

Angela's Charism as Spouse of the Lord

What is Angela's charism? What is our charism, as Ursulines? Many persons have already inquired: *Franciscans have their charism of poverty; Benedictines, that of liturgical prayer and work: "Ora et Labora", Carmelites that of prayer and penance. And you, Ursulines, what is your charism?* Different answers have already been given to this question. About 40 years ago, after Vatican II, Sr Teresa Ledóchowska, searched for the deep, specific charism of Angela and the Ursulines; she found it in availability to the Holy Spirit; others, in union between contemplation and action, so typical of Ursuline life throughout the ages. The Central Province of the United States took it up as its motto: *Contemplatives in mission.*



However, if we look for Angela's deep, personal vocation, the one she handed on to her daughters, on the level of her being and not of her actions, her charism was clearly that of loving union with her Spouse, the Son of God. The *new life*, which she led intensely and proposed to her daughters, is that of a spousal union with the Son of God. Angela mentioned this 12 times: six times in her Rule, twice in the Counsels and four times in the Testament.

Of course, this spousal spirituality was not unknown in the tradition of the Church. Already during the third century, Tertulian called the Christian virgin a "spouse of Christ". During the fourth century, Saint Ambrose developed this theme in three treatises on virginity. During the same century, Saint Athanasius, Saint Jerome, Saint Gregory of Nissa, all called the consecrated virgin, a "spouse of Christ". During the first centuries of Christianity, this expression was already widespread in the Eastern and Western Church as well.

During the Renaissance period, when a large number of congregations were declining because of families forcing young women to enter religious life for merely human reasons, Angela, through her example and her writings, gave new life in Brescia and in the Church to a form of consecration to Christ as Spouse. In our first section, we shall study Angela's union with Christ, her Spouse, in her personal life, and in the second one, the meaning she gave to this union in her Writings.

I. Angela, Spouse of Christ

Like all of us, Angela was not a saint when she was born. Her life span of about 65 years was a long process of continual and deepening consent to the overwhelming love of the Lord. Did those who witnessed her daily life give any evidence of this growth? A few signs show us how the Lord's challenges led her gradually to be more and more like Jesus Christ, her Spouse, her *only love*.

Her spiritual journey began very early, when she was about five or six years old. The two closest witnesses, Antonio Romano and Agostino Gallo both agree with this:

First of all, according to what she told me, she had heard her father read spiritual books on saints and virgins, and she began, when she was five, to lead a sober, pious and contemplative life (Romano 936 r).

I will say, according to what I have heard several times, that when she was five or six years old, she began to live a mortified life (because of her father's good teachings) and to avoid the company of others, so as to spend more time in prayer and devotions (Gallo 942 r).

After this assertion, both witnesses immediately add information on her spiritual progress:

She persevered more and more eagerly in this way of life (Romano 936r). As she grew older, she lived this more intensely, as well as her contemplative way of life. (Gallo 942 r).

Romano mentions the death of her sister, when Angela must have been around 15 or 16 years old. She was anxious about her sister's eternal state and *prayed daily to the Lord* about it. The vision of her sister, beaming with joy in the middle of angels, proved to be a lasting remembrance and led her to increasing fervor:

With this vision constantly in mind, she gave herself all the more ardently to fasting, abstinence and prayer (Romano 936v).

Angela's increasing availability to the Lord's action led her to enter the Third Order of Saint Francis.

She finally took the habit of the Third Order, so as to go to Mass, Confession and Communion more easily (Gallo 942r).

This information is important, for it reveals that despite the customs of her times, Angela yearned more and more for the sacraments, as her love of the Lord developed. Gallo also declared that « lay people were not allowed to receive frequent

communion, as was the case later on". For example, the members of the Third Order, according to their Rule, were invited to receive communion four times a year, during solemn feasts. This was an exception to the general practice, which was then only once a year, at Easter.

When Angela returned to Desenzano, she continued her life of poverty, self-denial, and prayer, strengthened by her commitment within the Third Order. "While working around the house, she tried to acquire that inner purity and perfection which she would have sought if she were in a solitary place", states one of her biographers, Doneda (33). To her "work around the house", she added working in the fields. "There, she raised her heart to God, when her companions were tired and took time for rest or meals"(39). Angela, therefore, searched for God and found Him not only in prayer and penance, but also in her daily work, thus strengthening her constant union with Him.

Angela's way of life was radiating around her. According to Bellintani, another biographer, her "deep humility prevented her from manifesting the graces she received. She took advantage of every opportunity for spiritual growth, but kept her personal life hidden, as much as possible, and unnoticed to the world, she avoided any strange or merely apparent form of piety. In no way did she hinder the actions of the Lord's Holy Spirit" (Bellintani, Ms. Queriniana, ch. 11).

Her neighbors finally noticed that radiant love for Christ, which led her to be a courteous and loving friend. According to Faino, "With great love she made friends with people not only in her town but also along the coast [of the Garda Lake]; they were eager to invite her. She went modestly to their homes, was trustful with everyone, and always tried to guide them towards heaven, which was her principal object" (24). Through her example and her words, she was already manifesting a personal call to the mission of helping others know and love Christ, the Spouse who had called her.

In 1516 Angela was sent by her Franciscan superiors to Brescia in order to comfort and encourage Caterina Patengola, and after one year she was invited by Antonio Romano to come and dwell in his house. She therefore had to discern: Would she return home? or stay in Brescia? According to Bellintani, the motives which determined her to stay in Brescia were spiritual ones: « greater facility for receiving the Sacraments, going to Mass, hearing homilies »; she then « gave up her family [An older brother was then living in Desenzano, probably in the Grezze with her] and her usual work, so as to commit herself more deeply to her spiritual exercises»; (Bellintani Ms. 20).

This event separated Angela from her former life: She effectively gave up her family, her home, her usual work, so as to follow Christ, her beloved Spouse more closely. Antonio Romano, a direct witness of Angela's life during 14 years, noticed how much she was making progress in virtue, and at the same time, influencing the people of Brescia:

She grew holier every day. People became aware of her holy life, and many persons in Brescia came to see her, so as to obtain graces from the Lord through her fervent prayers, or make peace amidst dissensions (Romano 937v).

How were Angela's contemporaries able to notice her growth in holiness? If we compare her reactions in Salò when she was young, with the evidence given at the end of her life, we are able to measure this growth, to a certain extent. Bellintani writes about different events related to her by Angela's family or by those who knew her in Salò. He depicts Angela's emotional character, and, at times, unreasonable or angry reactions. She went out to darken her hair when someone mentioned her attractive blond hair. One Easter day, she refused to eat the feast-day meal she had helped to prepare, and had a neighbor give her left-overs from the day before: a bit of fish and chick peas. When she was invited on a trip to the Isle of the Brethren, near Salò, she angrily threw some dirt on a fine dish they presented her, thus protesting against the worldly environment she had been drawn to unexpectedly.

When Chizzola observed Angela, at the end of her life, he stated:

I must say that she never gave any sign of anything evil, neither ambition, nor pride, nor anger. She took pleasure in a humble life, a life of pious prayer, and persevered in this direction, given to her by the Lord, through fasting, abstinence, and praying at night (Chizzola 940v-941).

According to Bellintani, it seems that it was particularly during a long prayer on Mount Calvary that Angela was strengthened in a grace of virginity, receiving it for herself and for her future daughters.

There she conceived the spirit of virginity which she communicated so widely to so many Spouses of Christ. There she was changed into a new creature, and received a new being. (Mary of the Incarnation received a similar grace after her vision of the blood of Christ.) Her fervent prayers and abundant tears gave birth to the Company on the very spot where the Cross had been planted... Just as Saint Francis received the grace of evangelical poverty, Angela obtained on Mount Calvary the gift and spirit of virginity (Bellintani, Queriniana 14, f. 13 r).

The spiritual birth of the Company in Angela's heart did not occur only on Mount Calvary, but we do notice that after her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and, a year later, to Rome, Angela began to show certain charismatic gifts: spreading faith, explaining Holy Scripture, converting people around her, working for justice and peace, showing spiritual insight. At the same time some women and young girls began to gather around her, manifesting their desire to live as she did, as chaste Spouses of Christ.

Angela's union with the Son of God became so intimate, so intense, so loving, so transforming that it enlightened all her writings. Christ's words became her words. Christ's prayer became her prayer. His yearning for the salvation of all people was hers. Angela, like Jesus, was led by the Spirit, who changed her into an entirely new being.

Angela never called herself a "Spouse of Christ"; she gave this title only to her daughters, saying that she was a mere « servant ». But Jesus Christ was her *only Love*, ...*the one who loves me and loves us all*. She sees herself as receiving a gratuitous love, an extraordinary love which encompasses her whole being

On November 25th, 1535, when the Company was founded, we can guess Angela's joy in consecrating herself officially, with 28 other young women to the One she calls her *only Love*. According to Doneda, ancient books belonging to the Company and now lost, relate that she personally made a private vow of virginity and encouraged her companions to do so. When she died; about forty of them had pronounced this vow, according to the Company's "Libro Rosso".

Angela, so discreet about her personal life, did not reveal how she lived her consecration and love for her Spouse, Jesus Christ. However, in her writings, she shows her deep esteem for her daughters' vocation, showing them the means to live effectively and faithfully as "Spouses of the Son of God".

II. Union with Christ in Angela's Writings

God's Choice :

Virginity, according to Angela, is a n eternal Covenant between God and His chosen ones.

...God willing, in his eternal wisdom, to call forth from the vanity of the world many women, especially virgins, that is, this our Company (T Prol 5).

Belonging to *such a noble family* (T Prol. 11), is a *new and astonishing dignity* (R Prol. 8), for which we should be continually grateful.

You have to thank Him infinitely that, to you especially, He has granted such a singular gift. (R Prol 5).

God's choice implies nothing less than being called to the dignity of Spouses of the Son of God.

You have been chosen to be the true and virginal spouses of the Son of God. (R Prol 7). We are called to so glorious a life, as to be spouses of the Son of God and to become queens in heaven (R Prol 17).

Angela reminds the Lady Governors of the importance of their mission:

What a new and beautiful dignity to be mothers of the spouses of the King of kings and Lord of Lords...spouses not of earthly husbands corruptible and ultimately disagreeable, but of the immortal Son of the eternal God. (T 4,12-14).

God commits Himself in His Covenant

Since it is a Covenant, Angela points out Christ's commitments to His brides. But first of all, for Angela, who is the Eternal Spouse? She reminds us of the names Jesus Christ gave Himself in the Gospels. He is *the way, the truth and the life, the Good Shepherd, the Lord and Master*. She repeats His noble titles: *Son of God, Savior, Most High, Immortal Son of the Eternal God, King of kings and Lord of lords*.

Most of all, Angela has loving words when she speaks about her Spouse: *He who loves us, our gentle and loving Spouse Jesus Christ... our Love... He who loves me and who loves us all*, and who wants to be loved wholeheartedly, because He is, in fact, *our only Treasure... our only life and hope*.

What does Angela tell us about Jesus Christ?

The basic truth to which Angela refers several times, is that Jesus Christ loves us, for *He lived thirty three years in this world for love of us* (R 5,12). Full of admiration, Angela cries out, *Who could resist Him?* (Last Leg. 19). *He wants nothing for us but only our good and our joy* (R 10,18). His endless presence spurs us on.

Always, let your principal recourse be to gather at the feet of Jesus Christ...In this way, without doubt, Jesus Christ will be in your midst. (Last Leg. 3,5).

His presence will never leave us, even in old age, because then we shall be *assisted and served as true Spouses of Jesus Christ*. (R 11, 29).

He is the one who enlightens us and *teaches us* (Couns. Prol 7). If we let Him *direct and teach us*, we will be *well taught*. (Couns. 7,28). Most of all, He has left us examples of His life, for He *the only way to Heaven*. (R 4,4). Angela, in her Writings, presents Christ's examples continually to her daughters, so that they would imitate Him.

In a hostile and wicked world, He gathers us around Him: *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). *There, all of you, offer most fervent prayers* (Last Leg. 3-4).

He remains with us, for He will never abandon us in all our needs:

God will provide for them wonderfully. How many lords, queens and other great

persons there are, who with the many riches and possessions they have, will not be able to find true relief in some extreme need; and yet, poor as they [the Virgins] are, they will find consolation and comfort (Couns 5,31-34).

He gives us the most precious things He has, His life and His own Spirit. We are *most dear in the Blood of Jesus Christ*. (Couns 1,1), *shed for love of us* (Test Prol 25). He has *chosen* us to send us His Spirit, if we *are well disposed*. (R 4,16). He sends *the Holy Spirit 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).

Finally He waits for us to come to Him in eternal joy: *His light and joyful splendor of truth will surround us at the moment of death* (Last Leg 20-21), *to lead us to the glory of heaven* (R 112, 36). *For the Lover of us all wants this too*. (Last Leg. 18).

Our answer to His call

The Covenant, which our Spouse Jesus Christ offers us, requires a response that is committed, joyful and free:

Everyone who is about to enter or be admitted to this Company must be a virgin and have a firm intention to serve God in this way of life. And then, she must enter joyfully. And of her own will (R 1,1-4).

a) a firm intention to serve God

In answer to God's call, we are invited to *live as is required of the true spouses of the Most High*. (R Prol 23).

Virginité of heart requires a will to *serve God*; Angela wants to strengthen in us the will to serve the One who has chosen us, whatever be our work or the community in which this service is asked. There is nothing - no circumstance, no person, no difficulty, - that could prevent us from serving the One who has chosen us as His spouse.

b) joyfully

A true bride is happy to meet the one she loves. All our encounters with Him, in private or common prayer, in our personal projects, in our activities - whether they be chosen by us or received from Him - are opportunities to meet him with joy. I remember - and many of you could recall the same memory - the joy of my mother around 5 in the evening, when my father was about to come back from work. She would then remove her apron, comb her hair, and her eyes sparkled in joyful expectation of his return. In the same way, our daily encounters with Christ are lived in the joy of His presence: *Let her be joyful and always full of charity, and faith, and hope in God* (R 9,11).

c) of her own will

In an epoch when entering a convent was due to the parents' decision, Angela requires of the Men and Lady governors to meet the parents or employers of the young woman, so as to make sure that she is free and that they would not in the future prevent her from living according to the rules of the Company (cf. R 1,7).

The qualities of our life as Spouses of the Lord

1. Love Him, in answer to His love

Above all, it is a question of loving Christ, our Spouse, by *voluntarily making to God the sacrifice of our own heart* (R 9 2), *in always having love burning in our hearts* (R 9 22), *in placing our hope and love in God alone, and not in any living person* (Couns. 5 22), *in placing all our love and delight in God alone* (R 10 :9,13).

Through this total love, we *do honor to Jesus Christ to whom we have promised our virginity and our very self* (Couns 5,21), so that *more and more we may please Jesus Christ, our Spouse* (T 4,3).

2. adopt the style of life of the Spouse of the Most High

God's infinite Goodness accompanies us and strengthens us in our daily life, giving us a particular style of life. He helps us *be diligent in prayer, mental as well as vocal* (R 5,1) and *always pray in spirit and mind*, for ourselves, for our parents and friends, and for the whole world. (R 5 23-24). Through His example, He invites us to fast, so as to *obtain from God the grace of a spiritual life* (R 4 4), and to take upon ourselves His own interests, on behalf of sinners, of Christians at large, and even of *His chosen ones*. (R 4 :10-11,13,16).

He inspires us to live a life full of joy:

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, provided they stand firm and steady in their resolve (Couns. 5,25).

Angela also suggests different practical measures for the life-style of her daughters: wear *modest and simple clothes, of dark and subdued color*, which are quite a contrast with the warm and glowing colors the Renaissance painters have fixed on their canvas. Angela recommends that her daughters, living in the midst of the world, avoid worldly relationships, secret messages, too great familiarity even with virtuous men, entertainments such as *weddings, or balls or jousts*, gossiping in the streets, (cf. R 3). They are to *keep themselves intact and chaste and in every action and gesture, behave with modesty and prudence*. (T 4,4-6).

She recommends to *eat and drink in order to serve God better, to be moderate in sleep, reserved and moderate in laughing, listening to modest and licit things, speaking wise and compassionate words leading to concord and charity; to bear everything with patience and charity, to spread peace and concord wherever they are.* (cf. Couns. 5,6-16).

Above all, Angela considers virginity as a proof of love, *voluntarily making to God the sacrifice of our own heart* (R 9 2) and *always having love burning in our hearts.* (R 9 22).

For this reason, virginity is *sister of all the angels* (R 9,3). Why the angels? They worship and love God unceasingly; they are sent by Him as messengers to fulfill His will. To worship Him, to be sent by Him to fulfill His will, are not these two attitudes characteristic of the « Spouse of the Most High »?

The love of the spouse will shine on all the persons Christ brings her to meet. *Let all our words, actions and behavior always be for the instruction and edification of those who have dealings with us.* (R 9,21). Joy (v. 11), truth (v. 14), faith, hope and charity (v. 11) all flow from a heart that seeks only love.

Because she is realistic, Angela does not hesitate to pin down attitudes opposed to love:

Above all, let her keep her heart pure and her conscience clear of any evil thought, of any shadow of envy and ill-will, of any discord and evil suspicion, and of any other wicked desire and purpose (R 9,7-10), *not answering haughtily, not doing anything grudgingly, not staying angry, not grumbling, not repeating any malicious gossip.* (R 9,15-19).

These warnings do not prevent our love from springing up clearly at Christ's call, and giving it a concrete form through the offering of our whole life.

3. The spouse's offering

The greatest proof of love resides in the spouse's offering. It is a treasure, a *sacred jewel*, to be kept at any cost: *Each one should be prepared to die rather than ever consent to stain and profane it.* (R 9 23). These words have been lived specifically by several Ursuline martyrs, in Poland, in France, in Salvador, in central Africa: they did not hesitate to give up their lives so as to remain faithful to the One who had chosen and loved them.

However, most of us are called to give up their lives daily, bit by bit. The offering suggested by Angela to the Lord, *our only life and hope*, is that of our heart, even if it is

vile and impure, but called to burn in the fiery furnace of His divine love (cf. R 9, 35-37). She invites us to offer Him our liberty, our thoughts, words and deeds, 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 5,35-43). This is the supreme act of our Covenant: after having received everything from Christ, our divine Spouse, we lovingly give Him everything we do, everything we have, everything we are.

4. With the help of Saint Angela

After having detailed the qualities of the Spouse and those required of His bride, Angela wants to confirm her presence among us, the presence of a mother, of a friend to guide and encourage us. She is fully conscious that this responsibility has been given to her by the Lord Himself:

He has been 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 a grace and gift as to be able to govern them according to his will... directing them and sustaining them in the life for which they have been chosen (Test Prol 6-9).

In order to *guide us and sustain us in the life for which we have been chosen* by the Lord, in order to *govern us according to His will*, Angela promises even more: her unceasing presence among us.

I am continually among them with my Lover or rather ours, the Lover of us all... Tell them that they should long to see me not on earth, but in heaven, where our love is. (Couns 5 : 38, 1.)

Angela's last word is *love*, the love of the Spouse who wants to respond to the call of Jesus Christ, trying to *please Him more and more* (Test 4, 3), and *persevering faithfully and joyfully in the work we have begun* (Last Leg. 22).

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