

## Research on Saint Angela



I must confess that I began to appreciate Angela, only at the age of 50! Before that, she did not mean anything to me. I found her writings insipid and uninteresting. I used to pray her, saying: “Dear Angela, I am a bad daughter of yours. I do not pray you, I do not appreciate you, and your writings are meaningless to me. If you really want me to know and love you, you have to do something about it”. And she did! It all began when in 1976 I was sent to join the Generalate community in Rome. There, I met Sr Luciana Mariani, who was radiant with her love of Angela. I asked to follow her commentaries on St Angela’s Writings given to the Tertians. Her enthusiasm struck me. Then I was requested to do some simultaneous translations during Sr Luciana’s talks. While translating, I had in front of me the original texts, together with the French and English versions. What was my surprise to see how these translations modified the original documents! I spoke about this to Mother Judith Mietzelfeld, then Prioress General; she finally decided that we would do some research to clarify Angela’s real personality and mission, and that of the first Ursulines. This led us to the Vatican’s Library and Archives, to the Archives in Brescia, Desenzano, Salò, Milan and Venice.

Since 1981, we were trying to focus on the original documents on Saint Angela. “We”, because I alone could never have been able to undertake this enormous work. Thanks to Sr Luciana Mariani, OSU, archivist in our Generalate, who devoted herself relentlessly to searching, gathering together and translating documents; thanks to Elisa Tarolli, a member of the Secular Institute of Saint Angela living in Brescia, thanks to two experts we consulted in Brescia, Doctor Presa, a scholar specialized in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian language and culture, and Doctor Mazzoldi, state archivist who studied specifically the manuscripts of the first half of the 16th century pertaining to the *Luoghi Pii* in Brescia – thanks to all these friends who collaborated with us, our work finally took a definite shape.

Our scope was mainly to search for the real Angela, according to those who were direct witnesses of her life, that is, Angela without the pious and edifying theories and interpretations added in later centuries. There are several of these direct witnesses:

- Antonio Romano, in whose house she dwelt during 14 years;
- Agostino Gallo, who brought her with him to Cremona and later welcomed her within his house during two years;
- Giacomo Chizzola, a well-known diplomat, named by Angela “protector” of the Company;
- Bertolino Boscoli, a neighboring carpenter;
- Giacomo Tribesco, a Canon of Saint Augustin at Saint Afra’s;
- Gabriele Cozzano, her faithful secretary.

Next, there are indirect witnesses, more or less contemporary to Saint Angela, who knew her through those who had lived close to her:

- Pandolfo Nassino, the Brescian chronicler, who wrote up a short notice after her death, but who seems to have known her indirectly;
- Francesco Landini, confessor of the first members of the Company, informed by them about Angela;
- Mattéo Bellintani, a Capuchin from Salò, who knew Angela’s family and friends and relied on their information.

There are also some later authors, who consulted the Company’s official documents:

- Ottavio Gondi, SJ, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the first to have published a life of Angela;
- Bernardino Faino and Carlo Doneda who both consulted the first documents belonging to the Company of Saint Ursula; these disappeared unfortunately during Italy’s invasion by Napoleon’s troops in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

We therefore can count on thirteen direct or indirect witnesses who relate what they know about Angela.

It is striking to notice that they all agree on the way they perceived Angela. They describe her as a mortified woman of prayer, whose words were extraordinarily deep and efficacious, and who, at the end of her life, founded the Company of Saint Ursula. They also describe the way of life and the apostolate undertaken by the first Ursulines. Did they ever work in Brescia’s hospitals? Did Angela do so? The documents we consulted give an answer to these questions.

### **Angela’s life style**

According to the witnesses, Angela’s personal holiness radiated around her. People esteemed her, not because of something she would have done, or some miracles, but because of the person she was, because of her holy life. If we put the statements of the witnesses in

chronological order, we see that the esteem surrounding her developed as the years went by, so that a growing number of people came to see her.

Angela's holiness was first perceived through her life of deep prayer. We are informed about her long hours of personal prayer, her love of the holy Mass, of the Eucharist - an important aspect contrasting with the pervading Lutheran attitudes in Brescia. According to Bellintani, one of the reasons which led her to remain in Brescia, after her year with Caterina Pentagola was the greater facility she found there for her spiritual life: attending Mass, receiving the Sacraments, listening to homilies. Her choice of the house at Saint Afra's was guided by the fact that it was next to the church, and that she could pray there as much as she wanted.

Angela's austere life also impressed her contemporaries. If she lived poorly, it was through free choice: an unpublished manuscript of Guzzago, found in the Queriniana Library in Brescia, reveals that in the town records of Desenzano, Angela's name is found several times, together with that of different members of her family. The amount she paid for taxes on the land she owned reveals that she possessed some property. And still, we know how poorly she lived: no bed, no table, no heating, very frugal meals, for she usually ate fruit, vegetables, and little bread. Some also mention very severe fasting, but no one ever says she lived practically on the Holy Eucharist. How are we to understand them? Personally, and you may agree or not, I think that "eating" may be the opposite of "not eating", but also that "eating " can be opposed to "fasting". This could be the key to a proper understanding of some rather drastic statements: When Tribesco says that Angela would eat only on Thursdays and Sundays, I presume it means that she would fast on the other days. When Romano mentions that during the novena preceding the feast of Pentecost, Angela would take only one meal, it would imply that she was fasting the other days.

As for the other virtues, Cozzano, her secretary, reveals her docility to the Holy Spirit, her devotion to the Church's teachings, her humility, her love of sinners, and her spirit of faith.

### **Angela's apostolate of the word**

What was Angela's specific apostolate? All the witnesses agree in saying that her personal apostolate was that of the word, that her love of others was revealed through the way she listened, encouraged, pacified, enlightened others, leading them to a conversion of heart; all agree on the strength of her words, based on a profound knowledge of Scripture and the Fathers of the Church; these had already been published in several successive editions since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Angela received from God the gift of understanding Scripture, a gift received in prayer; she also had an extraordinary intuition for finding the words capable of touching the hearts of others, of converting them, of stimulating and encouraging them to a greater love of God. This grace made her very popular: rich and poor alike thronged to meet her. Chizzola relates how she sometimes would speak spontaneously during a whole hour on spiritual matters. God certainly had given her a gift of communication. Her efficacious words gave her the grace of converting many people to real Christian living.

Angela's simplicity also encouraged people to drop in and talk over their personal difficulties. Her gift as a peacemaker encouraged them. Furthermore, we know through the witnesses of her life that they often asked for the help of her prayers. During her free time, that is, during afternoons - for she spent the morning in prayer - whenever there were no visitors come to see her, she used to pray or read many books on spiritual matters, as Agostino Gallo said. Professor Presa told us that among the many needs of her times Angela felt called to respond to the most important of all, a need for God. Her real personal charism was that of making God's love known, and making Him loved, through her apostolate of the word.

### **Was Angela involves in hospital work ?**

After Vatican II, several authors wrote about Angela's involvement among the sick in Brescia's hospitals or *Luoghi Pii*. Do the witnesses of her life say anything on the subject? Are there any documents informing us on this type of apostolate?

We began our research by going to the Vatican Library. There, we found a book published in 1916 by Bonelli, listing all the proper names found in the archives of Brescia's hospitals... several hundreds of them. Angela's name is never mentioned, nor that of any member of the Company of Saint Ursula. The "Annals" of the other *Luoghi Pii* in Brescia, the "Carità" and the "Pietà" never mention her either. Angela being so popular among her contemporaries, the governors of these works of mercy would certainly have been delighted to mention her name, had she been active among them.

As for the Hospital for Incurables in Brescia, it had not yet been built at the time when Angela would supposedly have been requested to stay in Venice "for the benefit of the *Luoghi Pii*" because of her experience in the Brescian hospital. The documents we found proved that some 20<sup>th</sup> century authors had mistakenly taken the date of the legal act donating the land for this purpose, as that of the opening date of the hospital.

The name of Angela's friends, known through the "Processo Nazari" are rarely mentioned in the "Libro Primo dei Consigli Generali" of the Hospital for Incurables, and only as councilors. Girolamo Patengola was elected as the 122<sup>nd</sup> among the 125 councilors, and was a member of the restricted council during only six months. Giacomo Chizzola and Agostino Gallo are mentioned in 1535, at a time when Angela was devoting herself exclusively to the foundation of the Company and could not at the same time have been active with them in hospital work.

If we consider what the word "hospital" really meant during the sixteenth century in Brescia, it involves what the Latin root suggests: a mission of "welcoming". Those "welcomed" were, among others, the elderly, the crippled, freed prisoners, orphans, illegitimate children, pilgrims on their way to a sanctuary AND the sick. The latter, because of the fear of plagues and infectious diseases were enclosed in special quarters, and those caring for the sick were not

allowed to leave the hospital freely. This would exclude any activity on the part of Angela among the sick.

Could we suppose that because of the status of women in Angela's times, their names would not be mentioned in official documents? Certainly not, for the following women, among others, are stated as active in the *Luoghi Pii*: Maria Lorenza in Naples, Maria de Zobenigo, Marina Grimani and Elisabetta da Fermo in Venice. In Brescia, there are records on Laura Gambarà, foundress of the "Pio Luogo della Carità" for past prostitutes. It is true that the name of Elisabetta Prato, one of the Lady Governors of the Company, is also mentioned, as collaborating with Laura. However, the document revealing this was written after 1741, two centuries after Angela's death. And in Faino's manuscript of "Brescia Beata", Elisabetta is also mentioned in the biography of Laura Gambarà, but the handwriting adding this information is not that of Faino's, but of a later author who also added corrections to many of Faino's expressions, according to a later style of language.

What about Angela's being asked to stay in Venice, for the management of the *Luoghi Pii*? When we went to Venice and consulted the head archivist of the city, Doctor Tiepolo, a member of the aristocratic Venetian family already well-known in Angela's time, we asked her if there were any records about Angela's being requested to stay there to govern the *Luoghi Pii*. Her eyes glazed as she answered: "Never! This responsibility was only given to elected, aristocratic, lay Venetians. Angela was neither aristocratic, nor elected, nor considered as a lay woman, but as a religious one!"

In fact the first witnesses never mentioned anything about Angela's "governing" the *Luoghi Pii*, but merely as being asked to stay "for the good" of these institutions. According to Doctor Presa, this meant "comforting, consoling edifying those who lived there. Taking about governing them would be altering the sense of the original document".

We had to search for a long period of time to find the source of this error. We finally found it, not in Italy, but in France: An Oratorian, Jean-Hughes Quarré published in 1648 a biography of Angela, stating that he was giving a French version of Ottavio Gondi's book published in Italian. After having consulted the different subsequent editions of Gondi's biography, with no mention whatsoever of Angela's being asked to "govern" the *Luoghi Pii*, we tried to find the first edition, to see whether it contained any mention of this. Finally one of our sisters in Paris came across the first edition found in the Mazarine Library, under the heading of "Italian documents", probably brought there in Napoleon's times. When we finally received a microfilm copy of this book, we found out that it, too, bore no mention of Angela's "governing" the *Luoghi Pii*.

In his preface, Quarré mentions that Gondi is much too precise, and that he tried to "enlighten" hidden facts, and to express openly what was merely understood. Unfortunately, he transformed Gondi's 60 pages or so into more than 700, thus revealing many instances of personal interpretations. This "light" printed by Quarré survived for a long period of time. When the "Chronicles of the Order of Saint Ursula" were printed in Paris, they included a short

biography of Saint Angela summarizing Quarré's book. When these Chronicles were in turn translated into Italian, they included Quarré's "lights". Consequently, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian biographies of Angela, we still find her being asked to "govern the *Luoghi Pii*". And this phrase is repeated even in some parts of the process of beatification and canonization, not because she would have been involved in taking care of the sick, but as a sign of her humility, for Angela refused the job! In Brescia, Faino does mention Angela's going from time to time to the *Luoghi Pii*, but he adds, "in order to exhort everyone to the practice of good".

### **Foundation of the company of Saint Ursula**

Angela's great contribution to the Church was not only her life of prayer and penance, nor her capacity of spreading God's word with efficaciousness; it included the foundation of the Company. Where did its first members come from? The first documents reveal that Angela encouraged women to practice virginity, prayer, fasting, love of the Eucharist...all ways conducive to nurturing vocations. The women she led to conversion of heart, she guided and accompanied them to further and deepen a way of life according to the Gospel. Angela "slowly attracted them to lead a spiritual life", "for love of their Creator". Bellintani adds: "Because of her, many persons gradually left a worldly way of life for a spiritual one. These were women, widows and young girls who finally entered this congregation". As the mission God revealed to her became more precise, Angela tried to find a place where she could gather these fervent women. We know that Elisabetta Prato gave her a large room in the center of the town, and that Angela used it as an Oratory and had it adorned with paintings on the life of Christ and Our Lady, and of different saints. There, she taught and formed her first daughters. According to Doneda, "These meetings prepared the new Institute. While Angela was giving spiritual exercises for a sort of novitiate, Angela set the foundation stones of her Institute".

Cozzano tells us that Christ had to insist several times in order to persuade Angela to begin this foundation: "Although it had been inspired to her since she was young, she never wanted to begin, until Jesus-Christ ordered, and cried out in her heart and impelled her to begin". This sentence, written confidentially by Angela's secretary, encourages us too. It shows that Angela needed time, as we all do, to finally say a complete and definite "yes" to the Lord. He had to "cry out" before.

We know that Angela had finished writing her Rule in 1535. Sr Cecilia Lubienska OSU rediscovered around 1932 the Torlino Edition printed in 1569. There was a previous one, referred to in the Process of canonization, but it seemed to have been lost. One day, Sr Luciana Mariani received a phone call from a secular Ursuline in Milan, saying there was an unknown edition of Saint Charles' Rule in the Trivulzian Library of the city. This information did not particularly interest Sr Luciana, but one day, when she had the opportunity of going to Milan, she decided to have a look at this unknown Rule. What was her surprise – and joy – to find that it had nothing to do with Saint Charles and that it was the authentic Rule of Saint Angela, in beautiful handwriting, probably prepared for a printing that never occurred. A Preface, in the style of Cozzano, praises the benefits of this Rule not only for the Company of Saint Ursula, but also for any laymen and women who would want to live according to the Gospel, in the spirit of

Saint Angela. It was easy to date it, for the manuscript mentioned the black leather belt, officially imposed by Lucrezia Lodrone on December 11 1545 and added that the Company awaited confirmation from the Holy See, which had not yet arrived, that is, before April 29, 1546. We therefore were thrilled to come across a copy of the Rule dated five or six years after Saint Angela's death. We found that, in many instances, it was simpler, more correct in its theological terms, and at the same time substantially the same as the Torlino one.

What was the aim of the Company? Angela specifies it herself in her Rule: "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... having been chosen to be the true and virginal spouses of the Son of God" (Rule Prol. 4, 6). Therefore, according to Angela, the aim is to live in virginity, united in the service of God. She did not give her daughters any particular apostolate. Francesco Landini later specified that hers was a consecrated way of life for those who did not feel the call nor had the means of entering a monastery, but who wanted to give their life to Christ. Bellitani speaks about "a new way of being spouses of Christ". Angela's Company was a sort of religious life lived in the world, with several spiritual characteristics of religious life, a certain withdrawal from the life of the world and a form of togetherness. We therefore are aware that Angela did not aim at the guiding principle of secular institutes as they are defined today – that of being present within the world so as to sanctify temporal values from within. Exteriously, the characteristics are the same: life within the world, but the scope and spirit are different.

### **The first generation of Ursulines**

Gabriele Cozzano gives us precious information on the way the first members of the Company lived, on their fidelity to the true Faith, their poverty and dependence, their spirit of prayer, their uniting contemplative and active life. Tribesco exhorts them to practice charity towards others, and gives them as a fundamental rule, that of "praying the Lord for others". The forms of charity he suggests are the following: catechesis, listening and encouraging women, visiting the sick members of one's own family, encouraging them to receive the Sacraments, and visiting the sisters in the monasteries. A little detail which is not unimportant: the members of the Company also dressed in a distinctive way: dark colors and a kerchief, according to Angela's Rule (3:2-3), the latter being usually white, and black leather cincture from 1546 on. Angela also specified that they were to avoid fashions and using different ornaments (Rule 3: 4, 8) thus making the members of the Company recognizable to others. All of this contrasts with women's clothing, as seen in Brescia's 16<sup>th</sup> century paintings.

### **Their apostolate**

In his letter dated 1566, Francesco Landini writes about the Ursulines serving in the hospitals of Brescia and in the schools of Christian doctrine. At that time, there were two hospitals in Brescia, the Hospital for Incurables, later called Hospital for Women or Hospital of the Pietà, and the Major or Grand Hospital. Landini has just arrived in Brescia and he noticed the presence of the Ursulines in the two hospitals. What was their mission there? A statement from

Doneda, relying on the Company's documents, reveals that "Since the beginning, the Ursulines have been teaching Christian doctrine to little girls and educating the poor orphans in the *Pio Luogo della Pietà* (the former Hospital for Incurables), and teaching the illegitimate girls at the Grand Hospital". This statement specifies clearly the type of apostolate the Ursulines undertook in the hospitals of Brescia.

It is interesting to know that a year later, in 1567, the Jesuits opened their first secondary school and boarding school on the premises of the Grand Hospital in Brescia, thus confirming the hospitals' use also for educational purposes.

Did the first Ursulines ever go to the hospitals for taking care of the sick? We only found two cases in the archives: According to minutes of the Company's General Council, on October 28, 1572, it was decided that if a member of the Company was sent or asked to be sent to work in the hospitals, she could do so, for temporary service only, and with the permission of her spiritual Father. However, the minutes do not specify if this work would be accomplished among the sick or in educating the orphans and other girls brought up in the hospital. Serving within the hospitals would mean, according to regulations, living inside without the necessary freedom of going out, and therefore the possibility of attending the frequent meetings of the Company. This activity, which would prevent the Ursulines from participating in their meetings, could only be temporary. There is also a single case, that of Antonia Asti, appointed governess of the orphans at the "Pietà" and the Hospital for Women, at the end of the sixteenth century. She assumed this charge not as a member of the Company, but as a matron belonging to one of the great aristocratic families in Brescia. As such, she was expected to help the hospital financially and to provide for it with her well-known gift of organization.

The first generations of Ursulines rapidly devoted themselves to the teaching of Christian Doctrine. Brescia was among the first cities, after Milan, to organize these "Sunday schools" after Mass. Officially from 1554 on, but practically since 1551, Francesco Alfieno, appointed by the Bishop to organize the catechetical centers in Brescia, entrusted these schools to the Ursulines. Different catechisms were published in Brescia at the same time. There are also records of hymn books having been printed, for singing was a popular "audio" method of the times, but as yet, we have not found any copy of them.

The 1572 Regulations by Elisabetta Prato, then General of the Company, and the 1587 Ursuline Rule of Ferrara give precise rules for these schools. Each sister has her specific task: the Superior, her Assistant, the teacher, and the one who is responsible for good discipline. The educational concern of these Ursulines is also expressed: "They have to accomplish this mission so as to teach not only Christian doctrine, but also good moral principles".

I could end here, with the picture of these first Ursulines, following Angela in her life of prayer and self-denial and imitating her charism of spreading the word. However, still more needs to be added. In referring to them, Jean Hughes Quarré, whom we mentioned above, also wanted to "put to light" other unseen biographical elements. The aim of the Company, he says, is "charity towards others", "a profession of doing good to every one" – which is not exactly

what Angela said. He thus imagined his own portrait of these first Ursulines, saying: “Angela ordered them to seek for the afflicted, so as to console them et to instruct them, [*so far, so good*] to relieve the poor, to run to the hospitals, to serve the sick and offer humbly their help for all kinds of service to which charity would call them”. This is a perfect description of Quarré’s contemporary apostle, St Vincent de Paul, and the mission he gave to his Sisters of Charity. Quarré’s paragraph, which is not based on any historical document, but on his own “lights”, was taken up in several 18<sup>th</sup> century biographies, and continues even up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Bertolotti, Guerrini, Cistellini, and, to some extent, Sr Teresa Ledóchowska. However, they all omit any document to prove this.

Finally, our whole research led us to a more precise and true knowledge of Saint Angela, of her personal apostolate, of that of the first Ursulines. It confirmed Angela’s intuition: through the power of the Holy Spirit, she felt the greatest needs of her times, needs so close to those of today, leading her contemporaries to a better knowledge and love of God; and her daughters to full human and spiritual development by consecrating themselves to Christ, for love of Him.

After the “Contribution to a Biography” was published, I was asked to study mainly the spiritual aspects of Angela’s life and writings. These have led me to deepen out my knowledge and love of Angela. I saw her becoming real, like the outlines you sometimes see in comic strips, which are gradually filled out to represent real persons. Yes, she really answered my prayer, like the real “friend” she is and called herself.

Marie Seynaeve, osu