

Saint Angela Close to Nature

Born in Desenzano, a little port village, Angela passed the greater part of her life there before going to Brescia. Having lived close to nature, it's not surprising that Angela mentions it several times in her Writings. Her allusions, similar to those of the Scriptures on which she meditated and commented, remind us that Jesus lived in full harmony with creation, as Pope Francis tells us, and others marveled at it : Who is this that even the sea and winds obey him ? [Mt 8:27] The Lord could invite others to consider the beauty which is in the world, for he himself maintained contact with nature and was attentive to it, full of affection and wonder. As he passed from place to place on earth, he paused to contemplate the beauty sown by the Father, and invited his disciples to recognize a divine message in things : Lift up your eyes and see the fields, white for the harvest. [Jn 4:35]

We recognize two important interventions by God in the life of St Angela : that which followed the death of her older sister, and that which declared her mission as foundress. It is notable that these two messages from God did not take place in a church or chapel, or a room or place of recollection, but in the open field ; thus, Angela paused to pray in her workplace. Antonio Romano, in whose home in Brescia she lodged for almost fourteen years, testified in the Nazari Process to what he had come to know, having heard it from Angela herself :

One day, finding herself in a little field on their property near Desenzano, while praying for her sister as was accustomed to doing, she saw in the sky a procession of angels, among whom was the soul of her beloved sister, joyful and triumphant. And suddenly, with all speed, the army of angels disappeared... [Nazari Process].

The place seems to have been that of "Machetto", which belonged to the Merici family and was not far from the house of LeGrezze ; an old chapel commemorating that grace still exists there today.

A letter written by Father Francesco Landini tells of a second vision in these terms : While in a field with her other companions, the harvesters having gone for their meal, she would go apart to pray, and once, while her spirit was lifted up to heaven, it seemed to her that heaven opened and a marvelous procession of angels and virgins came forth advancing two by two ; the angels played different instruments and the virgins sang. She heard the music so well that she could sing it afterwards. And as the procession advanced, there came a virgin, her sister, who had previously lived well, and who was drawing near Paradise ; as the procession stopped, her sister predicted that God willed that she should serve him by founding a Company of Virgins which would develop, and other similar things. I have heard this spoken of by a number of persons, servants of God, who almost all lived around her time ; I cannot say everything, since I do not have time now to go to Brescia to speak with the older women who were her companions.

Centered on Jesus Christ, Angela shows herself attuned, like him, to the vastness of the universe, heaven and earth : "where from all those in heaven and on earth great glory and triumph will arise for us." [Rule, Pr:31] "You will have in your favor all heaven and all the universe (tutto la machine mondiale)." [Last Counsel, 8] She points to the beauty of nature : "through your holy name—may it be blessed beyond the ocean's grains of sand, beyond the drops of the waters, beyond the multitude of stars..." [Rule 5:26]

These sights must have made a marvelous impression on her, recalling for her the greatness of her God, inviting her to worship, as in Psalm 148, "Praise him, Sun and Moon, praise him all stars of light ; praise him heaven of heavens, and the waters below the heavens ! Let them praise the name of the Lord." [vv3-5] As Pope Francis says so well : "All the material universe is a language of the love of God, of his immeasurable tenderness towards us. Soil, water, mountains, all is a caress of God."

Angela evokes the splendor of the light of Christ, who is himself named the Light of the World, even as she acknowledges the sadness of darkness when it invades our hearts : "Jesus Christ will be in your midst, and as a true and good master, will enlighten and teach you." [Last Legacy 5] "He whose light and joyful splendor of truth will surround you at the moment of death..." [Last Legacy 20] And the act of fulfilling the will of the Father by obedience is "like a great light which makes every work good and acceptable." [Rule 8:4]

By contrast, the world brings us darkness, from which the love of God separates us : "God has granted you the grace of separating you from the darkness of this poor world." [Rule, Pr:4] This darkness has

repercussions in our heart and our will : “O my Lord,” she prays, “illumine the darkness of my heart. [Rule 5:16] “Holy obedience” keeps us from “self-will which is within us like murky hell.” [Rule 8:2]

Angela recognizes in nature a source of richness and joy. As Pope Francis affirms : Each creature is the object of the tender love of the Father who gives it a place in the world. Even the fleeting sight of the most insignificant being is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, is embraced by his affection

Angela, for her part, affirms : “I have this undaunted and firm faith and hope in the infinite divine goodness... that our every pain and sadness will turn into joy and gladness, and thorny and rocky roads we will find flower-strewn for us, paved with finest gold.” [Rule Pr:25,27] She takes up also the example given by Christ himself, “The good tree, he says, that is, the heart and spirit imbued with charity, can do nothing but good and holy works. [Mt 7:18 ; Lk 6:43]” [Testament 1:5]

Angela experienced a powerful storm on the sea, the great earthquake in the city of Brescia, floods which destroyed crops. With reason she could say : “armed against us are water, air, and earth with all of hell, because the flesh and our sensuality are not yet dead.” [Rule, Pr:20] She takes up the biblical image of the devil... a roaring lion, [Rule, Pr:21] and accuses herself of “so many errors, so much ugliness and blame, so many monstrous and frightening beasts and figures !” [Rule 5:21]

Having grown up in a rural area, Angela understood how agriculture reflects a spiritual reality. Thus several times she mentions the act of planting, and that of the Lord above all : “Hold this for certain : that this Rule has been planted directly by his holy hand.” [Last Legacy 6] “For, if he has planted it in the first place, who is there who can uproot it ?” [Last Legacy 8]

Yet, she also adverts to the existence of an evil sowing : “For it often happens that certain bad seeds are planted in the mind, which cannot then be uprooted except with great difficulty. [Counsels 7:16] With this metaphor she addresses her command to the Colonelli (local superiors), “and thus you will not cease to prune this vine which has been entrusted to you.” [Counsels 8:8]

Like Christ, the Good Shepherd, Angela leaves to the Colonelli and Governors of the Company the care of the flock of which they are shepherdesses : It is he, who in the first place, governs them : “the more you are united, the more Jesus Christ will be in your midst as a father and good shepherd.” [Testament 10:9] Following his example, she recommends watching over them “as most vigilant shepherds.” [Counsels, Pr:6] “Since he has deigned to place you at the head of so noble a flock, may he give you also such knowledge and capability that you may be able to do work worthy of praise in his sight.” [Testament, Pr:19-20] And, “quickly, without any hesitation, go to the principal mothers and explain to them the needs of your lambs.” [Counsels 4:3]

This solicitude also involves attentiveness to the dangers which threaten the flock : “Know that you have to defend and protect your lambs from wolves and robbers : worldly persons or false religious.” [Counsels 7:1] “I beg you with all my heart, please be watchful and most vigilant, like so many caring shepherdesses, for this heavenly flock entrusted to your hands, that no weeds of discord or other scandal grow up.” [Testament 10:1-3] And finally, as Scripture says, Angela is attentive also to ordinary things, like rocks and flowers that fade ; “He, who (as Scripture says) can turn stones into children of heaven. [Mt 3:9] [Counsels 8:6] ; “who says through the mouth of St John : I counsel you to buy the crown which cannot wither [cf. Ap 3:18 ; 1 Cor 9:25]. [Testament 3:12]

In our time, which accentuates conscientious awareness of harm inflicted on nature by our negligence or human egocentrism, the example of Angela encourages us to see the loving power of God in all created creatures. According to Pope Francis : “Different creatures, willed for their own sake, each reflect in their own way, a ray of the wisdom and the infinite goodness of God.”

Angela invites us to care for all that God has made, for God has confided to us its stewardship and the task of advancing the universe.

Nature, for Angela, as for us, is a source of adoration and recognition of the One who has confided it to us in his great love.

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