw the human womb in the microcosm and creation in the macrocosm as the province of the Spirit.

In *O virga ac diadema*, Hildegard sees a "*novum lumen* – a new light" emanating from the miraculous womb of the Virgin. I suggest that it is significant that Hildegard directly experienced the Divine as *lux vivens*, living light. Mews says:

While John's gospel uses images of light and life to refer to the Incarnation, Hildegard employs the phrase *lux vivens*, never used in this way in previous Latin Christian literature, to describe the source of her inspiration (1998:55).

Hildegard describes this *lux vivens* in her letter to the monk Guibert in 1175. Mostly she sees the light in a reflecting surface like water:

This light I have named 'the shadow of the Living Light,' and just as the sun and moon and stars are reflected in water, so too are writings, words, virtues, and deeds of men [*homo*] reflected back to me from it" (Baird and Ehrman, 1998:23).

Later she says, "And sometimes, though not often, I see another light in that light, and this I have called 'the Living Light'" (Baird and Ehrman, 1998:23). It is

clear that for Hildegard this brilliant light is her direct experience of the Divine. This light is the new light of the song, *novus sol*, the *lux vivens* of the Incarnation, which shines from the Virgin's womb and which presages and brings to "light" the Divine for all creation to see and experience. In describing her highly intense awareness of the Divine in images such as a mother's miraculous womb, opening to allow radiant light to illuminate all creation and all creatures, Hildegard is shaping the imaginations of the women in her monastery, so that they too can experience the Divine as she often does, intensely female, continuously creating, lovingly relating to humanity as a mother is to her offspring. This image of the Divine is not passive, nor is Divine activity confined to a single delivery. Through what is like a portal between several realities, Divine illumination is continuously communicated to humanity, and humans are able to experience that which transforms the way in which they live with each other and all creation.

In a 1989 study, anthropologists and psychologists MacDonald et al suggested that, in many mystery traditions, portalling devices are used "at the junction between ordinary and non-ordinary realities" (1989:40). In defining portals they note:

The distinction between inside and outside bears a number of connotations...:known/unknown, safety/danger/sacred/profane...*portals* define thresholds and liminality presenting new possibilities for being. Another characteristic of portals is that they demarcate the qualities of transition...(1989:40).

They go on to say that, common to the experience of many mystics is the visualisation of a mandala-shaped object whose centre "typically opens up to become a threshold phenomenon of some sort: for example, a doorway, tunnel, cave, womb entrance" (1989:61).⁷ Hildegard's vision of the miraculous womb of the Virgin could be likened to the mystical portal suggested by MacDonald et al. At this site there is the possibility of an exchange between Divinity and humanity, a site where transformation could occur, and new possibilities for the virtuous and moral life, illuminated by knowledge and understanding, could be explored. This was, I argue, an important facet of Hildegard's creative activity, and she used multi-layered metaphorical imaginings to make these learnings come alive for the women in her monastery.

Hildegard's medical writings show that she believed that the womb was the seat of woman's physical pleasure, and that its opening and closing was related to a woman's orgasm. During intercourse "the woman's loins...contract, and all the members of her body that were prepared to open at menstruation close at once very tightly like a strong man enclosing something in his hand" (Berger, 1999:81). Hildegard also believed that a woman could experience pleasure in the uterus "without being touched by a man" (1999:62). In the microcosm, the opening and closing of the womb was not only for the creation and nurture of new life but also for enjoyment and physical pleasure, a delight in the body and its sensations, just as in the macrocosm the miraculous Divine womb opened to show Divine delight in creation, and to shower Divine blessings on creation.

Not only does the womb of God birth and shine, and is filled with joy and pleasure, but it has the capacity to heal as well. In a poignant reference to the Genesis story, Hildegard imagines Eve injuring her own womb. In the story, Eve's actions are the cause of her own subsequent pain in birthing and the pain of all women thereafter. However, the womb of the Virgin, shining with Living Light, produces that which heals all the pain and cleans the wounds, and in doing so almost justifies the first transgression; without it, the Divine would not have had the opportunity to express the love and forgiveness of a mother restoring a child to her good graces after an episode of disobedience. The regenerating activity of the womb is reminiscent of Hildegard's vision of the universe as a vast instrument (*maximum instrumentum*), pictured as a highly decorated mandorla, shaped like a womb (*Scivias* 1:3). In medieval terms, an instrumental cause was not an efficient cause; it was a means but not the instigator of an action. The instrument was regarded as the filter through which meaning flows in the way that music flows through, for example, a flute. The flute is not the music but the means by which the music is realised in sound and time. Hildegard's image of the universe is like a womb, the means by which the Divine as Mother continuously rebirths and regenerates all creation.

The image described and illuminated in *Scivias* 1:3, representing the universe, is subject to powerful forces which cause it to move in various ways. The "globe of sparkling flame" (Hart and Bishop, 1990:93) which represents the sun, moves up and down, and causes the flames which surround the vast instrument to rise, then die down. Hildegard connects the rising flames with the Incarnation:

Therefore *the globe sometimes raises itself up, so that much fire flies to it and therefore its flames last longer*. This means that when the time came that the Only-Begotten of God was to become incarnate for the redemption and uplifting of the human race by the will of the Father, the Holy Spirit by the power of the Father brought celestial mysteries wonderfully to pass in the Blessed Virgin; (Hart and Bishop, 1990:95).

Hildegard connects the dying flames to the misery and physical anguish suffered by the Incarnated One. However, the rising and falling of the flames is a continuous activity, indicating that she saw the Incarnation as a continuing Divine activity in the world, mediated through the Virgin's body. The "*maximum instrumentum*" could be thus said to be an analogy for a Divine womb, a metaphor which is reinforced by another attribute. Hildegard describes the moisture with which the "instrument" is flooded, and gives her key to this analogy. She sees an area of "*watery air with a white zone beneath it, which diffuses itself here and there and imparts moisture to the whole instrument....When this zone suddenly contracts, it sends forth sudden rain with great noise; and when it gently spreads out it gives a pleasant and softly falling rain*" (Hart and Bishop, 1990:97). This "flooding" is identified as the waters of baptism, the waters of birth into a new life. The concept of movement sometimes sudden and painful, sometimes gentle and pleasant, together with the idea of birth waters, added to Hildegard's identification of the "*maximum instrumentum*" with the universe, amplifies the

image of the Divine womb continuously re-birthing creation sometimes with anguish and pain and sometimes with gentle blessings.

There are some difficulties with womb imagery for the Divine. If images of the Divine are to resonate with the experience of all women and men, then womb imagery can exclude those who do not or have not yet birthed. In addition, romanticising God as Mother can work to elevate motherhood above all other aspects of parenting or being human. This can work to idealise motherhood, setting up impossible standards not only for discovering what it means to be a human person, but also what it means to mother, or become a mother, or experiencing being mothered. There are two approaches that can mediate these concerns, firstly looking more closely at women's actual experience of birthing. Naomi Wolf, analysing misconceptions around motherhood and birthing, keeps using the word "profound" and talks about the "white-knuckled struggle," "the most primal, joyful, lonely, sensual, psychologically challenging and physically painful experience" that a human can face, "a great work of stoicism, discipline and patience" (2001a:21). This is a realistic description of some women's experience of birth and motherhood. These images of a profound experience that is at the same time physically painful, yet sensual and joyful, requiring great courage to overcome the fear it engenders, resonate more closely with women's actual birthing experience. This, therefore, makes Divine images of God as mother and creation as both the womb itself and that which is birthed from the womb more resonant with human experience. Hildegard's descriptions of the Divine womb, shining, singing, moist, warm, regenerating, renewing, healing are full of images which counter images of a disembodied and distant Divine. Secondly, an approach which identifies experiences which are like birthing, such as the painful and yet joyous experience of bringing to fruition a creative work or a large project, works to counter exclusive patriarchal practices. This approach, in fact, resonates with the experiences of all humans, women, men and those who identify with other genders, such as lesbian, gay, transgender, trans-sexual and bi-sexual. In addition, being born from a woman's womb is an experience common, as yet, to all humans, even though all adult humans may not birth themselves. From an ecological perspective, imagining the Divine as a mother birthing the created world, could be an image which would nourish all humans. It could work to suggest to us that in becoming Divine ourselves, we should be like the mother who accepts the care of the fruits of her womb with love and compassion.

In the twenty-first century, Gael O'Leary has taken up Johnson's challenge to enshrine nourishing images of the Divine in art. Her painting "Birthed from the Womb of God" portrays the Divine as a woman in labour, about to deliver. Her legs are widespread and her cervix dilated. She says:

The stretched cervix draws us into the mystery and depth of the womb. The dash of red there is symbolic of the on-going life/love process, and a reminder that there we have been known, nurtured and carried, enclosed in an environment of tender love and protection (1987:34).

The woman is resting, as if between contractions, not fearful, but deeply concentrating on her body and what lies ahead. The image is graphic and

potentially disturbing to those who may not have considered imagining the Divine as female, but as O'Leary says, we are all human and yet differentiated. In our differentiation, she suggests, we need:

such images to glimpse the richness of the transcendences of God. The more we can touch into and reflect on the richness of our womanhood and our uniqueness in humankind, the more we add to our understanding of the image of God (1987:33).

The quiet repose suggested in the painting is reminiscent of what Schipperges, writing about Hildegard's views of the universe, says of God's delight in humanity: "It was not a Spirit encompassing the universe that actually illuminated and enlightened it, but woman's quietly gestating womb" (1998:139). O'Leary's painting is one artist's attempt to add dimensions to the imaging of the Divine, in this case as birthing mother. The distinction she makes between difference and differentiation is also useful. It has been unhelpful for women to be categorised as essentially different to males. Recognising that there needs to be some acknowledgement of differentiation between genders is helpful in the feminist project of expanding images of the Divine to include multi-faceted images which are female as well as male, gendered as well as non-gendered.

In her early theological work, Hildegard records her vision of a powerful woman, representing the Church, with a red glow like the dawn shining at her breast (*Scivias* 2:3).

After this I saw the image of a woman as large as a great city, with a wonderful crown on her head and arms from which a splendor hung like sleeves, shining from Heaven to earth. Her womb was pierced like a net with many openings, with a huge multitude of people running in and out. She had no legs or feet, but stood balanced on her womb in front of the altar that stands before the eyes of God, embracing it with her outstretched hands and gazing sharply with her eyes throughout all of Heaven (Hart and Bishop, 1990:169).

Black children are caught up in the net of her womb, like fish swimming in water caught in the fisherman's net, and then the woman "groaned, drawing them upward to her head, and they went out by her mouth" (Hart and Bishop, 1990:169), now clothed in pure white garments. Hildegard's exegesis of the vision makes it clear that the woman is the Church, labouring in birth, "always pregnant and procreating children of hers by the true ablution" (1990:171). As Newman says, Hildegard "compares the catechumens to fish and the womb of Ecclesia to a fishnet, which is presumably the net of Peter, the fisher of men" (1987:230). However what is extraordinary is what Newman calls the "feminisation" of the image (1987:230). On the altar is a woman tenderly holding her "quietly gestating" womb, from which she re-births humanity into the community of the faithful. Hildegard sees that she has no legs and feet because she, *Ecclesia*, "has not yet been brought to the full strength of her constancy" (Hart and Bishop, 1990:171). The transformation of creation into wholeness, the full embodiment of Divinity, has not yet been achieved. Yet the woman Hildegard envisions brings not only her

creativity (her miraculous womb), but also her rationality to the work of transformation:

for her purpose...can be obscured by no wickedness: no persuasion or devilish art, nor error of a wavering people, nor storms over the various countries in which madmen tear themselves to pieces in the fury of their unbelief (Hart and Bishop, 1990:172).

This Divine image is female, welcoming humanity into her miraculous womb which she embraces with a tender gesture of mother-love, re-birthing them tenderly through her mouth (her Word is their baptism into the community of the faithful), yet intently focussed on all creation, alert for danger to herself and the community.

Retrieving images of the Divine from the living tradition of Marian worship is an important aspect of the feminist theological project and this paper is a contribution to this on-going work. Hildegard's songs, such as *O virga ac diadema* are rich in diverse images of the Divine. In this paper I have explored just a few aspects of one area, the imaging of the Divine as mother. Hildegard's song of praise for the Virgin's body, her miraculous womb and radiant flesh, encourage all humans, in this case especially women, to see the Holy One as closely related to themselves, bringing their bodily experience into direct relationship with their imaging of the Divine presence in their lives.

Endnotes

1. Jeffreys also refers to this report with the additional information that the custodian and cellarer was a person according to the Rule of St Benedict who had to be "wise, mature, sober and a moderate eater (among other things)" (2000:36). Hildegard had lived under the rule of Benedict for almost all of her eighty-one years in twelfth century Germany. She was *Magistra* of two communities, at Rupertsberg and Eibingen and justly renown, in her lifetime, as a visionary and prophet. She also composed at least seventy-seven songs for worship.
2. In my PhD dissertation (forthcoming) I argue that Hildegard's songs were part of a comprehensive educational program for her community. In this dissertation I analyse both the music and the text but in this paper I concentrate on text alone. In doing so, I acknowledge that Hildegard regarded words and music inseparable as body and spirit. In her first theological work she reiterates the impossibility of disconnecting the body and the soul when she says: "And so the words symbolise the body, and the jubilant music indicates the spirit" (*Scivias* 3:13, in Hart and Bishop, 1990:533). However, for the purposes of this paper I will take the liberty of separating the text from the music in order to consider the kinds of praise being directed to the subject of the song, the Virgin, and some of the spiritual truths that are conveyed to the singers.
3. For example, Patricia Fox expresses this aspect of the feminist theological project well in the introduction to her 2001 publication *God as Communion: John Zizioulas, Elizabeth Johnson, and the Retrieval of the Symbol of the Triune God*. She argues that "the symbols of God exercise enormous power within the lives of human beings and that they are significant for the well-being of all creation" (2001:vii). She goes on to name "the destructive power of sexism inherent in Christian theology and praxis" as

needing transformation. One goal of this transformation would be to more clearly reveal the Divine presence.

4. The Latin text is from Newman's critical edition (1998:128-30). The English translation is my own, however, I am indebted to Dr Drina Oldroyd for her assistance.

5. This is one level at which I suggest this stanza works to reflect Hildegard's sense of the Divine birthing Godself, but medieval interpretation often works at more than one level without seeming incompatibility. At another level, this stanza also works to celebrate the more orthodox idea of the human Mary birthing the child Jesus.

6. I have translated both *venter* and *viscera* as "womb." *Venter* indicates the womb or the stomach. *Viscera* has the connotation of the internal organs, the innermost parts, the entrails, but was also understood to refer to the womb.

7. A *mandala* is a circular two-dimensional figure, often elaborately decorated, sometimes circling in a swirling pattern to a central point. Hildegard's illuminations often feature such figures, for example *Scivias* 2:2 where a sapphire man is pictured within swirling circles. Her understanding of these patterns was as Divinely inspired visions; however, one can recognise in them similar patterns to those used for meditation in Tibetan Buddhism for example, or in the labyrinth, such as that preserved in twelfth century Chartres Cathedral.

8. In her song *O clarissima mater* Hildegard refers to the Virgin as *vivificum instrumentum*, life-giving instrument, further suggesting the connection Hildegard makes between her vision of the universe and the Virgin's womb.

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