

Triduum : praying with Saint Angela



What helps me to pray? What makes me pray? Prayer is such an integral part of our lives that it is helpful to stop for a few moments and to ask ourselves how we pray, why we pray and how Angela can help us in our relation to God. Prayer was at the heart of Angela's life; it was this aspect which struck the most those who surrounded her. Pasero, a Brescian chronicler, wrote, after having related her meeting with Francesco Sforza, that "she was a contemplative woman who found pleasure in being alone in her room and praying to God, something that many scorn or laugh at", in his times.

In our introduction, we will examine how Angela's contemporaries perceived her as a woman of prayer. After that, we shall see what Angela's prayer was like, what was her teaching on prayer, and, finally, what God meant to her, as she prayed Him so intensely.

Introduction:

When we look at her life, we are struck by her love of prayer. She seems never to have enough of it. She finds in prayer the center of her life. Her need for prayer did not proceed from external circumstances but from the very depths of her soul. How did she come to such a love of prayer? The witnesses of her life have shed some light on this.

"No one on earth taught her how to pray, because at that time, very few people were apt to teach others how to pray. It was the Holy Spirit who guided her through His interior motions". (Bell. Queriniana 7, 8v).

Already during her childhood she felt a mysterious attraction to God; she felt like praying during the day and even during the night. She was exceptionally faithful to her need for prayer. Consequently, let us also allow the Lord to give us the same need for prayer, to stay with Him, even without words, to let everything else drop, and, if we feel at times a certain urgency for prayer, to yield to it and let the Holy Spirit draw us nearer to God.

“God Himself gave her a sort of natural instinct for prayer and renunciation”. (Bell. Queriniana 7, 8r).

Together with her need for prayer, Angela was inclined to self-despoilment, to an austere style of life, in food, clothing, furniture. When she said to her daughters: “May Jesus-Christ be you only Treasure”, she had lived it deeply herself. She knew from her own experience that the voice of the Holy Spirit is heard “all the more clearly as we have our conscience more purified and clean”. (R 8, 15). Therefore, if we want to pray well, we need to free ourselves of our worries, our anxieties, our memories, so as to concentrate on essentials.

Another aspect of Angela’s prayer is her continuous dialogue with the Lord.

“All her strength, all her time, all her gifts, she used them to be united to God, and considered that all the rest was of little value. Prayer was her whole life, except when charity led her to help others, encourage them, and enlighten them on spiritual matters.” (Bell. Quer. 7, 8r).

We know through Agostino Gallo’s testimony that she spent her mornings in prayer, before the Blessed Sacrament, in Church. After that, she was available during the whole afternoon. If people came to her, seeking for light, encouragement, or peace, she was attentive to their needs. If no one came, she would pray or read spiritual books.

Angela’s prayer was sustained by strong interior attitudes which shone forth throughout her whole being, her words, her way of dealing with others. One of these was her humility.

“Mental prayer gave her so much light on God and herself, that she experienced a deep sense of humility. She never would say anything about herself, without pretending very sincerely and with true feelings, that she was nothing. She became incapable of dealing with others, without great humility. (Bell. Quer. 7, 7v). She saw that all her gifts came from God... She couldn’t stand that others be mistaken in this regard”. (Bell. Quer. 9, 9v).

Furthermore, her prayer gave her joy, a joy which she communicated to others. The witnesses of her life say that she was of a happy nature and strove to share her joy with others. This explains why she had so much influence on them. We find in her joyful enthusiasm, a need to share her joy, a conviction that we are all called to be happy, on earth and in heaven. For example, she says, “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, and we shall find the thorny and stony paths blossoming for us, and covered with paving of finest gold”. (R Prol. 25-27).

I. Angela's prayer

What was Angela's prayer like? What helped her to pray?

We know that Angela's prayer was helped by :

- the teachings of her father, and most probably, though no document mentions them explicitly, the examples given by her parents.
- A certain bent for prayer when she was already 5 or 6 years old.
- Her reading : the life of the saints as a child, Holy Scripture and works of the Fathers of the Church as an adult.
- The Psalms which she recited while praying the Office of our Lady; they helped her "talk with God". (R 5, 10).
- Nature, while working in the fields, for it is there that God revealed Himself to her twice in a particular manner.
- Holy Mass and the Sacraments. These were privileged moments of prayer during her life. She even became a Tertiary of Saint Francis so as to take better advantage of them.
- Pilgrimages. She liked to pray within a fervent group.
- Gospel scenes depicted in art; for example the paintings in the Oratory she established in Brescia; sculptures on the life of Christ in Varallo.
- People who came to her to talk about their problems and difficulties, for example the Duke of Milan, Francesco Sforza. These induced her to pray for them, to ask for God's light to help and guide them,

Angela's prayer was also inspired by concrete situations, specific of her surroundings.

- Injustice, violence, permissiveness which "seem to lord it over the world" (R 4 10) led Angela to "implore mercy before the throne of the Most High" (R 4, 10). "For in these perilous and pestilential times, you will find no other recourse than to take refuge at the feet of Jesus Christ" (Couns. 7,27).
- Religious ignorance among her contemporaries, "those poor creatures who do not know you" (R 5, 31), urge her to give her life even to the end, so that they may be enlightened (R 5 34).
- She prays for the Church which, in her times, was in a pitiful condition: "Pray and get others to pray, that God not abandon his Church, but reform it as he pleases, and as he sees best for us, and more to his honor and glory". (Couns. 7, 24-26).
- Important decisions involving the future are also to be preceded by prayer: "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. 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". (Last Leg. 2-5).

- She prays to ask for God's blessing on others: "First I embrace you, and to you all I give the kiss of peace, begging God to bless you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen". (Last Leg. 27-28).
- She calls for a prayer of thanksgiving for God's gifts: "You have to thank Him infinitely that, to you especially, He has granted such a singular gift", that gift being His call. (R Prol. 5)
- Our efforts are also occasions for prayer: "Act, move, believe, strive, hope, cry out to him with all your heart, for 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)

All these specific opportunities for prayer, as suggested by Angela, we can find them in our own lives!

II. Angela's teaching on prayer

In our world today, people want to be efficient. They begin to do something only if they see the reason why, only if they are sure of a result-achieving process. Were people during the Renaissance also bent on seeing results? When it comes to prayer, Angela gives several reasons to why we should pray and the results which should come to, in our prayer.

A. Why pray ?

1. Because in each one of us there is a deep search for absolute values.

Nothing can eradicate from our hearts the need for absolute values which God Himself has inscribed deeply within us. Therefore, "by prayer one obtains from God the grace of a spiritual life" (R 5, 4), a grace which draws us up and above our instincts and desires. It is a question of life, and as such, it implies growth, development, progress, creativity, escaping from the routine of a commonplace existence.

2. Because we are in need of God.

Angela asserts that "one needs always to pray in spirit and mind, given the continuous need one has of God's help" (R 5,5). And God knows how much we need Him in our daily struggles!

a) Times are difficult, uncertain. That is why she states that "in these perilous (full of dangers) and pestilential times (where evil proliferates like a death-giving and lashing

disease), you will find no other recourse than to take refuge at the feet of Jesus Christ.” (Couns.7, 27). She would have said the same thing today!

b) Different opinions leave us puzzled, because we do not see at times where truth really lies, because it is so difficult to know how to cope with our responsibilities. She therefore recommends: “how much must you pray God to enlighten you and direct you, and teach you what you have to do...”(Couns. Prol. 7) And she adds, “Offer most fervent prayers, for in this way, with 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.”(Last Leg., 5)

Moreover, Angela adds counsels on how we should pray. After “why pray?” she tells us “how to pray”.

B.How should we pray ?

Within the Company of Saint Ursula, there were many contrasts because of social, economic, cultural, and religious differences. Angela wanted to respond to the needs of all her sisters, whether they were beginners or more advanced in prayer. She therefore gives simple, practical counsels on prayer, as well as deep principles for spiritual life. She recommends us :

- To pray daily (R 5, 15). She knows that it is through prayer that we learn how to pray, just as it is through dancing that we learn how to dance...
- To be diligent in prayer (R 5, 1), since it is a question of an appointment with someone we love and to whom we owe everything.
- To raise our mind to God (R 5, 15), that is, to begin by imposing silence on all the interior noise roaring within us, all the cinema we keep up by our thoughts, our memories, our projects.... And to be silently present before our God.
- To combine prayer with renunciation (R 5, 2, 4). She suggests fasting, because it was the most popular form of renunciation during her times. The reason is that we are not able to be simultaneously receptive to God and at the same time hold on to something, be it material goods, knowledge or power. It is impossible to keep our hands open and closed at the same time.
- To practice vocal prayer as well as mental prayer (R 5, 5-8), because vocal prayer prepares us to pray mentally. We all have experienced how reading and slowly rereading a Psalm or a Gospel text makes us all of a sudden conscious of the interior richness of a word or a verse.
- To follow a model, a master of prayer. Angela gives us Anne as a model. (R 5, 3). Anne lost her husband after 7 years of marriage and then decided to stay in the Temple for the rest of her life. It was a long life, for she was already 84 years old!

Anne had therefore spent more than 60 years serving the Lord in fasting and prayer, and she ended up by SEEING HIM! That is the real aim of our life: to persevere in prayer until we finally SEE the Lord present within us, around us!

C. For whom should we pray ?

For the members of our family: Angela prays for “her father, her mother, her relatives and friends” (R 5, 24), asking the Lord to pardon their faults and their sins. She wants them to be happy, as we want ours to be happy. She realizes, as we do, that deep, long-lasting happiness is a gift of God, a gift of His mercy, in spite of our limits, our errors, sometimes our refusals.

For those who suffer, and those who cause their sufferings: Angela had to intervene several times on behalf of others: for a friend exiled by Prince Louis of Castiglione, a domineering man full of anger and harshness; she pleaded for peace between two enemies, Francesco Martinengo and Filippo Sala, ready to kill each other in hatred. She made her first pilgrimage to Varallo in 1528 during war-time, so as to pray God for peace among her people. All these interventions were surely preceded by long moments of prayer.

For those who commit evil: “to implore mercy before the throne of the Most High for the many dissolute actions committed by Christians... as is more than obvious to all”. (R 4, 11).

For the whole world: Angela asks the Lord “to forgive the sins of the whole world” (R 5 24), because of His “precious Blood shed for love of us” (R 5 25). She prays “for those poor creatures who do not know Him” (R 5 31), for those who are not interested in religious matters – they are increasing in number in our consumerism society – for those “who do not care to partake in His most sacred Passion” (R 5 32), for those whose heart is blind. For all of them, she is ready to “shed her own blood to open the blind eyes of their minds”. (R 5, 34).

III. What did God Mean to Angela ?

What is Angela’s God like? He is the one Christ revealed to us, a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is striking to see how much her prayer is addressed to the Holy Trinity. She begins the first of her Writings, that of the Rule, “In the name of the blessed and indivisible Trinity” (R Prol. 1). She thus states that they are blessed, because full of the joy (“beata” in Italian) which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have in giving themselves to one another, and being fundamentally united. Five years afterwards, she ends her “Counsels” and “Testament” “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”. (Last Couns., 27; Last Leg. 28).

A. Who is the father for Angela ?

Angela claims His concern for all mankind in the universe: Each person is a child of the Father: “They are all creatures of God”. (Couns. 8, 2)

Each one is dealt with in unlimited respect, for, she says, “God has given free will to everyone, and wants to force no one, but only proposes, invites and counsels.” (Test. 3, 9-11).

All He wants is our good. His only desire is that we be happy: Therefore, “Do not trouble yourself about any of your temporal needs, because God, and he alone, knows, can and will provide for them, He who wants nothing for you but only your good and your joy.” (R 10, 16-18) However, His answer to our prayer is not an automatic one and not necessarily at the very moment when we pray, but will come at the time He chooses: “He will do marvelous things, in his own time, and when it pleases him”. (Couns. 8, 9).

We know that He is leading our life with gentleness: Angela reminds us that “He orders and governs all things with mildness”. (Test. 3, 5).

Therefore, we are sure that He will never abandon us: “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)

To prove that God is continually caring for us, Angela promises us His help even in the details of our daily lives: “Have hope and firm faith in God, for he will help you in everything.” (Couns. Prol. 15).

The Father, in His love for everyone of us will never fail to provide for all our needs: “God will provide for them wonderfully”. (Couns. 5, 31).

In His providential project, He has called us to Him and entrusted us His work in this world: “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”. (R Prol. 4)

He has also given us the means to accomplish this work and to be happy while doing it, for, “Blessed (in Italian, “Beati” - happy) are those into whose hearts God has breathed the light of truth.” (R Prol. 12) This includes material means: “Know that if it were not useful and suitable that this Company have some income, God would not have begun to provide it”. (Test. 9, 1). And “If, by God’s will and bounty, it should happen that they have money or other goods in common, let it be remembered that these must be carefully administered” (R 11, 22).

Finally, Angela reminds us that God is waiting for us in His home, for an endless joy, for an unlimited happiness: “How much they have to exult and rejoice, for in heaven a new crown of glory and joy is prepared for all of them, one by one”. (Couns. 5, 25) And again, “Look forward to the great reward which God has prepared for you, if you strive, each one for her part, to be faithful...” (Couns. Prol. 5)

B. Who is Christ for Angela?

This is revealed by what she says about Jesus Christ, the names by which she calls Him, and the teaching she reminds us of.

1. What does Angela say about Jesus Christ?

The fundamental truth Angela repeats again and again, is that Jesus Christ loves us. In fact, He “lived in this world for love of us” (R 5, 12), He is “our love” (Couns. 5, 41), the “Lover of us all” (Couns. 5, 38). And therefore “who could resist Him?” (Last Leg. 19).

He shows us His love through “His immense goodness” (Couns. 3, 4) and through His being continually in our midst, “enlightening us” and “teaching us what we have to do”. (Last Leg. 5).

He gives us His most precious gifts: His life and His Spirit, His teachings and examples. We are “most dear in the Blood of Jesus Christ” (Couns. 1,1) the “Blood He shed for love of us” (Teest. ProL. 25). He has “chosen” us to send us His Spirit, if we are “well disposed” to receive Him. (R 4, 16). This Spirit, He sends it “unceasingly into our hearts, He whose voice we shall hear all the more clearly as we have our conscience more purified and clean.” (R 8, 14-15)

Jesus Christ Himself enlightens us, and “if he directs and teaches you, you will be well taught” (Couns. 7, 28). Most of all, He gives us his examples, as He is “the only way to heaven” (R 4, 4). You must have noticed that Angela is continually presenting us His examples so that we may imitate Him.

In an unfriendly and wicked world, He gathers us together near Him. “In these perilous and pestinential times, you will find no other recourse than to take refuge at the feet of Jesus Christ” (Counc. 7, 27). “And always, let your principal recourse be to gather at the feet of Jesus Christ, and there, all of you, to offer most fervent prayers.”(Last Leg. 3-4). He remains with us, for “He will never abandon this Company as long as the world lasts”. (Last Leg. 7).

Finally He awaits each one of us in His blessed Eternity: He “whose light and joyful splendor of truth will surround you at the moment of death. (Last Leg. 20) to lead us to “Heaven, for the Lover of us all wants this too.” (Last Leg. 17-18).

2. The names given to Jesus by Angela

First of all, Angela recalls the names given to Christ in the Gospel: He is “the way, the truth and the life”, the “Good Shepherd”, the “Master and Lord”. She mentions His noblest titles: “Son of God”, “Savior”, the “Most High”, the “Immortal son of the Eternal God”, the “King of kings, the Lord of lords”.

Angela expresses her affection towards her divine Spouse, calling Him, “the one who loves us”, “the one who loves me and who loves us all”. He is the object of her unconditional

love, her “only Treasure”, “her only life and hope”. He is the one showing us the way by his words and deeds. As you see, quotations from the Gospel are abundant in Angela’s Writings:

3. The teaching of Jesus

Christ’s words are cited mostly in the texts related to some form of humility in His life: The first Counsel insists on this several times: “I have been among you not as the one who is served, but as the one who serves.” (Couns. 1, 7). “He who humbles himself shall be exalted”. (Couns. 1, 14).

Christ’s form of humility is accessible and approachable by all. It is lined with gentleness: “Learn from me that I am gentle and meek of heart”. (3rd Leg. 4); “My yoke and service is light and sweet”. (3rd Leg. 6)

Christ’s example and words urge us to be obedient, in the real sense, “ob-audire”, that is “listening to God”, but an active listening which turns to action. Angela reminds us that Christ “did not come to do His will, but that of the Father who sent Him.” (R 8, 3) She sees in people invested with authority Christ Himself, especially when they represent Him within the Church. All obedience is directed towards Him: “the one who listens to you, listens to me; the one who despises you despises me”. (R 8, 8).

Other words in the Gospel, dear to Angela’s heart concern faithfulness and perseverance: “The one who has persevered to the end, that one will be saved”. (R Prol. 11), for, s “blessed” the one “who hears the world of God and puts it into practice”. (R Prol. 12).

A listening hearts leads to the true spirit of the Beatitudes, to abandoning ourselves and our interests into the hand of the one who loves us: “Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things of yours will be set before you.” (R 10, 14). Obviously, the one who has stripped himself of everything, receives the treasure of the Kingdom, since Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. (R 10, 7). In that Kingdom, the Father of Jesus is attentive to the least of our concerns: “Do not be anxious in seeking what you will have to eat or what you will have to drink, because your heavenly Father knows very well that you have need of all these things.” (R 10, 15).

Most of all, the sign of the Lord’s presence is to be found in mutual, binding love; “By this the world will know that you are mine, if together, you love one another”. (Test. 10, 11). And Angela continues, “loving each other and living in harmony together are a sure sign that we are walking the path right and pleasing to God”. (Test. 10, 12).

C. Who is the Holy Spirit for Angela?

Angela received from the Holy Spirit very special gifts: understanding Scripture, commenting it clearly and efficaciously; touching hearts, bringing people to make spiritual

progress, converting them. Indeed, she was a very special spiritual guide for her contemporaries.

Her strong faith shines forth within her writings. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, what was her teaching? She claims that He is given to those who pray Him; that He acts inasmuch as our availability and docility allow him to intervene in our lives. He guides us and guides the Church.

1. Praying the Holy Spirit

Angela reminds of the fundamental attitude of all Christians towards the Holy Spirit. She asks to pray him, especially during the nine days between the Ascension and the Feast of Pentecost, so that He may dwell within His chosen ones, if they are well disposed. (R 4, 15-16). He must be prayed at least seven times a day during the Canonical Hours of the Little Office) so as to open ourselves to grace and ask for His seven gifts (cf. R 5, 13). We are to pray “as long as the Spirit and our conscience dictates”. (R 6, 7), our “conscience” being the duties of our state in life.

2. Obeying the Spirit

We are all aware of this fundamental principle in our Ursuline spirituality: “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 is the one who, as Jesus Christ says, teaches us all truth.” (R 8, 14-16).

Divo Barsotti says that these words are the newest and the most extraordinary in the whole Rule. Angela’s doctrine is extraordinary because she teaches us that our whole life is “unceasingly” guided by the Spirit. He counsels us and inspires us without end. Spiritual life consists therefore in continuous and total dependence on Him, but this dependence can be lived out only as far as our souls, purified from sin, are capable of perceiving His secret action.

Notice that obedience to the Holy Spirit is not at the beginning of the list of people to whom we should obey, according to Angela. It comes at the very end, for it supposes above all that our soul has been purified by all the other forms of obedience to natural and supernatural authorities.

3. Letting the Spirit guide us

The Holy Spirit inspires us to seek for God at all times and in every circumstance, and to remain faithful. “If you faithfully carry out these and other similar things, as the Holy Spirit suggests to you according to the times and circumstances, rejoice, go forward willingly.” (Last Leg. 14)

He is the one asking us to change something in our personal lives, in our activities. He is the one inspiring our decisions: "Make sure that you all meet with the leaders...and thus confer together, making a careful examination of the government... and provide for everything as the Holy Spirit inspires you."d (Test. 7, 1,2,3,7).

He is even the one who gives us light on our expenditures for our spiritual and temporal benefit. "Such income as you have, spend it for the good and the development of the Company, according as discretion and motherly love will suggest to you. Decide only among yourselves, according as charity and the Holy Spirit will enlighten and inspire you. (Test. 9, 4, 6-7)

He teaches us, for "the Holy Spirit is the one who, as Jesus Christ says, teaches us all truth". (R 8, 16). He helps us see far ahead, very far ahead, "directing everything towards the good and spiritual benefit of your dear daughters, as much to urge and move those who are already in (the Company) to grater love and obligation to do good, as to attract still others to it". (Test. 9, 8-10).

The Spirit is the one who comforts us and gives us His strength: "May the strength and true consolation of the Holy Spirit be in you all" (Cons. Prol. 3). But also, with gentleness, He reminds of God's tactful love: "He only proposes, invites and counsels". (Test. 3, 11)

4. The Church is guided by the Holy Spirit.

The secret action of the Spirit within us blends with our obedience to the Church. The Church itself cannot act without listening and respecting everyone because the Holy Spirit lives within each person. The Church has received from Him a discerning charism, which includes vigilance and love. . We also are invited to love the Church. Each Christian is invited to recognize that the Church is a mother, and that he receives everything from his mother. Christ Himself loved His Church and gave up His life for it. Therefore, the action of the Holy Spirit builds up within us patience and love for the Church.

Angela exhorts us to "keep to the ancient way and custom of the Church, established and confirmed by so many Saints under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. (Couns. 7, 22), for it is He that the Father will send to "reform it as He pleases", at the time chose by Him, and "as He sees best for us and more to his honor and glory". (Couns. 7, 24-26). The Spirit of Love, inspires us to love the Church and live in communion with the Body of Christ.

That is also true of our Institute. The one who is acting within the Roman Union, is the Spirit of Love, who promotes communion and unity among us. But the Spirit requires listening to Him and self-denial, so that He may pour out His love through us and inspire us positive words to say.

Angela's teaching on the Holy Spirit can be summarized in constant love, love to listen to Him and let us be guided by Him, love for the persons He sends us, love in making decisions for the good of others, love for the Church, spouse of Christ, and source of unity and communion.

Angela's "insieme" is not only lived in our relations with one another, it is first and foremost lived in our union with the Spirit of Love, sent to us by the Father and the Son.

Questions for personal reflexion:

1. What helps me to pray? Which is Christ's prayer that inspires me most now?
2. Present Him my personal prayer, my liturgical prayer. ... speak to Him about my joys and my difficulties in prayer... ask Him for His help, so that I may unite myself evermore to Him during my prayer.
3. Let Our Lady's prayer in different circumstances penetrate deeply within me:
 - a. At the Annunciation: Luc 1, 26-38.
 - b. At the Visitation: Luc 1 39-56.
 - c. At the birth of the Lord: Luc 2, 15-19.
 - d. After finding Jesus in the Temple: Luc 2, 48-51.
 - e. At Cana: John 2, 1-5.
 - f. At the foot of the Cross: John 19, 25-27.

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