

17/6: Angela's Charism – Afternoon

- How can Merici's spirituality appeal to modern society at large? For example: respect for the individual; women's freedom and social roles; importance of interiority rather than exteriority/rites; personal development; love as a guiding principle...
- What has survived of Angela's spirituality in the Ursulines today?
- What does it mean to follow Merici's values today? How can these be lived within the modern world?
- What are the specificities of today's Ursulines compared to other religious associations (and even to laypeople)?
- Why is there a decline of vocations in the West? How can the Ursulines change this trend?
- Do you follow Angela's rule today? Obviously if you adopt Angela's rule there are some aspects that can be seen as a source of inspiration but that cannot be followed literally because they were written for the 16th century, and don't make much sense in our society (why should an ursuline not go to weddings? or why should you walk quickly and with your eyes lowered?). Nevertheless, in the rule there are a lot of beautiful sentences, full of meaning, which make so much sense because they are universal (like the Gospel). There are a lot of passages which are very useful for the individual's development. I think that it would be beautiful if the Ursulines knew Angela's rule and words. Could you not leave the Ursulines to decide for themselves on what to follow and what to adapt? Can't the Ursulines (in their different locations or communally) write introductions to the rule which suggest how to read the rule? The introductions can specifically warn the Ursulines that certain things were written for her times (given women's condition, etc.), that not everything should be followed literally, etc.

I would like to conclude with a personal and to a certain extent, political, consideration on the modernity of Angela's message and of female spirituality in general. It seems to me that one aspect of great interest consists in the fact that within the religious domain, women especially promoted a form of relationship with the sacred that considered powerful, institutional, and exterior institutions as marginal. At the same time, women gave more importance to the individual and her interiority, psychology, affectivity, and sufferance: in one word to her humanity. Love, the care and commitment towards the others – which is more frequent among women – is partly a consequence of such consideration of humanity. Men, by contrast, could acquire their religious identity and authority through the exterior and institutional aspect of religion – ecclesiastical career, administration of sacraments, foundation of religious orders, etc. They may have been less inclined to develop religious identities which value humanity, psychology and care for the others. That is why perhaps women like Angela could contribute to the development of the Western identity, and especially the inner self.

I believe that these traits of female religiosity centered on humanity are “modern” also because today they can be meaningful to society in general. Indeed, today power is less sacred and the individual and subjectivity have become more important than in the past. However, it is also true that many individuals still seek self-fulfillment or self-realization through power, institutions and appearance – at the expenses of human values (both of self and of the other). In this sense the values proposed by Angela Merici (as well as by other female saints) – in particular respect for the individual and of differences, the openness towards other's people needs, the charitable disposition to listen and to help, the value given to interiority, self-awareness and personal growth, the attempt to live without imposing a personal power on the others, and the experience of humanity outside the institutional categories of power – are also relevant outside the religious sphere and can offer a valuable contribution to the wider society.