

12/6: The Company of St. Ursula after the Council of Trent

In this paper I will discuss the following questions:

- What happened to the Company of St. Ursula after the Council of Trent (1545-63)?
- How could the Company survive despite the Church's attempts to enclose women within convents?
- What has changed and what has survived of Angela's ideas in the new Companies?

The Company after Trent

Between the 1560s and the 1640s the Company expanded in many other cities in the North of Italy and in France (MAP): Milan (1567), Venice (at least from 1575), Ferrara (at least from 1584; rules in 1587), Bergamo (possibly from 1567; rules in 1588), Verona (since 1586 or 1580 with rules in 1594), Mantova (probably from 1600), Bologna (1603), Treviso (1603, with rules 1623), Reggio (1611), Cremona (possibly from 1565; rules in 1613), Modena (1620), Parma (1623), Foligno (1600 or 1572; rules in 1626), Piacenza (1649), Pavia, Novara, Lodi. These are the cities that we know, there may be more. The Company was also spread in the countryside around the cities.

The Companies were officially recognized by the Church and they were submitted to the Bishop. Exceptions were Parma e Piacenza, where the Companies were submitted to the civil power (the Farnese family) and Venice, which does not seem to have been officially recognized.

The companies kept their secular form in Brescia, Venezia, Milano, Bergamo, Cremona, Ferrara, Verona, Bologna, and Treviso¹. In some cases, next to the secular Companies, there was a group of congregated Ursulines (Milan) or Ursulines living in a school open to external pupils (Treviso). In Parma and Piacenza, the latter was the only form. In some cases, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the secular Ursulines changed into a school (Ferrara and Treviso) or in a

¹ [I do not have information about Mantova, Modena e Reggio.]

convent (Verona and Lodi). In Brescia and Bologna the secular Ursulines survived until the Napoleonic suppression of the religious institutes (and started again afterwards). I do not have information on the development of the Companies in Milan, Venice, Bergamo, Cremona, Modena, Mantua, and Reggio. Finally, in Rome there was an Ursuline convent (since 1688, when the Ursulines arrived from France) and in Naples there was a big confraternity named after Angela's Company. It seems that at the end of the XVIII century the congregated Ursulines were more numerous than the secular one.

According to various sources (books of the Companies, reports of pastoral visitations, letters, introductions to the rules), at the end of the century, the Italian Ursulines were hundreds (especially in the cities of Brescia and Milan and in the surrounding territories; in Ferrara they were 25 in 1584 and 50 in 1587, in the other cities probably on a similar scale or more). The social background of the Ursulines became higher, as from the end of the century the aristocracy entered the institutes. Women from the lower strata of society could still join the Company, but – as it was specified in the rules – they had to prove that they could sustain themselves rather than expecting to receive financial aid from the Company.

Reasons for the Company's survival and success

Here we arrive at my second question: how could the Company survive? The circumstances in which the Companies were established are interesting. The bishops played an important role in their foundations and in influencing their spirituality, as they composed the new rules. The Companies, however, were generally initiated by women, who spontaneously began to follow a devout life in the world. We don't know whether these women followed Merici's rule and if they modeled themselves on her Company. We cannot exclude it as it is possible that Brescian Ursulines traveled to other cities in order to spread Merici's ideas – as in the case of cities near Brescia. In support of the Company, we must also consider some religious orders, such as the Jesuits, the

Oratorians, and the Canonici Lateranensi. The priests of these orders were confessors, supporters and sometimes were involved in the direction of the Companies

The foundations were thus the product of a combination of forces. As far as women were concerned since the Middle Ages there was a tradition of women living a devout life in the world (either on their own or as tertiaries or beguines, etc.) and therefore it is not surprising that we find them in many cities also in the late sixteenth century. Indeed Angela's Company was precisely an answer to this need. It is very likely that these women at some point became aware of the existence of such Company and decided to name themselves after it. Furthermore, in the late XVI century there were many women outside the marriage and the convent markets because of the rise of dowries. In that period many women were also informally involved with hospitals and the houses for repentant prostitutes, orphan girls and poor women, as these places were founded by religious orders, city councils. All these women were potential members of the Company, once it became available in their cities, as it gave them the official recognition of their type of life. Indeed the bishop of Bologna Paleotti and Charles Borromeo corresponded about the possibility of giving Angela's rule to some devout women in Bologna who wanted to remain in the world, in order to organize them.

As far as churchmen were concerned, the situation is complex. The Council of Trent in 1563 and pope Pious V in 1566 had published decrees against the idea that religious women could stay outside the convent. Many bishops, however, did not agree with these decrees and since the Council of Trent the Church authorities were divided on this topic. Indeed in 1616, the Congregation of the Bishops and of the Regulars published a new decree, which allowed religious women to chose how they want to live. But why were these bishops in favor of this type of life? The reason was that they had to deal with many women who were living a devout life in the world, whom they could not shut into convents because the Council of Trent was against forced entries. Furthermore the bishops saw the Company as a useful tool to support the cause of Catholicism against the spread of Protestantism: in the rules' introductions it was said that the virgins taught catechism in the schools

of Christian Doctrine and to their families at home. The need to provide religious education, reliable devotional practices, and good social order, proved to be stronger than the need to comply with a traditional view of female religiosity that wanted them safely enclosed in convents. Furthermore, many Churchmen simply considered women more devout and reliable than men. If women were considered inferior and not apt to ecclesiastical offices, in terms of devotion and spirituality sometimes they were considered superior. We will discuss this issue in the next few days.

Now, was the image of religious woman in the world different to the one proposed by Angela Merici? How did the Ursuline changed in the new companies? This is the third and most important issue that I want to discuss today. What we will see however, regards more the ideas of the churchmen rather than the view of women themselves. If Angela wrote her rule, perhaps with the advice of other female companions, these rules were all written by the bishops and their entourage. So, we don't know if women agreed with the new organization, the new identity, and whether they shared the interest for teaching, working in charitable associations, etc. What we can say is that many of them accepted to be members of a Company which let them carry on with their secular devotion with the authorization of the Church, even if this meant some compromises or at least changes from their original inspiration.

What has changed/survived in the rules of the Companies

The rules. The rules I examined are those of the following cities: Brescia (1569, 1572, 1582), Milan (1567), Ferrara (1587), Verona (1594), Bologna (1603), and Treviso (1623).

Brescia: 1569=Turlino (first printed edition; it is very similar to the Trivulziano but it introduced some significant linguistic changes, which affected the Ursulines' spirituality); 1572 = reported in the Second General Book (Prato; it is based on Turlino and introduced changes in the government); 1582=Borromeo (it is based on Turlino and it introduced changes especially in the government, which is divided into 11 new chapters. The main body of the rule is the closest to the original, even if it omitted or altered some important parts).

Milan: 1567; it was composed by Borromeo and it represents the most different rule from the original.

Ferrara: 1587; composed by Leone; the author followed especially Borromeo's rule for Brescia (in particular the organization of the government, now explained in 34 chapters!) and partly Turlino (indeed there are some passages that were only in there). The rule of Ferrara is the only one which does not submit the General Mother to a male authority (apart from the Bishop).

Verona (1594): composed by Valerio it followed especially Borromeo's rule for Brescia.

Bologna (1603): this consists only in a few pages composed under Paleotti; it follows Ferrara's rule, as one can see from the order of some arguments.

Treviso (1603): written by the Archbishop Luigi Molino, it is innovative, as it uses all rules, and presents aspects of the original thought of the foundress.

Organization. Let's now begin the analysis of the rules and let's begin with the organization of the Company.

- Angela's CdSO: government composed by only women (Matrone and Colonnelle); democratic (elections, no class); no hierarchies (it was possible to criticize superiors). The Colonnelle were divided in areas of the city and they overlooked the Ursulines living in that area and every 15 days they met the Matrone to discuss the problems of the virgins.

The first thing to change in the new rules was the presence of men, especially churchmen. Coherently with the Council of Trent, the Companies were placed under the supervision of the Bishop. This was not only a formal supervision, as he authorized the new entries and all important decisions taken by the **Company**. Furthermore, with the exception of Turlino and Ferrara, the new rules placed another churchman, above the General Mother, the General Father. He attended the meetings of the Company, in which he decided what to discuss, and confirmed the decisions taken. He also authorized changes of confessor, new entries in the Company, and solved the internal

conflicts (which Merici left to the women themselves). Third, in the Companies now we find the Protectors and the Agents, roles that Angela's rule foresaw, but that were not fulfilled until 1555. In the new Companies they take care of the financial and legal aspects. The rule of Milan went much further, creating a whole male government, without General Mother and with priests ruling the female groups in each area of the city. Finally, the confessors increased their importance within the Company as they supervised and authorized more aspects of the Ursulines' lives.

The Company changed its structure. This change was first introduced by the Brescian rule of 1572 (Prato): the peripheric structure of the Company was reinforced as each area of the city also had a Matrona together with a Colonella and a group of virgins. The central government is thus no longer represented by all the Matrone and the Colonelle, but only by the General Father and Mother and 4 Assistants (among whom we may also find a treasurer, a secretary, a chancellor). This composition was quite typical of the governments of the time and in a way it is quite rational. The Matrone were responsible only for the virgins of their area, likewise the Colonelle. There were still meetings with all the members of the government, but they took place only every eight weeks, because the Matrone were supposed to solve the problems of their virgins in their local frequent meetings. The authority of the General Mother was strengthened, because she was the only one who had a view of the whole group (the General Mother sometimes attended the local meetings), and therefore in the general meetings she was in a better position to take decisions regarding the whole Company (whereas in Angela's Company the General Mother was more like a peer, as she gathered regularly with all other members of the government).

Furthermore, it has to be noted that already in the Brescian rule of 1572 the role of the Colonelle began to change. Her name changed into that of "Maestra" (teacher), and next to her we find a new figure, the "Avvisatrice", whose duty was that of visiting the virgins, either to control them or to bring them a message. The Maestra's role was to teach the virgins the content of the rule and to follow their initial period. Compared to Angela's Colonella, the Maestra is less important, as

she is submitted to the Matrona of the area, who is in charge of the well-being and of the problems of the virgins.

As far as the democratic aspect was concerned, in the new Companies the daughters kept their right to elect their female government (the General Father was nominated by the bishop, who also approved the election of the other members), which was renewed every time that the General Mother died. However, if a member of the government died before the death of the Mother, than it was other members to elect a substitute. The Ursulines also lost the right to elect a common father for mass.

Furthermore, hierarchy became more important: superior status was clearly stated in the fact that the virgins, during meetings, were told to seat in a hierarchical order. Furthermore Angela's precept that lax leaders of the Company could be expelled or criticized disappeared (it became a matter of the Bishop). The new rules introduced more repressive measures towards the daughters, such as punishment and expulsion. It is true, however, that the new Companies kept some of Angela's pedagogic principles on how to guide the daughters and on the importance of love and individuality. A simplified version of Angela's Counsels was often placed in the chapter for the Maestre, as principles that they should follow when they were guiding their daughters.

Spirituality. Let's now consider how the relationship with God and the experience of the sacred were conceived in the new rules.

- **Angela:** individual and unmediated relationship with God; mystic experience; divine intercession for salvation of humanity; Angela's view of perfection and conversion focused on the inner side of the individual (evangelical counsels); the exterior and ritual aspects of religion were unimportant (convent, habit, vow, ceremonies). Angela drew these religious concepts both from a medieval female mystic tradition and from contemporary ideas about perfection, which focused on interiority.

In successive editions of the rule – beginning with Turlino – we find that these aspects were mitigated, especially their most dangerous consequences. To begin with, the relationship between the Ursuline and God was far less immediate. For example, where Angela asked obedience to the Holy Spirit, Borromeo’s rule of 1582 significantly inserted the confessor as mediator between God and the Ursuline’s heart: ‘And also to obey the inner inspirations, which, with the *judgment and approbation of the confessor*, will be recognized to be coming from the Holy Spirit’. This passage shows that Borromeo did not deny the relationship with God, but the woman’s right to administer it independently from men. In the rule of Milan Borromeo deleted this passage altogether. In the rules of Ferrara, Verona and Bologna, this concept was formulated in a rather ambiguous way: the Ursulines were to obey ‘to God, the bishop, the Church, and to the spiritual father in all things as much as possible’.

Furthermore, if we consider Merici’s mysticism, already in Turlino’s rule we find that a more conventional, less medieval and more counter-reformistic approach was emerging. The passage where Angela imagined a mystic fusion of hearts between the Ursuline and God was altered so that a negative view of love and passion was introduced and the mystic experience was no longer implied: Angela’s statement ‘to burn its [of the heart] affection and passion in the fiery furnace’ became ‘to burn *from the heart* its *evil* affection and passion in the fiery furnace’. If Borromeo’s rule for Brescia kept Turlino’s version, the other rules reported nothing. The new rules did not include the passages where Angela spoke about interceding the divine for the salvation of humanity: “I would shed my own blood to open the blind eyes of their minds”; “They should fast... to subdue the senses and the appetites and sensual desires... to implore mercy... for the many dissolute actions...”. Furthermore, in all rules fasting is no longer associated to souls’ salvation.

The penitential element, which in women’s spirituality was part of the mystical approach, was mitigated in all rules. The number of days in which the Ursulines should fast were cut down: the new authors removed the 40 days after the Epiphany, the 3 days a week between May and the Advent (they normally prescribed it once a week and 3 days a week during the Advent). The same

can be said about prayer: if Merici prescribed the Office of Our Lady, the Seven Penitential Psalms for those who could read and 68 Pater Noster and 68 Hail Mary for those who couldn't, the rule of Milan prescribed 18 Pater Noster and 18 Hail Mary and the reading of the Office during the holidays for those who could read (the other rules followed it). In the new rules there isn't the explanation that Angela gave for vocal prayer (that is, as a preparation for mental prayer), but it is presented as a practice valid in itself.

Furthermore, there is a huge number of linguistic examples which testify of the increasing distance between the Ursuline and God. [For example, if Merici considered the Ursulines as Brides of Christ in this life, in the other rules the bridal encounter was postponed after death: Angela said: 'You strive with all your might to remain as you are called by God'; but Borromeo's rule introduced the future tense: 'You strive with all your might to remain as you will be called by God', and in the rule of Milan and Ferrara Christ 'awaits you in heaven with the crowns'.] Furthermore, while Merici described the Ursulines' relationship with God as a relationship of love, Borromeo's and Ferrara's rule introduced new feelings: 'they have to openly show the reverence and fear they have and that they ought to have of the Divine Majesty' (19).

However, the new rules kept Angela's emphasis on inner commitment. Some of them, such as Ferrara and Treviso, were even more extreme in interpreting the evangelical counsels, confession, and communion as ascetic fights against oneself in order to get rid of the distractions and every imperfection. The Spiritual Exercises became a common practice. I will discuss these issues at length in another session.

At the same time however, the new rules introduce exterior and ceremonial elements, such as a common dress, the ceremony of acceptance, and simple vows.

Finally, unlike in Merici's rule, in the new rules the Ursulines' spiritual life was very much directed by the confessor: he taught the virgins the exam of conscience, the vocal and mental prayers, he decided what penitence they could take, how long and how often the Ursulines should stay in churches, whether they could take the vow, how often they could attend the sacraments.

Identity and everyday life

Angela Merici proposed the identity of the virgin-bride of Christ to women and allowed a significant amount of freedom to her. Although the new rules accepted the consecrated virgin in the world, she was placed under the authority of men (the General Father, the confessor, the Protectors and the Agents), as the codes of honor of the time required. Furthermore, the new rules limited the freedom of the Ursulines. Borromeo's rule for Brescia affirmed: "the virgins should not be seen outside their homes... they should not go around the city unless they really need it or they are called by their Avvisatrice... they should not go outside the city without the permission of their Lady-governor" (Reg, 19). The virgins should not talk "with all sorts of people, but only with those who follow the same type of life... they must on no occasion speak to men on their own, but they should always be with someone else and do it only out of necessity" (Reg. 19). For the new rules is important to surveil and control the virgins. The function of reading or working was precisely to prevent idleness, which was the best ally of the Devil: "they should always be busy, or in serving, or in reading, or in praying, so that the Devil will find them busy and will not be able to tempt them" (Milan, VII). This was very different from what Angela Merici prescribed. Angela had a rather independent life, she lived 13 years in the house of a merchant who was single and she went on pilgrimage in several places. Why would she impose on her daughters something that she did not follow herself? She did warn them to be careful, not to accept secret messages and so on, but she trusted the Ursulines' judgment.

Furthermore in the new rules also the social and public role that Merici gave to the Ursulines was reorganized. Indeed it is revealing that in Borromeo's version of the Advice we no longer find the following statement: "tell them that, wherever they are, they should give good example. And be to all good odour of virtue... And seek to spread peace and concord where they are" (*Ric*, 5). The new rules also omitted Merici's requirement to obey civic law: the Ursulines were no longer considered as active members of society, they were seen as more apart. The only active role the Ursulines were

given was that of teacher. All the new rules specify that on Sundays and other feast days the Ursulines should teach and learn in the Schools of Christian Doctrine. This role had undoubtedly its social importance, because education was a factor of social mobility. In these schools, however, women were closely supervised by men and had to follow manuals for catechism.

Another important difference between Angela and her followers consists in the concept of virginity. In Angela's rule virginity is not simply identified with sexual purity, but it refers to a wide range of behavior, to love and to the Bride of Christ itself. In the chapter of virginity Angela asked the Ursulines to sacrifice their heart to Christ and to keep it pure, by not showing secular attachments, by staying cheerful, etc. Furthermore, in Angela's rule, the virgin is a powerful figure because she is a woman who is freed from parental and male control. In Angela's rule the virgins were not supervised by men, neither secular nor ecclesiastic. Indeed, Merici filled the virginal condition with heroic and virile connotations, embodied by the figure of Judith:

we are called to so *glorious life* [...] *Come on valiant daughters*, let us all embrace this holy Rule [...] And *armed with its sacred precepts*, let us behave so bravely ('virilmente') that we too, like holy Judith, having courageously cut off the head of Holofernes, that is of the devil, may *return gloriously to our heavenly home*, where, from everyone in heaven and earth, great *glory and triumph will burst for us*

Furthermore, Merici's writings evinced no common prejudice on female psychology and manifested a profound respect for human beings.

In the new rules the concept of virginity did not provide women independence and power and was associated to a much more passive ideal. The concept of virginity no longer implied a positive act of love towards God, which justified detachment from the world. The virginal condition did not necessarily transformed the Ursuline into a bride of Christ, but linked her to the Virgin Mary, who became one of the main religious referents for the new Companies. Virginity was less a

condition of the spirit and became limited to the preservation of sexual integrity: ‘they should keep their will of virginity... they should protect it, reminding themselves that they carry a precious treasure in a fragile vase of glass, a lamp exposed to wind, and a precious gem desired by many people’ (M, F, 8). The new virgin lost its powerful aspect. The Ursuline was no longer considered an active and virile woman: the sentence ‘Come on, valiant daughters let’s all embrace this holy rule... let’s behave so bravely (‘virilmente’)’ in Borromeo’s and Ferrara’s rule was changed into: ‘Well, dear sisters, let’s all embrace this holy rule... let’s behave in this manner.’ Similarly, Merici’s ideal that the Ursulines could defeat the devil (‘like holy Judith, having courageously cut off the head of Holofernes, that is of the devil’) disappeared. Instead, the Ursuline can defeat the devil’s illusions or temptations: ‘we (like Judith who courageously cut off the head of Holofernes), having cut off the deceits of the devil’ (Turlino and Borromeo). If in Merici’s rule the Ursuline’s act is more worthy, in the new rules the Ursulines were viewed as subjected to the deceits of the devil. Such ideal was connected to the traditional image of female nature as weak and easily corruptible and with the belief on witchcraft, which was very strong in this period. Indeed, in the new rules, the Ursulines are treated with a patronizing attitude and are described in very negative terms: they are accused of being ‘disobedient and stubborn’, ‘greedy’, ‘lazy’, ‘insolent’, ‘unfocused’, inclined to temptations and to frivolous things. It was feared that they begged in the streets or stole from their parents. Given their weak nature the Ursulines should be supervised in a patronizing way: ‘Let them hold to account their conversation both outside the house and in it, which they can do by often visiting them, and when they least expect it’ (B, 19).

Conclusion. In conclusion, several Tridentine bishops (beginning with Carlo Borromeo) approved the Companies, and gave them new rules introducing some significant changes to their initial lifestyle: the duty to teach in the schools of Christian Doctrine, a more hierarchical structure supervised by men, and a less mystical and penitential spirituality. The Ursulines, however, retained significant aspects of their original outlook, including their identity of Brides of Christ in the world

and a certain degree of autonomy in their spiritual and material life. If considered from the perspective of the debate on spiritual women's opportunities and limits after the Council of Trent, the new rules suggest that a part of the church accepted some spiritual ideals created and promoted by women, recognized them devotional equality with men, and gave them more responsibilities in the conversion and catechization of society. At the same time, the Tridentine rules promoted a more conventional concept of femininity and tamed and directed women's spiritual initiatives.