

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

Angela Merici lived in Renaissance Italy, a turbulent time of civil wars and widespread corruption in social, political and religious institutions. The role of women was subordinate; their choice was either marriage or the cloister, controlled by “a husband or a wall.” Angela sought neither. She envisioned a new, independent expression of religious commitment for women. Her Company of Saint Ursula granted women the freedom to live consecrated lives while living in the world, bound only by the love of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Angela’s Early Vision

Angela Merici (1474?–1540) was born in Desenzano, on Lake Garda in northern Italy. She and her siblings helped with the family farm and vineyards. Angela’s parents told her stories of the saints and taught her habits of daily prayer and fasting that remained with her throughout her life.

Angela’s family circle was broken during her teen years with the deaths of her parents and a sister who was her dearest companion. Tradition holds that, longing to know of her sister’s eternal happiness, Angela had a vision, which artists have depicted as the heavens opening to reveal a brilliant procession of angels and young girls, including her beloved sister. In this mystical experience, young Angela

opened herself to God’s intervention in her life and understood that she was called to establish a community of women, although it would be more than 30 years until her vision would be realized.

ANGELA MERICI

Woman of Vision



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

Angela, Secular Franciscan

Angela could have enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle with aristocratic relatives in a neighboring town, but instead she joined the Secular Franciscans, a lay community of women and men who followed the Rule of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi. For the next twenty years, Angela remained in Desenzano and lived in the simple Franciscan manner, dedicated to work, prayer and self-denial. Her devotion to Christ was centered in liturgy and the Eucharist, and she was well versed in the Scriptures. In this environment, Angela developed her contemplative stance towards life.

When Angela was in her late 40s, her Franciscan superiors sent her to comfort a widow and her family in the city of Brescia, which suffered from corruption in its political and Church life as did most of Renaissance Italy. Ecclesiastical power struggles and civil wars left the once flourishing diocese in a state of decay, degraded by immoral or absent clergy. Influenced by the Franciscans, who were on the cutting edge of Church renewal and reform, Angela began in Brescia what we might call her public ministry. Here she met other women and men who shared her love of God through service to others, and they were drawn to this wise, holy lay

woman as their spiritual center. Angela ministered in spiritual and practical ways to alleviate the effects of war, poverty and sickness around her. She responded to the needs of both rich and poor who sought her as a counselor, comforter and reconciler. Today, we might call her a spiritual director, director of charities, social worker, and advocate.

In 1524, at age 50, Angela joined other Franciscans on a Holy Land pilgrimage. The story is told that she mysteriously lost her vision during the journey and was unable to see the holy places. A violent storm nearly shipwrecked the pilgrims on their return trip, but they were spared and Angela regained her sight. One wonders if, directed by her heart rather than her eyes, Angela saw more clearly God's will for her to establish the Company of women she had envisioned thirty years earlier.

The following year, Angela made a pilgrimage to Rome and met privately with Pope Clement VII, who was aware of Angela's reputation for holiness and charitable works. He asked her to remain in Rome to take charge of a religious order of nursing sisters. Confident in her call, Angela courageously declined and returned to Brescia.

At last . . . Angela's Company of Saint Ursula

Angela became frail from age and asceticism, but her spiritual energy never waned as she worked to form her community. While she was living in a small apartment beside the Church of Saint Afra in Brescia, a group of young women and widows began to meet regularly with her for prayer and instruction. They found in *Madre Angela* a friend, companion, inspiration, sister and mother.

Crowded for space, they created an oratory in the larger home of one of the widows. On the walls Angela had frescoes painted honoring holy lay women -- Paula and Eustachia of Rome, Ursula, Catherine of Alexandria and Elizabeth of Hungary. Some of these women were virgins, others were mothers, none were members of religious orders and all were saints.

On November 25, 1535, when Angela was 61, she gathered her twenty-eight companions for a simple ceremony to consecrate themselves with her to the service of God. From then on, they were known as the "Company of Saint Ursula," under the patronage of the legendary fourth-century martyr who was revered as a heroine, protector and champion of young women. By the end of the year, the community numbered sixty, and would continue to grow.

Angela created a Rule for her Company that would become the first Rule written by a woman for a non-cloistered community of women. It was approved by the diocesan Vicar in 1536. In declining health, she dictated two more documents, addressed to the women who would follow her in leadership, the *Arricordi* (Words to Remember, or Counsels) and the *Legati* (Legacies or Testament). In them, she mentions three women from Scripture, Judith, Anna and Mary. Angela died on January 27, 1540, and was buried in the Franciscan habit, as she had directed. Angela Merici was canonized in 1807.

"Follow the Spirit"

As Angela created it, the Company of Saint Ursula was fundamentally different from other religious orders in existence, such as the Poor Clares or Benedictines. Instead of being cut off from the world, the women who followed Angela's Rule lived with their families or where they worked and were not directed to any specific ministry, but to a way of life. They wore no particular habit, observed evangelical counsels and voluntarily committed themselves to virginity, poverty and obedience. They were encouraged to "be happy, and always full of charity and faith and hope in God" (Rule, Chapter 9). Regarding poverty, Angela stressed poverty of spirit, for "...In God one has all wealth" (Rule, Chapter 10).

As for obedience, Angela directed the women to obey God's commandments and to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit and their own personal

discernment over all earthly authority. The Rule made the priorities clear:

Above all, obey the counsels and inspirations which the Holy Spirit continually sends into the heart . . . obey God and each creature for the love of God, as long as nothing is commanded against the honor of God and against one's own integrity.

(Rule, Chapter 8)

Angela's Rule included traditional characteristics of religious life, but she reinterpreted them in a radical, new way. She broke with prevailing conventions and allowed women the opportunity for both religious commitment and independence. They could live and act in the world on their own

**Above all, follow the counsels
and inspiration which the
Holy Spirit unceasingly sends
into our hearts.**

**Rule of Saint Angela Merici
Chapter 8**

authority, not governed by fathers, husbands or pastors, and still receive spiritual guidance and retain social respectability as members of the Company of Saint Ursula.

Moreover, Angela intended the community to be independent of outsiders. She placed the spiritual

leadership of the Company in the hands of four women who were to be elected by the community from within the community. *Madre Angela* became their first superior. She urged all subsequent leaders to do so "with love and a mild and kindly hand, and not imperiously, not harshly, but in everything be gentle" (3rd Legacy). The independence of the community as a whole and of each woman as an individual was limited only by "the love of God and the eagerness for the well-being of souls" (1st Legacy). Although priests served as confessors and ministers of the Eucharist, they held no leadership position.

Angela and Women Today

After Angela's death, the Company of Saint Ursula was criticized by Church and civil authorities threatened by the women's independence. Angela's original lay Company became a monastic order of women, which developed into the first female religious teaching order. In 1582, Cardinal Charles Borromeo recruited them to serve the Catholic reform movement in Milan as catechists, especially to girls and women. The community spread to France, where French cardinals imposed monastic rules, including a fourth vow to educate young women. Today, Ursulines have broadened their teaching mission and serve the needs of the Church and society on every continent, especially among the poor, with a special emphasis on supporting the dignity and gifts of women.

For centuries, Saint Angela Merici has been revered traditionally as the founder of the Ursulines. In 1967, the publication of the first comprehensive biography of Angela revealed the true portrait of this courageous, holy woman and her bold vision for her Company of women. Today, Angela is a model for all women, young and old, lay and religious, to trust our own integrity and "Above all, follow the Spirit" in responding to our call to holiness and serving the people of God.

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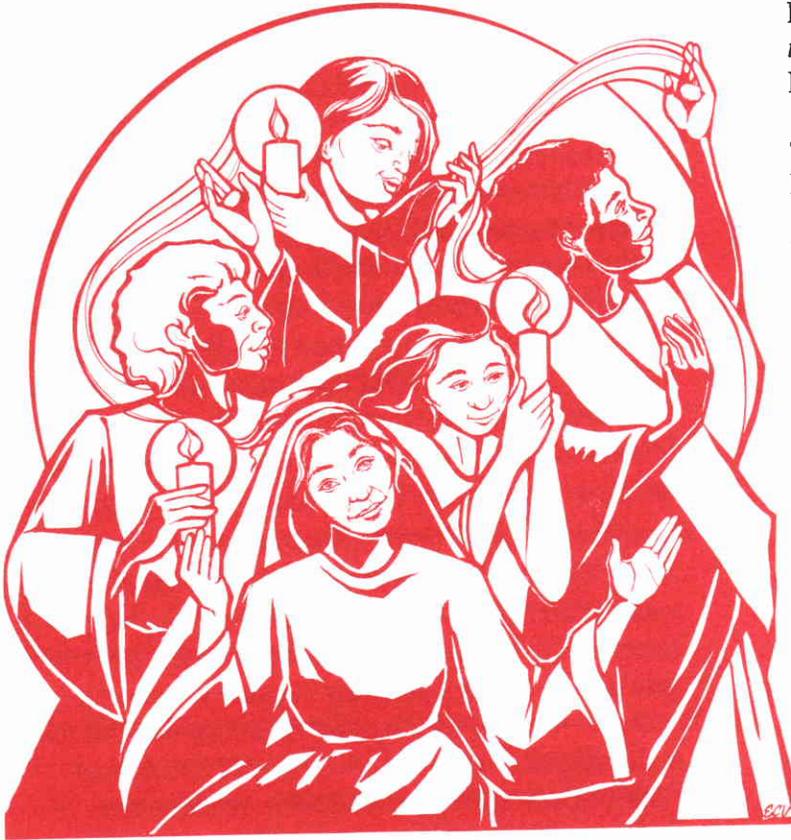
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Eileen Cantin Verbus

The feast day for Angela Merici is celebrated on January 27. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that day or at another appropriate time.

In 2001, **FutureChurch** developed the original **Celebrating Women Witnesses** projects in creative partnership with Call To Action. Since that time hundreds of educational and prayer programs have been held in schools and churches throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Latin America, Malaysia and Africa. Currently FutureChurch is solely responsible for administering this very popular project. A specially designed **Teacher's Edition** is also available from FutureChurch which includes lesson plans and special projects geared to junior and senior high school students.

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A Prayer Service Honoring St. Angela Merici

A Fire that Set Others Alight

This prayer service could be used on Angela's feast, January 27.

When Angela Merici formed the Company of St. Ursula in 16th Century Italy, she created for women a new, independent expression of religious commitment, allowing them freedom to live consecrated lives while living in the world and working to transform church and society. A confidante of Angela described her as "a fire that set others alight," which is the theme of this service. The Paschal candle should be present in the prayer space; tapers for all participants will be needed later. The service begins with the lighting of the Paschal candle as the group sings the Gathering Song.

Gathering Song: "Be Light for Our Eyes" (David Haas c 1985, GIA Publications, Inc.)

Greetings

PRESIDER: Loving God, creator of light in the darkness, you set Angela afire with love for you and empowered her with courage and persistence to fulfill the vision you placed in her heart. May your Spirit spark the embers within us that we may be inflamed with desire to respond to your intervention in our lives. Let us begin our prayer together by offering each other a sign of welcome and peace.

Liturgy of the Word

First Reading:

From the Last Council of Angela:

"Cling together with bonds of charity, esteeming one another, helping one another, supporting one another in Christ Jesus. If you really try to live like this, there is no doubt that God will be in your midst. You will enjoy the favor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the apostles, of the saints and angels, of all heaven and the entire created universe. God has designed that those who commit themselves to do good in God's name will experience fulfillment in every way. Their apostolates succeed because they have God and all creation on their side. I assure you that every grace you ask of God will most certainly be granted, and I shall always be among you, praying with you. Therefore, encourage each other to persevere in the work you have begun and to be happy together. For what I have said will definitely happen."

Second Reading:

Ephesians 5, 6-14 "...now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."

or

Matt. 5, 13-16 "You are the light of the world. ... Your light must shine before others."

A Reflection is offered from insights on the readings. Allow quiet time for private reflection.

Intercessions

PRESIDER: We praise our God who has drawn us together to celebrate the gifts of Angela as we pray...

(Response: Spirit, guide us.)

for the Church to welcome the prophetic women you send us today ...

that all who serve the Church may be strengthened in their baptismal vocation, we pray...

that peace and justice may prevail in the world, we pray ...

that political and spiritual leaders may hear and respond to the needs of all people, we

pray. ...

that we may bring comfort to those who suffer in body, mind and spirit, we pray ...

that, like Angela and her followers, we may do all for the glory of God, we pray...

Intercessions from the assembly...

PRESIDER: Angela encouraged her followers and still speaks to us today to discover and proclaim the fire of the Spirit within us. You are each invited now to come forward, receive a taper, light it from the Paschal candle, and name aloud (or silently, if you wish) what needs to be ignited in your own life. (If the group is large, the ritual can take place by lighting one taper from the Paschal candle, then passing the flame until all tapers are lit, inviting each to name silently the personal need.)

Litany of St. Angela

Said while all stand with lighted tapers.

PRESIDER: The response is "...Pray for us"

St. Angela, afire with love of God and gifted with a deep love of the Church ...

St. Angela, nourished by Scripture and a witness to Gospel values...

St. Angela, who responded to the needs of her time ...

St. Angela, who sought to bring peace in a world of alienation, injustice and violence ...

St. Angela, concerned with the integrity and dignity of women ...

St. Angela, dedicated to compassionate service to others ...

St. Angela, who encouraged her companions to be united by bonds of harmony and
happiness...

St. Angela, who instructed her followers, above all, to follow the guidance of the Spirit ...

St. Angela, who remained always faithful to her vision ...

PRESIDER: O God, you gave us Angela as a prophetic leader of her Company of women and a creative new voice within the Church. May she be a model for us today to live lives of holiness in the world and inspire us to blaze with the fire of your presence. We ask this grace in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dismissal

PRESIDER: Let us leave here filled with the Spirit, radiant and ready to bring God's hope and peace to the world.

ALL: Thanks be to God.

If a closing song is desired, "Light of Christ/Exsultet" (Marty Haugen c 1987, GIA Publications, Inc.) is suggested.
Prayer service developed by Dorothy Valerian, a pastoral minister in Cleveland OH.

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