

15/6: The individual and the community - Morning

As we have observed, Angela's idea of experience of the sacred does not give particular significance to institutional aspects. In connection with this characteristic of Angela's spirituality, we find one of the most interesting aspects of her Company, the respect and consideration for the individual. Angela "invented" a form of consecration, which has at its centre the individual and her humanity. As we will see this does not mean that Angela does not consider important the collective aspect of the Company.

Angela's idea was rooted in two main historical grounds. One we have already seen, the exclusion of women from the powerful and institutional aspects of religion, the other has to do with the centrality of interiority and humanity in the making of the Western concept of the self.

Introduction to the concept of the Self

The perception that societies have of the "self" changes through history, and, like the concept of "time", is a key concept for understanding a culture. The first category that defines the self is the relationship between the individual and the community: do we see ourselves as unique individuals or more like a part of a collective identity? Another aspect concerning the self is the perception of the relationship between the interior and exterior self: how is it viewed the relationship between what we do/say and how we think and feel? Today we are more aware than ever of the complexity of our inner world, which has been enriched by the discovery of the unconscious, which makes the correspondence between interiority and exteriority even more complicated. We are complex human being, and we recognize and value such complexity. This concept is historical.

As a matter of facts, historians have found in the concept of the self one of the most fruitful viewpoints through which to evaluate the period in which Angela lived, the Renaissance. During the Renaissance this concept was reshaped and presented some characteristics which are compatible

with our modern perception: increasingly, the self was perceived as unique, with a complex interiority. I argue that Angela's spirituality was based and promoted a view of the self, which in many respects was modern. Indeed Angela Merici's writings allowed the Ursulines to live a profound experience of their personhood. It is possible to say, therefore that Angela and other women like her, in the religious domain, participated to the construction of a modern concept of the self.

Although the faculty of introspection surely occurred in the distant past, evidence, however, suggests that the practice of self-examination was deeper in certain periods than others. Consciousness of self and of the inner life seem to be absent between the IV and the XII century. There is no medieval word which has anything like the meaning of "personality". Medieval people was valued especially for their exterior appearance and behavior.

Medieval and especially feudal society was also very much against individualism; conformity was the value requested from members of that society. The individual was seen as part of a group: a race, a religion, a village, a social category. There was no social mobility, but the life of the individual was decided by birth.

The Self in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Scholars have pointed out that from the eleventh century on, a variety of sources (treatises, iconography, rituals, and devotions) attest the increasing importance of psychological introspection, individualism, and human life in general. For example, the artistic representations of Christ increasingly emphasized his humanity: artists began to represent him in significant events of his life, such as birth, childhood, suffering, and death [PP] unlike Byzantines, who depicted Christ as judge or king [PP]. Inner feelings (affection, love, sorrow) became central to the religious experience of men such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi. Hagiographical accounts began to feature the individual life and virtues of the saints rather than exclusively their magical powers. Furthermore, monks were encouraged to live mystic marriage as a personal experience of

the divine, and theologians developed complex psychological portraits of the human soul in its mystical ascent toward God. Within monasticism the communal dimension declined, while more individual forms of life were brought in, such as private property and individual rooms.

However, if medieval piety shows increasing attention to individuality and interiority, externality and collectivity were also important: solemn gestures, rituals, ceremonies, poverty, fasting, flagellation, and stigmata. Interiority and exteriority were not clearly distinguished, since people tended to believe that through exterior acts (such as penance) the inner side of an individual followed his external conversion. Theologians promoted a concept of the person as a “psychosomatic unity,” as body and soul together.

Scholars have shown that concerns with interiority further developed in the Renaissance. This can be observed, for example, in the deep psychological analyses conveyed in Renaissance writings (from Petrarch’s *Secretum* to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*), [PP] in the diffusion of portraits and self-portraits. The inner and outer aspects of individuals were increasingly viewed as separate, and the inner one (thoughts and feelings) took central stage since it was seen as responsible for the exterior one (words and deeds). Other examples consisted in the popularity of the theme of “dissimulation”, of the term “sincere” and in Descartes’s famous statement “I think therefore I am”. Furthermore, the Protestant Reformation, which denied the role of the church in mediating salvation, placed greater responsibility on the personal commitment of the individual.

These changes were also present in the Catholic camp. [PP] The rules of some new religious orders (such as the Barnabites and the Jesuits) of some confraternities (such as the Company of Divine Love), various manuals of pious behaviour (such as those composed by Battista da Crema) showed similar views of the self. The spiritual model here described can also be traced back in the Flemish movement of the *Devotio Moderna*.

Examples: “The food and nourishment of those who are proficient lies in mental prayer... exterior prayer.... is merely exterior satisfaction, and hypocrisy of true prayer and of the true spiritual food” (Barnabites, *Constitutions*, X)

“By the term ‘Spiritual Exercises’ is meant...every way of preparing and disposing the *soul* to rid itself of all inordinate attachments” (Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*)

“Make an effort to overcome the passions of the heart, because it is better to resist a passion either of anger or of cupidity than to discipline oneself forty times and fast for an entire year.” (Confraternity of Buon Gesù, *Rule*, 17)

Angela Merici

How does Angela Merici’s spirituality and her Company of St. Ursula fit within this history? Angela’s spirituality expressed a notion of the self which is compatible with that emerging during the Renaissance (considered as inwardly complex, individual, unique). The whole religious proposal by Angela is shaped on the individual and her interiority. By contrast, collective, exterior, institutional aspects are unimportant. This applies to both material and spiritual aspects of the Ursulines’ life. Let’s see all these aspects.

Independence from the Church. First of all the Ursulines were autonomous from churchmen and ecclesiastical structures. The Company was an association entirely composed and managed by women and independent from the Church. Its government was managed by the *Colonelle* and the *Matrone*, wiser virgins responsible for the spiritual growth of the members and aristocratic widows in charge of practical matters. The Company chose a common confessor who had a limited impact on the life of the Ursulines: he confessed and communicated them once a month and he was not present in the Company’s institutional gatherings. These characteristics of the Company were unusual: women who joined Third Orders, for example, had to submit their intention to the approval of a male member of the order; and in those confraternities in which women were accepted, they were excluded from administrative and managerial offices.

Democracy: respect for the U’s will. The Ursulines’ individuality was also respected in the democratic nature of the company, which allowed them to choose their protectors, guides, and confessors and proposed neither a sacred hierarchy nor perfect obedience. The Ursulines were

responsible for and protagonists of their institutional structures. The Company was democratic and meritocratic, founded and managed 'from below' and its members were equal 'political subjects', regardless of their social background. The Ursulines could express their will in the choice of their spiritual guides and lady-governors. They elected all members of the government, the Colonelle, the Matrone, and the General Mother, as well as the common spiritual father. Even Angela Merici herself became General Mother through an election. Any Ursuline could become a Colonella, a spiritual guide in charge of other Ursulines, without consideration of her social upbringing. This meant that a virgin from a poor background could have a virgin from a higher social status under her responsibility. These traits distinguished the Company from female religious orders and charitable institutions for women in danger.

Independence in everyday and spiritual life. The Ursulines did not live in common or carry out collective activities in the world, but they could choose where to live, they could shape their everyday life and they followed a religious life according to their personal inspiration. Angela did not propose to the Ursuline to live a life in common, within a common space like the monastery, but on their own, in their houses. The Ursulines were given a significant amount of freedom both in their spiritual and daily life. This was quite unusual, as contemporary secular charitable organizations for lay women tended to impose a regimented style of life. As far as their spiritual life was concerned, the Ursulines had no common life or common activity to pursue in the world. As far as the Ursulines' worldly life was concerned, by entering the Company the Ursulines gained freedom. To be sure, Angela wanted to separate and protect the Ursulines from the risks of the world: for this reason, the members were told to avoid public events, not to stay too long in church, to walk quickly in the street, etc. However, the Ursulines were not subjected to strict supervision. No longer submitted to familial authority, they were visited by their spiritual guides only every fortnight. Each Ursuline could decide where to live, with whom, she did not have to ask permission when she left home and she chose whom to visit. She decided if and when work, and was free to judge how long to stay in churches.

Angela did not ask the Ursulines to put everything in common and to live with a fixed sum. The Ursulines could dispose freely of their possessions. Obviously the Ursulines were not expected to invest possession and to try to make money in their lives, but the individuals were responsible to keep and manage what they had. Actually the Company even provided legal assistance to those Ursulines who had difficulty in getting their salary or inheritance. We know that in 1523 Angela herself declared a piece of land cultivated with a vineyard. Angela therefore, does not adopt and propose the traditional monastic concept of “poverty”, which forbids nuns and monks to keep private property. Angela does not consider material and exterior aspects of life particularly relevant. To her is not important what the Ursulines own, but how they live interiorly the relationship with material goods. Angela wants them to be detached from wealth and possessions, as she explains in the precept of “poverty” - we will see later.

Individual pedagogy. Furthermore, Angela’s pedagogy acknowledged the diversity of single individuals and refused to impose common codes of behavior. As we will discuss tomorrow, Angela gives innovative advice to the members of the government, both the Colonelle and to the Matrone. In these advice emerge again Angela’s respect for individuality and interiority. Indeed, Angela does not associate general penalties to the misconducts of the Ursulines. Rather, Angela affirms that each Ursuline is different and deserves a specific treatment. It is the government’s duty to know what is the best corrective for each of them in that situation.

Angela warned the Colonelle that they had to respect the choices made by the Ursulines: “who can judge the heart and the innermost secret thoughts of any creature?...it is not up to you to judge the handmaids of God; he well knows what he wants to make of them” (Ric., 8). As you can see this passage also shows that Angela believes that the center of the individual is located in her interiority.

Merici’s interest for interiority emerges clearly and she portrays different character-types and analyzes their psychology (especially in the *Ricordi*). She described a wide range of personalities citing positive and negative inclinations of character: the terminology used by Angela

includes “humble”, “pleasing”, “human”, “good”, “sober”, “strange” (difficult), “pusillanimous”, “cowardly”, “presumptuous” and having a “wide conscience”, “disconsolate”, “timid”, “inclined to despair”, “doubtful”, “fragile”.

Consecration

Angela conceives a relationship with the sacred and a form of consecration based on individual, human, and inner conversion, without the mediation of exterior and institutional structures that transmit the sacred in an institutional and supraindividual manner—for example, the convent, vows, rituals, and specific devotions.

Habit. Angela did not ask the Ursulines to wear a particular dress as a distinctive sign of the Company or as a visible manifestation of their religious commitment. The lack of common dress had a specific religious significance: according to Angela the religious commitment had to be interior rather than projected into an exterior manifestation. That this was the motivation behind lack of common habit emerged in the evolution of the Company. Indeed after Angela’s death the Company and to its split two groups for 14 years (1545-59) precisely because some of the *Matrone* introduced a black leather cincture for the Ursulines as a distinctive exterior sign. Furthermore, in the document which imposed the cincture, issued by the religious authorities in Brescia together with some lady-governors, the exterior sign was justified with the idea that “through the exterior signs very often we know the inner spiritual disposition of the person”. The fact that the party of the cincture had to justify the exterior sign with this motivation shows that the reason why Angela did not propose a common dress should be explained with the fact that she was only interested in the inner commitment.

Bride of Christ. As a Bride of Christ, the Ursuline did not lose her identity and was respected as an individual: unlike nuns and secular wives, the Ursulines did not change their name and house, did not submit to male bosses.

Penance, prayer, etc. Furthermore, the Ursulines managed their relationship with God individually; He spoke to their heart, the centre of the Ursuline’s emotional life, her most inner and

secret place.

Second, in Angela's spirituality the importance of the inner conversion of the individual emerges in the pursuit of penance and prayer. Here the ritual and exterior is considered marginal and accessory to the predisposition to a life of the spirit. Although Merici engaged in penitential practices, they did not occupy a central place in her spirituality. In fact, as we have seen, she recommended caution and warned of the danger of excessive fasting. Angela distinguished between corporal and spiritual fasting and made it clear that the function of abstinence from food is to attain spiritual abstinence, that is, independence from the things of the world. If corporal fasting is a means, spiritual fasting is an existential condition:

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... fasting and abstinence be the source and means of all our spiritual good and profit
(*Reg.*, IV)

Similarly, in relation to prayer, Angela distinguishes between "vocal" and "mental" prayer. Angela Merici made a clear distinction between the two and stressed how union with God takes place through mental prayer. Vocal prayer is also important but is a means to prepare the Ursuline for spiritual life:

Just as by fasting one mortifies the appetites of one's flesh and one's own feelings, so by prayer one obtains from God the grace of a spiritual life. And although one needs always to pray in spirit and mind, given the continuous need one has of God's help... nevertheless we also advise frequent vocal prayer, through which the bodily senses are awakened and one disposes oneself for mental prayer (*Reg.*, V)

Will. The respect of the individual and the inclusion of her interiority within the religious experience can be seen in the importance Angela gives to the will of the Ursuline. In Angela Merici's writings the "will" (*volere/volontà*) was key for the religious life. Firstly, the will was a clause for entry into the Company: "she must enter joyfully and *of her own will*" (Reg., I). Moreover, the will is at the centre of one of the most radical traits of Merici's spirituality. The Ursuline's conversion was sanctioned not by the profession of vows but by her will, a human element which depends only on inner commitment:

Each one should also preserve sacred virginity, *not making a vow on account of any human persuasion, but voluntarily* making to God the sacrifice of her own heart
(Reg, IX)

Angela's rule reflected her theological principles very consistently. Note for instance how the will of the Ursuline replaces the obligation to carry out the precepts of the rule. A statistical linguistic analysis of the rule shows that she used the word *volere* (want, wish, desire) sixty-two times and the word *dovere* (must, ought) three times. The extensive use of the verb *sforzarsi* (to make an effort, to strive) and *esortare* (to exhort) also testify to the involvement of the Ursuline's will. Thus, the Ursuline managed her religious life without the mediation of an "obligation". Angela considered the will of the Ursuline in every possible circumstance involving the life of the Bride of Christ. It was not sufficient for Ursulines to "carry out" what was prescribed in the rule, for they should "want" to do so.

The Rule did not sanction strict rules but exemplified, inspired, exhorted, warned, and directed. Her pedagogy, too, was based on the encounter between God's grace and the Ursuline's will. She explained to the Matrone:

And above all, be on your guard not to want to get anything done by force; because God has given the *free will* to everyone, and wants to force no one, but only proposes, invites and counsels (*Tes*, 3)

Evangelical Counsels. We can find Merici's attitude towards the individual also other aspects of her view of the relationship with the sacred. The evangelical counsels, for example, were not explained in their exterior and material significance – as is the case with religious rules –, but as an inner disposition. Let's see how it worked. Angela required that the Ursulines were detached from the secular world and united with God:

God has granted you the grace of setting you apart from the darkness of this miserable world and of uniting you together to serve his divine Majesty (*Reg.*, Prologue)

The Ursulines, however, did not live in a convent, physically separated from the world. Merici substituted physical separation with an 'existential transformation,' consisting of an inner detachment from secular values, which she elaborated through the concepts of 'obedience', 'virginity' and 'poverty.' The precept of "poverty" does not refer so much to material poverty (the Ursuline could keep their possessions and inherit) but it meant inner detachment from worldly values: **[PP]**

Finally we exhort each one to embrace poverty, not only effective poverty of temporal things, but above all the true poverty of spirit by which man strips his heart of all affection and loving for created things, and of his very self (*Reg*, X)

Spiritual poverty meant detachment from the world, which implied that the Ursuline should depend neither on her own needs nor on human relationships, such as relatives and friends. Instead Angela asked the Ursuline to place all her love and affection in God alone: **[PP]**

And so, let each one strive to strip herself of everything, and to place all her wealth, and love, and delight, not in goods, not in food and gluttony, not in relative and friends, not in herself and in her own resources and knowledge, but in God alone
(Reg, X)

The Ursuline must not impose her will in an attempt to satisfy her secular needs (such as hunger, thirst, and sleep), since God would provide for her sustenance: **[PP]**

do not be anxious in seeking what you will have to eat or what you will have to drink, because your heavenly Father knows very well that you have need of all these things
(Reg., X)

The concept of “obedience” is tightly connected to this idea of inner detachment from the world. Obedience does not mean passive submission to other people’s will, but is a means to free the Ursuline’s will from the material world. Angela considers the will towards secular ends as an obstacle to the following of God’s will and asks the Ursuline to renounce it through obedience: **[PP]**

We also exhort each one to keep *holy obedience, the only true abnegation of self-will*, which is in us like a dark hell (Reg, VIII)

The ideal of detachment from the world as transformation of the “inner self” was fully expressed in the concept of “virginity”, not limited to just sexual abstinence (as in the rules of most

other orders), but embracing a wider range of the soul's inclinations. "Virginity" entailed inner "purity", involving behaviour, thoughts, and feelings that expressed having placed one's love in God:

[PP]

And so, above all, keep the heart pure and the conscience clear of any evil thought, of any shadow of envy and ill will, of any discord and evil suspicion, and of any other wicked desire and purpose... Not answering haughtily. Not doing anything grudgingly. Not staying angry. Not grumbling. Not repeating any malicious gossip; (Reg. IX)

Above all let them be humble and gentle (Ric, 5)

Love for God implies virtuous behaviour: the absence of envy, discord, suspicion, haughtiness, anger, ill will, gossip. Here detachment from the world is achieved through the refusal of those feelings that attach us to the material world. Angela's interpretation of the evangelical counsels depicts an existential conversion. It depicts the religious dimension in which the Ursuline lives: inwardly detached from the world and in union with God.

Indeed in Angela's rule freedom from worldly attachments and preoccupations allows the Ursuline to hear God's voice more clearly: [PP]

whose voice [of God] we shall hear all the more clearly as we have our conscience more purified and clean (Reg, VIII)

Angela gives a lot of importance to self improvement, purification of conscience and self-awareness, both in the spiritual and everyday life.

Moreover, in Angela's spirituality the individual finds affirmation of her own personhood and subjectivity in mystical union. Angela depicted the Ursuline's union with God as a projection

of the individual self into the divine. The experience of thoughts, feelings, will, words, deeds, and any other inner and outer aspect of the self was best fulfilled in the relationship with God: [PP]

And strengthen my affections and senses... I pray you that you deign to receive this most vile and impure heart of mine... receive my free will, every act of my own will... Receive my every thought, word and deed, everything that is mine finally, both interior and exterior (Reg., 5).

Thus, Angela's rule respected the Ursuline as an individual in both her spiritual and material life. It considered her a complex human being with inner feelings, a will, and an intellect. The rule treated the Ursuline as an independent subject since it accorded her great freedom and responsibility in her relationship with God and everyday life (respectively unmediated and non-prescribed). From this perspective, therefore, one could say that the Ursuline was a "modern" individual.

Communality

As we have seen, Angela's Company lacked many aspects typical of female forms of associations and especially nuns. The Company lacked a common space (the convent), a common habit, a common life, a common activity to carry out in the world, common rituals, a strong hierarchical structure, a heavy surveillance of the daughters, and properties in common.

The Company is a very "light" structure. This is because in Angela's rule the 'sacred' was not projected onto exterior actions and institutional arrangements but emerged above all in the Ursuline's individual experience of the divine. The Company can be seen as a sum of individuals who established vertical connections with the celestial dimension and lived in the world guided by, and united with, God. In this sense the rule can be defined as a non-rule and the Company as an "invisible structure" which permitted the relationship between God and the Ursuline, but did not mediate it.

It is true, however, that in Angela's writings the notion of community is important: Angela considered the Company a family, a group who should act of one will and heart. If this is true, it is also true that the link among the sisters was based on human feelings, such as love, affection, and friendship, that is, on personal relationships and interiority. Ultimately the group existed by virtue of the personal relationships among the Ursulines. Furthermore, the group was important because legitimized and permitted the Ursulines to pursue their personal relationship with the divine. The group allowed the individual to be herself.

The Ursuline's will replaced the external structures of the Company and undergirt its unity:

And tell them that they should want to be united and in concord together; (Ric., 5)

See then how important is this union and concord. So, long for it, pursue it, embrace it, hold on to it with all your strength; for I tell you, living all together thus united in heart, you will be like a mighty fortress and tower impregnable against all adversities, and prosecutions, and deceits of the devil (Ric., Last)

The Company of St. Ursula also created a network of relations which allowed the Ursulines to become self-sufficient and independent from the world in which they lived. Financially the Company was self-sufficient as the Ursulines were allowed to keep their possessions, work and inherit. Through the intervention of the Ursulines themselves, the widows and Angela's friends, the Company offered accommodation and some economic help for the virgins who needed it, found jobs for those who wanted to work, provided legal assistance in case of disputes, and assisted those who were sick or dying. It remains clear, however, that these measures were not an aim in themselves but were established to enable the Ursulines to live the religious life offered by the Company.

Here are some examples taken from chapter XI of Angela's rule, where she explains these types of intervention:

if she wanted to go to work as servant or maid, those who govern should see to it that she be placed where she can feel at home and live honestly;

If, by God's will and bounty, it should happen that they have money or goods in common, let it be remembered that these must be carefully administered, and prudently distributed, especially to help the sisters and according to each need which may arise;

And if she is near to death, she should leave a little something to the Company as a sign of love and charity;

If there were at least two sisters left alone, without father and mother and other superiors, then, out of charity, a house should be rented for them (if they have none) and they should be provided for in their needs. But if there is only one, then let one of the others receive her in her house, and to be given the subsidy which seems suitable to those who govern;

If it should happen that one of the sisters, being an orphan, could not get what is hers, or if, being a servant, or a maid, or the like, she could not obtain her wages, or if there should arise another such situation which would make it necessary for her to go to court and through legal proceedings... take the matter in hand and assist according as there is need;

[the Colonelle visited the Ursulines] To comfort them and to help them if they should happen to be in some disagreement or other trouble, of body as much as of mind; or if their superiors at home did them any wrong, or wanted to prevent them from doing something good, or to lead them into the danger of doing something wrong;

Finally, if one of the sisters is ill, it is recommended that she be visited, and assisted, and served, by day and by night, if it is necessary;

When one of them has died, then all the others will accompany her to her grave, walking two by two, with charity, and each one with a candle in hand.

In conclusion, the Company responded to the problems that a young girl or an old woman might have to face: economic problems, health problems, legal problems, accommodation problems, defense of sexual and social honour. Angela created a network of relations which allowed the sisters to persevere in the form of life she envisaged in the Company, as Brides of Christ in the world.