

ANGELA'S WAY TO HOLINESS



When Angela founded the Company of Saint Ursula, she had only one goal in mind, that of guiding her daughters on their way to holiness. In each of her Writings, this call is a primary one: *place all wealth, and love, and delight in God alone and in his gentle and ineffable Providence* (R 10:9,12), *in God alone and not in any living person* (Couns, 5:22). And to the Superiors she points out: *Strive, with the help of God, to grasp and keep in yourselves such conviction and good sentiment that you are moved in this care and government by the sole love of God and by the sole zeal for the salvation of souls* (T 1; 2-3).

Her counsels meet those given by Pope Francis, especially in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate: We must first belong to God, offering ourselves to him who was there first, and entrusting to him our abilities, our efforts, our struggle against evil and our creativity, so that his free gift may grow and develop within us: "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God"* (Rom 12:1) (G.E. 56).

Three keys are found in Angela's writings for advancing towards true holiness: an unwavering attachment to Jesus Christ, a deep life of prayer, and charity lived in union and communion.

I. AN UNWAVERING ATTACHMENT TO JESUS CHRIST

In the chapter on poverty in her Rule, Angela mentions the renunciations to all self-seeking we need to avoid in order to direct our lives to *God alone: We exhort each one to embrace... the true spirit of poverty of spirit by which one strips hrt heart of all affection and longing for created things, and of her very self, and in God have all hrt wealth* (R 10:1-6).

She adds details on the different ways of living this renunciation: *...place all one's love and delight, not in goods, not in food and gluttony, not in relatives and friends, not in herself and in her own resources and knowledge, but in God alone and in his gentle and ineffable Providence alone... because God wants nothing for you; but only your good and your joy* (R 10:8-13,18).

: *Let them eat and drink, not for pleasure and to satisfy their appetite, but only out of the need to sustain nature in order to serve God better. Let them be moderate also in sleep, sleeping only as much as necessity requires. Similarly in laughing, let them be reserved and moderate. In listening not taking pleasure except in hearing modest and licit, and necessary things. In speaking, let their words be wise and reserved, not harsh, not rude, but compassionate and leading to concord and charity* (Couns 5:8-12). *Let all our words, actions and behavior always be for the instruction and edification of those who have dealings with us, always having charity burning in our hearts* (R 9:21-22).

These demanding requirements give an answer to God's choice of the Virgins ...*having thus been chosen to be the true and virginal spouses of the Son of God (R Prol:7), called to so glorious a life as to be Spouses of the Son of God and to become queens in heaven (R Prol:17).*

This choice, on the part of God, requires a joyful and thankful answer: *You have to thank Him infinitely that, to you especially, He has granted such an exceptional gift (R Prol:5). How much they have to exult and rejoice, for in heaven a new crown of glory is prepared for all of them, one by one (Couns 5:25).*

Angela does not hide the necessary efforts for being faithful to God who has chosen the Virgins of the Company as Spouses of Jesus Christ! *Strive with all your might to remain as you are called by God, and to seek and desire all the means necessary to persevere and make progress to the very end. For it is not enough to begin, if one does not also persevere. That is why Truth says, "The one who has persevered to the end, that one will be saved (R Prol:9-11). 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 (T Prol:22-24).*

She asks that *more and more they may please Jesus Christ, their Spouse (T 4:3), and adds the obstacles and challenges the Virgins may have to meet: Here 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 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 (as St. Peter says) like a roaring lion, is always watching and seeking which approach he could use to devour any of us, and with his so many devious ways and viles, that no one could count them (R Prol;19-21).*

Thus, as Pope Francis explains: *We are not dealing merely with a battle against the world and a worldly mentality that would deceive us and leave us dull and mediocre, lacking in enthusiasm and joy. Nor can this battle be reduced to the struggle against our human weaknesses and proclivities (be they laziness, lust, envy, jealousy or any others). It is also a constant struggle against the devil, the prince of evil. Jesus himself celebrates our victories. He rejoiced when his disciples made progress in preaching the Gospel and overcoming the opposition of the evil one: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Lk 10:18) (G.E.159).*

Sometimes, their own relatives present obstacles to the Virgins' way of life : *If their mothers or other secular superiors should want to lead them into theses or similar dangers or want to prevent them from fasting, or prayer, or confession, or any other kind of good, they should immediately refute the matter to the lady-governors of the Company so that they may see to it (R 3,7-10)*

After pointing out the dangers and obstacles, Angela reassures et invites all to be confident : *Act, move, believe, strive, hope, cry out to him with all your heart, and without doubt you will see marvelous things, if you direct everything to the praise and glory of his Majesty and the good of souls (Couns Prol;17-18). If you strive in the future with all your might to live as is required of the spouses of the most High and to keep this Rule as the way along which you have to walk, and as that which has been drawn up for your benefit, 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 greater 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, and we shall find the thorny and stony paths blossoming for us, and covered with paving of finest gold (R Prol:22-28).

Most of all, Angela invites her daughters to be full of joy: *Invite them to desire the celestial joys and treasures, to long for those joyful and new feasts of heaven, those blessed and everlasting triumphs, and henceforward to abandon totally all love for this miserable and treacherous world, where there is never either rest or any true contentment* (Couns 5:3-4).

Pope Francis also invites all the faithful to live joyfully because they have been called by the Lord: *The Christian life is “joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17), for “the necessary result of the love of charity is joy; since every lover rejoices at being united to the beloved... the effect of charity is joy”. Having received the beautiful gift of God’s word, we embrace it “in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess 1:6). If we allow the Lord to draw us out of our shell and change our lives, then we can do as Saint Paul tells us: “Rejoice in the Lord always; I say it again, rejoice!” (Phil 4:4) (G.E. 122).*

God’s choice allows us to be constantly related to Jesus Christ: *Let them have Jesus Christ for their only treasure, there also will be love, which is to be sought not here in this world, but above in the high heaven, at the right hand of the Father, as the Apostle says: If you are risen with Christ, seek for the things on high, and not for those that are on earth* (Couns 5; 43-44). *In these perilous and pestinential times, you will find no other recourse than to take refuge at the feet of Jesus Christ. Because if he directs and teaches you, you will be well taught... Therefore, humble yourselves under his powerful hand, and you will be enlightened* (Couns 7;27-28). And she invites all to entrust themselves to the Lord: *Leave it to God; he will do marvelous things in his own time, and when it pleases him* (Couns 8:9).

Angela then shows the necessity of prayer, in order to live available to God who loves us and wants our good.

II. A LIFE OF DEEP PRAYER

In her Writings, Angela points out different means allowing us to live for *God alone* ; above all, she mentions prayer, *given the continuous need one has of God’s help, which is why Truth says: One must always pray”* (R 5:5). *How much must you pray God to enlighten you and direct you, and teach you what you have to do for love of Him* (Couns Prol;7).

As Pope Francis wrote: *The Lord speaks to us in a variety of ways, at work, through others and at every moment. Yet we simply cannot do without the silence of prolonged prayer, which enables us better to perceive God’s language, to interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received, to calm our anxieties and to see the whole of our existence afresh in his own light. In this way, we allow the birth of a new synthesis that springs from a life inspired by the Spirit* (G.E. 171).

Angela requires the practice of mental and vocal prayer, especially the Little Office of the Virgin Mary, and she details for those who do not know how to read the number of *Our Father’s* and *Hail Mary’s* to pray for each hour of the Office, *because, saying the Office, one speaks with God* (R 5;10).

She mentions different interior attitudes that can inspire our prayer (R 5:15) :

- Ask the Lord for His grace:
Give me the grace to die rather than today offend your divine Majesty (R 5:17). Strengthen my affections and senses so that they do not stray and turn me away from that dazzling face of yours which contents every afflicted heart (R 5:18-19).
- Ask forgiveness for self and for others:
Deign, O most loving Lord, to forgive me so many offenses and every fault that I have ever committed from the day of my holy baptism to this hour. Deign also to forgive the sins of my father and mother, and of y relatives and friends, and of the whole world (R 5: 21-24). Lord, in place of those poor creatures who do not know you, and who do not care to be partakers in your most sacred Passion, my heart breaks, and willingly (if I could) I would shed my own blood to open the blind eyes of their minds (R 5:31-34).
- Be sorry for our lack of faithfulness :
I deeply regret that I have been so slow to begin to serve your divine Majesty. I have never been obedient to your divine precepts. Every adversity has been hard for me, because of the littleness of my love for you (R 5:27-30).
- Ask for light, personally and together:
Lord, light up the darkness of my heart (R 5:16). Always let your principal recourse be to gather at the feet of Jesus Christ, and there, all of you, and all your daughters, to offer most fervent prayers, for in this way, without doubt, Jesus Christ will be in your midst, and as a true and good master, he will enlighten and teach you what you have to do (T 11;3-5).
- Ask for the grace of being strong and persevering in daily life:
How much you have to pray to him, so he would deign to give you such knowledge and capacity that you may be able to do work worthy of praise in his sight, and to put all your zeal and strength into carrying out your duty (T Prol:17-21).

On his side, Pope Francis pointed out:

The first of these great signs is solid grounding on the God who loves and sustains us. This source of inner strength enables us to persevere amid life's ups and downs, but also to endure hostility, betrayal and failings on the part of others. "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Rom 8:31): this is the source of the peace found in the saints. Such inner strength makes it possible for us, in our fast-paced, noisy and aggressive world, to give a witness of holiness through patience and constancy in doing good. It is a sign of the fidelity born of love, for those who put their faith in God. (G.E. 112).

_- Finally, a total offering of self to the Lord:

O my Lord, my only life and hope, I pray that you receive this most vile and impure heart of mine, and to burn away its very affection and passion in the fiery furnace of your divine love. I pray that you receive my free will, every act of my own will, which by itself, because it is affected by sin, does not know how to discern good from evil. 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;34-44).

And Pope Francis points out: *When, in God's presence, we examine our life's journey, no areas can be off limits. In all aspects of life we can continue to grow and offer*

something greater to God, even in those areas we find most difficult. We need, though, to ask the Holy Spirit to liberate us and to expel the fear that makes us ban him from certain parts of our lives. God asks everything of us, yet he also gives everything to us. He does not want to enter our lives to cripple or diminish them, but to bring them to fulfilment (G.E. 175).

Angela reminds the Virgins that prayer is based on the Word of God, which needs to be kept and developed like a precious treasure: *Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it; that is, blessed are those into whose hearts God has breathed the light of truth, and to whom he has given the will to yearn ardently for their heavenly home, and who then seek to preserve within themselves this voice of truth and this holy desire (R Prol:12).*

She also reminds them that they need to pray through the liturgy experienced in the heart of the Church: *Each one should go to Mass every day, and hear at least one entirely... for in the holy Mass re to be found afresh all the merits of the Passion of our Lord. 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 6:13-4).*

Confession is the *necessary medicine for the wounds of our souls (R7:1). Let each one, then, willingly present herself before the priest as if before God, eternal Judge, and there, full of sorrow, with honesty and in truth of conscience, confess her sin, and ask forgiveness for it. (R 7, 7-10) A place or a particular church has to be designated, where a common spiritual father, prudent and of mature age, will be elected to whom each one will, at least once a month, confess herself. And then, every first Friday of the month, they will gather in this church, and there, all together, receive communion from this same father (R 7:12-13).*

Angela also stresses the public witness her daughters need to give, at an epoch in which Lutheranism prevented Christians from receiving the Sacraments: *We exhort each one to go to confession and communion in her on parish on solemn feasts (R 7;14).*

Angela clearly asks to pray for the Church: *Pray, and get others to pray that God not abandon his Church, but reforms it as he pleases and as he sees best for us, and more to his honor and glory (Couns 7:4-6).* And she prudently gives the following counsel: *Keep to the ancient way and custom of the Church, established and confirmed by so many Saints under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And lead a new life (Couns 7;22).*

In the same trend of thoughts, Angela proposes to join obedience to our life of prayer, a practical obedience lived in the circumstances of ordinary life, but with our eyes on the Lord: *We also exhort each one to keep holy obedience, the only rue abnegation of self-will, which is in us like a dark hell. That is why Jesus Christ says: I have not come to do my will, but that of the Father who sent me (R 8:3). Obedience is in man like a great light which makes his every action good and acceptable. (R 8:4).* And she shows the persons that should be obeyed, including the Superiors of the Company: *Remain obedient to the principal mothers whom I leave in my place... and what you do, do it as obeying them, and not as following your own judgment, for obeying them, you will be obeying Jesus Christ (Couns 3:1-3).*

However, in order to make progress on the way to God, Angela insists above all on submissiveness to the Holy Spirit: *Above all, obey the counsels and inspirations which the Holy Spirit unceasingly sends into our hearts, He whose voice we shall hear all the more clearly*

as we have our conscience more purified and clean. For the Holy Spirit, as Jesus Christ says, teaches us all truth. (R 8, 14-15). Provide for everything, as the Holy Spirit inspires you

(T 7;7), May the strength and true consolation of the Holy Spirit be in you all, so that you can sustain and carry out vigorously and faithfully the charge laid upon you (Couns Prol;3-4).

Pope Francis also insists on invoking the Holy Spirit: *Let us ask the Lord for the grace not to hesitate when the Spirit calls us to take a step forward (G.E.139) Let us ask the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us a fervent longing to be saints for God's greater glory, and let us encourage one another in this effort (G.E. 177). We need to ask the Holy Spirit to liberate us and to expel the fear that makes us ban him from certain parts of our lives. God asks everything of us, yet he also gives everything to us. He does not want to enter our lives to cripple or diminish them, but to bring them to fulfilment (G.E. 175).*

Finally, Angela shows that prayer needs to be accompanied by self-renunciation, and especially by fasting, *something necessary, and the means and way to true spiritual fasting through which all the vices and errors are cut away from the mind. And to this, the example of all the holy persons very clearly invites us, and above all, the life of Jesus Christ, the only way to heaven. That is why the holy mother Church proclaims all this explicitly in the ears of all the faithful (R 4;1-5).* In Angela's time, fasting was strongly recommended by the Church. Pope Clement VII himself did not celebrate Mass every day, but he practiced fasting daily.

Angela's detailed prescriptions on fasting are enlightened by the spiritual motives she suggests: *implore mercy before the throne of the Most High, for the many dissolute actions committed by Christians... implore divine help for the Christian people... asking for that great promise (the coming of the Holy Spirit) made by Jesus Christ to his chosen ones who re well disposed (R 4:11,13,16).*

Prayer also needs to be based on humility: *God himself will exalt you as much as you have humbled yourselves... A true and prudent servant of God humbles himself in his heart, and annihilates in himself his own feelings, and delight in his own reputation, because he hopes and expects from God another delight and truer glory and honor, for he firmly believes what the Gospel says: he who humbles himself shall be exalted (Couns 1;11-14).*

She proposes servit, as a special form of humility : *Learn from Our Lord who, while he was in this world, was as a servant obeying the Eternal Father even unto death. That is why he says: I have been among you, not as one who is served, but as the one who serves (Couns 1; 6-7).* And she gives the following counsel to Superiors: *Regard yourselves as ministers and servants, reflecting that you have more need to serve them, than they have to be served by you and governed, and that God could very well provide for them by other means even better than you (Couns 1;3-4).*

All these counsels lead us to love God with our whole heart, and our neighbor as we love ourselves. That is why Angela insists so strongly on real charity, favoring union and communion between her daughters.

III. CHARITY LIVED IN UNION AND COMMUNION

Following the instructions of Jesus, the Lord, on loving God above all, and our neighbor as ourselves, Angela refers several times to love for all the Sisters, and repeats several times

how to live this love. She makes strong requests for union among all: *There will be no other sign that you are in the grace of the Lord, than that you love one another and are united together (T 10:10). Take care especially that they are united and one in will... the more you are united, the more Jesus Christ will be in your midst (T10:7,9).* And she continues, more and more convincing : *My last word to you... is that you live in harmony, united together, all of one heart and one will. Be bound to one another by the bond of charity, esteeming each other, helping each other, bearing with each other in Jesus Christ (Couns 9;1-2). See then how important is this union and concord. So, long for it, pursue it, embrace it, hold onto it with all your strength; for I tell you, living all together thus united in heart, you will be like a mighty fortress, or tower impregnable against all adversities, and persecutions, and deceits of the devil. And moreover I assure you that every grace you ask from God will be infallibly granted to you (Couns 8:10-19). The more you are united, the more Jesus Christ will be in your midst, and there will be no other sign that you are in the grace of the Lord than that you love one another and are united together (T 10;9-10).*

Pope Francis echoes the same thoughts: *At the centre is charity. Saint Paul says that what truly counts is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). We are called to make every effort to preserve charity: "The one who loves another has fulfilled the law... for love is the fulfilment of the law" (Rom 13:8.10). "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14) G.E. 60).*

Angela continues in the same trend of thoughts: *Let all their behavior, their actions and their words be with charity and let them bear everything with patience, for with these two virtues especially, one crushes the head of the devil (Couns 5;18). Pay attention to Jesus Christ who says: I am gentle and meek of heart... And again Jesus Christ says, My yoke and service is light and sweet, so you also must strive to do and use all possible gentleness (T 3;4,6).*

Kindness and gentleness, following the examples given by Jesus Christ, are also recommended by Pope Francis: *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" . These are strong words in a world that from the beginning has been a place of conflict, disputes and enmity on all sides, where we constantly pigeonhole others on the basis of their ideas, their customs and even their way of speaking or dressing. Ultimately, it is the reign of pride and vanity, where each person thinks he or she has the right to dominate others. Nonetheless, impossible as it may seem, Jesus proposes a different way of doing things: the way of meekness. This is what we see him doing with his disciples. It is what we contemplate on his entrance to Jerusalem: "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey" (Mt 21:5; Zech 9:9) (G.E. 71).*

In her counsels for going forward on the way to holiness, Angela also insists on discernment and its basis, which is charity: *Charity, which directs everything to the honor of God and the good of souls, charity indeed teaches such discretion and moves the heart to be, according to place and time, now gentle and now severe, and little or much as there is need (Couns 2, 6-7). Concerning decisions in view of the future, she points out how to proceed with the right discernment: If, according to times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, do it prudently and with good advice. And always let your principal recourse be to gather at the feet of Jesus Christ, and there, all of you, with all your daughters, to offer most fervent prayers (T 11:2-3).*

Angela encourages the sisters to meet together, in order to maintain their unity : *so that, together, they might also meet each other as loving sisters, and thus, talking over spiritual*

matters, rejoice together, and together encourage one another, which will be no small help to them (T 8;3-6).

She also shows special love for those who are in need, within their families, or in the places where they work: *Comfort them and help them, if they should happen to be in some situation of disagreement or other trouble of body, as much as of mind, or if their superiors at home did them any wrong, or wanted to prevent them from doing something good, or lead them into the danger of doing something wrong (R 11;8-12). If it should happen that one of the sisters, being an orphan, could not get what is hers, or if, being a servant or a maid, or the like, she could not obtain her wages, or if there should arrive another such situation, to go to court and through legal proceedings, or to come to an agreement (which could be the best thing to do) then let the four men, out of charity, in the manner of fathers, take the matter in hand and assist according as there is need (R 11;15-19).*

She also considers solitude as a problem, for fraternal help is necessary in order to go forward, one step at a time, towards the Lord : *If there were at least two sisters left alone, without father or mother or other superiors, then, out of charity, a house should be rented for them (if they have none), and they should be provided for in their needs. But if there is only one, then let one of the others receive her in her house, and be given the subvention which seems suitable to those who govern (R 11:25-27).*

Angela foresees measures for those who leave their family to go out and work: *If she wanted to go to work as a servant or maid, those who govern should see to it that she be placed where she can feel at home and live honestly (R 11:28).*

Finally, she gives advice for paying particularly attention to those who are aged and ill, so that they may continue to serve Christ in their situation: *If one of the sisters is ill, it is recommended that she be visited, and assisted, and served, by day and by night, if it is necessary (R 11:29-30).*

Above all, she asks the Superiors to be vigilant so that all continue to live united: *I beg you with all my heart, be watchful and most vigilant; like so many caring shepherdesses, for this heavenly flock entrusted to your hands, that no tweeds of discord or other scandal grow up among them (T 10:1-3).*

She points out how mutual love is the virtue most afflicted by difficulties and temptations: *Be vigilant on this point, for on this point especially the devil will set snares for you under the guise of good (T 10:13).*

Pope Francis also mentions this aspect and points out the value of the Cross to overcome these difficulties: *Whatever weariness and pain we may experience in living the commandment of love and following the way of justice, the cross remains the source of our growth and sanctification. We must never forget that when the New Testament tells us that we will have to endure suffering for the Gospel's sake (G.E. 92).*

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The conclusion has been suggested by Angela herself. She is aware that God's grace alone has enabled her to give all this advice to the members of the Company of St Ursula, and lead them to the Lord:

God being pleased, in his infinite goodness,

*to use me as his instrument for this great work of his,
even though for my part,
I am a most inadequate and useless servant,
he has also, in his usual goodness,
given and granted me such grace and gift
as to be able to govern them according to his will,
and to provide for their needs and wants,
especially those concerned with directing them and sustaining them
in the life for which they have been chosen (T Prol; 6-8)*

Our hearts can raise up to the Lord much thanksgiving for the road to holiness lived by Angela and taught by her for the good of all her daughters.

Saint-Saulve, January 2019

And Angela ends up on joy and asserts: *If you strive in the future, with all your might, to live as is required of the spouses of the Most High... I have this firm and unquestioning faith and hope in 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)*

Pope Francis asserts likewise: *Ultimately, discernment leads to the wellspring of undying life: to know the Father, the only true God, and the one whom he has sent, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 17:3). It requires no special abilities, nor is it only for the more intelligent or better educated. The Father readily reveals himself to the lowly (cf. Mt 11:25) (G.E. 170).*

To know the history of the sculpture of Saint Angela at the top of this conference, see : <https://ursulines.union.romaine.catholique.fr/Apres-un-incendie>