Sunday, December 7, 1986
UNOFFICIAL SAINTS
Luke 1:39-56

Who are the “saints” among us? We frequently think of “saints” as being especially good people — people who are ready to be of help in any situation, or some of us might think of saints as being those who are more religious than most persons, or more pious, or otherworldly. But there’s more to it than that.

What is a saint? In the very early Christian church, all Christians were called saints. So when the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church at Rome, he addressed it to “all of God’s beloved in Rome who are called to be saints,” and in so doing he was writing to all of the church members there.

Later in Christian history, the heroes and heroines of the faith, those who stood out because of what they were and did, were designated “saints” with a capital “S.” In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church set up an elaborate system for designating a person a saint. A dossier is built and a “devil’s advocate” appointed to search for flaws in the case at issue. Some years ago, a best-selling novel by Morris West was entitled “The Devil’s Advocate,” and the story was about a person who had been assigned that role and his job was to dig up all the bad things he could find about the person who was being recommended to be a saint. It made a fascinating story.

There have also been people in the history of the Christian church who have become “unofficial saints,” that is, they have never been officially canonized by the hierarchy of the church, but because of the quality of their lives and their contributions to the whole of society, we recognize them as saints. People we think of as “saints” are especially sensitive and aware of the spirit of God at work in them and in the world. Both Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were saints in this way.

It is a person like them that I want to talk about today as we prepare for the coming of Christmas. Her name is Hildegard of Bingen. She lived about 800 years ago in the lush Rhineland Valley of what we now know as West Germany, and she was a woman of extraordinary spirit and courage.

She was born in the summer of 1098, at Bickelheim, on the left bank of the Nahe River, a tributary of the Rhine. The Nahe River flows into the Rhine at the town of Bingen. Her father was a German knight attached to the castle of Bickelheim. Hildegard was the youngest of ten children and she admits to having had visionary experiences even as a little girl.

Hildegard was educated under a tutor named Jutta, a nun attached to a Benedictine monastery. At the age of eight, Hildegard joined Jutta and another woman in their quarters in the monastery and there she was educated in the Benedictine traditions of music, spinning, biblical history, prayer, and work. At about 18 years of age, Hildegard became a nun in the Benedictine order.

In 1136, at the age of 38, Hildegard was appointed to take over the leadership of the group of nuns of which she was a part. Within the next four years, she had her celebrated spiritual awakening. From this time on, she began to share the visions and thoughts that had been incubating in her for years. She started to write. A secretary was appointed for her, a young

monk named Volmar, who took down what she dictated. Her first book took shape over a ten-year period. She called it “Scivias” (Know the Ways).

Her fame began to spread. Pope Eugenius III heard of her and sent a commission to investigate. This commission, on interviewing Hildegard, found her competent and authentic and so reported to the Pope. Her works were brought to the Pope and upon examination were given papal approval. She was encouraged to keep writing. This she did, but she also wrote the Pope admonishing him to work harder for reform in the church and its monasteries.

Because of her fame and leadership, her community of sisters rapidly increased and she did not want to stay in the women’s cramped quarters. She had her eye on another location where there would be ample room. However, the monks and their leader did not want Hildegard and her nuns to leave. But leave she did.

From her new headquarters, Hildegard set out to preach to clergy, laity, monks, nuns, and ecclesial officials all over the land. Usually, she did her preaching in the cathedrals, and in her talks, she preached against the corruption of the church of that time. She often pictured the church as a weeping mother in pain. Her preaching deeply affected the people who heard her, and church leaders asked her for texts of her sermons. When she was in her middle seventies, she journeyed to Tours and then to Paris.

The year before she died, when she was in her eighties, Hildegard and her sisters in the monastery got into a serious conflict with the church hierarchy. The controversy centered around Hildegard and her community’s decision to bury in their cemetery a revolutionary youth who had been excommunicated by the archbishop. Hildegard refused to dig up the body and eject it from her convent grounds, insisting that he had made his peace with God before he died. To prevent anyone from digging up the body, it is said that Hildegard personally went to the cemetery and removed all traces of the burial so that the grave could never be found.

Hildegard died on September 17, 1179. She has never been formally canonized as a saint, although three attempts were made to have this happen. However, in 1979, Pope John Paul II, in celebration of the 800th anniversary of her death, referred to her as “an outstanding saint, a light to her people and her time who shines out more brightly today.” That’s why I call her an unofficial saint.

And there are many unofficial saints like her among us. We can learn so much from them, and they give us so many gifts. Here are some of the gifts that Hildegard has given us:

She was a woman in a male-dominated church and culture who worked hard against many obstacles to be heard, and she was heard. It was a struggle for her to offer her own wisdom, which came out of her life and her intense relationship to God. She deeply felt God’s spirit within her, and her experience could not be kept to herself. It had to be given to others. Her religious experience was as valid as that of any male.
In many ways, Hildegard was the Susan B. Anthony of the 12th century — another unofficial saint. In 1853, the New York State Teachers’Association held its annual convention at Rochester, New York. Presiding was Charles Davies, L.L.D., professor of mathematics at West Point and well-known author of textbooks. The meeting was moved to consider “why the profession of teacher is not respected as that of doctor, lawyer, or minister.” Although a large number of the teachers present were women, they did not speak at such meetings. Suddenly, however, Miss Susan B. Anthony of Rochester, an experienced teacher in various girls’schools who had recently retired as girls’headmistress at a prestigious academy, rose in her place.

“Mr. President,” she said to the chair. “What will the lady have?” he asked in the midst of a shocked silence. “I wish to speak to the question under discussion,” Miss Anthony replied. The president was willing to entertain a motion to that effect, which one of the men in the meeting made thereupon. Then for a half-hour or so, it was debated whether Miss Anthony should be allowed to speak. She remained standing silently in her place through it all, lest she lose her chance to speak. It was noted that she was not wearing the tight-waisted hoop skirt then in fashion but one of the new costumes named for Mrs. Amelia Bloomer: a short loose-fitting skirt worn over a pair of baggy trousers down to the ankles. When the debate had worn itself out, the motion was passed in her favor by a small margin, and then Miss Anthony had her say.

“It seems to me you fail to comprehend the cause of the disrespect of which you complain. Do you not see that so long as society says woman has not enough brains to be a doctor, lawyer, or minister, but has plenty to be a teacher, every man of you who condescends to teach tacitly admits before all Israel and the sun that he has no more brains than a woman?”

She sat down. At the meeting the next day, Professor Davies spoke in his flowery manner, suggesting that pure chivalry and the wish to protect female teachers was the reason that they had never been invited to speak or take part in committee work in the association. A Mrs. Northrop of Rochester then stood up, got the floor with some difficulty, and introduced a resolution to the effect that the teachers’association recognize “the rights of female teachers to share in all the privileges and deliberations of this body.” She also referred to the inadequate salaries paid to the women teachers: $2.50 a week, compared to the $10.00 per week for the men. The president tried to ignore the resolution, but the combined votes of the female delegates and the more liberal men were enough to pass it. Once more Miss Anthony, a quiet, rather diffident Quaker Christian, had gotten something started.

Unofficial saints often do that — they get something started! Hildegard has been called “the first medieval woman to reflect and write at length on women,” and her correspondence reveals a lifestyle of political and social activism that was unheard of in a woman of her time. She taught the revolutionary doctrine which came out of her Christian faith that men and women are biologically different but equal as partners in God’s creative work. She was not afraid to castigate a pope for his timidity and an emperor for moral blindness. She taught scholars and preached to clergy and laity as no woman before her had ever done.

Hildegard was one who brought together the holy trinity of art, science, and religion. She saw the universe, God’s creation, in a holistic fashion. She was so in love with nature, so taken by the revelation of the divine in creation, that she sought out the finest scientific minds of her day. She used art to connect, to supply the missing link between science and religion. The proper context for spirituality and faith is, according to Hildegard, the cosmos, not the privatized individual soul, and the only way to express this cosmic experience is through art and creativity. Human beings become the musical instruments of God. The divine spirit makes music through us.
Hildegard also recognized the connectedness, the interdependence of all creation. She saw that we human beings are interdependent with all creation and that it is from this knowledge of interdependence that truly wise living will be learned and practiced.

Hildegard was a true mystic. She knew that the spirit of God, which was active in her life, is the same spirit that is active throughout creation. It is the same spirit that inspires all true religion no matter what its name. She was an ecumenical mystic. She knew that there can be no global

peace and justice without global spirituality. That which unites us in our deepest spiritual foundations is stronger than anything which divides us.

Thirdly, Hildegard was not only a mystic who sensed and experienced the interconnectedness of all things, but she was also a prophet. Like the prophets of our biblical heritage, she disturbed the complacent and provoked the privileged. She was not afraid to be critical of popes or archbishops, or emperors or monks or priests. She was not afraid to denounce the corruption of religion in her time. Many scholars have seen in Hildegard's denunciations a precursor of the Reformation in Germany carried out by Luther.
She was not a lone prophet. She inspired dozens and dozens of Benedictine sisters, monks, and laypersons all around her to launch out and renew Christianity, and the movement she started continues on long after her death.

Unofficial saints and prophets like Hildegard challenge us to be our own kind of unofficial saints and prophets in our own time. As unofficial saints, we are to be especially sensitive to God's spirit, which is always seeking to work in and through us. This is what the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is all about.

If there is one message that the season of Advent proclaims as we prepare for Christmas — it is that God frequently works through people like Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, like Mary, the mother of Jesus, like Hildegard, and more importantly, in unofficial saints like you and me. Amen.