

## **16/6: Love as government and as a social role- Morning**

Today we talk about the concept of Love in Angela Merici. We will discuss this concept from several perspectives: as love towards the divine, as a form of government within the Company, and as a social role. Obviously this concept intersects with many things we have already said about the importance of mysticism and individuality, humanity and interiority.

### Spiritual women and love

The concept of love was central in many women mystics. We don't have time to discuss many individual examples, but it is clear that this was a major theme. Many mystic nuns and tertiaries in northern Europe around the XIII century, and later on in Italy, wrote theological treatises, poetry, and had visions on this theme. The object of their love was God or the human Christ. They probably influenced several men such as Ruysbroeck or Suso, who became famous for their mystic theology. We have seen the example of Catherine of Siena who recounted her vision to her confessor, where the theme of the mystic union of love was very important.

Mystic women's emphasis on love, brought them to have greater trust in God's love and compassion for his people. In this position they were almost heretical, because they could not accept that God was not infinite and that he could send us to hell for the eternity. Indeed some of them prayed for the souls that were damned – something that they could not do as they went against the will of God. This difference with churchmen can be probably explained with the fact women were more marginal to society, to the administration of justice, to hierarchies, etc. Women, who could not be judges and lawyers, had a distinctive idea of offence and satisfaction, and, when it came to judgment of sinners, they were less judgmental. They even wanted to sacrifice themselves in the place of the sinners. We find this also in Angela: "I have this firm and *unquestioning* faith and hope in *infinite* divine goodness" (Reg., Prologue); Turlino: "I have firm faith and hope in divine goodness".

Many women described “sin” as “lack of love”. The sinners are people who do not love God, do not understand how much God loved humanity, so much that he had died for it. For women, therefore, God was less a judge and more a romantic lover, whom through love he saved humanity and whom applies the law of love in everyday life.

Women’s idea of charitable activities in the world derives from this point. Christ’s supreme act of charity was dying for humanity, in order to redeem it. So women affirm that charity is above all to repeat his act of love, in order to continue to save souls. As we have discussed sacrificial suffering and prayers for the souls in purgatory was one of the main forms. However charitable works and the salvation of people took various forms. Here are some examples:

- Working in hospitals: taking care of the “other Christs”; alleviate the physical suffering of people;
- Preaching the end of conflicts: to put an end to men’s selfishness; to spread love for each other in repetition of God’s love; to give life putting an end to death;
- Criticism towards vices and love for oneself: love should be directed towards Christ;
- To convert people: to give new life;
- Visiting the prisoners sentenced to death: save the soul of the prisoner; integrate the outcast within the community;
- Penance: repetition of Christ’s suffering in order to save souls; identification with Christ;
- Mystic union with Christ: affective interpretation of Christ charitable act towards men;

### **Angela Merici**

These points are reflected in the spirituality of Angela and in the organization of the Company: to be more specific, in the view of Christ, in the relationship with him, in the social role of the Ursulines and in the government of the Company.

## Government and Relationships

Love is a key concept for understanding the government of the Company of St. Ursula. First, at the beginning of the *Ricordi*, Angela stated that *love for God* justifies the reason why the Colonelle should learn how to guide the Ursulines: “what you have to do *for love of him* in this task.” (Reg. Prologue); “And strive to *act solely out of the sole love of God* and out of the sole zeal of the souls” (Ric., 2).

Second, love is the main criterion through which the members of the government should rule the Company and guide the daughters. Indeed Angela’s Company was conceived to allow the Ursulines to establish their relationships with God in the best possible way. Angela explains to the members of the government that love is the best way to take care of the daughters and to help them to get the best out of them. Angela in this way proposes a new model for administering a government, which is not based on the exercise of a form of power, sacred in itself. To do so, Angela uses a female image for exercising authority, that is maternal love. In addition her ideal of government is consistent with the centrality of humanity in her theology.

Let’s see the characteristics of the government of the Company according to Angela’s rule. The government of Angela’s Company was conceived in a practical and simple way, and was presented in one short chapter of the rule. This contrasts with other rules which devote several chapters to defining the organization of power. This does not mean, however, that the Company was not properly organized but rather that the organization was different and sustained by an alternative logic. Angela was conscious that she was proposing an alternative type of religious life and organization. She explicitly said so in the *Ricordi*, when she warned the Colonelle of the difficulties their duties implied:

Do not be afraid of not knowing and not being able to do what is rightly required in such a singular government (Ric., Prologue)

The scope of the Company was to establish the conditions for celestial union and, therefore, the role of the superior was to take responsibility for the success of this aim. Within this logic, Angela established not a hierarchy but a structure in which there were different roles. As we have seen, the Matrone and the Colonelle had different and specific responsibilities in relation to the spiritual growth of the virgins. Significantly, Angela resorted to a head of the Company (the *Madre generale*) only when it became necessary for practical reasons. This shows that she attached no sacrality to the office. Furthermore, the way she used the concept of “superior” indicates the absence of power positions within the Company. The term “superiore”, used nine times in the rule, never referred to the Matrone: it referred six times to people in the secular world with whom the Ursulines had a relationship (parents, tutors, landlords), twice to the Colonelle and once to Saint Gregory the pope (as a model of authority associated with charity and humility). When referred to the Colonelle, Angela used it only to reject it, proposing service in its place:

Do not consider yourselves worthy to be superiors and leaders. Rather regard yourselves as ministers and servants, reflecting that you have more need to serve them than they have to be served by you, or governed (Ric., 1)

The foundress’ main preoccupation was the spiritual health of the virgins rather than respect for hierarchy. The members of the government – who were elected by the virgins – could be removed from office if they did not fulfill their duties properly:

If one of them were unable to fulfil her office or behaved badly, that person should be removed from the government (Reg., XI)

The Colonelle had the right to question the authority of the Matrone if they neglected the virgins’ needs. In the *Ricordi* Angela warned the Colonelle to give priority to their responsibility towards the

virgins rather than to the obedience and respect due to the Matrone. In the passages of the *Ricordi* where she explained this delicate matter, Angela began by asserting that the Colonelle should obey the Matrone, criticise them very mildly and bear with their inappropriate and eccentric responses:

Remain obedient to the principal Mothers whom I leave in my place, since this is just...  
Now, if it should happen that you have some just reason to contradict or reproach them, do it with discretion and respect. And if they do not want to pay you heed, have patience. And know that it is right to love the mothers if they are good, and bear with them if they are eccentric. And be very careful never to complain, or grumble, or speak ill of them, whether with others or with your daughters (Ric., 3)

Angela added, however, that if the Colonelle were seriously upset or hurt, they should not hesitate to talk to someone they could trust:

Still, if you have something in your heart that disturbs you in them, you may rightly and without scruple talk about it in confidence with some person who is good and faithful in many respects and ways

Angela drew the line where the virgins were in danger because of the Matrones' behaviour. In this case the Colonelle must confront the Matrone directly without concern for the respect due to them:

Know, however, that where you see clearly that the salvation and honour of your daughters are in danger, you must on *no account consent to it, nor tolerate it, nor have any respect*. Yet all this with discernment and maturity of judgment<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>It is significant that this passage was changed in Borromeo's rule, which gave the Father of the Company the authority to sort out the problem. It read: "You must with humility and maturity have

Angela stated clearly that if the Colonelle were unable to solve a virgin's problem they must unhesitatingly seek help from the Matrone, with no reluctance because of their position. If they had no immediate response they must importune them:

You will be careful and vigilant to know and understand the behaviour of your daughters, and to be aware of their spiritual and temporal needs... But if you cannot provide for them yourselves, go to the principal mothers, and quickly, and *without hesitation* explain to them the needs of your lambs. And if you see them slow to provide, *be insistent*; and in that case, in my name even be *importunate and troublesome* (Ric., 4)

Considering the importance of hierarchical structures both in religious orders and in society, Angela's attitude towards authority was unique.

*Pedagogy.* Now if we consider Angela's advice to the Colonelle (especially) and the Matrone on how to guide their daughters we find that love was a guiding principle at the expenses of a more traditional ideal of the exercise of power. In her pedagogical advice, perfect execution of external practices was not central. Her instructions for the government of the Company also proposed a very innovative pedagogical model based on exhortation and love. Furthermore, her pedagogical method respected the diversity of persons.

In advising the members of the government on how to deal with the Ursulines, Angela made it clear that each person is different and deserves specific treatment. Angela considered types of personalities and suggested actions to take according to their differences:

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recourse to the Father of the entire Company that he with his prudence may provide for everything" (Ric, 3).

If you see one faint-hearted and timid and inclined to despondency, comfort her, encourage her... And on the contrary, if you see another presumptuous, and who has a lax conscience and little fear of anything, into this one instill some fear (Ric. 2)

She was very precise in her description of personalities, and understanding towards the difficulties the Ursulines might experience. She never yielded to the temptation to simplify the complexity of human responses to a new form of life:

When you see that one of them finds great difficulty in deciding to give up fashionable trifles and other similar frills... do not have too high a hope about her that she will persevere under this Rule. For if she does not want to do what is lesser, much less will she do what is greater. But here, however, you must be prudent, because it can happen that a person has set almost all her desire on a bagatelle, so that, having conquered herself on this point, she will no longer find any other too difficult (Tes., 6)

Her pedagogical model reflected the fact that the Company did not propose a form of supraindividual “power” in relation to which the members must mould themselves. Respect for the individual lays at the basis of Angela’s pedagogy.

Angela recommended to the members of the government be humane and gentle rather than strict and harsh. However, she conceded that in certain situations and with certain people one might sometimes need to resort to corrective rebuke. To know which was the most appropriate behaviour, Angela maintained that the Colonelle should love their daughters (Angela gave the Matrone a very similar advice, *Tes*, 3):

Be gentle and compassionate towards your dear daughters. And strive to act solely out of the sole love of God and out of the sole zeal for souls when you admonish and advise

them, or exhort them to some good and dissuade them from some evil. For you will achieve more with kindness and gentleness than with harshness and sharp rebukes, which should be reserved only for cases of necessity, and even then, at the right place and time, and according to the persons. But charity, which directs everything to the honour of God and the good of souls, charity indeed teaches such discretion, and moves the heart to be, according to place and time, now gentle and now severe, and little or much as there is need (Ric. 2)

The words used by Angela to describe the Colonelle's attitudes towards the Ursulines shows the complexity of the human relationships implied: "to be disheartened", "to worry", "to desire", "to regret", "to console", "open their hearts", "appreciate", "bear with", "help", "advise", "comfort", "vivify", "exhort", "love", "to be nice to" and "give pleasure", "cheer", "correct lovingly", "not judge", "promptly provide", "be an example", "instill respect", "admonish". Finally, she described the attitudes expected of the Colonelle towards the Matrone: they should be "solicitous", "vigilant", "pleasant", "sharp", "humble", "irksome and vexing", "not be negligent"; use "dexterity", "reverence", "disapproval", "discretion", "earnest solicitation"; they should also "annihilate themselves", "skillfully and reverently contradict", and act "without scruple or any respect for authority".

Love played a very important part in the government of the virgins. Angela said that if the Colonelle and Matrone loved their daughters their treatment of the virgins would be appropriate because they would know them well and, consequently, would be able to judge what they really needed:

For the more you esteem them, the more you will love them; the more you love them, the more you will care for and watch over them. And it will be impossible for you not to cherish them day and night, and to have them all engraved in your heart, one by one, for this is how real love acts and works; (Ric., Prologue)



I beg you that you willingly hold in consideration and have engraved on your mind and heart all your dear daughters, one by one; not only their names, but also their condition, and character, and their every situation and state. This will not be difficult for you if you embrace them with an ardent charity... because this is how real love works (Tes. 2)

In her writings concerning governance Angela did not prescribe detailed duties for the governors. Instead she simply set a principle to follow: their decisions must be guided by love and charity, for the good of the virgins:

That you are moved to this care and government solely by the love of God and by the sole zeal for the salvation of the souls. Because all your works and actions as governors, being thus rooted in this twofold charity, can bear nothing but good and salutary fruits (Tes. 1)

Angela's concept of love was in opposition to "power" in its anti-human and anti-individual sense. If one acts for the good of others there is no need to establish perfect behaviour. This was summarised in her interpretation of the Augustinian saying:

"Ama, et fac quod vis"; that is have love and charity and then do what you please...  
charity cannot sin

The characteristics of Angela's pedagogy reflect her personality and type of sanctity. Cozzano, albeit apologetically, described her attitude towards the daughters and the people who asked for her help:

amongst them all [the virgins of the Company]... She had such gratitude and gentleness that it seemed to her that she could not never [sufficiently] reward with courteous acts

those who did even a small but heartfelt service for her. She so thirsted and yearned for the health and well-being of her neighbour...With motherly love she embraced every creature (*Dichiarazione*, f. 974v)

Angela's pedagogical model fitted into the spiritual logic discussed above. The imposition of perfect behaviour and the expectation of perfect obedience do not fit into a proposal of religious life conceived as a personal relationship with God, the forms of which were in many respects left to the Ursulines themselves rather than established by the Company. Thus her pedagogic advice was connected with her respect for humanity and individuality, with the belief that relationship with God was personal, and with her anti-hierarchical and anti-institutional approach.

### Maternal love

Following women's social roles and experiences, the Company's female government was understood in terms of *maternal love* and its main duty was protecting the honour of the daughters [PP]: 'And the widows [should be] as mothers, full of concern for the good and welfare of their spiritual sisters and daughters' (Reg. XI). The *Matrone* were to administer the Company's possessions 'according to [...] motherly discretion and love.'

The *Matrone* were to administer the Company's possessions according to their motherly love ("according to your motherly discretion and love"). Angela insisted on the analogy between the role of having both carnal and spiritual daughters when she referred to the *Matrone* in the *Testamento*:

True and loving mothers of so noble a family, confided to your hands that you may have for them the same care and guardianship you would have if they had been born from your own body, and even more (Tes., Prologue)

Her use of family symbolism for the widows is not surprising, since the Brescian aristocracy, the family and familial strategies were at the heart of the economic system and of social prestige. Angela transferred examples from the context of the duties of carnal mothers to the spiritual family. In order to persuade the Matrone, she referred to how marriages were used to improve the status of the family. Angela is very acute in exploring the typical mechanisms of a daughter's preparation for her encounter with her secular bridegroom, and the anxiety of the mother who wanted to have her future son-in-law on her side. It followed that the celestial son-in-law deserved an even more carefully brought-up bride. By doing this the "mothers" would have the favours of the father of the most important of lords:

Now one see temporal mothers putting a great deal of care and effort into attiring, adorning and embellishing their daughters in many different ways, so that they may please their earthly spouses; and the more important and noble these men are, the more the mothers strive with all diligence to make their daughters more and more attractive, especially in what they understand to be more agreeable to them. And there they have and place all their contentment... for in this way they also hope, because and by means of their daughters, to have the love and favour of their sons-in-law. How much more must you do this for those heavenly daughters of yours, who are spouses not of earthly, corruptible, and stinking husbands, but of the immortal Son of the eternal God? Oh, what a new beauty and dignity to be lady-governors and mothers of the spouses of the King of kings and Lords of lords, and to become in a way the mothers-in-law of the Son of God; and thus, by means of the daughters, to win the favour and love of the Most High (Tes., 4)

Finally love, friendship and familial relationships were essential in order to keep the Company united. Angela created a network of "informal" relationships among the virgins that were

based on solidarity, affection, and new “familial” bonds, love, trust, and friendship, which were presented in their human significance. In this way the Ursulines were bound together, and both Angela and Christ could be trusted as true friends: [PP]

Live in harmony, united together, all of one heart and one will. Be bound to one another by the bond of charity, esteeming each other, helping each other, bearing with each other (Ric., Last);

immense and inestimable grace that my Lover, or rather ours, will grant you at the supreme moment of death, for in times of great need, true friendship is recognized. And believe firmly that then, especially, you will recognize me to be your faithful friend (Ric., Last);

And when you visit them, I give you this charge, to greet them, and shake hands with them, also in my behalf (Ric., 5)

### Love as public role

The social activities that Angela proposes in her rule can be seen as a form of love for the world in imitation of the love that Christ showed for us: “Jesus Christ lived in this world for love of us” (Reg., 5); “I implore you this of you by your most sacred Passion and your precious blood shed for the love of us... Alas! Until now I have never shed even the smallest drop of blood for love of you” (Id.). Here the role envisaged to the Ursulines has to do with the salvation of souls – to be undertaken through penance – as we have seen in our discussion on Angela’s mysticism.

This principle, however, lies also behind other public roles that Angela proposed to the Ursulines, which were not resulting from a supernatural experience. She envisaged a ‘political’ role to the Ursulines, one that society often asked of female saints, and that she herself filled. First, the Ursulines should act as peacemakers: [PP] “In speaking, that their words be wise... and leading to concord and charity... And seek to spread peace and concord where they are” (Ric, 5). Furthermore,

the Ursulines were advised to be virtuous and an example to others, helpful and available to assist people with their problems. This could include, as in Angela's case, help and advice concerning various spiritual and civic matters: "let all words, actions and behaviour always be for the instruction and edification of those who have dealings with us" (*Reg*, IX); "tell them that, wherever they are, they should give good example. And be to all good odour of virtue" (*Ric*, V). These prescriptions show that spiritual women's social roles were not necessarily resulting from their experience of the divine but also the product of their human and rational qualities.

It is interesting that Angela does not mention working in the hospitals as part of the Ursulines' charitable and apostolic activity. Angela's case thus suggests that medieval and Renaissance spiritual women associated apostolic life and charity more with the salvation of souls rather than that of the bodies.

In the rule, finally, Angela provides advice on how to deal with other people (a method which contributed to her widespread popularity). Her advice is based on love and patience:

And may all their behaviour, their actions and their words be conducted with charity;  
and let them bear everything with patience, for with two virtues especially, one  
crushes the head of the devil (*Ricordi*, 5)