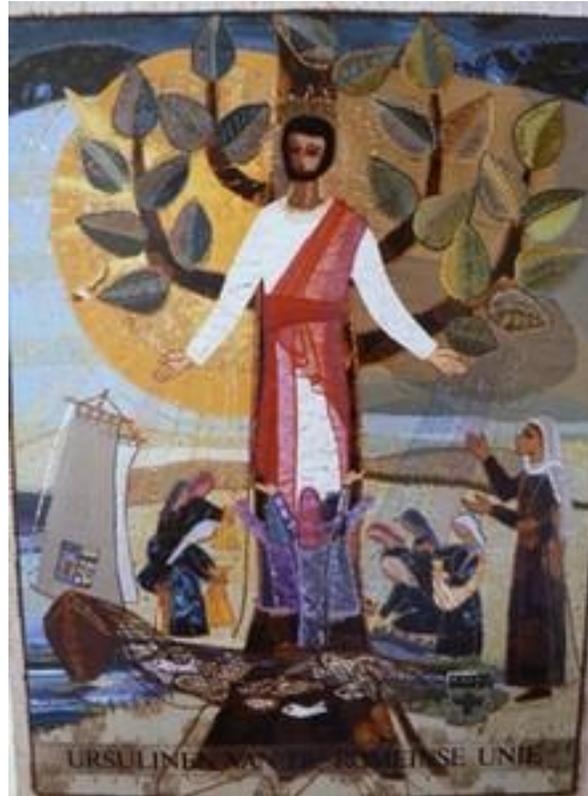


Liturgical prayer in relation to everyday life



When we consider liturgical prayer, we usually think about two main forms: Divine Office, on one hand, the Sacraments and Holy Mass, on the other. How did Angela live these two sources of grace? The direct witnesses of her life have left little information concerning her liturgical prayer. She certainly recited the Office of Our Lady, since she requested this of her daughters. Her book of Office, Angela had promised and bequeathed it to John-Peter Fontana. He was a shoemaker, and one of the witnesses she chose for the first General Chapter in 1537. On the first page, there is a written mention of Angela's death on Tuesday, March 27, 1540. This book of Office has been described in detail in the pages of the Canonization Process.

Angela's devotion to the Holy Mass is asserted by Agostino Gallo, who says that she assisted at several Masses during the morning. We must not forget that outside the celebration of Mass, the Churches in Brescia were used for different meetings, political, financial, religious, and even for love-affairs. If anyone wanted to pray peacefully in church, he necessarily had to go there while Mass was being celebrated.

As for the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation, we remember that one of the reasons for which Angela entered the Third Order of Saint Francis, was that as a member, she could receive communion and go to Confession more often. Moreover,

according to Bellintani, when her mission of comforting Caterina Patengola came to an end, Angela, instead of returning to Desenzano, chose to remain in Brescia, because there she had more opportunities to assist at Mass, receive Communion and go to Confession.

What are the counsels Angela left to her daughters in this respect? As we study her Writings, we realize that she not only spoke about specific times for liturgical prayer, but that she also proposed constant and daily attitudes as a background for Divine Office, Mass and the Sacraments, attitudes which help us live them on a deeper level.

I. Divine Office and prayer of praise and intercession

Divine Office is first and foremost a prayer of praise to which all creation is invited. But for Angela, praise is not limited to the time when she recites her Office. Throughout her writings there flows a sort of stream of praise and admiration for God's deeds. Her prayer of praise rises up in the midst of the beauty of nature: "(your holy Name), be it blessed above the sands of the seas, above the drops of the waters, above the multitudes of the stars". (R 5, 25).

In the same spirit of praise, Angela proclaims the greatness and the power of God, who alone knows us as we really are, and who wants nothing but our good: "Who can judge the heart and the innermost secret thoughts of any creature?... He will do marvelous things in his own time, and when it pleases him." (Couns. 8, 4;9)

He is worthy of all our confidence: "They should place their hope and love in God alone, and not in any living person."(Couns. 5, 22). "Let them hold this as most certain: that they will never be abandoned in their needs. God will provide for them wonderfully."(Couns. 5, 31). This confidence is proposed especially to "those you see disconsolate, doubtful and faint-hearted." (Couns. 5, 40).

Our songs of praise alter with hymns of thanksgiving: "Because God has granted you the grace of setting you apart from the darkness of this miserable world and of uniting you together to serve his divine Majesty, you have to thank Him infinitely that, to you especially, He has granted such a singular gift". (R Prol. 4-5). "How much you have to thank Him for this, and at the same time to pray to him, that ...he would deign also to give you such knowledge and capacity that you may be able to do work worthy of praise in his sight." (T Prol. 17-18; 20).

Divine Office also includes an important prayer of intercession. Angela prepares us for this prayer throughout her writings and gives us different reasons to pray for others, first for those who are nearest to us and whom we love, "my father and mother, my relatives and friends" but also for "the whole world" (R 5 24), for "those who do not

know you and do not care to be partakers in your most sacred Passion.... Willingly I would shed my own blood to open the blind eyes of their minds". (R 5, 31-34).

Angela recommends interceding through prayer and fasting not only for the wicked, but also for all Christians, and even the most fervent ones, "to implore mercy before the throne of the Most High for the many dissolute actions committed by Christians... to implore divine help for the Christian people...to remain in prayer with as much strength of spirit as is possible, asking for that great promise (of the Holy Spirit) made by Jesus Christ to his chosen ones who are well disposed." (R 4, 11; 13. 15-16).

Within this climate of praise and intercession in our daily life, Angela gives precise counsels for specific prayer during the Divine Office. It is a vocal prayer, but it helps us acquire an inward spirit of prayer, for, she says, "We advise frequent vocal prayer, through which the bodily senses are awakened and one disposes oneself for mental prayer. For this reason, each one will say every day at least the Office of Our Lady and the seven penitential psalms with devotion and attention, because saying the Office, one speaks with God." (R 5, 6-10). What Angela means by "frequent prayer" is specified in praying the Office seven times a day, for each Canonical Hour.

So as to really "talk with God" through "mental prayer", Angela suggests motives centered on "the thirty-three years Jesus Christ lived in this world for love of us" and on the Holy Spirit who blesses us with "His seven gifts". (R 5, 12-13).

II. Taking part in Christ's offering in the Eucharistie

The form of liturgical prayer which involves us most is the Eucharistic prayer; there we are invited to unite ourselves daily to the Sacrifice of Christ. On the altar, Jesus Christ continues His offering for the salvation of the world. On the other hand, He expects our offering ourselves to Him.

Angela foresees that this mutual offering be lived daily in the concrete circumstances of our life. Only then will the Holy Mass release its real meaning and full measure. She reminds us several times of the offering Christ made of His own life. Through Him we are united as "daughters and sisters most dear in the Blood of Jesus Christ" (Couns. 1,1). It is His Sacrifice which gives us the strength to be faithful to our commitments: "I ask you all, or rather I beg you for love of the Passion of Jesus Christ and of our Lady, that you strive to put into practice these few counsels."(Couns. Prol. 20).

We are called, most of all, to offer ourselves, as He did. That means offering all that we are, all that we have received, our temperament, our qualities, but also our weaknesses. Angela proposes this offering in the prayer included in the Rule. She begins by giving the Lord all her affections: "I pray that you deign to receive this most vile and

impure heart of mine, and to burn away its every affection and passion in the fiery furnace of your divine love.”(R 5, 36-37). We could be surprised by the rather negative trend of that prayer, for our affections are such beautiful things. They render us sensitive to others. They permit us to share their joys and their sorrows. But we also know that we have to make continual progress, and that the God-given gift of our affections needs to be purified and drawn heavenwards.

Next, Angela offers her liberty: “I pray that you receive my free will, and every act of my will, which by itself... does not know how to discern good from evil. (R 5 29-30). It often happens that we ask ourselves, “What am I to do? Where should I go? What must I decide on?”, because we do not always see what is best and we need interior light to guide us.

Finally, Angela offers her whole being to the Lord: “Receive my every thought, word and deed, everything that is mine finally, both interior and exterior. All this I lay down as an offering at the feet of your divine Majesty. And I pray that you deign to receive it even though I am unworthy of this. “ (R 5, 40-43). After having received Christ’s offering, we thus respond by giving ourselves entirely to Him.

This gift includes our availability to accomplish, as Christ did, the Will of the Father: “Therefore you must make a sound and firm resolution to submit yourselves totally to his will, and with a lively and steadfast faith to receive from him what you have to do for love of him, and in this (whatever may happen) to persevere with constancy to the very end.”(Test. Prol. 22-24).

This is the daily climate which prepares us for the Eucharistic celebration: our offering ourselves hour after hour throughout the day.

Angela also asserts that “In the Holy Mass are to be found afresh all the merits of the Passion of our Lord” (R 6, 3). The “merits” mean all the graces, all God’s love for us, all the help He wants to give us, all the light He wants to shed upon us. “And the greater the attention, faith and contrition one brings to it, the deeper is one’s participation in these blessed merits and the greater the consolation one receives.”(R 6, 4). That is the true “devotion” Angela suggests. (R 6, 2).

However, you and I are well aware of the fact that we do not always assist at Mass with “great attention, faith and contrition”, and that we are not always conscious of the “consolation we receive”. Fortunately, Angela also mentioned our “faith”, for it is truly in pure spirit of faith that we present ourselves to the altar, and this faith is not necessarily felt, but relies on our interior convictions. We know that Christ is there, that He is giving Himself to us, and we really want to give ourselves to Him from the depths of our being. This is where our daily offering comes in. It is there, buried deep within us, but very real; it is not only seen by Him, but welcomed with love by the One who has chosen us.

III. Pardon et reconciliation

Angela mentioned “contrition” as one of the best attitudes to attend the Eucharist. This contrition forms part of our daily living, and prepares us for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Our daily living is made up of struggles. Angela does not hide the very real aspect of the inward battles we are called to wage. We are confronted with darkness that is why she prays, “My Lord, light up the darkness of my heart” (R 5, 15). Then we have to face all that in us and around us is opposed to good: “For there is no kind of evil which will not try to stand in the way, seeing that here on earth we are placed in the midst of snares and perils, so that water, air, and earth, with all of hell, will take up arms against us, since as yet our flesh and sensuality are not dead. Neither does our adversary, the devil, sleep, he who never rests, but is always watching and seeking which approach he could use to devour any of us, and with his so many devious ways and wiles that no one could count them.” (R Prol. 19-21).

Angela, however, does not leave us with this dark picture of life; these are not her last words on our condition in today’s world: “I have this firm and unquestioning faith and hope in infinite divine goodness, that not only shall we easily overcome all dangers and adversities, but also, to our great glory and jubilation, we shall defeat them. We shall even spend this very short life of ours in consolation, and our every sorrow and sadness will be turned into joy and gladness. (R Prol. 25-27).

While waiting that “our every sorrow and sadness be turned into joy and gladness”, Angela invites us to call on God’s mercy: “Deign, O most loving Lord, to forgive my so many offences, and every fault that I have ever committed from the day of my holy baptism to this hour.”(R 5, 24). “Therefore, I am compelled, day and night, moving, staying still, acting, thinking, to call out and to cry to heaven, and to beg for mercy and time for penance”. (R 5, 22). This really concerns our every-day life, made up of rest, of work, of different activities. The “penance” Angela proposes is that of changing something in our lives, that of beginning afresh every day, and this, evidently needs “time”!

While recognizing her weaknesses, Angela implores for the Lord’s help: “Give me the grace to die rather than ever today offend your divine Majesty”.(R 5, 17). Notice how realistic is the mention of “today”, for it is every day that we begin again our journey towards God, that we start a “new life”, and it is every day that we need His grace.

Angela realizes very well that we are often tossed around between good or evil, or at least, between good and less good. This is why she asks the Lord to “strengthen my affections and senses so that they do not stray, neither to right nor to left, nor turn me away from that dazzling face of yours which contents every afflicted heart”. (R 5, 17-18)

She pins out certain weaknesses which we all have: and first of all our slowness in saying “yes” to God: “I have been so slow to begin to serve your divine Majesty!” (R 5 27) This includes all our hesitations, our procrastinations when it comes to giving up something for God. She admits that she has not been entirely submissive to God’s will, like all of us, especially when we are facing trials, different difficulties, especially the unforeseen ones. At times it is hard to say a spontaneous “yes” to God: “I have never been obedient to your divine precepts and every adversity has been hard for me, because of the littleness of my love for you.” (R 5,29-30).

Finally, Angela insists several times on the necessity of being heedful in the face of evil and avoiding the occasions which could lead us to it, for “there is little or no difference between saying outright: ‘I will no longer serve God’, and not wanting the ways and rules necessary to be able to remain in his service.” (R Prol. 14).

As Angela addresses women who have to face the lax atmosphere of the pagan Renaissance period, she insists on certain occasions to be avoided: “They should avoid standing about on balconies or on doorsteps or in the streets, either alone or with others, and that for many reasons” (R 3, 4) “They should walk quickly, not lingering, or stopping here and there, or standing about to gaze curiously at anything, for everywhere there are dangers and various diabolical snares and traps.”(R 3, 6-7). What would she say today? Our streets do not always guarantee physical or moral security, especially at night!

Most of all, Angela sees in “going frequently to confession”, the “necessary medicine for the wounds of the soul”. (R 7, 1). She specifies the frequency, “at least once a month”, to the “common spiritual father”, and “in her own parish on solemn feasts” (R 7, 12; 14). She insists on the essential aspect: the “necessary medicine” to cure our “wounds”. Medicine usually is taken pill by pill or spoonful by spoonful, a little at a time, until we are healed. The effects of miracle medicine acting instantaneously usually do not last, for they do not respect nature... That is why frequent confessions are necessary.

Angela lived before the Council of Trent which came to distinguish between compulsory confession, after mortal sins, and devotional confession, so as to make progress in the ways of the Lord. Her counsels apply, of course, to devotional confession.

She first appeals to our spirit of faith; “Let each one willingly present herself before the priest as if before God, eternal Judge” (R 7, 7). In Hebrew, the words for justice and mercy blend, for both have the same semantic root. It is because of His justice that God is merciful, for He recognizes our weaknesses.

Angela then specifies what our interior tendencies should be: “Let each one, full of sorrow, with honesty and in truth of conscience, confess her sin and ask forgiveness for it”. (R 7, 9-10).

The “sorrow” she calls for is not a matter of feeling guilty or shameful. It refers to our pain for having failed in our love for God, who is so good and generous on our behalf. This sorrow also belongs to the realm of faith, of being interiorly convinced, and not necessarily of feeling it.

Angela insists on “honesty and truth of conscience”, thus placing each one of us in front of our responsibilities. She does not invoke an outside law, but a personal, interior one, according to the light given to each one by her conscience.

Finally, for those young members of the Company of Saint Ursula, who are not accustomed to go to Confession, she goes into details of external attitudes: “And always, with fear and reverence, let her remain before the confessor until she has received the absolution”. (R 7, 11).

Another aspect on Confession as described in the Rule may surprise us: It is Angela’s insistence on the necessity of admitting our faults to the priest: “For no one will ever be justified from sin, if he does not first, with his own lips, confess his faults to the priest”. (R 7, 2). We must not forget that in the climate of the Protestant Reform, the practice of Confession had dropped. According to Luther, all we need to do is to express inwardly to God our regrets for our faults. This statement is not entirely false. For example, Holy Mass begins with a penitential rite, so that we may come near the altar with our souls purified from sin. However, the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation acts with particular strength to help us overcome our faults. That is the “remedy” proposed by Angela.

It is not without reason that in her Rule, the chapter on confession is immediately followed by the one on obedience. The “new life” which the Sacrament bestows on us is lived by entering more fully on the road trodden by Christ, that of the servant, seeking in all circumstances the Will of the Father. And so, Angela, after the strong impulse given to us by confession, sends us back to our daily life, so as to follow that “great light which makes our every action good and acceptable” (R 8, 4). We could repeat Angela’s words and say that the “remedy” for our weaknesses is also found in that “great light”, that is our seeking constantly the Will of the Father, as it is manifested to us, through the persons and events He sends us.

Liturgy and daily life: the two blend in harmony and reinforce one another. The two help us imitate Christ, in His love for the Father and for others. In this sense, our daily life also forms part of a liturgy, inspired by Christ’s offering of Himself and our will to offer ourselves in return. Our simple everyday acts enter into His prayer of praise,

intercession and offering, which He presents to the Father. Christ hovers over our daily lives with their ups and downs, so as to give us mercy, pardon, renewal. Liturgical prayer, as such, confirms in specific strong moments of the day, what we are living, what we receive from Him as our days go on.

Questions for personal reflection:

1. Are there moments in which liturgical prayer has specifically influenced our lives? Temporarily? Habitually? How could we bring fresh life to our daily liturgical prayer?
2. Meditate on chapters 4-5-6-7 of Saint Angela's Rule, where she speaks about liturgical prayer and apply them to our lives today.
3. Read slowly and pray over the Gospel texts on the Last Supper as related in Matt. 26, 26-28; Lc 22, 15-20; Jn 13, 1- 22; I Cor. 11, 23-25.
Or, pray with renewed attention some Psalms of praise and confidence, as found in our Divine Office.

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