

Ordo Virtutum

(The Play about the Virtues)

By Hildegard von Bingen, ca. 1151

Trans. Linda Marie Zaerr

PATRIARCHS AND PROPHETS

Who are these, who seem like clouds?

VIRTUES

O ancient holy ones, what about us makes you marvel?
The word of God gleams forth in human form,
and therefore we shine clear with him,
building up the parts of his beautiful body.

PATRIARCHS AND PROPHETS

We are the roots,
and you are the branches:
you are the fruit of the living eye,
and we were his shadow.

The lament of embodied SOULS

Oh, we are pilgrims!
What have we done, wandering into sins?!
We were destined to be the king's daughters,
but we have fallen into the shadow of sins.
O living sun, carry us on your shoulders
to the righteous heritage which we lost through Adam!
O king of kings, we are fighting in your battle.

A happy SOUL

O sweet divinity, o pleasant life,
in which I will wear a brilliant robe,
receiving what I lost in my first manifestation,
I sigh in longing for you and invoke all the virtues.

VIRTUES

O happy soul, sweet creation of God,
built up in the deep height of God's wisdom,
you love abundantly.

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The happy SOUL

Oh, let me come to you gladly
so that you may offer me a kiss from your heart.

VIRTUES

Our duty is to fight together with you, o daughter of the king.

But the troubled SOUL laments

O what hard labor, o what a heavy weight
I have in this robe of life,
because it is so difficult for me
to fight against the flesh.

VIRTUES *to the soul*

O Soul, created by God's will,
O happy instrument,
why are you so tearful over the problem God solved
with the virgin birth?
Your duty is to overcome the Devil through us.

The SOUL

Hasten to help me, that I might stand firm!

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD *to the Soul*

Behold the raiment you are wearing,
daughter of salvation;
if you are steadfast,
you will never fall.

The SOUL, unhappily

Oh, I do not know what to do or where to flee!
Woe is me! I cannot fit into this garment
in which I have been clothed.
Indeed, I want to take it off.

VIRTUES

O unhappy thought, o miserable Soul,
Why do you hide your face before your Creator?

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

You neither know, nor see,
nor understand the one who created you.

The SOUL

God created the world:
I do him no harm,
but I want to enjoy it.

The DEVIL, shouting to the Soul

Fool! Fool! What do you gain from your labor?
Look to the World,
and it will embrace you with great honor.

VIRTUES

Oh, this wailing voice of utmost sorrow!
Ah, ah, a miraculous victory
had arisen through her marvelous desire for God,
but, in this desire, love of the flesh had hidden itself--
alas, alas--there where the will knew no guilt
and where the desire fled human lewdness.
Mourn, mourn for this, Innocence,
who, in lovely purity, have not lost your righteousness,
and who have not devoured the avarice
of the ancient serpent's throat.

DEVIL

What kind of power is this, that no one should be above God?!
But I say that to whomever wants to follow me and my will
I will give everything.
Humility, you certainly have nothing you can give your followers,
for, in fact, none of you knows what you are!

HUMILITY

My companions and I know well
that you are that ancient dragon
who longed to fly higher than the highest one,
but God himself hurled you into the abyss.

VIRTUES

All of us, though, dwell on high.

HUMILITY

I, Humility, queen of the Virtues, say:
come to me, Virtues, and I will nourish you
in seeking the lost coin
and in crowning her who perseveres joyously.

VIRTUES

O glorious queen, o sweetest mediator,
we come gladly.

HUMILITY

Because of this, beloved daughters,
I hold you a place in the royal wedding-chamber.

LOVE

I am Love, a precious flower.
Come to me, Virtues, and I will lead you
into the cleansing light of the flower of the branch.

VIRTUES

O dearest flower, we run to you with burning desire.

FEAR OF GOD

I, Fear of God, prepare you, most fortunate daughters,
to behold the living God.

VIRTUES

O Fear, you are immensely helpful to us.
In fact, we earnestly strive never to be separated from you.

DEVIL

Bravo! Bravo! Who is this great Fear? And who is this great Love?
Where is your fighter, and where is your rewarder?
You do not know what you should value.

VIRTUES

But you were terrified by the highest judge
because you, inflated with pride,
were submerged into Hell.

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OBEDIENCE

I am gleaming Obedience.
Come to me, loveliest daughters,
and I will lead you back to your homeland
and to the king's kiss.

VIRTUES

O sweet summoner,
it is right for us to come to you with earnest zeal.

FAITH

I am Faith, the mirror of life.
Come to me, venerable daughters,
and I will show you the flowing spring.

VIRTUES

O serene watcher, we have the courage
to come to the true fountain through you.

HOPE

I am the sweet beholder of the living eye,
she whom treacherous sluggishness does not deceive.
Therefore you, o darkness, cannot overcloud me.

VIRTUES

O living life, o sweet consoler, you who make death die,
conquer, and, with a seeing eye, open the lock of Heaven.

CHASTITY

O Virginity, you stand in the royal wedding-chamber.
Oh, how sweetly you burn in the loving embraces of the king,
while the sun shines through you,
so that your noble flower will never fall.

VIRTUES

The meadow flower yields to the wind, and the rain sprinkles it.
O Virginity, you remain in the harmonies of the celestial cities,
and therefore you are a sweet flower who will never wither.

INNOCENCE

Flee, you sheep, from the excrement of the Devil!

VIRTUES

If you hasten to our aid, we will flee that filth.

CONTEMPT FOR THE WORLD

I am Contempt for the World, the radiance of life.

O unhappy pilgrimage on earth, fraught with many labors,

I renounce you.

O Virtues, come to me, and let us ascend to the spring of life.

VIRTUES

O glorious lady, you always undertake Christ's battles.

O great virtue, you crush the world under your foot,

and therefore you dwell victoriously in Heaven.

CELESTIAL LOVE

I am a golden gate set in Heaven.

Whoever passes through me

will never taste bitter petulance in the mind.

VIRTUES

O daughter of the king,

you are held fast in those embraces which the world shuns.

Oh, how sweet is your love in the highest God.

DISCIPLINE

I am a lover of innocent ways that know no evil deeds.

I always behold the king of kings,

and I embrace him in the highest honor.

VIRTUES

O angelic companion,

you are magnificently adorned

for the royal nuptials.

MODESTY

I conceal and drive away

and crush beneath my feet

all the filth of the Devil.

VIRTUES

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Blossoming among the shining lilies,
you have a part
in the building of heavenly Jerusalem.

MERCY

O how bitter is that hardness of mind which does not yield,
mercifully easing the pain!
But I long to stretch out my hand to all who suffer.

VIRTUES

O praiseworthy mother of pilgrims,
you always lift those wanderers up
and anoint the poor and the weak.

VICTORY

I am Victory, a swift and strong fighter.
I fight with a stone;
I crush the ancient serpent beneath my foot.

VIRTUES

O sweetest warrior,
who swallowed the voracious wolf in the boiling spring,
o glorious crowned one,
we gladly fight with you against the deceiver.

DISCRETION

I am Discretion, the light and treasurer of all creatures,
the impartiality of God that Adam drove away
through his irresponsible ways.

VIRTUES

O fairest mother,
you are so sweet and gentle
that no one is confused in you.

PATIENCE

I am a pillar which cannot be warped,
because my foundation is in God.

VIRTUES

O how firm you stand in the stone cavern,

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and o what a glorious warrior you are,
who endure all things.

[HUMILITY]

O daughters of Israel,
God has raised you up from beneath the tree;
so at this time remember how the tree was planted.
Therefore rejoice, daughters of Zion.

VIRTUES

Alas! Alas! Let us wail and mourn,
for our Lord's sheep has run away from life.

The lament of the penitent SOUL calling on the Virtues

O regal Virtues, how brilliant
and how glistening you appear in the highest sun,
and how lovely is your dwelling.
Woe is me therefore, because I fled from you.

VIRTUES

O fugitive, come, come to us,
and God will raise you up.

The SOUL

Ah! Ah! A scorching sweetness
devoured me in my sins,
and so I did not dare to enter.

VIRTUES

Do not be afraid or run away,
for the good shepherd seeks
his lost sheep in you.

The SOUL

Now I need you to hold me up,
for I reek with the wounds
with which the ancient serpent defiled me.

VIRTUES

Run to us. In our company
follow those footsteps in which you will never fall,

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and God will heal you.

The penitent SOUL to the Virtues

I am the sinner who ran away from life:
I will come to you covered with sores
so that you may offer me the shield of redemption.
O all you army of Queen Humility,
and o you, her white lilies and crimson roses,
turn to me,
for I was exiled from you as a pilgrim,
and help me,
so that, in the blood of the son of God, I can rise up.

VIRTUES

O fugitive Soul, be strong,
and put on the armor of light.

The SOUL

And o true medicine, Humility,
give me your aid,
for Pride has broken me in many vices,
inflicting me with many scars.
Now I am escaping to you, so receive me!

HUMILITY

O all you Virtues, take up this weeping sinner
with all her scars for the sake of Christ's wounds,
and lead her to me.

VIRTUES

We want to bring you back and not desert you,
and all the army of Heaven rejoices over you,
so it is right for us to play instruments in harmony.

HUMILITY

O unhappy daughter, I want to embrace you,
for the great surgeon has suffered
grievous and bitter wounds for you.

VIRTUES

O living spring, how great is your sweetness.

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You did not turn your face from those who looked to you,
but you clearly foresaw
how you could avert them from falling like the angels,
those who thought they had a power
which could not subsist thus.
So rejoice, daughter of Zion,
for God has given back to you many
whom the serpent sought to separate from you.
Now they gleam in greater brilliance
than they would have done before.

DEVIL

Who are you, and where do you come from?
You embraced me, and I led you forth,
but now by turning back you defy me.
Yet my assault will hurl you down.

The penitent SOUL

I recognized that all my ways were evil,
and so I escaped from you.
But now, deceiver, I fight against you.
O Queen Humility, come help me with your medicine.

HUMILITY *to Victory*

O Victory, you who once overcame this
evil one in the heavens,
hasten with your soldiers,
and all of you bind this Devil!

VICTORY *to the Virtues*

O bravest and most glorious soldiers, come,
and help me to vanquish that deceitful one!

VIRTUES

O sweetest warrior,
who swallowed the voracious wolf in the boiling spring,
o glorious crowned one,
we gladly fight with you against this deceiver.

HUMILITY

Bind him then, o gleaming Virtues!

VIRTUES

O our queen, we obey you,
and we fulfil your commands in all things.

VICTORY

Rejoice, o companions,
for the ancient serpent is bound!

VIRTUES

Praise to you, Christ, king of the angels!

CHASTITY

In the mind of the highest, o Satan,
I crushed your head beneath my foot,
and in the form of a virgin I brought forth a sweet miracle
when the son of God came into the world.
Therefore you are cast down together with all your plunder.
And now let all who dwell in Heaven rejoice,
For your belly has been confounded.

DEVIL

You do not know what you bring forth,
for your womb is empty of any fair form received from a man.
In this you transgress the command God issued for pleasant intercourse.
Therefore you do not know what you are.

CHASTITY

How can what you say touch me
when your suggestion pollutes your words
with foul unchastity?
One man I have brought forth,
who gathers the human race unto him,
against you, through his own birth.

VIRTUES

O God, who are you, who held this great counsel in yourself
which destroyed the infernal poison among the publicans and sinners,
who now shine in celestial goodness?!
For this, o king, may you be praised!
O almighty father, a fountain flows from you in fiery love.

Lead your children to a favorable wind for sailing on the waters,
so that we may lead them in this way
to the heavenly Jerusalem.

In the beginning all creation thrived.
In the midst, flowers blossomed.
Later the greenness diminished,
and the champion saw this and said,
"I know this, but the golden number is not yet complete.
You, then, behold the mirror of the father:
in my body I endure exhaustion;
even my little ones faint.
Now remember that the abundance
which was made in the beginning
should not have dried up.
Then you decided in yourself
that your eye would never fail
until you saw my body encrusted with jewels,
for it wearies me that all my limbs
are laid bare to mockery.
Father, see. I show you my wounds."
So now, all people, bend your knees before your father
so that he may stretch out this hand to you.

BACKGROUND

Hildegard von Bingen probably created the *Ordo Virtutum* for the dedication of the convent she established at Rupertsberg, near Bingen on the Rhine River in Germany. The work is the earliest extant liturgical morality play, and it is preserved in the "Riesencodex," a manuscript weighing about twenty-five pounds. The work was probably first performed by sixteen of the fifty women living in the cloister, with the role of the Devil spoken by the monk Volmar. Volmar was employed by the community to administer the sacraments to the nuns and, together with Richardis von Stade, one of the nuns, to act as Hildegard's secretary.

Hildegard was born in 1098 the tenth child of Hildebert von Bermersheim and Mechthild. By the age of five she had demonstrated extraordinary visionary powers, and at eight her parents dedicated her to the religious life at a Benedictine monastery. She became abbess at thirty-eight, and continued to develop as an administrator, poet, musician, scientist, and mystic. She was consulted by popes and kings and was greatly respected throughout western Europe. She lived to be eighty-one years old, working productively until the end.

The music for the *Ordo Virtutum* is closely connected with the Latin text, and it is notated in neumes, symbols above the text showing the melodic pattern. One of the characteristic patterns of Hildegard's music is a rising fifth followed by a rise to the octave. Her music is highly original, and there is a vibrant connection between the emotional imagery and the expressive melodies, consistent in style, but infinitely varied.