

# Hildegard's Green Grace

Kay Bonikowsky

If Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) were cut, she might just bleed green, so deep was her love for the color and all it symbolized.

As a Benedictine abbess known for her wide-ranging interests, Hildegard is original in countless ways. Perhaps nothing illustrates her inventiveness more than her use of the color green as a broad theological motif. Although Hildegard seldom employs established theological terminology, her systematic teaching about *viriditas*, or “greening,” represents her doctrine of divine grace. Hildegard’s *viriditas* is God’s energetic life-force, a figurative “green sap”<sup>1</sup> bestowing fertile blessing in nature, divine life through Christ, and spiritual vitality in the believer. *Viriditas* pulses strongly through Hildegard’s theology; it is the green lifeblood of her theological universe.

Since Hildegard’s novel use of *viriditas* springs from her life experiences, this article will provide a short biography of these experiences. Then, after defining the term *viriditas*, we will look at Hildegard’s specific teachings about *viriditas* to get the full scope of her theological thought. Finally, the purpose of this study is to inspire today’s church to view creation and humanity through Hildegard’s green lens.

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## Hildegard of Bingen

It was a three-year-old Hildegard who received her first vision from God.<sup>2</sup> From then on, she was constantly aware of a fiery light that remained in her consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Facing ridicule as a child for sharing her vision, she fell silent about it at the age of fifteen, confiding only in her mentor, the abbess Jutta (1091–1136).<sup>4</sup> In 1141, at the age of forty-three, Hildegard received a divine command. She heard a voice declare: “Write down what I tell you!” Initially, she resisted, but her refusal resulted in a long illness which only relented as she took up her pen. Describing herself as “a fragile and wretched creature,” Hildegard obeyed, writing what she saw and heard with a “trembling hand.”<sup>5</sup>

Hildegard’s visions are explained in her three theological works: *Scivias* (*Know the Ways*), *Liber vitae meritorium* (*Book of Life’s Merits*), and *Liber divinorum operum* (*Book of Divine Works*). The medieval scholar Peter Dronke (1934–2020) emphasizes that Hildegard herself attributes her theology to her visions, yet Dronke recognizes her mastery of Scripture and extensive reading as the foundation of her thought. Hildegard weaves truth with her

evocative insight to develop a unique theological style. Dronke also observes that, even though she had been informed by early Christian and medieval writings, “She took nothing ready-made.”<sup>6</sup> Her three theological treatises reflect both original insight and careful scholarship centering on creation spirituality—a materialistic cosmology revealing how the triune God redeems his creation.

Hildegard wrote and taught most often in the context of her Benedictine community of nuns. At the age of eight she was dedicated by her devout family as a postulant to the monastery in Disibodenburg, Germany. When she was thirty-eight, the nuns elected her as their *magistra*, which is similar to a Mother Superior.<sup>7</sup> It was in this setting that Hildegard helped form the spiritual lives of these women. The monastery was surrounded by the lush, productive countryside of the Rhine Valley. Priest and theologian Matthew Fox describes this region’s rich soil, winding rivers, and fertile fruit orchards and vineyards, crediting them as a source for Hildegard’s vivid metaphor of *viriditas*.<sup>8</sup>

Later, while building her own monastic foundation at Rupertsberg near Bingen, Hildegard won the approval of mystic, abbot, and reformer Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), and through Bernard’s influence, Pope Eugenius III (1088–1153) recognized the authenticity of her divine gifts. In 1147, the pope instructed her to record whatever she received from the Holy Spirit. With this sanction, she became an influential counselor, receiving requests for guidance from royalty, clergy, and politicians on matters ranging from theology to marriage.<sup>9</sup>

A true renaissance woman before her time, Hildegard’s gifts extended beyond theology. She was a music composer and a playwright. In 1158, she conducted four preaching tours sanctioned by the pope. She authored two encyclopedias on pharmacology. Her personal correspondence is a chronicle of the who’s who of the twelfth century. She died in 1179. In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI posthumously named her a Doctor of the Church.

## Defining *Viriditas*

Hildegard uses her concept of *viriditas* extensively, although she never clearly defines it.<sup>10</sup> Instead, she expounds on its location, characteristics, usefulness, source, abilities, and its scarcity. Hildegard transforms *viriditas* into a complex and flexible theological motif of God’s grace, applying it in multiple contexts and imbuing it with profound depth across the spectrum of nature, medicine, doctrine, and spiritual practices.

*Viriditas* is translated from Latin into English as “greenness” or “viridity.” It is not a coincidence to Hildegard that the first color mentioned in Scripture is green (Gen 1:30), because this color reflects the character and creative energy of God. As Hosea 14:8 suggests, God is like a fir tree that is always green. Hence, the plain sense of *viriditas* encompasses both the literal color and the figurative idea of fertility.

Hildegard adds an essential element to *viriditas* of not only greenness and growth, but moisture. That which lacks *viriditas* is dry (*ariditas*), whereas that which possesses *viriditas* is alive and fresh. Translators of her works, struggling to capture the meaning *viriditas* in one English word, render it variously as “freshness, vitality, fertility, fecundity, fruitfulness, verdure, [and] growth.”<sup>11</sup>

### Interpreting *Viriditas*

It is hard to pin down a one-word definition of *viriditas* because Hildegard does not build her system of thought with coherent, ordered structure and precise definitions. Instead, she gathers her diverse insights into a looser, more associative whole. Hildegard’s theology of *viriditas* is a living patchwork of insight into how God’s grace flows and enlivens his beloved creation. Millard Erickson, an evangelical systematic theologian, writes that grace “means that God supplies us with undeserved favors.”<sup>12</sup> In Hildegard’s cosmology, this favor is green, wet, and alive.

## Like Jesus who drew teaching inspiration from the landscapes around him, Hildegard employs the organic imagery of *viriditas* to express theological insight.

### *Viriditas in Creation*

Hildegard saw God’s grace at work literally in the material world, describing this *viriditas* as “the exquisite greening of trees and grasses” and the “earth’s lush greening.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike the Reformers centuries later, she does not delineate the differences between kinds of *viriditas* in terms of common grace and salvific grace. Rather, she presents God’s undeserved favor on humanity as flowing from the same source. Theologian Robert Shore-Goss describes her vision of *viriditas* as an “uninterrupted flow of God’s communicative love.”<sup>14</sup> God’s verdant grace is of one kind, offered universally through creation, incarnate in Christ, and imparted by the Spirit. It transforms all who receive it from dead dryness to lush, vibrant, divine life.

Hence, the essential element in the development of Hildegard’s theology of *viriditas* is its source. God shares his divine energy as *viriditas*. In her *Book of Divine Works*, she describes God as “the fiery life of divine essence” actively present in all creation—the sea, sun, moon, stars, wind, and flowers.<sup>15</sup> This living energy is not only a fiery power, it is greening<sup>16</sup>—a life force from the triune God who is “always in motion and constantly in action.”<sup>17</sup> Her concept of *viriditas* has been described as “God’s generative power that permeates and upholds the creation,”<sup>18</sup> echoing Acts 17:25–28: God “himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. . . . ‘For in him we live and move and have our being’” (NIV). *Viriditas* portrays God as living action that fills creation with constant greening power.<sup>19</sup>

It is only through God’s sharing of his own *viriditas* that the earth was formed and flourishes.<sup>20</sup> Author Allison Elledge notes that Hildegard views *viriditas* as analogous to the soul in plants and animals. God’s essence enters the natural world and is shared with all creatures.<sup>21</sup> In her work, *Physica*, Hildegard writes that

“the herbs vigorously imbibe [*viriditas*], as a lamb sucking milk.”<sup>22</sup> *Viriditas* in natural substances varies by degree in species, climates, and functional application. Even stones and gemstones, especially emeralds, receive green growth from God. *Viriditas* in plants can be transmitted to humans or animals through consumption. *Viriditas* can also be transmitted through the Eucharist, which for Hildegard, imparts divine grace. Those who partake the bread and wine “become green and fruitful from him so that they too bring forth the fruits of virtues.”<sup>23</sup>

Hildegard expounds on God’s green grace as an energetic force bestowing fertile blessing and divine favor across creation in poetic language similar to Psalm 104.<sup>24</sup> She speaks of the Holy Spirit bringing the waters that are the “source of the earth’s lush greening.”<sup>25</sup> In a song to St. Disibode (619–700), she exclaims, “O life giving greenness of God!”<sup>26</sup> When she describes God’s greenness falling on “the evil and the good,” “the righteous and the unrighteous,” she is quoting Jesus in Matthew 5:45, affirming that God rains his favor upon all. This rain is green and alive in Hildegard’s imaginative mind.

Like Jesus who drew teaching inspiration from the landscapes around him, Hildegard employs the organic imagery of *viriditas* to express theological insight. Jesus used sparrows, lilies, seeds, fig trees, vines, branches, and sheep to illustrate how God’s favor on humanity is evident all around us, a sign that God is here in our midst (Luke 17:21). Hildegard also desires to portray God as immanently involved in both the physical and spiritual realms. Acts 17:27 affirms that, through creation, God is not remote, but nearby. This immanence is at the heart of Hildegardian theology. She rarely frames the spiritual and physical as opposites. Instead, God’s *viriditas* represents the continual outpouring of God’s vigor for both physical and spiritual health, emphasizing the unity of creation with humans and the physical body with the soul. Author Carmen Butcher observes that Hildegard’s strength lies in her refusal to accept neat dichotomies like earth versus spirit, body versus soul, and nature versus humanity. Instead, Hildegard presents a unified vision, a “whole,” as Butcher puts it, rich in metaphor and bright with imagery, interwoven and alive.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, *viriditas* offers a vivid, organic lens through which we deepen our understanding of God’s favor not exclusively towards humanity, but towards all creation.

### *Viriditas in Salvation*

Hildegard’s vision of God as the source of *viriditas* extends beyond the material to the spiritual realm. *Viriditas* is the life-giving breath of God that gave humankind a soul in Genesis 2:7. Commenting on John 1:1, Hildegard writes that *viriditas* was the work of the Word from the beginning.<sup>28</sup> She writes: “The Word is . . . all verdant greening.”<sup>29</sup> The Holy Spirit, whom Hildegard describes as a “sweet greening power, sent the Word into the womb of the virgin.”<sup>30</sup> Referencing Genesis 3:15 where the woman’s seed is foretold as defeating the serpent, she describes Mary as producing the Spirit’s “glowing, most green, verdant sprout.”<sup>31</sup> Jesus is *viriditas* incarnate, preexistent, and proceeding from the Father’s “burning viridity.”<sup>32</sup> It is the incarnation that redeems us and the death of Jesus that awakens us. Hildegard writes, “Just as a mother gives milk to her children,” the Word pours his *viriditas* into humanity, bringing us new life.<sup>33</sup> She imagines Christ shaking out his green mantle saturated from the bubbling fountain of God’s *viriditas* so

that we might be “drenched, watered, with thousands of drops of precious dew.”<sup>34</sup>

Hildegard’s theology diverges from that of her contemporaries in that she does not center her thought on Augustine’s framework of fall and redemption.<sup>35</sup> While themes of sin and salvation appear in her work, they exist in the broader context of God’s activity throughout creation. Her cosmic Christ, though a redeemer in every sense, is primarily God’s self-sharing with all of creation, not only with humanity. In Jesus, God interacts perfectly with his creatures by becoming human. In her words, God says: “The human is the very garment with which my Son robed himself in royal splendor.”<sup>36</sup> As the Franciscan priest Richard Rohr observes, the cosmic Christ Jesus is “God materialized.”<sup>37</sup>

This materialization of God in Jesus expands Hildegard’s use of *viriditas*. Hildegard ties the teaching in Romans 1:20—that God’s invisible qualities (*viriditas*) are revealed in the created world—with Hebrews 1:3—that the radiance of God’s glory (*viriditas*) is found in the Son. *Viriditas* in both creation and in Christ represents the part of God accessible to human experience and understanding. She writes, “There is no creation that does not have a radiance. Be it greenness or seed, blossom or beauty, it could not be creation without it.”<sup>38</sup> Witnessing that radiance in creation and in the Son allows a glimpse of God.

Hildegard’s theology is rooted not only in the natural world, but also in her existential visions. It is these real encounters with God, rather than abstract academic reasoning, that gives her teaching such passion. She experiences faith not as a set of propositions but as a dynamic interaction with Christ.<sup>39</sup> Jesus, in her view, is “familiar and approachable,”<sup>40</sup> not a creed to rationalize. Hildegard’s poetic use of *viriditas* in her theological works and in her music conveys emotion as well as intellect, celebrating the emotions of both God and humanity.

The emphasis on passion contrasts with earlier Christian approaches, which often distrusted emotion. Thinkers like Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 394), influenced by a privileging of reason over passion, argued that corporeal affection must be suppressed to savor spiritual passion.<sup>41</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux extended this, suggesting that spiritual love replaces carnal desire.<sup>42</sup> Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254) emphasized the spiritual senses as superior to the five physical senses as ways to experience God. Hildegard departs from their lead by affirming that “God is delighted with humankind” and that he “allows himself to be disturbed by it.”<sup>43</sup> God is impressed by human form, even kisses it.<sup>44</sup> Unlike Origen, she teaches that it is the five senses that facilitate knowing God. “In seeing—we recognize all the world. In hearing—to understand. In smelling—to discern. In tasting—to nurture. In touching—to govern. In this way humankind comes to know God.”<sup>45</sup> She urges celebration and service: “Be ablaze with enthusiasm!”<sup>46</sup>

Though her imagery can be elaborate, even fantastic, her allegory of *viriditas* serves a precise purpose. Because she grounded her teaching in “self-evident truths rather than textual authority,”<sup>47</sup> she opens alternative pathways for theological reflection and expression. Her development of the concept of *viriditas* exemplifies this approach, presenting the doctrinal truth of Christ’s redemption through organic imagery and poetry, inviting deep contemplation on divine favor in order to draw us nearer to him.

## *Viriditas in Spiritual Growth*

For believers, *viriditas* produces virtue and spiritual fruit. A new Christian is like an unplowed field who receives the Word of God. God’s love is poured on them like rain, and the Spirit brings fruitfulness to the soil. However, a Christian can also cultivate growth by the “greening of the soul” in which “the soul honors God by the doing of just deeds.”<sup>48</sup> This greening of the soul is more than doing good works. Hildegard affirms that “a person cannot be fruitful without the greening power of faith and an understanding of Scripture.”<sup>49</sup>

Hildegard’s fresh vision of God’s empowering grace in *viriditas* aligns with Ephesians 2:5–10. God made us alive in Christ, offering grace through faith that enables us to do the good works God created us to do. Hildegard writes that God says, “I am the life and verdancy of good works.”<sup>50</sup> This verdancy, she teaches, enlivens believers with the Holy Spirit’s “green freshness of life,” enabling them to flourish and bear fruit.<sup>51</sup> In her *Book of Divine Works*, Hildegard explains that a good life begins with the awe of God, alongside a disciplined mind that gives constant attention to the divine (Vision Two: 18). This is her description of faith. This faith “submerges” the believer in confidence, dispelling confusion, falsehood, and indecent desires. Hildegard describes this constancy, or “abiding” as Jesus calls it in John 15:5, as “green vitality.”<sup>52</sup> She exhorts her correspondents to remain spiritually “juicy,” to strive for “spiritual greenness” by abiding as branches connected to the vine.<sup>53</sup>

Hildegard also contrasts the faithful, who possess “the sap of life,” producing good fruit, with those who are in a “drought of indolence.”<sup>54</sup> If *viriditas* embodies God’s lush, life-giving energy, then the opposite, *ariditas*, represents death and sin. Fox notes that for Hildegard, *ariditas* is “the sin of sins . . . the sin of drying up.”<sup>55</sup> The lack of *viriditas* “destroys our creative powers, marking the end of all good works, the beginning of laziness and carelessness.”<sup>56</sup> Hildegard declares: “Envy drives out all greening power!”<sup>57</sup>

Significantly, Hildegard teaches that even the earth’s “greening power” is affected by spiritual forces, either nourished by God’s moisture or drained into a dry and dusty land.<sup>58</sup> Those who refuse to grow in virtue, are “cut off from the waters of faith,”<sup>59</sup> and fail to bloom. They wither and die. This spiritual *ariditas* affects the world around us, diminishing the overall greening of God’s grace. Hildegard challenges her readers: “How dare we live without the verdancy of God’s grace?”<sup>60</sup>

**Understanding *viriditas* as the pulsing green vein of God’s grace results in an ecological awareness that marries spirituality with stewardship.**

## **Going Green**

When humans reject God’s *viriditas*, all creation suffers. This interdependence and reciprocity between humanity and creation naturally lead Hildegard to reflect on the deep impact that humans

have on the earth. Unbelievers, “the people who were meant to be green,”<sup>61</sup> spread filth and destruction. Just as God gave creation for our use, he also “permits creation to punish humanity.”<sup>62</sup> She reminds us of God’s warning to Israel, linking human faithfulness with the health of the land.<sup>63</sup> She vividly warns: “The winds are burdened by the utterly awful stink of evil. . . . The air belches out the filthy uncleanness of the peoples. . . . There pours forth an unnatural, a loathsome darkness that withers the green.”<sup>64</sup> Sin affects the food we eat, the air quality, and brings about the extinction of species. The earth is rendered “incapable of sustaining humanity.”<sup>65</sup> Hildegard pleads: “The earth should not be injured. The earth should not be destroyed!”<sup>66</sup>

Understanding *viriditas* as the pulsing green vein of God’s grace results in an ecological awareness that marries spirituality with stewardship.<sup>67</sup> Mary DeJong, an eco-theologian, sums up Hildegard’s creation theology as “a way of knowing that involved integrating the soul and soil. Creation is not a scenic backdrop designed only so

humans can take the stage. Creation is in fact a full participant in human transformation.”<sup>68</sup> Nature speaks to us of our Creator<sup>69</sup> and eagerly anticipates our joint redemption.<sup>70</sup>

God tasked humans to care for his creation because creation care is reciprocal.<sup>71</sup> Robert Shore-Goss, a pastor reflecting on the dedication of new solar panels for his church, asserts that it is impossible to separate “Christ from the social responsibility for the Earth.”<sup>72</sup> Hildegard would concur; she believed that “Christ brings lush greenness to shriveled and wilted people” as part of his greening of the cosmos.<sup>73</sup> Her theology of *viriditas* calls believers to pray for creation, to mourn its losses, to safeguard its survival, and to celebrate in song for the green earth.<sup>74</sup>

Hildegard’s final words bring her theology full circle. The woman who saw *viriditas* as the lifeblood of creation departed this world praying, “Let the rainfall be grace. Let this green earth take me.” If she bled green in life, in death she rested in green grace.<sup>75</sup>

## Notes

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**God tasked humans to care for  
his creation because creation  
care is reciprocal.**



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# Back to Brazil

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