

Intro:

Joy filled the chapel of the Ursuline Sisters of Youngstown Jan. 26 as a celebration took place honoring two events: the Jan. 27 feast day of Ursuline Sisters' founder St. Angela Merici and the welcoming of seven new associates. The Associates program is a way for the Ursuline Sisters of Youngstown to further the mission of St. Angela. Watch this video to enjoy the beautiful reflection offered by Sister Nancy Dawson, general superior.

Text:

The Ursuline Sisters of Youngstown welcomed seven new associates during a Mass Jan. 26 that also celebrated the feast day of Ursuline Sisters' founder St. Angela Merici. Sister Nancy Dawson, general superior, offered this warm and inspiring reflection.

Sister Nancy Dawson, General Superior: "Well, Mother Angela, we're back again another year, and as we sung in our opening hymn, we're bigger and better than ever. And Mother Angela – by the way, this was done by Sister Mary Alyce [Koval] when she studied in Europe a long time ago. Isn't that wonderful. So dear St. Angela, you bring to our celebration tonight three wonderful, wonderful gifts. First, the staff that you so often used to support you on pilgrimages to Holy places, the staff you chose to support you on the inner-journey. And because of your great love for the Scripture and of nature, I personally believe that you personally chose the Gospel that we just read [Mark 4:26-34] for your feast day tomorrow. The reading of the 'Mustard Seed' tells us a great deal about Angela, about Jesus, your one and only treasure, and also about our associates, whom we welcome as companions on the Ursuline journey tonight.

"In studying Angela's writings, we see – and you'll be receiving those today, and you can look at this – we see her love of nature in so many of her pastoral images. She refers to her leaders, her associates, as shepherdesses. Now, we're going to have to rewrite that for the men. She prays that right conviction and humble sentiment takes root – notice her imagery for her associates. She speaks of the roots and the needs of her flocks. The planting of the company of God. She encourages her leaders to 'protect the flock.' She refers to 'bad seeds sewn in a line' that are difficult to uproot. She advises, 'Don't stop pruning the vine. Produce good and sound fruit.' Obvious from these images is that Angela knew the Brescia farmland and those who served there, those who worked the fields and the vines. She loved the environment and she surrounded herself with it. Her images bespeak generativity, which our associates and all the Ursuline Sisters are well known for. Staff in hand, she mentored her flock, but was on a spiritual journey. And the use of the staff itself says she did it with confidence, and with authority.

"Angela's writings -- in so many ways -- compliment the Gospel story we just heard. Now, unlike Angela, Jesus was probably not a farmer, but he listened attentively to his environment and the natural world. And he was amazed at the mystery of growth, he was never daunted by small beginnings. But he saw the potential of great things coming from these small beginnings. Note that the huge tree – which started as a small seed – expands its branches of hospitality to invite the birds of the air and produce the fruit that is shared with the poor. This parable in Angela's writings reminds each associate and each Ursuline Sisters that once the charism of

Angela is planted in each one of us, the possibilities for continued contemplative growth and continued apostolic zeal can never, never be contained in this city and beyond.

“Each of our stories, associates and vowed religious here, no matter how small that story is, has potential to flourish. But the beautiful thing is, we do not have to journey alone. The wise associate and the wise Ursuline Sisters delight in relationships and in shared faith experiences. The wise one – like Angela and Jesus – engages with people on the piazza and in the marketplaces. Isn’t that what the associates and Sisters do when they leave their comfort level in their homes for Dorothy Day House or other volunteer services or their own ministries? They nurture all they meet to their fullest maturity and humanity and they live in communion with all that and they leave behind the illusion of isolation. No separation between the sacred and the secular. God – for us – is rooted in the mundane reality of life. We talked about the mystery of our revelation. The mystery of our revelation comes in little wisps or fragments when we share our stories and our personal experiences in faith. In other words, the attention to the present moment is the foundation for receiving gifts. The present moment is the seed that grows into a tree bearing fruit that shelters the poor. This process takes patience, and it takes time, and it takes companions on the journey. And there’s no fanfare here.

“The reading today, finally, describes the journey and growth of our seven associates during their period of orientation. I was so inspired to your responses to the questions you received at the closure of your orientation period about the mission and the charism and the ministries of the Ursulines. You were asked how the orientation for becoming an associate enriched you. And how you’ve grown in your faith, your ministry and your community. Permit me to share a few of those responses.

“This is what you said, and this is only one little seed of what you said or planted in the Ursuline community and in the world. ‘Sister Norma and the Sisters welcomed us as individuals with our God-given talents into a mutually-enriching role in the Ursuline community of love, service, faith – and get this – and revolutionary commitment to the values of the Gospel.’ Another said, ‘I have been enriched by the commitment of the Sisters who shared their faith in our associate meetings, as well as the liturgies and Wednesday prayer services. I am joining the Ursulines against classism, sexism, racism, as well as working for peace and service to the poor.’ You said this. ‘I have grown spiritually in my daily living, more aware of the needs of the poor and the desire to volunteer. I love the benefit of sharing faith and experiences. I’m in a constant state of prayer throughout my day, but I’m looking to add more study, structure and reflection.’ Powerful, isn’t it. ‘I feel peaceful, welcomed and at home whenever there are Ursulines eating, praying, ministering or talking with us.’ Another: ‘I love the common prayer in our retreat.’ They loved the retreat! ‘And I hope to make a retreat now once a year.’ We can learn from our associates, can’t we? ‘I look forward to getting to know others who can support me and I them in answering God’s call.’ Another: ‘I’ve been blessed to go beyond time and space to encounter Angela, who has shared her prayer charism with me and with the group.’

“Well, the seeds have been planted in these new associates. They reflect, don’t they, today’s Gospel boundaries. That’s what their journey was about, wasn’t it, the mustard seed, and what

they brought, they provide in fellowship with us. So, they enflesh what we read and the spirit of Angela and of Jesus and of the all Ursuline Sisters. So, my dear associates, what can I say? What can I say? Take up your staff, continue to plant, plant in your hearts the love and service of God and St. Angela, and then just watch with amazement as the mystery flourishes into hope filled branches that embrace the whole world. Amen.”

An introduction offered by program director Sister Norma Raupple and the ceremony welcoming the new Associates is available in a separate video.

The Ursuline Associates program forges a deeper relationship between the Sisters and Catholic adults who share our values and mission.

For more information on the Ursuline Sisters of Youngstown, visit us online at theursulines.org and at [Facebook.com/Ursuline.Sisters.Youngstown](https://www.facebook.com/Ursuline.Sisters.Youngstown).