

17/6: Angela's Charism - Morning

Today I am evaluating Angela as a person and the significance of her work for the history of the Western civilization. I will first recount some important aspects of her life and then I will focus on the achievements of her Company.

Angela Merici's life and character

We all know the story of Angela, but it may be useful to go through the essential aspects of her life, character, and spiritual influences. As you know the main source of her life is the *Processo Nazari*, where her friends spoke, while the successive biographies did not add too much. In recent times, the best source of information on her life is the book by Mariani-Tarolli-Seynaeve, the *Contribution*.

From both the few testimonies of Angela's friends and her own writings, Angela emerges as a rather complex figure. She was both contemplative and active, mystical and practical, learned and aware of the matters of everyday life. Her personality was human, independent and determined. She was in contact with many people from every kind of social background. Angela attracted the attention of merchants, professionals and nobles who remained in contact with her throughout her life, even though they did not form a stable circle. Angela, however, shared the last years of her life with women of artisan background and founded a Company with them. Furthermore, she used to spend her days with all sorts of people, who visited her pleading for inspired favours. Like other female saints, Angela Merici established her reputation as a spiritual leader and became a religious focal point for her fellow-citizens. Although it does not seem that Angela was famous for miraculous phenomena and for extreme penances, she was perceived as being a mystic woman in contact with God and was considered to be more divine than human.

But let's start from the beginning. Angela was born around 1474 from a family of impoverished minor nobility. She enjoyed a good relationship with her family, and this fact may have played a role in shaping the balanced personality which emerges from her writings. It seems that her

family did not try to oppose her devotion by forcing her to consider marriage or the convent. On the contrary, she developed her spirituality in harmony with her family. When Angela was about eighteen, her father, mother and sister all died of unknown causes. Now an orphan, Angela went with her younger brother to live in Salò in their uncle's house. Salò was quite a rich city and the life it offered her was different from the rural life she had known. From the anecdotes reported in the hagiographic accounts, it seems that it was a difficult period and that her devotional choice may have been at risk. After a few years (she may have been in her early twenties), during which she attended the church of the Observantist Franciscan order of Salò, Angela became a tertiary of that order. Angela returned to Desenzano, where she owned some land and where she pursued, in accordance to the Franciscan Third Order, a life of prayer, penance, and, possibly, works of mercy such as visiting the sick and comforting the dying. During this period, she experienced a vision in which she saw pairs of virgins and angels going up a stairway which connected the earth and the sky. This vision became one of Angela's distinctive hagiographic hallmarks (often shown in pictorial representations). It was invested with particular significance since it was interpreted as the divine inspiration of the future foundation of the Company of St. Ursula.

Angela arrived in Brescia in 1516. There she established her reputation as a 'living saint'. From a religious perspective Brescia reproduced the dynamics of many early sixteenth-century Italian cities: the pastoral service of the clergy was lacking; there were attempts to reform the religious orders; the Council and the laity in general actively promoted religious initiatives, such as public celebrations and founding hospitals; popular preaching was made by external preachers (Savonarola preached in Brescia in 1494) and hermits. In Brescia there also was a tradition of female mysticism.

Angela was sent by the superiors of the Third Order in Brescia, to the house of the aristocratic family Patengola, to assist Caterina, a 46 years-old widow who had recently lost her three children. There she was introduced to some young nobles and merchants, who remained in contact with her. Soon after arriving in Patengola's house she met Girolamo Patengola and Antonio Romano, and a few

years later Agostino Gallo, while Elisabetta Prato, Giacomo Chizzola and Gabriele Cozzano probably came into her life in the early 1530s. Antonio Romano and Gallo offered Angela accommodation from 1517 to 1529 and from 1529 to 1530 respectively.

Angela's life in Brescia was divided between solitary retreat and interaction with the community. She pursued a life of contemplation, asceticism and study as well as performing a public role. According to Gallo, Angela spent her mornings attending mass where she showed great devotion for the sacrament. During the night she prayed, contemplated, possibly had mystical experiences, and reflected on theological problems. During the rest of the day Angela interacted with the community either in person or through prayer:

She took communion every day that she could, remaining in front of the Sacrament many hours of the morning to hear the masses; and also, since she slept very little, it is to be believed that she spent the greater part of the night praying, contemplating, speculating on those divine matters which are granted to the few, then spending the entire day in good offices, either with her neighbors, or else in praying for them and for sinners (Gallo, PN, 944v)

Angela was able to read and according to her friends she used to spend time reading and studying holy books. As with other female saints, this ability was viewed not so much as the result of individual intellectual capacity as, above all, another indication of transcendent inspiration. Her interpretation of the Holy Scriptures attracted many people, especially preachers and theologians. Angela used to preach to her friends, holding long "sermons":

Though she was never taught even the alphabet, nevertheless she not only read a quantity of holy books, but many times I have also seen religious men, and in particular preachers and theologians, ask her to expound concerning many

passages in the Psalms, the Prophets, the Apocalypse, and all of the New and the Old Testament, and hear from her such expounding that they remained amazed, so that one might say that this woman had more of the divine than the human; (Id.)

It also appeared very remarkable to me that, not having studied Latin letters, she understood so well the workings of Latin; and moreover, not having studied the Holy Scriptures, she gave such beautiful, learned and spiritual sermons, which at times lasted one hour (Id.)

According to the sources, Angela thus used to preach privately. She was also known for her capacity to convert people and to incite others to follow a Christian life. We can see from her writings and the testimonies concerning her that Angela had excellent pedagogic skills, she had a ‘method’ for dealing with people and the capacity of transmitting ideas in tune with different personalities. One of the most important characteristics of Angela’s personality seems to have been her human approach, which was also interpreted as another sign of divine inspiration and an aspect of her sanctity. According to Bellintani, Angela’s manner was one of the reasons why she attracted people:

Therefore, both for the fame of her sanctity, for which she was celebrated, and for the gentle ways by which, conversing, she won the souls of the persons with whom she made friends... almost all competed as to who should welcome her in his house (Bellintani, in Lombardi, *Vita*, 53-54)

The Brescian hagiographer’s point is confirmed by the words of Romano and Gallo, whose affection for Angela grew and who emphasized her caring way of communicating:

And so, while I sometimes went to visit the said Mother Sister Angela, I was seized with great affection; (Romano, *PN*, f. 937v)

She spoke to me so lovingly... that I immediately remained a prisoner, so that not only did I not know how to live without her, but my wife too, and all my family (Gallo, *PN*, f. 941v)

Thanks to her charisma, Angela became a point of reference for the city. She was called on to perform roles of public utility. She provided the Brescian community with various kinds of help, such as counseling people on personal and civic matters and acting as peacekeeper:

For many years she was of great benefit to a multitude of people, since they asked for her advice, either to change their way of life, or to bear with tribulations, or to draw up wills, or to take a wife, or to marry their daughters and sons, besides which she never lacked for work as peacemaker, between wives and husbands, sons and fathers, brothers and sisters, and so with many others according to their condition: advising and comforting each one insofar as she could, so that her work had more of the divine than the human (Gallo, *PN*, f. 942v-943r)

By 1524 Angela's fame had spread outside the Brescian territory and persons of importance requested her presence. In 1524, when she was in Venice some Venetian noblemen and clergymen visited her and wanted her to remain there to work in the Hospital of the Incurables. The following year, when she went to Rome, it was Pope Clement VII who wanted her in his city. When she was in Cremona in 1529, she was visited by many important people. In 1532 Duke Francesco Sforza II also pleaded with Angela to remain in Milan. She declined, however, all these invitations and remained in Brescia all her life. Angela's refusal to move elsewhere can be seen as a sign of attachment to the city, another typical trait of spiritual women.

Between 1522 and 1532 Angela undertook a series of pilgrimages which took her to the roots of her spirituality. In 1522 she went to the sepulcher of Osanna Andreasi. In 1524 she embarked on a long and dangerous pilgrimage to Jerusalem with Romano. The following year, Angela went to Rome for the holy year and met Clement VII. In 1529 and 1532 Angela went to Varallo to see the “Sacro Monte” with the reproduction of scenes (with sculptures) from the life of Christ. She undertook this trip the second time with a group of women who became the first members of her Company.

What spiritual influences can we find in Angela Merici? First, Angela obviously found a source of inspiration in the foundations of Christianity, the Old and New Testament, and the church fathers like Augustine. We know that Angela’s father read her Jacopo da Varagine’s *Golden Legend* when she was a child, and she may also have read the collections of lives of famous virgins and martyrs (such as the *Leggendario delle santissime vergini*) together with Catherine of Siena’s letters, *Dialogo della Divina Provvidenza* and Domenico Cavalca’s *Specchio della Croce*, a successful guide to spiritual life composed in the fourteenth century.

Furthermore, Angela’s times were a very important period for the history of Christianity. There were several religious ‘experiments’, as new forms of individual perfection and projects for the reform of the Church’s institutions were discussed in many spiritual circles. This spiritual situation was quite fluid, new groups and individuals were influenced by a variety of mystical and ascetic traditions, and were often out of alignment with the expectations of the hierarchy. New congregations emerged then, such as the Theatines (1524), the Barnabites, the Angelics (1533), the Jesuits (1540), as well as new confraternities such as the Company of Divine Love, the Confraternity of Buon Gesù, etc. Angela’s confessor, Serafino of Bologna was a Lateran Canon and his name and order lead us to the spiritual milieu of the founder of the Barnabites, Battista da Crema and of his disciple, Serafino da Fermo, both authors of several influential books on spiritual perfection, virtues and vices, self-abasement, control of self, which Angela probably read. Angela probably also read, and was influenced by, Thomas à Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, which was a very successful

book, and also proposing these spiritual ideas. Another important book which Angela may have read was the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* by the famous Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, who proposed a moral view of Christ's message and an image of the Church similar to that of the apostles (an image that reminds us a bit Angela's 7th advice and Cozzano's writings). Angela has many traits in common with these groups, and in particular the centrality of inner spirituality. This attitude, already present a century earlier in the Flemish *Devotio Moderna* was also shared by the Franciscan third order, which probably also transmit her a more optimistic view of life, based on love and friendship.

If Angela was influenced by the spirituality of the books of these individuals and currents, none of them had a decisive role on her, especially in the foundation of her Company. On the whole Angela seems to have been a rather 'independent' saint. She had no established spiritual circle in which to spread her revelations and doctrine and was one of the few famous women of her time whose deeds no lay or religious person registered while she still lived. Her milieu lacked significant spiritual figures and, apart from Cozzano, who had a specific role in her Company, none of her friends seem to have had a profound awareness of her spirituality. Although Angela's confessor, Serafino da Bologna, was part of the spiritual milieu discussed above, it is unlikely that he influenced Angela significantly also because he became her confessor only after 1530 when Angela's fame was already established. Besides, he was about 30 years younger than her.

Another source of spiritual influence on Angela is female spirituality. Indeed Angela's times were very prolific for women saints, as the Italian cities were full of these women who were considered to be in contact with the divine and were recognized a public prophetic role. Angela showed a devotion for and affiliation with these women. This was not unusual among spiritual women, who often looked to female models, both contemporaries and ancestral Christians. Angela knew the charismatic Stefana Quinzani, who lived in a convent in the nearby town of Soncino, and she venerated the Mantuan Osanna Andreasi (whose sepulchre she visited in 1532), two famous contemporary mystic women visionaries who bore the stigmata and held a political role, in particular at

the Gonzaga court. Angela probably also met Laura Mignani, another well known mystic, who lived in the convent of S. Croce in Brescia and was advisor to several religious and secular personalities, such as the founder of the Theatines Gaetano da Thiene, the founder of the Divino Amore in Brescia, Bartolomeo Stella, the Duchess of Ferrara Lucrezia Borgia, and the Duchess of Urbino Elisabetta Gonzaga. Angela probably also admired the charismatic Franciscan tertiary Chiara Bugni. Finally, interestingly, a few years before Angela's arrival, another charismatic woman, Giustina, or Suor Candida, who died in odour of sanctity in 1515 in the monastery of St. Croce, had also worked in the Patengola household. She too may have represented a source of inspiration for Angela.

The greatest achievement of Angela's life lies in the foundation of the Company of St. Ursula, an institutional novelty and the codification of her personal spiritual experience. We do not know the exact stages which led Angela to the foundation of the Company but it is likely that she had this project in mind for some time. From 1532 on we find other women in Angela's life, who became the original Ursulines. The sources agree that Angela used to meet regularly with these women, at first in her house and then in a small house (later transformed into an oratory) provided by an aristocratic Brescian widow, Elisabetta Prato (a future member of the Company's government). The Company grew out of the type of life Angela and her companions were living. It also appears that Angela founded the Company with this group of women (the future Ursulines) rather than with the widows who later administered it or under the influence of the religious orders close to her – the Franciscans or the Lateran Canons.

The Company was founded on 25 November 1535 with the admission of 28 virgins. Angela dictated the rule to a Brescian notary, Gabriele Cozzano, who became her personal secretary and the Company's Chancellor as well as its defender and legal representative. In 1536 Angela obtained approval of the Company from the local Vicar, Lorenzo Muzio. In 1537 Angela Merici was elected head of the Company. In 1539, a few months before her death, she left two written works, the *Ricordi*

and the *Testamento*, as guidelines for its government. The Company in the meantime grew rapidly: in 1537 it counted 75 Ursulines and at Angela Merici's death, in 1540, it reached 150 members.

Angela's charism

Historiography has often depicted the Company of St. Ursula as an organization devoted to charitable activities, such as works in hospitals, or as an institution devoted to assisting and teaching poor girls, similar to the new confraternities and charitable institutions that flourished in this period. However, such interpretation largely distorts the objectives of Angela's Company. The Company of St. Ursula became an association devoted to the religious teaching only in the second half of the sixteenth century. It is true that the Company did provide material assistance to the needy Ursulines and religious education (in the sense of explanation of the rule), such *internal* activities did not represent a "charitable" aim, but were necessary means to allow the Ursulines to persevere in the religious life envisaged in the rule. Indeed, the Company of St. Ursula was not intended to be specifically directed to girls who were poor or in danger of losing their honour, but it was open to women of all social strata. If the majority of the Ursulines' fathers were craftsmen (mostly masters), some of the virgins were quite well-off and others were either daughters of merchants or they belonged to important families.

Furthermore, the claim that the Ursulines were primarily involved in teaching or in carrying out charitable works *outside* the Company, such as in hospitals, should be regarded as incorrect. If it is possible that some of the Ursulines worked in the hospitals or did charitable works, this should not be seen as the aim of the Company but only a specific choice of individual Ursulines. Neither in Merici's writings nor in the documents regarding the Company there is any reference to the charitable duties that individuals must carry out in the secular world. As a matter of facts, the image of Angela and the original Company involved in these charitable activities, absent from the early biographies on the saint, was promoted only in mid-seventeenth century. This image found fertile ground in the more

recent historiographical trend which stressed the importance of charity as one of the distinguishing traits of the Catholic Reformation.

The idea that Angela was charitable and a teacher is rather reductive for what she achieved. Angela was a religious innovator and a theologian, as she proposed a very coherent and logical form of consecration for women, alternative to monasticism. Angela was a theologian, but not an abstract one: Angela's theology – like Christ's theology – has a practical goal, the achievement of a life of "perfection" lived with God, with people, in the midst of social life.

From an historical perspective, Angela Merici's charism can be seen in several aspects:

- a) she synthesized and institutionalized existing spiritual tendencies in a religious rule:
 - she included women's medieval spirituality: mystic union; repetition of Christ's sacrifice and active roles in society, both supernatural and rational; motherly love as government; a-institutional religion; unsupervised heroic virginity;
 - she also included the spirituality of her age: from the projects of church reform put forward by many contemporaries, to a spirituality more interior and individual which did not give much importance to institutional and exterior aspects (like the Jesuits, the Barnabites, etc.)

Through this synthesis she promoted:

- a) the Bride of Christ in the world, an innovative form of consecration for women, an alternative to monasticism. This figure was in a mystic relationship with the divine, independent, socially active, powerful, wise and virtuous (detached from worldly attachments which generate vices like pride, envy, anger, etc.). Albeit altered in many ways, the Bride of Christ in the world became accepted by the church and gave way to new secular opportunities for religious women – teaching, etc.;

b) a form of religion where all aspects (relationship with God, consecration, government, and everyday life) include and have at their center the Ursuline's humanity (affection, will, intellect).

This was possible because the institutional side was unimportant;

c) a religious form where love played a central part: towards God (mystic union), in the government (motherly love) and in the relationship with the world (affection, patience, openness to people and situations).

Through this religious experience she also achieved the following:

a) From women's history perspective Angela gave women new opportunities:

Angela Merici, like other spiritual women of her time, surpassed many limitations that society put on ordinary women. She capitalized on female privileged access and likeness to the divine and on the social opportunities it offered, in order to promote an unofficial manner of relationship with God (personal, unmediated, interior and based on the identification with Christ's redemptive role), and to affirm women's spiritual authority within the community.

Furthermore, although Angela gave the Ursulines traditional familial identities, such as the virgin, bride, the mother, the widow, Angela proposed that these women were free from men control (both lay and ecclesiastics) and were responsible for their daily and religious life. Angela also rejected the notion that women were irrational and weak, that they should be confined to the private and submissive to men, as she encouraged them to express their rational capacities publicly and she gave them positions of responsibility within the Company. She used the ambiguous and powerful aspects of virginity and widowhood to shape virile and independent women. Indeed, the idea of leaving virgin women in the midst of the world without male supervision caused criticism towards the Company (as we know from Cozzano). From a woman's history perspective Angela's Bride of Christ represented a new form of life for women, since at that time they had to choose between the wife and the nun. It is possible to say that the Ursuline was the missing link between the wife and the lay single woman, or its prototype.

b) She contributed to the making of the modern self and she allowed women (the Ursulines) to participate to its history. She did it more than her male contemporaries because historically women's spirituality has always been "a-institutional" (not focusing on rites, rules, hierarchies, and other exterior and institutional aspects). Because the Company did not propose communal and institutional features, in relation to which the members must mould themselves, the individual is accorded a significant amount of freedom to shape her religious experience and experienced the sacred through her humanity. Therefore, Angela's Company recognized and helped to forge the Ursulines' subjectivity, interiority and will and aided them to become independent selves. This experience of the self was also typical of many medieval spiritual women. In Angela's religious model, however, the consideration for the interiority of the individual seems deeper compared to them. In Catherine of Siena's mystical encounter the bodily signs of the conversion were the core of the *Imitatio Christi*.