

Elisabeth of Schönau

THE COMPLETE WORKS

TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY
ANNE L. CLARK

PREFACE BY
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Cover art: Mother Placid Dempsey, a Benedictine nun of the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut, is a painter and sculptor who employed both these mediums to create the cover image for *Elisabeth of Schönau*. Regarding her work she says: "The cover of *Elisabeth of Schönau* depicts the vision of the Virgin clothed with the sun as Elisabeth has recounted it. The Virgin clothed with the sun is a well-known image, which occurs first in the New Testament and recurs over and over again in Christian art and iconography. It is usually understood to represent the church and/or the Virgin Mary. However, in Elisabeth's vision, and perhaps uniquely there, the Virgin represents Christ himself. As I thought about it, I realized what I already knew—that Christ is the Source and Exemplar of every grace that comes to humanity. All graces and blessings flow from his passion, death and resurrection. This Christocentric reality glimpsed by Elisabeth in an unusual way underlies and assumes every Marian and ecclesial expression of the same image. It is perhaps the most important of her visions and, within our own times, pertinent to ecumenical dialogue. Certainly it is enlightening and consoling for everyone, for it is a vision of Christ unvanquished by death and radiantly alive, transfiguring the world in the grace of his resurrection, in which we are all called to share."

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moreover, to make me a partner in your prayers, and that as soon as the Spirit of the Lord prompts you, write back to me with some words of consolation.

20. Another letter sent to Hildegard.²¹⁸

Rejoice with me, my lady and venerable daughter of the eternal king, since the finger of God writes in you so that you may proclaim the word of life. Blessed are you and may it be well for you forever. You are the organ of the Holy Spirit because your words enkindle me like a flame touching my heart and I burst forth in these words.

21. She greatly commends Hildegard and expounds to her about the leaders of the church and the Cathars.

My lady Hildegard, rightly are you called Hildegard because the stimulus of God works well in you with marvelous fortitude for the edification of His church.²¹⁹ Be strong in the Holy Spirit. Blessed are you, for the Lord has chosen you and has appointed you like one of those about whom He said, "I have appointed you so that you may go and bring forth fruit and your fruit will endure" (Jn 15:16). In this way you enter the path of contemplation of the Lord like a dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow in the wall (Sg 2:14). The One who chose you will crown you with the crown of gladness. The way of the Lord is made straight in your presence. O lady Hildegard, carry out the work of the Lord, just as you have done so far, because the Lord has placed you as worker in His vineyard (Mt 20:1). Indeed, the Lord sought workers in His vineyard, and He found them all idle because no one leads them. The vineyard of the Lord does not have a cultivator; the vineyard of the Lord perishes; the head of the church languishes and its members are dead. Alas, what should be done about this, since the Lord finds few in His church who contemplate this with a blazing mind, but instead finds only those who wish to rule themselves and follow their own will. The Lord has tested them and found them sleeping. On account of this a thief has come and broken in and destroyed the foundation stone, and thrown it in a cistern that had no water and was not irrigated. The foundation stone is the head of the church

that was thrown away. The church of God is arid, having no moisture, and it is cold in love for God. But I also recall to myself that once there appeared to me poisonous serpents about to come into the church of God, secretly hoping to destroy God's church.²²⁰ I understand this to refer to those Cathars who are now secretly beguiling the church of God. Expel them, Lord, our protector! And blessed is the one who will not be scandalized in this time. The patriarch David said, "Will those who sleep not rise again?" (Ps 40:9). Arise and be stirred and keep watch because the vengeance of God shouts to you! Shriek, pastors, and cry aloud! Sprinkle yourselves with ashes and repent (Jer 25:34)! Don't give place to the devil (Eph 4:27), because like a roaring lion he circles, seeking what he may devour (1 Pt 5:8). Blessed is the one who fears the Lord of all creation and thus agitates the high priest so that he will remove the opprobrium from his people (Is 25:8) and all Israel will be saved.

22. She expounds to Hildegard about their contempt for the Lord and His saints.

Now, moreover, My people are perverse to Me, and stiff-necked they walk in My presence, and they do not think about how to bear My judgment: with flagellation and offerings to Myself and My saints who daily cry before My throne, saying, "Lord, king of eternal glory, in your speech all things are ordained and there is no one who can resist your will. Avenge our blood (Rv 6:10), because the earth oppresses us with their con-taminations." I the Lord, Creator of all creatures, have sent My incarnate Word from the heights of the heavens into the dark valley so that it would illuminate those who were in shadows and who thought they were something but were nothing. And the people loved the shadows more than the light. But this was the true light and like the morning star in the midst of fog (Eccl 50:6), and like the sun shining in its strength in the middle of the day (Rv 1:16), so did He shine in the midst of His people, full of wisdom and fortitude, and the whole earth was filled with His teaching, yet you have forgotten Him. I swear by My right hand and My throne that this will no longer be.

23. She turns her sermon to the people of God.

O human, whoever you are, what reason can you use to excuse yourself? You have eyes and you do not see, and ears for hearing and you do not understand. What more shall I do for you? If you lose Him, who do you think is going to redeem you? Remember that the only Son of My heart died once for your sins and arose and ascended into heaven and sits in His glory and left you a model so that you could follow His footsteps. How, by what heart, or by what knowledge, do you follow Him? Far indeed are His ways from your ways. If you will not walk like He walked, how can you come to Him? Do not turn aside to the right or the left, but follow His footsteps and in this way you can come to Him. But now you are slipping from sin to sin, from damnation to damnation. Walk, while there is light in you, lest the shadows surround you, for that ancient leviathan thinks that he is about to swallow the whole world. But there is still time for grace. Do penance, seek the Lord your God while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near (Is 55:6). Turn to Me with your whole heart, and I the Lord will be turned to you and will be reconciled with you and I will not abandon you in the time of tribulation and distress (2 Mc 1:5). And that ancient serpent will fall into such a ruin that even his guts will be poured out.

24. Again she speaks about the Cathars.

What is this that I have said about the guts of the ancient serpent? There are some people who are now swallowed up in his gut and later will be cast forth. They are murderers, adulterers, plunderers—the unjust who have hurled their souls into death. They are also the wretched Cathars, who are more abominable than all creatures and utter their blazing words in sulfury tongues. The earth is contaminated by their abominable faith. Just as once the peoples crucified Me, so daily I am crucified among them because they cultivate such practices. Oh, what devilish insanity! They know that I am the Creator of heaven and earth and all things in them, and I see into the depths. They tear at My wounds, dismissing the body and blood of My sacraments, offered for the salvation of all believers. And if they provoke Me to wrath, I the Lord in My anger will wipe out the earth and its offspring all the way to hell. Cease, sinners

against justice! Cease this insanity! If you do not, I will order you to be tortured beyond belief by hellish worms without end, in sulfur and fire inextinguishable. And there is no faculty that can comprehend this hellish punishment except that great leviathan who has stretched out and is seducing the whole world.

25. She turns her sermon to those who have undertaken to govern the church of God; they should destroy the various errors of the heretics in the catholic church.

Lest I strike you with the sword of My mouth, I the Lord, through My right hand, order you kings and princes, bishops and abbots, priests and everyone who is in power, to use all fortitude and the catholic faith to expel and destroy all the heresies that make schisms in My church, which I gave birth to in pain and suffering. Oh, most miserable and wretched hypocrites! In the presence of the people you appear to be pious and innocent, yet within you are full of evil inclination. Tell me how you believe in almighty God if you do not believe that all things are possible with almighty God (Mt 19:26)! Indeed it was possible for God to send the Holy Spirit from the seat of His great majesty into the virginal womb and for the Word of His incarnation to spring forth. Do you believe that God the Father created human beings in His own image and likeness and established them in the paradise of delight so that they would work and guard it? And that ancient serpent deceived them and they fell into sin and were thrown out for their disobedience? Oh, unhappy hypocrite: How long do you think you will remain in your sins, not believing in the Son of God who proceeds from the Father? And therefore you don't believe He was incarnate and truly suffered, or was buried and resurrected, or ascended into heaven and will come to judge the living and the dead.

You, however who are learned, study the books of the New Testament and remember their words and you will find great fruit. Be renewed in the Holy Spirit and revive your souls in the structure of the church, which has been sanctified in Christ Jesus and illuminated by the holy gospel and whitewashed of its ancient rust. The holy church was united with and betrothed to the celestial bridegroom, the Son of the eternal king, who washed her crimes in the

Jordan so that there would be one faith, one baptism, one church, and a single dove, and one elect of Christ Jesus. Therefore you, a chosen race, a holy people, a royal priesthood, a people of purchase (1 Pt 2:9) must remember the freedom with which I have freed you from the yoke and captivity of the devil (Gal 4:31). Indeed, for some time you were the darkness, but now you are the light. Walk as My beloved children, the children of light (Eph 5:8), says your God. And again that same Truth spoke: "My chosen vineyard, I have planted you and made known to you every way of truth. How could you have turned away, walking not along the straight path, but following your own sinful ways? You seek peace according to your own will and you say, 'There will be peace' but you seduce yourselves—this is not the Son of peace!"

26. She delivers a sermon to them about avoiding simony.

So I have been driven out, and there is no place where My feet may rest. I stand at the door and knock, and there is no one who lets Me in. My head is full of dew (Sg 5:2); My bed, in which I was hoping to rest, has been violated by various vices. Those who enter into My sanctuary with their impurities stain My bed with their perverse works. My pastors are weighed down as if in a heavy sleep, and what should I do to awaken them? I will raise up My right hand above them. I have been patient and have waited for them from day to day, and they have consigned Me to oblivion. Indeed, the Law disappears first from the priests and elders of My people (Ez 7:26) because they seek to sell the sacrifices of My sacraments. Those who sell, sell judgment unto themselves. And those who buy, buy a double-edged sword.

Again with fatherly chastisements I warn My pastors who know My secrets: "Be imitators of Me and not of the devil; there are some who do not enter My fold by the door, but climb in by another way, through a different path, like thieves and robbers (Jn 10:1), thieves because of their avarice and robbers because they lose the souls commissioned to them."²¹ Indeed they cover their depraved works lest they be seen by the people. On account of this, those who are reprehensible in their own ways do not boldly speak out against every heresy." Again I say to you, "Know beyond doubt that as many of the

souls which you have received to govern and guard that are lost from My sheep because of your negligence, that many will I seek from your hands. At the dreadful judgment you shall render an account and all the evils that I spread over them will flow back upon you.

27. She makes an exhortation to those pastors of the church.

"Now, therefore, be revived and think about your predecessors the apostles and the other holy doctors of the church who did not fear the threats of the people and the scourges of the executioner, but carried My word before kings and leaders. They were beaten and suffered many torments, but they endured all on account of My name. Therefore they stand before My throne in glory and honor that no one can reckon. There they see Me not in mysteries, but eye to eye, face to face, in great brightness and majesty. Blessed is the one who reads and hears the words of this text and preserves them because they are true and have been sent from My throne through My angel for the edification of many."

28. How to understand her earlier comment about the Cathars, "They utter their blazing words in sulphury tongues."

While I was thinking about the meaning of the phrase I had spoken, "They utter their blazing words in sulphury tongues," the Lord placed these words in my mouth: "The nature of sulfur is such that its flame does not ascend on high but it burns with obscurity in bitterness. This signifies heresies, which so obscurely offer poisonous words from which the blackest flames come forth and ignite the hearts of the faithful and make them hesitate in the catholic faith."

29. She describes a vision that she saw in Lent about a bright wheel in the sky, a bird above the wheel, and the form of a man next to it.

God has magnified His mercies in me and done these things for me, my brother, during your recent absence.²² At First Vespers on the first Sunday in Lent, a sudden physical languor overcame me and—as usual—I went into a trance. I saw a bright wheel spinning around in the sky with astonishing speed. Also, at the top of the wheel I saw a small white bird maintaining itself with great difficulty lest it be carried around by the force of the wheel. Indeed, several times it seemed to slip down a little from the top and then struggle again to

