

14/6: Mysticism and the Bride- Morning

Today we discuss the significance of mysticism and of the role of the Bride in Angela Merici. Angela in this respect, fitted a long tradition. Let's first discuss the main passages of this tradition and then Angela herself.

At the beginning of Christianity women in order to show a life of religious perfection had to be Virgins. At that time there was the idea that both men and women become like angels (neoplatonism): purified by fasting and enlightened by prayer, they overcome their sexual and human nature. Women had an additional problem as God was male and women could not imitate him, and therefore they had to overcome their female nature. That is why virginity became immediately a very important religious symbol for women. Virginity allowed women to become associated with spirit and manliness (Jerome).

Around the XI-XIII centuries new forms of piety emerged, which were more affective, personal, bodily, etc. One of the centers of this spirituality were the Cistercian convents, where the treatises addressed to the monks of Bernard of Clairvaux proposed a new view of mystic marriage, conceived as a personal encounter between God-male and the soul-female. Before it was conceived as an allegoric image of the union of the Church with God. Another important context are the Italian cities of the XIII century where the pauperistic preaching of Francis of Assisi emphasized a personal devotion to the human Christ. [PP affective spirit]. Religious culture therefore values aspects that are normally considered feminine. It is in this context that women can participate and become creative.

It is within these contexts that women developed their own spirituality, focusing on mysticism and on the figure of the Bride of Christ. Let's now discuss female spirituality in more detail.

Mysticism Although, not all spiritual women were mystics, mysticism was a very important form through which women experienced the sacred and expressed their creativity within the religious sphere. Mysticism was not gender specific, as men too expressed themselves through this manner of

communication with God. From the thirteenth century, however, mysticism was more frequent among women and it was believed that women had a special relationship with the transcendent. [PP **Mystical experience**] Women's mystical experiences consisted in visions, ecstasies, experience of the union with God. Particularly important to women's mysticism was the contemplation and the repetition of the Passion: in their ecstasies women suffered like Christ and sometimes received the stigmata. During these experiences women could receive divine revelations about the problems of their community and exercise the role of the prophet.

Nuptial images Mystics women were considered to be and considered themselves as brides of Christ. [PP] We find this view of female religious status in women's writings and in the ceremony of acceptance of religious orders, in which women took the identity of *sponsa dei* and men soldiers of Christ. Though women sometimes saw Christ as a judge, a father, or a baby to nurse, he was, above all, a man to love. Many mystics put together the language of the monastic mystic marriage with the language of courtly love (Hadewijch, Marguerite Porete, Machtild of Magdeburg). Women's religious writings were also more direct, affective, introspective, and colloquial than those of men. Women wrote more often about their personal mystical experiences. By contrast, in describing their search for union with God, men tended to be more theoretical, discussing the steps needed to reach God. Moreover, when mystic men spoke of their ecstatic experiences, they did so either because they were influenced by women or they were using female images for themselves. Furthermore, in the hagiographical lives of male saints the emphasis was placed on conversion, whereas on women what counts is the intimate relationship with God.

Penance Physical penance and sufferance were a very important expression of women's direct experience of God. Food deprivation, self-inflicted suffering and the interpretation of illness as a religious experience were particularly common to women. Catherine of Siena starved herself to death at thirty-three years of age. Women, however, were not punishing themselves, but were imitating Christ, because at that time he was considered as a man who suffered. [PP] So women repeated Christ's physical suffering, because in this way they imitated and united with Christ.

Apostolate. In their mystical experiences and penitential activity women were repeating Christ's sacrificial and saving role. Mystic women were seen, and saw themselves, like Christ, as saviors of humanity, taking responsibility for sinners and repeating his sacrificial suffering. They wanted, like Christ, to save souls: these women affirmed that they abstained from food to alleviate the suffering of others, or to relieve souls in purgatory. The idea that the sufferance of a person's body can substitute that of somebody else, is typical of Christianity and it is based on the idea that the Church is a unique body of devout people. However, men did not use penance for this purpose. The mystic relationship also allowed women to perform several roles within the community: they were prophets, healers, protectors, they were involved in the reformation of the Church, they became theologians, political advisors, peacemakers, they promoted new cults, etc.

Catherine's letter. I would like to show you a letter that Catherine of Siena wrote to her confessor, Raymond of Capua. Catherine tells him about a young guy, Niccolò di Toldo who was executed in Siena because he swore against the local authority. Catherine goes to visit him in prison and assists him during the execution. It is a famous letter, where, in my opinion emerge many of the themes relating to female religiosity.

In the name of Christ Jesus Crucified and of sweet Mary... I went to visit him whom you know... he made his confession and prepared himself very well. He made me promise by the love of God that when the moment of justice came I would be there with him... I led him to hear Mass, and he received Holy Communion... God played a trick on him, creating in him such affection and love in the desire for God that he knew not how to live without him, saying, "Stay with me, and don't leave me..." And he leaned his head on my breast. Then I heard a jubilation and smelled his blood. It was not without the odor of mine which I wish to shed for the sweet bridegroom Jesus... I said, "Take comfort, my sweet brother, for very soon we will arrive at the wedding. You shall go there bathed in the sweet blood of the Son of God..." So I waited for him at the place of justice, and I waited there with continual prayer and in the presence of Mary and of St. Catherine, virgin and martyr. But

before I attained that, I prostrated myself and stretched out my neck on the block, but it did not happen, but I had my desire full of myself... My soul was so full then that although a great crowd of people was there I couldn't see a single creature... Then he arrived, like a gentle lamb, and seeing me he began to smile, and wanted me to make the sign of the cross. And when he had received the sign, I said "Down! To the wedding, my sweet brother!...". He prostrated himself with great meekness, and I stretched out his neck, and bent myself down, and reminded him of the blood of the Lamb. His mouth said nothing except "Jesus" and "Catherine." And while he was speaking, I received his head in my hands, closing my eyes in the divine goodness, and saying, "I will". Then was seen God-the-Man, as if the brightness of the sun were seen, and his side remained open and received the blood... Christ received it in the fire of his divine charity. When he had received his blood and his desire, he received his soul, which he put into the open storehouse of his side, full of mercy... When he was at rest, my soul so rested in peace and quiet, in such a fragrance of blood, that I couldn't bear to remove from me the blood that had fallen on me from him.... I don't want to say anymore... I impose on you [the confessor] nothing except to see you drowned in the blood and fire that the side of the Son of God pours out... Sweet Jesus, Jesus love.

In Catherine's letter we find many of the themes discussed.

- *Priestly role*: she converts the sinner; she obtains his confession and takes him to hear mass and to receive communion (1-6); she makes the sign of the cross and basically absolving him from his sins (14); thanks to her intercession the guy is saved in Christ (19-22); she tells the confessor how to improve spiritually (23-25).

- *Identification with Christ in his saving role*: Catherine wants to offer herself in place of the guy twice, once placing her head on the block (11-12); Catherine smells her own blood and wishes to shed it (blood is a symbol of redemption: her blood redeems like that of Christ) (8-9); the guy pronounces the words "Catherine" and "Jesus" as if they were the same, then she receives the head

and says “I will” as if she had just married with the prisoner-Lamb (17-18); Catherine describes also the guy himself as a sacrificial lamb (13).

- *Nuptial spirituality*: Catherine affirms that the converted guy, once dead, will marry Christ (15); when Catherine says “I will” it may refer to the wedding ceremony (18).

- *Visions*: Catherine affirms to wait the guy in the company of Mary and Catherine of Alexandria (10); she does not see anybody even if she was surrounded by people (it was typical of mystics to lose their senses) (13); at the end she has this almost apocalyptic vision with the blood of the guy entering the side of Christ – this vision confirms the success of Catherine’s mediation of salvation (19-22); furthermore it carries a theological point about the goodness of Christ that out of mercy saves people (20).

- *Public role*: Catherine is doing all this publicly, in front of a multitude of people (13).

Angela Merici

Bride of Christ

Let’s now consider Angela Merici. First, Angela proposes to the Ursulines the identity of the Bride of Christ:

God has granted you the grace of setting you apart from the darkness of this miserable world... having been thus chosen to be the *true and virginal spouses of the Son of God* (Prologue)

Throughout the rule Angela constantly referred to them in these terms (12 times between the rule and the other writings). This trait of Merici’s Company was innovative, because Angela asked the Ursulines to live their bridal relationship with Christ not behind the walls of a convent, but in the midst of the secular world. Indeed the rules of the Third Orders and of the beguines, did not ask women to identify with the figure of the virgin-bride of Christ. Famous mystic women such as

Catherine of Siena and Angela Merici herself, who belonged to the Dominican and Franciscan Third Orders, were considered and did consider themselves Brides of Christ, and so did many *pinzochere* and beguines. They did so, however, not because they were induced by their rules, but out of their personal, spiritual experience. Thus Angela's Company represents a rare, if not unique, case of an association which gives official recognition to the Bride of Christ living in the world. This religious condition is symbolically expressed in the choice of St. Catherine of Alexandria as one of the patrons of the Company, and this significance is explicitly revealed in Girolamo Romanino's picture, *The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*, where the saint is represented in the act of receiving the ring from the infant Jesus, while Angela Merici and St. Ursula look on [PP].

The Bridal relationship is proposed in contrast with worldly marriage and was its reverse positive image. Angela affirmed that her daughters were: "spouses not of earthly, corruptible, and stinking husbands, but of the immortal Son of the eternal God" (Tes, 4). Here the word stinking ("puzzolenti") refers to the fact that secular men are sinners, because according to sixteenth-century literature sin stinks. By contrast, virtue emanates a good odor: the incorruptibility of a saint's corpse and its good odor were seen as proofs of sanctity.

Like many other mystic women, the Ursuline's relationship with her divine referent consisted above all in a relationship of love. Christ, throughout the rule, is generally called "l'Amator" (the "Lover"):

Tell them...that I am continually among them with my Lover, or rather ours, the Lover of us all... let them have Jesus Christ for their only treasure, for there will be love (Ric, 5)

In Angela's rule, the concept of the Bride is associated to that of the Virgin. This can be seen in the chapter on virginity, where Angela puts at the center of this concept an act of love towards God: "Each one should also preserve sacred virginity... making to God the sacrifice of her

own heart”. Now, unlike traditional views of virginity in Merici’s spirituality the figure of the virgin is a powerful and independent figure. To begin with in Merici’s rule, the daughters’ virginity was not supervised by men (neither secular nor ecclesiastic), but was managed by the daughters themselves. As it emerges from a letter by Cozzano (the Company’s notary), the Brescian elite criticized Merici’s choice of leaving virgins in the world [PP]:

What Company is it that each person mocks it? Friars, priests, especially and other wise people [...] And that sister Angela deserves to be vituperated, for having solicited so many virgins to promise virginity, without a thought for where she was leaving them in the dangers of the world [...] to place virgins in the midst of the world, a thing which none of the patriarchs ever dared to do (G. Cozzano, *Risposta*)

Furthermore, in Merici’s rule virginity was not identified simply with sexual abstinence, but it consisted in a positive act of love towards God and in inner detachment from the world: “Keep your heart pure... not answering haughtily. Not doing anything grudgingly. Not staying angry.” (Reg. 9). Furthermore, in the history of Christianity, virginity held an ambiguous significance because it freed women from male dominance and secular links. In a society that identified women mostly with reproduction and sexuality and exchanged them between families in order to reinforce lineage, the virgin was a potentially independent woman. Furthermore, by refusing the sexual and reproductive role, the virgin overcame the female condition, represented a middle course between the male and the female. Indeed, as we have seen, 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... 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 (Reg., Prologue).

Moreover, each one should be prepared to die rather than ever consent to stain and profane such a sacred jewel/happiness (Reg., IX)

In Angela's spirituality, we thus find the double women's identity of the Bride of Christ (typical of the Middle Ages) and of the Virgin-virago, virile, independent, interiorly detached from the world, and potential martyr, typical of the early Church.

Mysticism

Angela's rule had an evident mystic aspect, which was proposed to the Virgin-Bride of Christ. The Ursuline lived immersed in the divine relationship. A statistical linguistic analysis of the writings addressed to the virgins (*Regula* and *Ricordi*) shows that the Ursulines' religious reference consisted mainly in transcendental entities. By contrast, the institutional Church did not have a central place. Whereas God, Christ, and other celestial beings are mentioned 110 times, the Church and spiritual fathers appear only 14 times. The Ursuline's life was replete with transcendental references. She lived her worldly life in contact with all sorts of divine entities. Heaven, the saints, and the angels were also mentioned in the rule and were perceived as concrete presences. Heaven ("Cielo" and "Paradiso") is mentioned twelve times; Saints ("Santi") six times; and Angels ("Angeli") three times. The dimension in which the Ursulines lived closed the gap between celestial life and worldly life. The life of the Bride of Christ was presented in a spiritual dimension, in complete immersion in the divine: "For the angels of eternal life will be with us, that is, in so far as we share in an angelic life" (Prologue). Divine contact had a positive impact on the concrete life of the Ursuline. Together with the promise of eternal reward, Christ's Bride could turn all the difficulties of her secular life into happiness:

Our every sorrow and sadness will be turned into joy and gladness, and we shall find the thorny and stony paths blossoming for us, and covered with paving of finest gold (Prologue);

Although at times they will have troubles or anxieties, nevertheless this will soon pass away and will be turned into gladness and joy (Ric, 5)

Moreover, according to Angela's rule, the Virgin-Bride of Christ, like mystic women, was in direct contact with God without the mediation of the clergy: [PP] "above all: to obey the counsels and inspirations which the Holy Spirit unceasingly sends into our hearts". Angela allowed the individual Ursuline to take responsibility for the evaluation of God's advice. As we have seen Borromeo mediated this relationship with the confessor.

Furthermore, the highest moment of the Virgin-Bride's religious experience consisted in mystical union, which Angela described with images of blood, death, love, and an almost visionary language, current in female spirituality. Angela repeated spiritual women's model of elevation towards God: it started with self-abasement, which led to identification with Christ-man; then there was the assumption of responsibility for the sins of the world and the self-sacrifice for its redemption; and, consequently, union with God.

At the beginning there is the contemplation of one's own wretchedness, despair, and repentance, which are all reported in violent and imaginative language: [PP]

Alas! How grieved I am that, entering into the secret of my heart, for shame I dare not raise my eyes to heaven, for I deserve to be devoured alive in hell, seeing in myself so many errors, so much ugliness and vileness, so many monstrous and frightful wild beasts and shapes. Therefore I am compelled, day and night, moving, staying still, acting, thinking, to call out and to cry to heaven, and to beg for mercy and time for penance

The Ursuline was encouraged to extend her desperation from her own sins to those of the community and to sacrifice herself in repetition of Christ's Passion: [PP]

I deeply regret that I have been so slow to begin to serve your divine majesty. Alas! Until now I have never shed even the smallest drop of blood for love of you... Lord, in place of those poor creatures who do not know you, and do not care to be partakers in your most sacred Passion, my heart breaks, and willingly (if I could) I would shed my own blood to open the blind eyes of their minds

The (desired) repetition of Christ's sacrifice allowed the Ursuline to raise her status before God. In Angela's rule this process culminated in the mystic fusion of the heart and passions with divine love: [PP]

My Lord, my only life and hope, I pray that you deign to receive this most vile and impure heart of mine, and to burn its affection and passion in the fiery furnace of your divine love

Like mystic women, also in Angela's rule the "apostolate" of the Virgin-Bride was partly connected to this privileged relationship with the divine. As we have just seen the Ursulines are asked to take responsibility for the sins committed by others and symbolically shed their blood for them. Furthermore Angela asked the Ursulines to intercede with God through prayer in order to obtain forgiveness for the sins of the people around them and beyond: "Deign to forgive the sins, alas, of my father and mother, and of my relatives and friends, and of the whole world". These ideals are further developed in the chapter "On Fasting": [PP]

They should fast... to subdue the senses and the appetites and sensual desires which then, especially, seem to lord over the world, and also to implore mercy before the throne of the Most High for the many dissolute actions committed by the Christians during that time (*Reg*, III)

From these passages it can be noted that the distinction between active and contemplative life is not very useful for understanding Renaissance women's religious practice. Praying and suffering to provide and obtain the remission of sins were both a contemplative and an active practice. They were private activities with a public dimension.

A final point to consider is the significance given by Angela to penitence and the body. Although Merici gave physical penance religious significance, she also recommended caution [PP]: 'reduce and diminish these fasts, as they see that to be needed, because to afflict one's body indiscreetly [...] would be to offer in sacrifice something stolen.' (*Reg*, IV). Indeed, Merici's biographers do emphasize her penitential life, but this does not appear as severe as in other women's biographies. Furthermore, in relation to fasting as a means of self-purification, Merici moved the focus from the body to inner life. She clarified that food abstinence was instrumental to the achievement of an inner and spiritual condition, that is, separation from worldly values: 'Embrace bodily fasting as something necessary, and as a means and way to true spiritual fasting through which all the vices and errors are cut away from the mind.' Merici's case testified a decline in the importance of the body for some sixteenth-century spiritual women, which can be put in relation to the influence of the spirituality of the Catholic Reformation and of the Renaissance views of the "self"– which is tomorrow's topic of discussion.

Angela, the mystics and the attitudes towards the female

I would like to conclude my discussion by considering the following issues: why were women more inclined than men to take up the identity of the virgin and of the Bride? And given the

exclusion of women from leadership positions, how can we explain women's achievements within mysticism? In order to answer these questions we should consider the Renaissance attitudes regarding the female.

Bride and virgin.

The identity of the virgin and of the bride were clearly connected with the cultural and social roles of women, and in particular with the association between women, sexuality and reproduction. Examples of this association can be found in scientific ideas of conception and generation and in physiological theories, in which the woman provided the matter and nourishment (the blood) for the human body and man the spirit. Furthermore, theological tradition associated woman with lust, weakness and irrationality, whereas men were identified with spirit, reason and strength. There was a tendency to see female sin as bodily or sexual while male sin was viewed as the result of external temptation. Furthermore, Renaissance treatises on the family considered men and women very differently. Whereas men were classified on the basis of age, class and work, women were classified on the basis of their sexual status: they were seen as virgins, wives and widows.

If we consider law, we find that married women were not legal subject because they were dependent on the husband: they could not sue, make contracts, or go to court for any reason without his approval. Women did not inherit properly, but they were given a dowry, a fixed sum or properties that she brought in the marriage. And we find a similar situation in the world of work. From the XIII century and especially with capitalism, work gave social identity to people. However, work did not give a professional identity to women. Indeed women were rarely part of guilds. Furthermore, when women worked their work was not recognized as such, but it was perceived as an extension of their duty of wives: domestic works as servants, delivery of children as midwives, lactating other's people children as wet nurse. Furthermore women were involved in duties which had to do with the body: they cared for the ill, elderly people, and had a role in the burial of the bodies. And women were

prostitutes. Finally, it is revealing that when women worked they were not given a salary, but a contribution towards the dowry.

If we consider literature, we find that some women managed to write and study. However, these women were not seen as women, but as androgynous being, as men in the body of women. For this reason these women had to stay at home, deny their sexuality, and be chaste. When they married they had to stop writing and studying, because if they married and had children then they fulfilled their roles of wives and mothers, and this was incompatible with the activity of studying and writing.

It is in this light that we should understand the importance of the role of the virgin and of the bride within religion. Virginity could change women's identity, because women were defined by their sexual role and because their social role was that of the wife and of the mother. The fact that Jerome affirmed that a woman could become a man simply by renouncing sex, can be explained with the identification of women with sexuality, reproduction and motherhood. Similarly, when women abandoned their children to enter a convent, they were seen as virile and as sort of martyrs, women who abdicate their motherly role (Jerome again).

Women therefore identified with a religious identity which was largely based on the social and cultural perception of femininity, which was associated to body, sexuality and reproduction. From women's perspective, the positive aspect of virginity, was that in the history of Christianity it carried an ambiguous value, as it gave women power and freedom from male control.

As far as the Bride is concerned, this image emerged especially with the middle ages, when the relationship with God became affective and personal. Women were perceived as more apt to this type of spirituality in continuity with their cultural association to reproduction and sexuality and to their social role of wives. Within the new affective spirituality they could subsume the identity of the Bride of Christ and be honored and admired.

Mysticism.

The same logic lies behind women's success within mysticism. Let's start with penance, which was an important aspect of women's mysticism. Religious women could be recognized as mystics because medieval religion sacralized the body, and in particular the body of Christ. At that time, therefore, penitential practices became very important because they were pursued in imitation of Christ, who was seen as a suffering body. Flagellation and fasting were means of imitating the savior, attaining salvation and direct contact with the divine. Women were considered as more apt to express themselves through religious practices connected to the body. The explanation consists precisely in the association that late medieval society made between 'woman' and 'body'. Therefore, within a religious culture which saw Christ as a suffering man, both men and women agreed that women's penance was more apt to imitate Christ's sufferance. This association between woman and the body also led medieval people to see some of Christ's bodily functions as female and motherly: he nurtured (through the eucharist), gave birth (through redemption), and his love for souls was identified with the love of a mother for her child.

Finally, there were other reasons why women could succeed as mystics. The point was that theologians and clergymen often considered spiritual women as having a special connection with the divine, predisposed to the visionary experience, and mediators with the supernatural. Such a view of spiritual women was connected with the cultural misogynistic perception of the female as lacking a stable identity, weak, changeable, subjected to external influences, open to the other world, mysterious, made of an impressionable soft and humid nature, socially and symbolically liminal and charged with 'alterity.' The ideas about women could become positive for women, when the mainstream religious model became compatible with these ideas about women. This could happen, that is, when the main model of relating to God became mystic visionary, personal, penitential, etc. It was a model which had Francis of Assisi the main model. Women, that is, could be recognized as more apt to follow this religious model because the ideas concerning female nature combined well with it. Indeed it was a model that was especially brought forward by women.

In conclusion, women's power was actually connected and not in contradiction to the cultural misogynistic perception of femininity. The view of women as naturally close to the realm of nature and to the supernatural, bodily, irrational, emotional, changeable became a positive factor when the main religious model was more based on female values, as it was mystic, direct, affective, bridal, mediator, and bodily. It has to be said that the same ideas could justify belief in women's diabolical possession. However, for a long period they established a special connection between women and the divine.