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Church's new doctor inspires woman's voice

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

Devi Mathieu was traveling in Minnesota on Sunday, the day Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed Hildegard of Bingen as a doctor of the church.

Had she been at home in Sebastopol, Calif., Mathieu would have mixed up a batch of cinnamon-nutmeg cookies based on one of Hildegard's own recipes. Then she would have organized a special gathering of friends to celebrate the music of her favorite saint, an earth mystic, Benedictine abbess, wisdom teacher, "Sybil of the Rhine," author, healer and spiritual conscience for the patriarchy of her time.

Mathieu sees the 12th-century nun's liturgical plainchant compositions as "a doorway into the source of all being. Anyone can go through that door to partake in the beauty," she explained last month at the Procter Center at The Episcopal Church in Southern Ohio in London, Ohio.

"Hildegard had this vision of a crown of pipes. She saw each of us as being one of those pipes. Through singing praises, we become sounding beacons, (leading) to the One. It is a journey through the ear to the heart," she said.

About 20 of us from many different faith traditions had gathered in the Procter chapel that day. We were preparing to sing along with Hildegard, led by Mathieu, a trained specialist in medieval music. Her own spiritual practice is Ruhaniat Sufism, a tradition that taps into the mystical paths from all the world religions. It teaches that music, dance and poetry are portals to the divine.

We were on an afternoon break from our official retreat, "The Genesis Meditations," a four-day dancing/chanting/meditation event facilitated by Sufi scholar Neil Douglas-Klotz. That morning, we had experienced three circle dances celebrating Holy Wisdom, whom the Hebrew proverbs tell us in Douglas-Klotz's Midrash version, "I was dancing in you from the first waters and I was baptizing everything." So

in the same spirit, our teacher chose one of Hildegard's most famous Latin chants, "O Virtus Sapientiae," or "O Virtue of Wisdom."

Setting the scene for us, Mathieu gave us an image of Wisdom, a being of three wings. "One flies above in heaven. One draws sweat from the veriditas, the green power of nature. The third flies everywhere at once."

We plunged into the first phrases a capella, the way Hildegard taught her music in the monasteries at Rupertsberg and Eibingen. It did not take long for the energy of Holy Wisdom, who shines through all of creation, to be there in our midst. She danced alongside us in our singing circle. She soared outside the vast sanctuary window.

As we chanted, we delighted in the sight of a mother deer and her youngster drinking water from a pond. A large flock of ducks floated by, smoothly and seamlessly.

Mathieu soothed us up and down the ladder of notes, even those of us with musical ranges below middle C. Some of us did not manage to soar, but that was OK. We did the best we could, basking in the ethereal high notes piped effortlessly by some of our circle companions.

"Our bodies are our singing pipes," Mathieu said. "Rest in their sounds and put aside those notions of self-judgment, criticism, and performance mentality. Remember, from the ear to the heart."

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From the ear to the heart is a phrase Devi Mathieu has borrowed from her late spiritual teacher and musical mentor, Barbara Thornton. Thornton was a singer and musicologist who, with Benjamin Bagby, founded and directed Sequentia, a medieval music ensemble. Thornton specialized in the music of Hildegard, bringing the saint from relative obscurity to fame in 1982, when Sequentia went on tour with a production of Hildegard's "Ordo Virtutum," an allegorical work that depicts the soul being challenged by both the virtues and the devil.

Mathieu met Thornton and Bagby in 1994 at a medieval music workshop at Santa Sabina Center in San Rafael Calif. She had sung all of her life, but lacked self-confidence.

"I was the little chorister at my Methodist church in Texas, very timid, and not confident singing in front of people," she said.

Mathieu left her church while in college because "somehow, I could never seem to be good enough."

She discovered Buddhism as a college student in San Francisco, and later combined it with Sufism. Her husband, Allaudin Mathieu, is a choir director and composer who started the Sufi Choir in 1969.

By 1994, Mathieu was searching for a spiritual teacher. But she never anticipated her guide would show up at Santa Sabina Center in San Rafael. But it was there she met Barbara Thornton, who became her mentor and spiritual teacher over the next four years.

Thornton introduced Mathieu to the beauty and depth of Hildegard's music as a spiritual practice for herself. Inspired, Mathieu went to another workshop a few months later in Vancouver. But she couldn't sing the first three days because she was in excruciating pain from a muscle spasm in her neck and back. Thornton found a physician who could help, and Devi was able to finish the two-week intensive.

When Thornton became ill with a brain tumor in 1998, Mathieu traveled to Cologne to see her in the hospital. Thornton was in a coma, but Mathieu was amazed because the two of them communicated telepathically. "As I sat there, I remembered how she would often close her eyes and rock from side to side as she listened to her students sing. I found myself rocking -- being rocked -- and suddenly realized I wasn't the only one awake in that hospital room. Barbara's physical body may have been sound asleep, but her essence was awake and present, remembering with me.

"We spent the next half-hour in a magical wordless communication filled with both joy and sadness. We cried about the inevitability of her leaving this life, and laughed at the silliness of Barbara envisioning herself, first as Janis Joplin singing 'Take a Little Piece of my Heart,' then as the Virgin of Guadalupe surrounded by golden haloes and masses of roses."

Mathieu said Thornton's final gift was "an infusion of courage, determination and self-acceptance. It is a message I know she would want me to share. It's this: 'Whatever vision you have, whatever your heart's desire, don't hold back. Don't want for permission. Don't wait for someone else to say yes. Go for it. Now. Assume acceptance, assume success. It's the only way to live, the only way to accomplish anything.'"

Mathieu now performs in Hildegard recitals and shares the saint's music with others.

Since last year, she has conducted monthly Hildegard singing sessions at the Santa Sabina Center. A couple of weekends ago, she led a weekend retreat there.

Dominican Sr. Margaret Diener, director of the center, is a regular member of the Tuesday evening gatherings.

"Along with the music, Devi is able to introduce much of Hildegard's perspectives and theology; through her comments, the deep ecology of Hildegard's understanding of creation and the divine presence with it shines through," Diener said. "The harmonics of the music truly do suggest the power of sound and song to rouse the spirit and to heal."

"As I listen and participate, I am reminded of 'The Music of the Spheres,' " she continued. "Didn't some of our predecessors have it right? The harmonics of the music truly do suggest the power of sound and song to rouse the spirit and to heal."

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