

Reflections on Our Madre

As I began my reflections on our Madre for today's conference, I could not help noticing how prominent in her writings is the image of light. Almost immediately, at the beginning of the Prologue to the Rule, Angela recognizes her beloved daughters and sisters—and us—as graced by God in having been set apart from the darkness of this miserable world and united together—not merely united—but united together—a deliberately chosen redundancy—for the service of the divine majesty. While the words betray a tinge of medievalism, their meaning is most apropos in our twenty-first century context as we prepare to celebrate 475 years. We need look no further than this morning's headlines or the latest TV/radio/on-line news report for continuing evidence of misery coloring our complex global society. Yet, for all the darkness surrounding our world, then as now, we find ourselves set apart from it in light, perhaps blinding at times. Then as now, we owe thanksgiving to God for being so graced—so united together—for the service of His people.

How resonant are Angela's words with those of Sandra Schneiders regarding the position of women religious vis-à-vis the imminent, Roman visitation of our United States communities. Contrasting today's American congregations with pre-Vatican ones, Schneiders explains in a recent *National Catholic Reporter* essay that Constitutions now define the purpose of religious life as having a single and integrated end. "Urged by the love of Jesus Christ and empowered by His Spirit," contemporary Sisters "incarnate their total vowed consecration to God in the promotion of God's reign (an echo of Angela's "service of the Divine Majesty") through a variety of ministries addressing the current needs of Church and society."

Angela regarded the consecrated life she extended to her Company as a gift to be recognized, cherished, and preserved through perseverance in living it. "Blessed are those into whose hearts God has breathed the light of truth...and the will...to preserve this voice of truth" (*Writings*, p. 9) that demands for its sustenance, fidelity to the Rule—a fidelity undergirded by firm, unquestioning hope in God's "infinite divine goodness." Such firm hope will, she assures, help the hoper to fend off and ultimately defeat danger and adversity. Further, she promises: "every sorrow and sadness will be turned into joy and gladness...the thorny path shall blossom and be covered with "gleaming gold pavement" (*Writings*, pp. 11-13). Indeed, the light bathing the members of the Company, would serve to dispel the darkness of Angela's Brescia and beyond. Not to be hidden under the bushel of monastic structures, this light would emanate—like a lighthouse beam—in response to societal need.

Once known as "moniales," some of us remember days managed by horaria and custom books, filled with silence, personal prayer, and Divine Office. Beautiful as that lifestyle may have been, it was not what Angela had envisioned for her Company. As Querciolo Mazzonis points out, even in drawing up her Rule Angela did not sacralize it. Rather she respected the diversity of her daughters. They were not to be passive vessels

filled with God's love and power as members of earlier medieval groups liked to characterize themselves. No, a daughter of Angela was to be respected as an individual who could express her will as a "subject who stood independently before God" (Mazzonis 133). Members of Angela's Company would live in harmony, united together—having one heart and one will—esteeming each other, helping each other, bearing with each other—but having personal responsibility for shaping one's own religious life.

The medieval women preceding Angela were regarded by men as exhibiting a religiosity colored by a privileged relationship between the individual and the transcendent. These women's claims to sanctity arose from charismatic authority, especially visions and supernatural signs, indicating an intimate rapport with the sacred and access to a prophetic gift. Male saints, by contrast, owed their power to ecclesiastical or secular office (Mazzonis 97 ff.). Women's writings in those times centered on ecstatic union through contemplation of the Passion, and were more direct, affective, introspective, and colloquial than those of men—a phenomenon possibly explained by their exclusion from formal education and ecclesiastical roles. In sum, women's spirituality—characterized by affectivity and mysticism—was assigned to them by male religious who had appropriated for themselves the roles of preaching and priesthood while seeking to maintain order within the Church. Barred from formal education and viewed by men as weaker and less rational than men—the women were expected to avail themselves of the numinous, the mystical—hearing voices and having visions—practicing asceticism and embracing virginity "to escape from the female condition"—i.e. the female body—a source of lust (Mazzonis 62).

But, despite such limiting, male perspectives, some women (Angela among them) pursued a more rational role in society, even giving moral and political advice. Witness Angela's role as adviser to Duke Francesco Sforza of Milan or her obtaining pardon from the arrogant and severe administrator, Luigi Gonzaga di Castiglione, so that his former servant might be reinstated (Mariani 172). Consider also, Angela's much-sought expertise in restoring harmony between husband and wife, teenagers and parents; and, her giving advice on drawing up wills or establishing new family ties (174).

Since medieval women did not seek to manage the sacred through institutional forms and structures and regarded the creation of rules as the preserve of men, Angela created in her Rule what Mazzonis deems "a precious document, a rare instance of the codification of female spirituality." Like mystic women, Angela's followers were in direct contact with God without the mediation of the clergy/Church—a radical stance outlined by Angela in her chapter on obedience. In Angela's Rule, obedience is due chiefly to God and to the advice that the Holy Spirit sends "continuously and directly" to our hearts (Reg. VIII). Angela "allowed the Ursuline to take responsibility for evaluating God's advice," writes Mazzonis (p. 112). By viewing the Holy Spirit's inspirations as

“continuous,” he explains, she stressed the existential condition of the divine relationship: contact with God was unmediated.

Angela, convinced that obedience is due first and foremost to the Holy Spirit, lived accordingly. Thus, she refused Pope Clement VII’s request to remain in Rome to serve in the Luoghi Pii—welfare institutes such as hospitals, orphanages, recovery sites for prostitutes (Mariani, p. 15). Rather, after politely kissing the Pope’s foot, Angela excused herself and later that night left secretly for Brescia and the life she knew she must lead (Mariani, p. 201). On other occasions, when she felt earthly obedience was incompatible with God’s voice or in disagreement with it, she refused similar invitations from the Duke of Milan and Venetian noblemen to work in their respective cities. “Above all, obey the Holy Spirit,” says Angela’s Rule, and unmediated contact with God gave her daughters fuller responsibility for their lives. According to that Rule, God as Provider and Christ as Lover, are responsible for the Ursuline’s entire life—spiritual and secular (Mazzonis 112-115).

Angela’s chapter on obedience, perhaps the essence of her Rule, echoes her chapter on prayer and continues its light/dark imagery. She invites her followers to prudent fasting, daily Mass, diligent prayer—in the secret of the heart—in words such as: “My Lord, light up the darkness of my heart [so that I never turn away from your] dazzling face...Burn away...every affection and passion in the fiery furnace of your divine love...Receive my free will...my every thought, word and deed”—for obedience to the Spirit will free one from the dark hell of self-will—and be in us like a great light, making every action good and acceptable (*Writings* 29, 37, 39). With charity burning in our hearts, “let all our words, actions, and behavior” (45) be a light for others. Delight not in goods, or food and drink, or relatives and friends, or one’s own resources, she urges, but only in God’s gentle and ineffable Providence—seeking first the Kingdom—and relying on God ‘who wants nothing for [us but our] good and our joy’ (47).

Empowered by such light, Angela expects that like her, we, her followers, will intercede for others before God and speak such words as lead to concord, charity, and the spreading of peace wherever we are; that we will act out of love and with patience, thereby crushing the head of the devil (*Writings* 83). She prescribed no one activity—no one service or apostolate—but directed her followers to decide on their particular ministries according to time, place, circumstances—and each one’s particular gifts and talents. Her form of consecrated life is a-institutional: without convent, solemn vows, or habit; without common life, or perfect execution of precepts; with a government not based on power but organized on an “alternative logic”—Mazzonis’ phrase (p. 125)—of caring, serving, guiding, and protecting. From the Holy Spirit, she learned and enacted respect for each individual, no matter how diverse. Insisting on the importance of love and convinced that women could be responsible leaders, she knew that following her Rule—her way of life—would lead to experiencing Christ’s presence in their midst. What greater joy! Amen! Happy Anniversary! Ad multos annos!

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