

### **13/6: Women as Leaders- Morning**

Today we are going to discuss what leadership positions women were able to occupy within the Church, from the beginning of Christianity to the 17th century. Second, we will discuss the influence that the attitudes towards the female had on the limits that women suffered within the Church. Third, I will briefly point out the position of Angela Merici in relation to this history. Here my treatment of Angela is mostly an introduction to the following lectures, which deal with her in more detail.

#### **Women in the Church**

Within the Church the situation was rather complex. On the one hand women were full members of the new religion. Christ himself was very open to women: he spoke to women, women figured among his followers, he broke taboos about women, and the first to find out that he was resurrected was a woman, Mary Magdalene. In addition, Christian women enjoy spiritual equality, as the souls of both men and women can go to heaven. Baptism is one of the very few initiation rites which is also open to women. The Jews had circumcision, but St. Peter and St. Paul opted for baptism. Indeed St. Paul in a letter to the Galatians affirmed that “(26) You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, (27) for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

However, at the same time, women were considered inferior to men. St. Paul, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, affirms: “I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman.” (1 Cor., 11:3). Furthermore, Paul forbade them to teach: "Let women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted them to speak, let them be submissive as the Law also says. But if they wish to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is unseemly for a woman to speak in Church", 1 Corinthians 14:34-35). Paul's contradictory positions could be explained in two ways: first, Christianity had two dimensions, one was otherworldly and eschatological (the last will be the first in the kingdom of God), and the second was worldly and social

(where nothing can be changed, including women's subordination). There is another possibility: the negative passage on women was not written by Paul.

On the whole in the primitive church, when the hierarchical church had not been established, women enjoyed quite a lot of freedom and a certain equality. In the first Christian communities women were numerous and had an important role. Since the apostles congregated in houses, it seems that women took an active part in the evangelization: they went to talk to women in their houses, cared for women who were sick, organized the houses where the meetings were held. Furthermore there were women martyrs and women who converted their husbands – especially the wives of Roman aristocrats. A famous example is Tecla, who escaped two martyrdoms, baptized herself and received from St. Paul the authorization to evangelize. Since they had more freedom of movement, they went around with the apostles and they had some managerial duties in the community. Some of them, possibly the widows, could dispose of their finances and they used their money for the Christian cause.

Moreover, it is possible that some women were deaconesses, who exercised some of the ministerial activities among women (for example, in the ceremony of baptism of women, they put the oil on the head of the women while the man said the sacred words). They took up preaching roles in connection with the celebration of the eucharist and the reading of the gospel, given that at this stage these activities were performed in private houses, quite informally and spontaneously.

In the early church some women were also prophets. This is less surprising as women prophets were present both in the Judaic and Classic traditions. The prophet is someone who connects the secular world with the divine, who can predict the future, either through revelations, or dreams, or signs. The Judaic prophets were chosen by God; when it happened the prophets lost their control over their senses and language, they had visions and they became instruments in the hands of God who used them to reveal his message to humanity. In the New Testament there is Anna, who recognized Christ as the Messiah. Sources indicate that some women prophets were present in the early church as they were involved in debates on the direction that the church should take.

It is thus possible that in the early church, when the organization of the church was more informal, still fluid and changeable, when Christianity was not an official religion and was still trying to affirm itself, some women exercised a priestly role. This is likely because women were more numerous than men in the first communities; because various sources affirm that they exercised a variety of roles connected with priesthood. And, above all, because early theologians talked about how terrible it was to have women priests, women who read the sacred scriptures, women who wrote about Christian issues: if theologians spoke about it, condemn it and wanted to forbid it, it means that there were women doing it.

The situation changed gradually, when the expectations of the arrival of the end of times declined, around the III century, when Christians realized that they had to live in the world. At that point the Church began to be a hierarchical structure and women were excluded from priesthood and from any ecclesiastical position. At the Council of Nicea (325) it was decided that they should not be given the sacrament of ordination. The Church followed the patriarchal models and the institutional structure of Roman society.

From the IV century, monasticism had become a very important way to live Christian perfection, and monks made a great effort in resisting the temptations of the flesh. For this reason monks began to warn each others of how terrible women were and how important was to keep them away from their lives. Monks produced a vast literature on women, despite the fact that they had never seen one (apart from their mother). However, at the same time women were permitted to follow the monastic way of life. The most important aspect for women was virginity, as it was believed that through renunciation to sex, women overcame their sinful condition and became men. Through monasticism women could experience some authority, as every convent, or groups of convents, had an abbess as their leader. Abbesses could also undertake some spiritual functions, such as directing common prayer, hearing confession. Furthermore the feudal society allowed noblemen to rule their territories like kings. Therefore abbesses, who were aristocratic women, in some cases could administer the land possessed by the convent and the people residing there (including the clergy). They

run parishes and hospitals, collected taxes, appointed priests to parishes, paid their salaries, maintained church buildings, excommunicated heretics or dissidents; and in some cases, heard the confessions of their sisters.

Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries a more positive attitude towards women emerged among the Church writers. By that time the Church had become much more involved with the secular life of laypeople living in towns, and especially with the mendicant orders (the Franciscans and the Dominicans) who were not living apart from the world but in the middle of social life. Virgin Mary therefore became more human, a mother who loved and suffered for her child. In this way other women could identify with her (unlike when she was purely seen as the woman who gave birth to the son of God). In addition Mary Magdalene became important: the repentant prostitute represented the chance for women to redeem from their supposedly sinful nature.

New religious models became available in this period, such as the penitential, pauperistic and evangelical movement, confraternities, and the laity managed to participate as never before. Francis of Assisi was the most famous individual of these movements, which had the human, poor, and crucified Christ at their centre. The Church created a new form of life for the laity, the Third Orders. Women too participated and could follow these models, developing some aspects even more than men, such as mysticism, prophecy and penance. Devout women could decide to live their spirituality outside the convent, as tertiaries, beguines, bizoche. It was a European phenomenon, which saw many women having visions of Christ, received divine revelations, imitated the Passion of Christ and some of them even became spiritual leaders. [In the North of Europe, already since the XIth century several women, both in convents and outside convents, wrote about theology, poetry, and philosophy, and were admired by men and famous theologians.] In Italy, where the phenomenon lasted longer, women like Catherine of Siena, and many other women up to the XVI century became object of devotion of both the elite and ordinary people.

Penitent and mystic women therefore, at an informal level, did exercise priestly roles: they preached publicly (perhaps to a circle of friends who would spread their words), they repeated Christ's

sacrifice on their bodies thus mediating the salvation of the souls of the dead or the pardon of the sins of the community, they could hear confessions informally, as their spiritual friends counted on their advice, and they could guide the community through prophecy. Some of these women healed people and protected spiritually their communities, while others founded hospitals, convents, houses for women, and even religious orders. Others promoted new devotions or wrote theological treatises which have influenced other church writers and common people. Theologians went to visit them to hear their revelations, lords of the cities invited them at court to provide supernatural protection, and circles of followers and other clergymen involved them in the debates of the reformation of the church.

The Church was ambivalent towards these women, tried to put spiritual fathers behind them, but these often became devout followers of the women. It is not a coincidence that in this period the number of women who were canonized increased considerably. If up to the XIII century canonized women were about 10% of the saints, from the XIV to the XVI centuries the proportion of women raised to 33%. It should be noted that despite this increasing success, which allowed some women to exercise some priestly roles, women never gained access to official administration of sacraments and ecclesiastical positions.

After the Council of Trent, with the Counter-reformation, the Church tried to control the religious world more tightly, and in particular women. The church tried to impose conventual life on them. However, the attitude of the Church after the Council of Trent was ambivalent, because women were also a useful tool to combat the Protestant heresy and they were also seen capable of great devotion. Several female religious orders were allowed to stay in the world, like the French Daughters of Charity and the Italian Ursulines. Gradually, in the XVII and XVIII centuries religious life in the world became acceptable. The spiritual leadership, however, declined, and women lost many of the priestly roles that they could exercise as mystics in the world. With the church reorganizing itself and becoming in control of religious life, misogyny became strong again. The most terrible expression of this attitude was the belief that women's weak nature made them perfect allies for the devil. In a period characterized by the fear of the devil, many women were persecuted as witches. It is interesting that

also in relation to witchcraft we can see the same differences that there were in religion. Male witches could control the demonic forces in a more institutional way, through books and magic prayers; female witches, by contrast, were invaded by the devil at personal level, they were possessed much more frequently than men and they were subordinated to the devil.

Finally, also the Protestants repeated women's exclusion from institutional positions of power, and in particular from priesthood, although at the beginning Luther preached the idea of the universal priesthood.

### **The attitudes towards the female**

From what we have seen so far, there is no doubt that women had important roles, leadership roles, within Christianity. Women, however, remained excluded from the institutional side of the church, ecclesiastical positions and official priestly roles. Why was that the case?

Before we analyze the reasons, let's see what are the powers of the priest. First, the priest *repeats Christ's sacrifice* through the rite of the eucharist; second, the priest *sanctifies the community* with the sacraments, which channel divine grace; third, the priest has the duty to *preach*, which means to reveal God's words (like the prophets and the apostles); fourth, the priest must *administer and rule* the community.

At a theological level women were not considered apt to carry out these roles for various reasons: first, there was Paul's famous passage; second, Christ did not choose women as apostles; third, women have never been ordained; fourth, Christ is a man and only men can represent him.

However, apart from these theological reasons, the problem was the view of woman, who was considered inferior to man and therefore incompatible with the powerful status of the priest. The Church had a strong misogynistic view of women, which was inherited from the Jews, the Romans and the Greeks. Obviously the most influential text for western European ideas on the essence of womanhood was the myth of Eve. Eve was the symbol of physical inferiority because her creation followed that of Adam. She was made not in God's image but in that of man from a spare rib. Eve was

also the paradigmatic image of women's moral and intellectual inferiority because she was viewed as the cause of the fall from Eden and therefore identified with evil. In the Church's view women were corruptible, curious, unreliable, and sensual.

Such ideas are to be found in other spheres of society, such as science and law. Sixteenth century scientists maintained that human beings are made of 4 elements, heat, cold, dry and humid: while men were hot and dry, women were cold and wet. These elements explained a number of physical characteristics and intellectual qualities. Men burnt excessive blood and raised spiritual qualities to their heads, something that women couldn't do. Men's greater heat also meant they more often possessed qualities associated with heat: courage, reason, honesty, moral and physical strength. Scientists maintained that the womb wandered inside woman's body, causing hysteria. In addition women have always been perceived as cyclical and for this reason scientists established a connection between women and the moon. Obviously the lunar relationship exposed women to lunacy and irrationality because the moon changes and therefore women were affected by these changes. For all these obvious reasons, women were more prone to physical weakness and psychological and physiological disorders: women were irrational, lustful, talkative, lovesick, melancholic. Women thus lacked the physical strength of the male and so they were passive rather than active, people for the home, not the political arena.

If we consider law, we find that traditional medieval law codes in Europe accorded women a secondary legal status, based generally on their inability to perform feudal military service, and thus required women to have a male legal guardian who could undergo trial by combat or trial by ordeal for her. The rediscovery and introduction of Roman Law implied an even harsher treatment of women as this was more clearly based on the supposed weakness of women.

Such view of women limited the opportunities of women in all sectors of society. Women were excluded from the possibility of joining official institutions of all kinds, such as city councils as politicians, courts as judges, universities as teachers. Any type of women's government was considered as a disgrace. For example in 1558 the theologian and protestant reformer John Knox

affirmed that “To promote a woman to bear rule, superiority, dominion or empire above any realm, nation, or city is repugnant to nature, contumely to God, a thing most contrarious to his revealed will and approved ordinance, and finally it is the subversion of good order, and all equity and justice” (J. Knox, *The first blast of the trumpet*, 1558).

This story is quite sad, but there were exceptions of women who gained political power, accessed to intellectual positions, worked at high level, and, as we have seen, exercised religious authority.

One obvious example is the figure of the queen. The Middle Ages and the Early Modern period are full of women who became queens and ruled their countries. The queens became so for dynastic reasons, when in a royal family there was no male heir or when he was too young to rule. In that case a woman could rule either as a queen or as the mother of the future king, until he came of age. The queen was surrounded by male advisors and it was up to her and to the situation to establish how much decisional power she could exercise.

Furthermore, women were able to have informal political power and the possibility to shape political events. They could be widows taking care of the land of the husband (like in the case of queens); they could influence their husbands who held an official position; they could arrange marriages creating important connections between families; they wrote letters spreading opinions and rumors, contributing to consolidate political factions; they could also finance certain causes such as the Protestant reformation or the political career of a man; and, finally, they participated to rebellions, such as in the French revolution.

So, how can we explain that women manage to have some power in certain situations? On the whole I think that it is possible that women gain more opportunities to rule or to be more influential in society in two main circumstances: one, when there is a period of crisis of the official and institutional power; or, two, when a society tends to value aspects of life which are considered more “feminine” or universal (for example, fertility, introspection, love, sacrifice), as opposed to a



culture that values male values (such as physical strength, authority, etc.). Better is when there is a combination of the two. However, women remain outside institutional power also in these circumstances.

Indeed women become queens when there is a crisis of official power, when there is no male heir in the dynastic family. The same is true for women who exercised power informally, behind the scenes: they represent a complementary form of power to the official one, which finds its space of action in helping formal power to work better, and it becomes important when the official one is weak. Furthermore, in the middle ages and the renaissance women acquire power in society if their husbands are either dead or absent. Widows could dispose of their money, sign contracts in the name of the husband, etc. However, no matter how good women were at ruling a country or investing the money of the deceased or absent husband, they could not change the general organization which excluded them from power. Women remain excluded from the institutional and official side of power.

But why, then, are women not recognized able to manage institutional power? Let's briefly look at anthropological theories on this matter, as cross-cultural studies have revealed that women's exclusion from institutional forms of power is an almost universal fact.

The reason lies in the association between woman and nature. Anthropologists affirmed that almost all cultures establish a connection between woman and nature on the one hand and between men and culture on the other. Woman is associated with nature because of her reproductive function and her cycle. Men, by contrast, are associated to culture. Because culture must be in control of nature also men must control women. Indeed in all cultures men are associated with positive concepts, while women occupy the negative scale of the values of a society. While men are associated with "culture", "public", "spirit", "strength", "rationality", "up", etc., women are associated with "nature", "private", "body", "weakness", "irrationality" "down", etc.

Now, the association with nature, does not only imply the association with birth and life, but also with death. And, by extension it also means life after death, that is with the world of the dead, of the ancestors, with the supernatural, as all cultures establish such possibility. Women's link with

nature is thus also a link with the supernatural. Women, and in particular women's body, with his reproductive power, is powerful by nature, because it is naturally connected to the supernatural. Women's natural contact with the other world is considered dangerous and polluting, and that is why almost all cultures have surrounded women's cycle and reproductive power with taboos.

That's why then women are excluded from cultural institutional power. If women are powerful by nature, they are incompatible with cultural power. Cultural institutions are created precisely to tame, regulate and control the power of the supernatural. Women, who are naturally connected to the supernatural, who are powerful, polluting and impure by nature, are not apt at channeling at a cultural and institutional level the power of God. This is true for all types of institutions, because in medieval Europe, political power, jurisdictional education, law, knowledge, were all about God's will and word. The king and the emperor represented God on earth, a juridical verdict was the earthly manifestation of God's will, and studying and writing was about learning the word of God. Exceptions to this general cultural scheme are possible, precisely because they are perceived as exceptions and because it becomes necessary for practical reasons.

### **Angela Merici**

Let's now turn to Angela Merici. How does Angela relate to the issue of female leadership? Did she advocate new roles for women in the Church? What is the significance of institutional structures within her religious ideal? On the whole it can be said that Angela recognize the role of ecclesiastical institutions without advocating such roles to women. At the same time, she does not value institutional structures in her religious model, and she capitalizes on feminine modes of power.

1) Angela did recognize the power of administration of sacraments of the Church and she did not advocate such role to women. Angela acknowledged confession as a necessary medicine for freeing the individual from sin:

no one will ever be justified from sin, if she does not first, with her own lips, confess her faults to the priest... whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven... By which is clearly demonstrated that sin cannot be taken away except by a priest and through confession (Reg., VII)

2) More in general: what did Angela think about the Church? Angela's loyalty to the Church was beyond question. However, if she recognized its institutions she called for its reformation:

Keep to the ancient way and custom of the Church, established and confirmed by so many Saints the inspiration of the Holy Spirit... pray, and get others to pray, that God not abandon his Church, but reform it as he pleases, and as he sees best for us, and more to his honor and glory

In addition, Angela referred to the corruption of the Church. If she warned the Colonelle that they must guard the daughters from the Protestants (the "robbers"), they must also defend them from the immoral clergy and from secular men (the "wolves"). Lax clergyman might convince the daughters to abandon some aspects of the religious life established by the rule, or even the rule in its entirety:

Know that you have to defend and protect your lambs from wolves and robbers, that is from two kinds of pestilential people: worldly persons or false religious with their deceits, and heretics. Firstly... take care especially that they not become familiar with young men, and other men too, even if they are spiritual... Be on your guard lest a confessor, or some other religious, turn them away from some good inspiration, or from fasting, or from the purpose of virginity, or from esteem for this holy Rule divinely ordained

3) Angela, does not give much importance to institutional aspects of religion - as we will discuss in more detail in the next days. Angela's Company, for example, does not sanctify the members of the Company through a ritual, a ceremony, a vow, a habit. According to Angela's rule the sacred cannot be projected onto exterior rituals or devotions (such as vocal prayers, common and specific religious activities). The Ursulines create and experience the sacred in the relationship with God, at personal level. Indeed, also in the chapter about going to mass every day, she focuses the attention of the Ursulines on Passion and spiritual communication (rather than on the liturgical aspects).

4) Although Angela does not advocate priestly roles to women, she gives women leadership roles in the Company's government without male supervision. How does this concept relate to the cultural exclusion of women from institutional power? Angela does not consider women irrational and incapable to exercise authority and administrative skills. However, it is interesting that here Angela does not ask the Matrone and the Colonelle to exercise a traditional form of power, based on hierarchy, authority, discipline, control, obedience, etc. Indeed these elements are either absent or secondary to the main objective of the government, which was the well-being of the Ursulines. Moreover, as we will see another time, Angela wants the members of the government to rule with human love and maternal love, which are here alternative and possibly female ways of ruling institutions, alternative to male ways.

5) Throughout her writings, Angela advocates two types of powerful roles to women. One is based on charismatic power, which is personal, rather than institutional, it is given by the personal relationship with God, rather by an institution or a ritual. This type of woman experienced an ecstatic union with God, imitated the sacrifice and salvific role of Christ, could be enlightened by the divine, and consequently perform a public role in the community. This figure was especially embodied by medieval and Renaissance mystics. The other is the virgin virile-woman, Bride of Christ: an independent figure, who lives in the world outside male control, detached from the values of society, above everything that is material, contingent, and worldly. This figure of woman finds its inspiration in

early Christianity. By putting together these two types of powerful women, Angela allowed the Ursuline to live outside the convent and to exercise some priestly roles in the community: saving souls, prophetizing, preaching, converting, giving advice, etc. In Angela's writings we find some figures of powerful Christian women, who incarnated these roles. Ursula and Catherine are obvious examples, virgins living in the world, learned, and brides of Christ, capable of taking decisions independently from men, faithful to their ideals without fear of dying. Another is Judith, the Biblical brave and virile virgin-widow who saved the people of Israel, cutting the head of the enemy, of vice, of evil, of danger. Another is a character in Luke's Gospel (2, 36-38), Anna, who was a prophet, who dedicated herself to prayer and fasting: "And one reads in the Gospel about that Anna, daughter of Phanuel, who in the Temple day and night unceasingly served God in ieiuniis et orationibus [fasting and prayer]". Here Anna's example should be probably referred to the role that mystic women exercised during Angela's times: fasting and praying is a kind of service of God because in this way women saved souls, both of the dead and of the community – a role that Angela was depicting precisely in that chapter.

6) Finally in Angela's writings women exercise rational roles in the community, such as spreading peace, advising, etc. Indeed, in her rule there is no passage which implies women's inferiority or weakness. As we will discuss she considers women full human beings, with intellect, will, wisdom.

In conclusion, Angela did not contrast women's cultural exclusion from institutional power. She rather emphasized alternative forms of power, which were part of a female tradition. Angela, like many contemporary mystic women, believed that women were not irrational and weak, that could exercise a form of authority based on love and humanity, and could even carry out informal priestly roles, based on mysticism and virility.