

**IN THE SAME CHARISM....**

**with responsibility**

**COMPANY OF ST. URSULA  
SECULAR INSTITUTE OF ST. ANGELA MERICI  
FEDERATION  
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**BICENTENARY OF THE CANONISATION  
OF ANGELA MERICI**

**KEEP TO THE ANCIENT WAY...  
AND LIVE A**

Angela Merici – Seventh Counsel; 7,22

**INTERNATIONAL MEETING**

**ACTIONS**

Salesianum  
Rome 22 - 26 May 2007

## CONTENTS

Introduction	page
The Eucharistic Celebration an introduction to the International meeting	page
Greetings and introductions	page
Two hundred years of Holiness In the Basilica of Saint Peter – 24th May 2007	page
Angela Merici: a holiness for today	page
The holiness of Angela Merici read by a member of the secular institute	page
15th May 2007 Eucharistic Celebration held in the Parish of St. Angela Merici in Rome	page
A testimony from Burundi	page
After the meeting	page

# INTRODUCTION

## *Beyond the hills and the seas....*

The various speeches we heard at the International meeting of the Federation that took place in Rome from the 22nd to the 26th May 2007, have given a richer, deeper meaning to our meditation on the holiness of Angela Merici.

All the contributions of the Reporters, the Celebrants and the Sisters of many Companies are offered to us so that we can have a better understanding of the service we can render to the Company and ourselves.

While proposing these “**ACTS**”, I feel urged to point out some new aspects from the Bull of Canonisation written by the Holy Father Pius VII.

The Church explains this holiness and guarantees that in Angela’s life it was clear that “everybody noticed that the servant of Christ became holier”. (par.5)

“Everybody” implies that Angela was a testimony of faith and love “visible” to all.

She guarded her relationship with the “Beloved” with all her heart and kept the relationship very much alive by means of prayers and corporal punishment that “increased” daily (par.5). She turned her punishment into charitable love towards her neighbours and was always ready to help those who turned to her.

She turned her attention, and “...all she did with persevering zeal” (par. 6) towards the end of her life to her beloved “Daughters and Sisters”, she reunited with her to form that “rose garden” which spread the scent of Christ in the world.

The suggestions dictated to them in the Rule and other readings are clear: .... **To behave well in homes they go to with good judgement with prudence and modesty;**” (5th Counsel 6).

**“And seek to spread peace and concord where they are.”** (5th Counsel 16).

**“And be to all a good odour of virtue.”** (5th Counsel 14).

The description of the foundation of “... That most important Institute...” (par. 8) is all her Work and the focal point of the Bull of Canonisation.

The church recognised the holiness of Angela Merici basing and sustaining this on her Foundation.

The long years of waiting and discerning helped Angela see more clearly the Work God had entrusted her with as He had previously shown her in a vision.

In this way, “... She worked only for the glory of God and eternal salvation of souls (...) and started gathering in her house those girls who, although aiming to lead a perfect Christian life, did not want to belong to a religious order” (par. 8).

Angela proposed to these Daughters and Sisters a way to holiness based on advice taken from the gospels: “... That they should preserve sacred virginity, preserve especially solitude, preserve charity, keep holy obedience, urge spiritual and corporal mortification, frequent the Sacraments...” (par. 8).

Let us keep in mind the words of Pope John Paul 11”that <<living theology>> of the saints, is our inheritance and can be of a great help to us.”(NMI, 27)

Angela Merici’s “living theology” is simple yet demanding: **“In the name of the Holy Indivisible Trinity”**(R par, 1) Angela has built her whole existence on the “Presence” of the Holy Trinity, a “Presence” which has to be the focal

point of the lives of the Daughters and Sisters who were close to her then and the numerous ones that were to follow.

“Barely a year had passed since the foundation of the Institute (...) when the Ecclesiastical authority of Brescia approved the Rule.” (par. 9).

The mandate had come to an end: The work which God had entrusted to Angela was finished “... and very rapidly...” (par. 9) the Institute “... **spread in other provinces, in other countries beyond the hills and the seas.**” (par. 9).

It seems that Angela’s work today goes on by itself but it is not so!

The Institute spreads on “... beyond the hills and beyond the seas...” but one always finds “sister Angela” at the helm; she who is the “... **unworthy servant of Jesus Christ**” (Counsels par, 1) “... **Who in his immense goodness, has chosen me to be mother, both alive and dead of such a noble Company**” (3rd Precept 4)

Maria Razza

## **The Eucharistic Celebration as an introduction to the International Meeting**

**Salesianum, Rome, 22nd May 2007**  
**Homily by Fr. Adriano Tessarollo**  
**Assistant of the Council of the Federation**

We meet in Rome on the BICENTENARY OF THE CANONISATION OF ST. ANGELA MERICI.

We are in the week between Ascension Sunday and Pentecost, a week during which we continually invoke the Holy Spirit during the prayers at Mass and the Divine Office, to enkindle us with the same attitude of expectancy of the Blessed Virgin and the Apostles, until the great promise of the Lord was fulfilled.

Seeing many members of the Merician family reunited in Rome during the week prior to the feast of Pentecost, I invite you with the words St. Angela wrote in the 4th Chapter of the Rule: “They should fast every day after the Ascension, and they should remain in prayer with as much strength of spirit as is possible, until the day of the sending of the Holy Spirit that is until the Easter of May, **asking for that great promise made by Jesus Christ** to his chosen ones who are well disposed.”

In the gospel of St. John, which we are reading at the time, we also find the same promises Christ made before he left the world; there would be times of trouble for his disciples while carrying out their mission on earth, but they would be sustained, encouraged, defended and guided by the Holy Spirit.

This week’s readings from the Acts of the Apostles show us that it was not an easy task for the Disciples of Jesus

to preach the Gospel, but St. Paul's words confirm that they were certain that the Holy Spirit was there to guide them on their missions. He says "And now you see me on my way to Jerusalem in captivity to the Spirit: "I have no idea what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit in town after town, has made it clear to me that imprisonment and persecution await me." (Acts 20; 22 – 23) This is the testimony that the Holy Spirit the Lord promised now accompanies the Church.

In her writings, St. Angela mentions the Holy Spirit 9 times. She refers to Him as a gift given to us so that we can pray to Him and as a guide for the church and the Company. In difficult times, she always appealed to the Holy Spirit for help. The very motto chosen for this bicentenary "Keep to the ancient way and live a new life" can only be achieved by the intercession of the Holy Spirit as is indicated in the 7th Counsel, 22: "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 live a new life".

It is the Holy Spirit "whose voice we shall hear" and who "teaches us all truth" but we must be willing to hear Him and "have our conscience purified and clean "and above all: to **obey the advice and inspiration 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) "Docet nos omnem veritatem, **teaches us all truth**. " (Rule Ch V111, 14 – 16 On Obedience).

In order to make the right decisions in our lives, we must be led by the Holy Spirit; "...make sure that you all meet ... and provide for everything as the **Holy Spirit inspires you**." (Testament Seventh Legacy). "In this matter, I do not



want you to seek outside advice; you decide only among yourselves, according to **charity and the Holy Spirit inspires you...**” (Ninth Legacy, 5 – 7) “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 Legacy, 14).

However, one must long for the Holy Spirit to come; one must pray and obey Him. “Sixth; they should fast every day after the Ascension, and at the same time they should remain in prayer with as much strength of spirit as is possible, until the day of the sending of the Holy Spirit, that is until the Easter of May **asking for that great promise made by Jesus Christ** to His chosen ones who are well disposed.” (Rule Ch. 1V 14 - 16 On Fasting).

The Holy Spirit will bestow His gifts on the person who prays for them: “Then. at Prime, say seven Pater Nosters and seven Ave Marias for the **seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.**” (Rule Ch. V, 13 On Prayer) “**May the strength and true consolation of the Holy Spirit be in you all.**” (Counsels Prologue, 3).

Even in personal prayer, one must be led by the Holy Spirit: “They should go to their rooms and there, shut in, **pray as and as long as the Spirit and their conscience dictate.**” (Rule Ch V1, 7 on going to Mass every day).

This is what St. Angela invited the Company to do, to allow oneself to be guided by the Spirit, who “dictates”, “inspires”, “teaches” and “enlightens”, “gives strength and gifts” but one must pray to Him, await Him and obey Him.

Rome, “Salesianum”, afternoon of May 23, 2007

**GREETING AND PRESENTATION  
MARIA RAZZA  
PRESIDENT OF THE FEDERATION**

The delightful and important moment of greeting and welcome has arrived!

Welcome to all!

To the the Directresses of the Companies and to all the Daughters,

To Father Adriano Tessarollo, Assistant to the Council of the Federation and to all the Counselors,

to the Reverend Assistants and to the Friends who love and share with the Daughters and the Companies a charism both ancient and ever new!

To the presenters who with their specific areas of competence will help us to raise questions for ourselves and to reflect.

Our Convention has already had a very important “prologue”, this morning, when we went together to the audience with the Holy Father!

I hope that you all realize that you are welcomed with great joy by the Council of the Federation and by me personally.

I hope that in these days we may be able, together, “**to**

**experience more intensely among ourselves the intercessory presence of our Foundress”!** (Const. n° 15)

The occasion is unique: the **Bicentennial of the Canonization of ANGELA MERICI!**

We realized that we were strongly requested to commemorate the recognition and solemn honor that the Church, **on May 24, 1807, in the person of the Holy Father Pius VII**, granted to Saint Angela Merici, and the Federation considered that the truest and most appropriate way would be to suggest this International Convention.

Here, in this local Church where the successor of Peter lives, close to the tomb of the first among the Apostles, where Saint Angela herself came on pilgrimage to testify to her unity with the Apostolic Seat, we too desire to express our unity and filial docility to the Holy Father, to recognize that we are living members of our Church and to “have a party” for our Madre Saint Angela.

The occasion of the Convention offers us the opportunity to reflect on the holiness of Angela Merici, but it also stimulates us to ask ourselves about our own road of holiness, both individually and as a Company. It would be “little benefit” to us, if we did not feel stimulated to imitate the holiness of our holy Madre in conforming ourselves always more and more to the “Lover”, according to the criterion that she has pointed out for us: ***“Keep to the ancient way... And live a new life”!***

These are the desires and good wishes that I extend to all—to spend these days joyfully, rejoicing in the mutual closeness of sisterhood!

With my whole heart I thank those people, the counselors of the Federation and other collaborators, who have committed themselves with great generosity and sacrifice in organizing these days, and I thank all, repeating my cordial greetings and affectionate welcome!

**The President relays the participation of the sisters, groups and Companies throughout the whole world who were not able to participate in the Convention and who express their closeness in spirit and their prayers. In particular she mentions:**

➤ The telephone call from **Mons. Gianfranco A. Gardin**, O.F.M. Conv. *Secretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*

➤ The letter from **Father Arturo Bellini**, *former Assistant to the Council of the Federation:*

Verdello, May 15, 2007

*My very dear Maria,*

*The bicentennial is at the door, but I will not be able to participate with you because of unexpected duties...*

*I assure you and all the daughters of Saint Angela that I will be in Rome in my heart and my prayer, because the days of celebration may be lived as a gift of the Holy Spirit who calls us always and in every way to conversion.*

*A special greeting to the members of the Council of the Federation, to Father Adriano Tessarollo, assistant to the Council of the Federation and to all the assistants to the diocesan Companies who are participating in this singular event.*

*I ask a prayer for myself, too.*

*With affection and esteem,*

*Father Arturo Bellini*

➤ The letter from **Mons. Mauro Orsatti**, *Vicar for Consecrated Life in Brescia*

*Dear Maria,*

*It is with pleasure that I receive the invitation to the international convention next May 22-26.*

*Academic duties prevent me from participating. I'm sorry, because it would have been a wonderful occasion to*

*deepen my knowledge about St. Angela and to meet with all of you. I will be present with my affection and prayer.*

*In brotherhood,*

*Father Mauro Orsatti*

➤ The letter from **Sr. Enrica Rosanna, F.M.A.**,  
*Undersecretary of the Congregation for Institutes of  
Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*

CONGREGATION  
OF INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE  
AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE

12.05.2007

Prot. n. Is. 5959/07

*Dear Miss Razza,*

*I have received with joy the invitation to the Convention organized by your Institute on the occasion of the bicentennial of the canonization of Saint Angela Merici.*

*However, because of previous commitments, I will not be able to be present, but I will participate with prayer in this important moment for the Institute and for the Church.*

*In sending you my best wishes, I assure you of my prayers for yourself and for your whole spiritual family that, in the footsteps of the foundress, you may be able to continue to live your consecration in the world, accepting each day the Lord's invitation to walk the path to holiness and to be a sign of his presence in your life circumstances.*

*May the Lord, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, give you an abundance of his graces and blessings.*

*Sr. Enrica Rosanna, F.M.A.  
Undersecretary*

## **Two Hundred Years of Holiness**

(The Canonization of Angela Merici;  
a historic and contemporary document)

**By Don Ennio Apetici,  
responsible for the Causes of Saints – Dioceses of Milan.**

### **Outline**

1. The deed of the canonisation.
2. Why did Pope Pius VII canonise? The spirituality of Angela Merici:
  - a. The canonisation as an example.
  - b. The spirituality of Angela Merici as shown by Pope Pius VII.
  - c. The pontificate of Pius V 11: the difficult times during his election
3. When does Pius VII canonise? The historic context of the canonisation.
  - a. The French Concordat.
  - b. The suppression of the Pontifical states.
  - c. The Emperor's cult: Saint Napoleon.
  - d. The Emperor's Cult: The Napoleonic catechism
  - e. The suppression of the "traditional religious orders.
4. For whom does Pope Pius VII canonise? The teachings of Pope Pius VII.
  - a. The importance that should be given to the formation of youths.
  - b. A spirituality which is not Jansenistic but aimed to recover one's serenity.
  - c. The innovative value of religious consecration
  - d. The fruits of the canonisation: the new Institutes.

## THE DEED OF CANONISATION

To write this report I asked myself a few questions, starting with the reason for us being here today; two hundred years ago, on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1807, Pope Pius VII canonised Angela Merici (1470 – 1540).

This, as we well know, was an event of great importance. As can be seen from the processes of St. Angela <sup>1</sup>, the processes for canonisation at that time were so demanding that, because of excessive length, it became customary to introduce the beatification, that is, the veneration of a person who was known for sure to be a saint, until the strict process for

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<sup>1</sup> Let us keep in mind the dates; it was only two centuries after her death that the canonic process according to the rites of the Congregation (which originated in 1582) began. This because, as was customary at that time, Angela was considered and venerated as a Saint by the people, before the decree of the Holy See whose rules were more exacting. Thus, the Canonic Process was delayed by 200 years. Angela's holiness brought serenity and was according to the former customary rules. However, it was not yet recognised by the laws of the Church as that could only be achieved through the canonical process. On the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1758, Clement XIII installed the Commission that had to bring up the case. After 10 years (30<sup>th</sup> April 1768) they issued the sentence which excluded any violation of the decrees of Urban 111, which would declare the canonization null if there was any trace of "unbecoming worship", that is to say bestowed without the authorisation of the Holy See. As a result, the same Clement XIII could concede the "affirmation of worship" which was already attributed to Angela. But until the canonisation could take place, the greatness of her virtues had to be declared and this was carried out by Pius VI on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1777. It took another 10 years to examine the three miracles that were approved on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1790. On the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1790 Pius VI issued the decree *de tuto*, authorising the canonisation "with immediate effect" (Bull no.11), but because of the French Revolution with all its anticlerical ideas, the canonization could only take place on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1807, the feast of the Holy Trinity. Besides Angela, four others were canonized Francesco Caracciolo, Benedetto da S. Filadelfio, Coletta Boilet and Giacinta Marescotti.

canonisation came to an end. One can understand the strict measures taken, because the canonisation of a person involved and still involves, according to many scholars, the infallibility of the Pope.

## **WHY THE CANONISATION?**

Urged by the reason for our meeting – the canonisation of Angela Merici – I ask:

- Why did Pope Pius VII declare Angela Merici a saint?
- What was so striking about her?
- What was he proposing to the church through the canonisation of this humble and courageous (woman) lady who was also a forerunner of secular institutions?

## **The Canonisation as an example**

The canonisation, in fact, is never just a concession of “honour” or “cult”; it is also not merely an acknowledgement that the candidate – the Venerable or the Saint – behaved in such a way that the person should be rewarded with a “knighthood” of Heaven.

More than to the Saint in question, the canonisation is directed at us, believers on our journey.

Persons are proclaimed saints so that we can follow their example, and this can be of an incentive to us, as St. Augustine’s famous expression goes: “Si iste et ill, cur non ego? If he or she, why not I?”

It was not by coincidence that Pius VII in the Bull of Canonisation reminded us that Angela Merici showered by God with “magnificent gifts” founded the Company of St. Ursula, “that rose garden which perfumes the Church at springtime with the sweet fragrance of her virtue” and was



worthy to be entrusted “with the education of young ladies then and with the help of God, in years to come”<sup>2</sup>

For this reason in the Bull – more solito – we find a summary of the saint’s life “so that all the faithful will be urged to imitate her virtues, especially the worthy progeny of such a mother”.

Therefore, it will be interesting to mention, even briefly, Angela’s elements of spirituality as pointed out by Pius VII.

Going back in time, we become familiar with his character, his dramatic pontificate and with the message he wanted to pass on to the faithful during those difficult times.

### **The Spirituality of Angela Merici as shown by Pius VII**

It is interesting to read from the text of the Bull of canonisation. L’incipit is solemn.

“The wisdom of the eternal Father, the only begotten son of God, when issuing the New Law [ ....] taught that all the laws and teachings of prophets are found in two commandments, the first and most important is to love God and the second similar to the first, is that in which we are commanded to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. In truth, one cannot love one’s neighbour fully if not enkindled by the divine flame that helps us to love God with all our heart, mind and soul. In fact, St. Paul urges mankind to help one another through love, and says that all the

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<sup>2</sup> A modern version of the text of the Bull of Canonization, translated by Pietro Dell’Aqua on the 26th November 1924, which was kindly given to us by the Ursulines of Milan.

commandments are summarised in these few words “Love thy neighbour as thyself”<sup>3</sup>.

It is in the nature of all Christians, since the beginning of Christianity to be willing to love and to be charitable. Indeed, the history of the Church is a history of love, as Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in his first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*. Since the very beginning, Clement Romano urged the Corinthians around the year 96 A.D.

“Let us keep the body which we form part of in Jesus Christ, whole and healthy .... The strong taking care of the weak and the weak showing the strong respect; the rich supporting the poor and the poor thanking God for having found the persons to supply their needs”.(1 Clem 38).

And later, the unsigned letter A Diogneto (11 ex.-111) addressed to the pagan friend, Diogneto, perhaps another Roman citizen living in Egypt, who was (searching) in search for truth. The unknown author (wrote) could have written to his friend:

“Do not think it strange that a person wants to be the image of God; he can become that because it is God’s will. A person cannot achieve this or be happy if he tries to dominate another person, or become wealthier than the rest through being a tyrant and taking over the possessions of a weaker person; these do not make him a better person. It is only he who shares the burden of others and tries to serve those beneath his station, he who is charitable towards the needy, it is he who becomes similar to God to those who have benefited from him; this person is the image of God.” (n.10).

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<sup>3</sup> Canonisation Bull n. 1

We are therefore inspired by our model, the Lord, who is calling us to follow Him as well as by our brethren.

We cannot take our time. It is enough to remember that even the Emperor Giuliano himself, later called “The Apostate” (331 – 363) urged the pagan priests to follow the example of the love shown by the Christians:

“While no Jew begs for charity, while even the inhuman Galileans feed their beggars and ours, it is shameful that we fail to see to the needs of our poor people.” (*Epist.* 84).

Pope Pius VII, in the Bull of Canonisation, wrote that in the history of the Church we always find those who:

“putting aside all their possessions, try to do the will of God, they dedicate their lives to the spiritual and temporal needs of others, they serve everybody.”<sup>4</sup>

This “group of witnesses” (Eb. 12, 1) is made up of admirable and exemplary men and women, because:

“they were strong enough to dedicate themselves to the needs of others and to commit themselves wholly to educating the young to piety and holiness in such a way that religion and society itself benefited from such goodness”<sup>5</sup>.

This is the reason why Pius VII decreed the canonisation of Angela Merici.

(As was customary at the time, Pius VII talked about Angela Merici’s life and pointed out a singular virtue; penitence.) She ate very little while fasting, wore a hair shirt, used to flog herself and cared very little about her physical appearance. He also referred to her great love for the Holy Eucharist, the fact

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<sup>4</sup> Bull n. 1

<sup>5</sup> Bull n. 1

that she frequently received Holy Communion and that because of this love, she refused her inheritance.

Perhaps he emphasised the fact that she frequently received Holy Communion because it was still common practice to refrain from receiving the Eucharist, following the Janienistic traits that were present at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in the church.

It was not only penitence for the sake of penitence; all she refused was motivated out of love.

“She reduced her small daily portions, she gave away generously to the poor, especially the sick whom she always served lovingly”<sup>6</sup>.

The following should be given importance. The Pope admired Saint Angela because she not only did penitence but, more important, she transformed penitence into charity. She did not only lead a life full of severe penitence but a life full of love.

Another aspect mentioned by the Pope was the “missionary outreach” and her “testimony in the world”.

It was not by chance that the Pope said that St. Angela was a “very important Institute” because it was meant to help and protect those women <sup>7</sup>

“who though aiming at leading a perfect Christian life, did not want to belong to a religious order, but at the same time, that Institute did not accept the errors and vices of the time”<sup>8</sup>.

It was not by chance that the Pius VII declared that in the alert Rule of St. Angela one did not find “any of the vows abundant in Religious Professions”; on the other hand, the Rule stipulated that each one:

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<sup>6</sup> Bull n.5

<sup>7</sup> The translation of the Bull says “girls”, but is a bit limited

<sup>8</sup> Bull n. 8

“should preserve sacred virginity, preserve especially solitude, preserve charity, keep holy obedience, urge spiritual and corporal mortification, frequent vocal and mental prayer, be full of charity, frequent the sacraments and to be diligent in prayer”<sup>9</sup>.

Personally, I prefer “meditation” to “solitude” and instead of “mortification”, it would be better to use “temperance”. Using these words, would give a better meaning to the active and actual rule proposed by St. Angela, the same rule that was emphatically mentioned by Pius VII in the Bull of Canonisation.

Therefore, although it was not a traditional religious Institute, its rules were based on it and this was the farsighted and innovative view of Angela Merici, approved and re-proposed by the Pope.

This was the ideal that Pope Pius VII associated with the saint and it bore fruit as we will see.

### **The pontificate of Pius VII; the difficult time during his election**

It is important to remember that, on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1807, Pius VII, in addition to Angela Merici, also canonised Francesco Caracciolo, Benedetto da S. Filadelfio, Coletta Boilet and Giacinta Marescotti.

This merits deeper consideration. Two centuries before John Paul II, canonisations were not every day events, but exceptional, solemn ceremonies that took place only to bring to light the spirituality of a) New Saint and present it to the “people of God”.

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<sup>9</sup> Bull n. 9

Still, the times were difficult and Angela Merici's canonisation took 17 years, having been chosen by Pope Pius VI in August 1790.

With the canonisation of Angela Merici, new hopes arose, the difficult times were over and the new Pope treaded uncertainly where nobody thought he could. His predecessor, Pius VI (1775 – 1799), had passed away on the 29<sup>th</sup> August, 1799 and, as a final insult to his difficult pontificate <sup>10</sup> died alone and officially “a prisoner of the French”. He was “imprisoned” in the abandoned Palace of Valence and forbidden to see anyone.

With the approval of the local authorities, the body of the defunct Pope was left in the chapel of the Palace <sup>11</sup>, with the hope that it would be sent back to Rome. However, in December orders arrived from Paris to have him buried in a simple ceremony in the local cemetery<sup>12</sup>. Even then, the local people continued to bring up excuses to defer the burial.

It is worth quoting comments from a French newspaper regarding the death of the Pope:

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<sup>10</sup> It is enough to mention the unsuccessful visit to Joseph II at the Imperial court in Vienna (1782); the conflict between the German Bishops: the reforms made by Pietro Leopoldo in Tuscany following the synod of Pistoia (1786); the oppression of the Polish Catholics by the Russians after Poland had been annexed in 1772, 1793 and 1795 followed by the division of Polish states.

<sup>11</sup> Other sources report that after a few weeks it was hidden in the dungeons of the palace to avoid the destruction of the corpse, which was embalmed as was the custom to stop the faithful from keeping relics. The administrators of the city thought it better not to burn the corpse of the “citizen pope” because the ashes would make better relics.

<sup>12</sup> It was only at Christmas time 1801 that Napoleon gave permission to re-exhume the corpse and take it back to Rome where it finally arrived on the 17th February 1802

“With his death, Pius VI has sealed the document giving way to the philosophy of the New Era”<sup>13</sup>.

And effectively, this is the way Roger Aubert concluded the chapter “Pius VI in History of the Church” by Huber Jedin:

“(with the death of Pius VI) practically the organisation of the Holy See did not exist any more. The Curia’s administration was disorganised, the College of Cardinals disbanded, many of the Cardinals imprisoned. And (, as a result, many thought that, with the death of Pius VI, the papacy was over.”<sup>14</sup>

Even more striking is the concluding page of “The History of the Popes” by Ludwig von Pastor:

“(with the death of Pius VI) it was thought that the papacy was over and that one could happily celebrate its perpetual ending. The enemies of the Church were jubilant because the French rosette was pinned to the papal tiara, the banners of democracy blew over the pontifical burial grounds and the corpse of the exiled pope was not buried on holy ground. The capital of Christianity had become the hub of the revolution, the highest dignitaries of the Church disbanded. This sad ending was the result of the events of the spiritual revolution that had taken place during the past century [ ....] Many rulers and diplomats were blinded beyond measure and failed to see the approaching disaster instead of avoiding it; the tempest of

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<sup>13</sup> Currier Universel, 8th September 1799

<sup>14</sup> ROGER AUBERT, *La Chiesa cattolica e la rivoluzione*, in : *Tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione. 1775-1830* (= *Storia della Chiesa* 8/1), Milano, Jaca Book, 1977,49.

hatred which had broken out among the people would destroy not only the altars but the thrones, not only divine but also temporal authority. When all traditional ways were buried in the flames of the French Revolution, it seemed that the Roman pontifical was near the end”.

However, it was not the end, least of all for the Church. It was not by chance that Pastor continued:

“But the miracle happened again. Peter’s rock overcomes the tempests of all the centuries. The greatest and least inconceivable historic event of the church is that the times when it is humiliated most are those from which it emerges regenerated by an invincible force. Death and graves are not a sign of the end but symbols of the resurrection, just as the catacombs of the early years and the Christian persecution are only signs of glory. All great events have a humble and silent beginning. From the “Piazzetta di Venezia” one gazes at the lagoons that reach the magnificent church of San Giorgio Maggiore, whose construction resembles a citadel. This insular convent was chosen by Providence as a beginning of a new era in the history of the Popes”.<sup>15</sup>

It is well known that on the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1799, three months after the death of Pius VI and a few days after the opening of the Consulate in France, 34 out of 45 cardinals met to elect the new pope. This was perhaps the most difficult election in the history of the Church and on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1800, a new Pope was elected (in reality it was 6 months after the death of Pius VI). The new Pope was a Benedictine monk, the bishop of

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<sup>15</sup> LUDWIG VON PASTOR, *Storia dei papi*, 16/3, 677-678



Imola, Gregorio Barnaba Chiaramonti,; he was at that time 58 years old and took the name, in honour of his predecessor, of Pius VII (1800 – 1823). This was also an indication that he intended to follow in his footsteps.

Pius VII was well aware that more than being crowned and wearing the splendid tiara, he was burdened to carry a heavy cross and the fact that he did not leave the Island of St. George before his election was accepted by the sovereigns and France, emphasised this

On the 28<sup>th</sup> March 1800, 15 days after his election, Pius VII addressed the cardinals and thus opened his pontifical programme from the Benedictine monastery of St. George.

“Called by your pleas, chosen to the supreme government of the Church by means of the mysterious judgement of God, we accepted the pontificate with grave inner perturbation.

Although these times are more favourable for the Church, the pontificate is still a very grave matter and, going through hostile, turbulent and difficult times, we cannot but ponder on what the future may hold for us. We cannot but help thinking that God, for reasons known only to His Divine Providence, decided to inflict upon the Church this great suffering.

God, the all knowing, asks us to persevere in our faith and priesthood until the world can benefit from our tribulations and boast about them. In this manner, everyone can understand that it is not the wealth that was taken from us, not the pomp that turned our enemies against us, nor all the manifestations which are more fit for the worldly people rather than followers of Christ; but it is in the disdaining wealth, in being humble and modest, in being patient

charitable and observant in all our duties as priests that we represent the image of Our Creator and the real identity of the Church”.<sup>16</sup>

Napoleon may have tried to implement this pontifical programme, humiliating and manipulating the Church to fit his imperial projects, but history proved otherwise.

## **WHEN DID PIUS VII CANONISE? THE HISTORIC CONTEXT OF THE CANONISATION**

It is enough to keep in mind that Pius VII could only enter Rome on the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1800 after a long, humiliating yet enthusiastic journey.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Napoleonic Concordats**

On the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1801, Napoleon published a *Concordat* in which he declared: “The Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion would be free practiced in France” (art. 1) but added:

“The Roman, Catholic, Apostolic religion will be free practiced in France; public worship will be allowed but this must conform to the rules imposed by the police and if the Government decides that this will not disturb the peace”.

It is easy to note that while the Concordat allowed freedom of action, the latter had to conform to the rules of the police.

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<sup>16</sup> Allocation Ad supremum, 28th March 1800, n.9. Taken from:UGO BELLOCCHI, *Tutte le encicliche e I principali documenti pontifici emanate dal 1740, 2 Citta' del Vaticano*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994,331-333

<sup>17</sup> Humiliating because the Austrian Emperor first invited to Pope to settle in Vienna under his protection , then when the Pope refused, he forbade him access to Rome across his Italian territories (which originally belonged to the Vatican) and Pius VII had to travel by sea to Pesaro and Ancona and from there via Loreto to Rome Full of enthusiasm because the Pope was enthusiastically welcomed by the people

However, since the conditions were vague, subject to the discretion of the Government and were designed to protect the Government's interests, it would only be Napoleon who could effectively establish what was necessary not to disturb the peace.

In fact, after only a few months (8<sup>th</sup> April 1802), no less than 77 *organised systematic articles* were issued in connection with the implementation of the Agreement.

The relations between the local church and Rome were subject to the Government's "*placet*"; all Church documents were subject state control, priests could only wear their habits during liturgical services so they concluded that, in all other circumstances, they had to wear normal clothes and all church activities including bell ringing required permission from the commissioner of police.

This harsh tyranny spread on from Paris; the French *Concordat* was imposed on the *Italian Republic* (or *Cisalpinian Republic*) on the 16<sup>th</sup> September 1803 then to the states and later the "reigns" founded by Napoleon.

### **The suppression of the Pontifical States**

Napoleon tried to control Pius VII in every way, firstly he forced him to annul his brother Jerome's wedding, then made him write a note of formal alliance between the Pope and the emperor and ended up by asking the Pope to proclaim him "Emperor of Rome" (13<sup>th</sup> February 1806) but he received the famous answer from Pius VII "Sire, remove the veil".<sup>18</sup>

When the Pope refused, Napoleon became more arrogant. In his letter to the Italian viceroy on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1807, Napoleon wrote:

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<sup>18</sup> CARLI CASTIGLIONE, Napoleone e la Chiesa Milanese (dal 1783 al 1818), A.R.A. Milano 1934,183

“Does Pius VII want to denounce me to all Christians? Interdict me? excommunicate me? Nothing will stop me from re uniting the French, Italian, German and Polish churches and discussing my matters without the Pope, thus protecting my people from the pretexts of the priests of Rome”.<sup>19</sup>

What he then wrote to Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, Secretary of State to Pius VII is well known: “I will destroy your church”. To which the Cardinal replied:

“Your Majesty, we have been trying to do that ourselves for the past 18 centuries and we failed.”

If this anecdote does not give us a true picture of the facts, it definitely illustrates the style of the two parties; the arrogance of Napoleon and the peaceful resistance, full of ironic wisdom of the Holy See.

This was followed by the French occupying Ancona (1805), Benevento and Pontecorvo (1806) Le Marche (1807) and, finally, Rome (2<sup>nd</sup> February 1808). The Pope locked himself in the Quirinale Palace and remained imprisoned there for 6 months, resisting the pretexts of General Mollis, who wanted the Pope spontaneously to renounce any claim to the Papal States. On the 27<sup>th</sup> October 1808, Pius VII replied; “You can tell Paris that even at the cost of losing my life, I will never accede to your requests.”

The Pope’s resistance was in vain and on the 17<sup>th</sup> May 1809 – at the time of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Coalition* – Napoleon, for the second time, declared that the Pope’s authority had been revoked. He decreed the annexation of the Papal States to the French Empire, declared Rome *a free imperial city*, and, on the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1809, he ordered the papal coat of arms to be bombarded.

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<sup>19</sup> Extract from “Trenta Giorni”, n.10, October 1998, p.77

Furthermore, on the night between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1809, the French climbed through the windows of the Quirinale Palace, arrested the Pope and deported him, dressed as he was, first to Siena and then to Savona<sup>20</sup> and forbade him to have contact with anyone.<sup>21</sup>

On the 7<sup>th</sup> January 1811 the Pope was not allowed to go anywhere<sup>22</sup> and Napoleon convened a meeting of the *National*

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<sup>20</sup> The Pope was transferred to Genova, then to Alessandria, Torino, Grenoble, Valence, Avignone and then he was sent back to Nice, Monaco Oneglia, Final Ligure and Savona.

<sup>21</sup> He had to travel through Viareggio, Sarzana. To avoid Genova and not to reveal the deportation- the Pope caught the boat at Sampierdarena. From here he went to Alessandria and Moncenisio, but he was so weak that Extreme Unction was given to him after Moncenisio, then he kept on travelling and arrived at Grenoble on the 28th July. On the 1st August he left again for Cuneo, Mondovi, Ceva, Carcaare, Cadibona and arrived in Savona on the 17th August 1809.

<sup>22</sup> On the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> January, the Pope was interrogated to reveal the names of those who delivered his letters abroad without going through the channels of the censors. The entire palace was searched; even the pockets of the pope's cassock; all that was in the study, in the bedroom including the papers where the pope jotted his notes, the book of prayers of Our Lady, pens and ink well were seized. As a precaution, they also took away the pastoral signet ring (because the fisherman's ring had already been taken away from him) so that he would not be able to issue a decree or documents. However, before giving them the ring, the Pope destroyed the signet himself. Dr. Porta, the Pope's physician, was allowed contact with the Pope and this was only because he was spying on him for the police. It is worth identifying some of the Pope's secret messengers. The gardener, Francesco Falco, used to bring him messages and take back his replies hidden among the cabbages. Francesco Galleano, a stone mason carried the dispatches in a hidden compartment in the sole of his shoes. Paola Olivieri, who used to clean his rooms, brought in messages hidden in her thick hairstyle or in the corset of her bodice and then put them between the pope's sheets as well as taking back with her any messages left there by the Pope. All this was possible because Pius VII asked for permission to receive the poor and humble people who wanted to visit him and there was always a regular flow of common people. This, over time, would lead

*Council* in Paris for June 1811 to nominate new bishops without the authority of the Pope.

Since the Pope firmly opposed, Napoleon first expected to Pope to go to Avignon<sup>23</sup>, the new Papal Seat, then he explicitly asked him with insulting words to resign:

“It is a pity that a Pope, who could do much for the Church, has brought only disaster! Therefore, I declare that the Concordat is no longer binding on the Empire. Moreover, tell Pius VII that it would be better if he were willing to vacate the pontifical seat, so that it can be occupied by a man, saner in mind and principles and who would be able to repair all the damage done in all the countries of Christian faith.”

Again, Pope Pius VII replied with dignity:

“Napoleon tends to turn Peter’s successor into a beggar, but I will never degrade the Holy See. He thinks he can dominate me by imprisoning me, but he is wrong. I am old and soon he will only hold prisoner the corpse of a poor imprisoned priest”.<sup>24</sup>.

Soon, Napoleon left France for the Russian Campaign, a campaign that marked the decline of the Emperor. Napoleon left in May 1812 but before doing so, he made sure that Pius VII was well guarded for fear that, in his absence, the British fleet would come to free the Pope.

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to the establishment of papal audiences. Because of his isolation, the Pope could receive neither food nor shopkeepers and thus frequently ended up hungry. So, the people of Savona left packets of biscuits and parcels of food for him along the walls of the garden of the palace where he was imprisoned.

<sup>23</sup> To be exact, he had already been taken there once before

<sup>24</sup> CARLO CASTIGLIONI, *Napoleone e la Chiesa Milanese (dal 1783 al 1818)*, A.R.A. Milano 1934, 250

So, on the 21st March 1812, the by now elderly\_Pope was deported from Savona to Fontainebleau <sup>25</sup>.

On his return from the disastrous Russian Campaign, Napoleon, needing something to strengthen his shaky throne, tore up what the Pope called a *draft Agreement* but which Napoleon had published as an authentic document on the 25<sup>th</sup> January 1813 even though Pius VII had withdrawn it after 3 days.

Since Napoleon had done all this in secret, after three months (14<sup>th</sup> March 1813), the Pope wrote an article against the Agreement and publicly refused to acknowledge it.

Meanwhile, Napoleon's luck was running out and on the 16<sup>th</sup> October of the same year, he was defeated at Leipzig by the *Seventh Coalition*. Napoleon tried to make peace with the Pope

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<sup>25</sup> Napoleon ordered that the Pope was to leave in a carriage dressed "as a simple priest", wearing a black cassock and accompanied only by his personal doctor. It was also ensured that, during the journey, the carriage travelled through the larger cities of Turin, Chambery and Lyons only at night. Thus, on the night between the 9th and the 10th June, the Pope was put in a carriage, which had wheels lined with cloth and driven by horses whose hoofs had been removed not to awaken the people. To hide the fact that the Pope had been deported, the changing of the guards in front of the Episcopate where the Pole had been imprisoned was carried on for a few days. The government agent also came every day to the palace, provisions were delivered daily and the food was even cooked in the kitchen. Every day, a valet lit the candles for Mass which the Pope said privately (as soon as the candles were lit the people had to leave because this was a sign that the Pope was about to enter the room to say Mass). The journey was disastrous to the extent that the monks had to give the Pope Extreme Unction at the Hospice of Moncenisio, while the doctor did not do anything to assist the Pope because he seemed close to death. However, in compliance with the orders given, the Pope, immediately after receiving Extreme Unction, was carried to the carriage that had been modified to carry a stretcher. The Pope reached Fontainebleau on the 19th June 1812. At first, he was set up in a little house on the outskirts of the city, then in the Senator's Palace and later in the Royal Castle

and allowed him to return to Rome<sup>26</sup> but by that time it was too late: and Napoleon abdicated in the same castle of Fontainebleau (6<sup>th</sup> April 1813) and moved to the island of Elba. Pius VII went triumphantly back to Rome where he arrived on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1814.<sup>27</sup>

A few months later (7<sup>th</sup> August 1814) by the Bull *Sollicitudo omnium Ecclesiarum*<sup>28</sup> the Company of Jesus (Jesuits) was solemnly refounded: This seemed to be a sign that the Church did not want to fear princes any more, furthermore it confirmed its liberty<sup>29</sup> and her kind of charity: Pius VII welcomed Napoleon's old mother, a poor refugee who nobody wanted, to Rome and he always treated her with dignity till her death.

### **The cult of the Emperor; Saint Napoleon**

After the “coup d’etat” of the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1804 that gave Napoleon the title of Emperor, he crowned himself Emperor in Notre Dame on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1804 and forced the Pope to attend the ceremony even though the Pope did not participate in any way<sup>30</sup>. Soon after, France witnessed the first instance of

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<sup>26</sup> Most probably, Napoleon wanted to prevent the allied forces from marching to Fontainebleau, so that he would boast of being the one to free the Pope. The Pope was again taken back to Savona, but this time in triumph (23 January – 6th February 1814). When he arrived in Savona, the people freed the horses and pulled the carriage by hand.

<sup>27</sup> In remembrance of this, the new feast of Our Lady of Assistance was instituted

<sup>28</sup> Text in: UGO BELLOCCHI, *Tutte le encicliche e i principali documenti pontifici emanate dal 1740*, 2 Citta' del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994,392-395

<sup>29</sup> For further reading about this Company refer to :GIACOMO MARTINA, *Storia della Compagnia di Gesu' in IAtalia* (1814-1983),Brescia,Morcelliana, 2003 (written by MARCO IMPAGLIAZZO, “l'Osservatore Romano”, 1st October 2003,8)

<sup>30</sup> The series of events for propagandistic reasons show the Pope blessing the hero. On the other hand, it was humiliating enough for the Pope to



“personal worship”; something which may be considered as normal in a dictatorial government but which could also excellently serve to help religion.

In this sense – it was like an old pagan ritual under a false catholic name – lives the *fabrication, the deceit* – the feast of St. Napoleon was fixed for the first time for the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1806, on the same day as the most popular feast of the Assumption.<sup>31</sup>

Napoleon wanted for himself the worship given to the Assumption and furthermore in 1811, he erected a statue of himself on one of the spires of the Duomo in Milan!

### **The cult of the Emperor; *The Napoleonic Catechism***

Of particular significance is the Napoleonic Catechism, approved in disdain by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montecuccoli Caprara (1802 – 1810) Archbishop of Milan in October 1806 and later passed on to the Italian states belonging to the Emperor.<sup>32</sup>

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be present to watch a lay auto proclamation where usually he was the one to crown the Emperor with Imperial dignity

<sup>31</sup> It happened also to be Napoleon’s birthday and a Bishop was found to endorse this initiative: ref. NIERO ANTONIO, *Riflessi liturgici dell’eta’ napoleonica a Venezia: il culto di san Napoleone e sue connessioni*, “*Ricerca di Storia Sociale e Religiosa*” 55 (1999) 67 – 91.

<sup>32</sup> *Catechismo ad uso di tutte le Chiese del Regno d’Italia*, Edizione originale ed autentica, Stamperia Reale, Milano 1807. With regards to Imperial Catechism see: ANDRE’LATREILLE, *Le catéchisme impérial del 1806. Etudes et documents pour servir á l’histoire des rapports de Napoléon e du clergé concordataire*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1935; ROSA PESCHINI, *La polemica sul Catechismo napoleonico e una confutazione romana di esso*, “*Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia!*” 17 (1963) 406-412; FRANCESCO PISTOIA, *Nota sul Catechismo imperiale del 1806*, *Rivista di Letteratura e di Storia Ecclesiastica*” 8 (1976) 299-313

It is worth reading the famous *Seventh reading* about *the Fourth Commandment*:

Q: What are the duties of the Christians towards the Princes who govern them, and what are our particular duties towards Napoleon I, our Emperor and King?

A: The Christians must show the Princes who govern them and we in particular must show Napoleon I, our Emperor and King, love, respect, obedience, fidelity, military service, the impositions ordered to defend the throne. We must pray fervently for his health, and for the spiritual and earthly prosperity of the state.

Q: Why are we obliged to observe these duties towards our Emperor?

A: First, because God created Empires and distributes them according to His will, showering our Emperor with gifts both in times of war and peace. God made him our sovereign, His minister and is His image on earth. To serve and honour the Emperor is therefore to honour and serve God Himself. Secondly, because our Lord Jesus Christ, by His teaching and examples, taught us what we owe to our sovereign. He was born to obey Caesar Augustus's edict; He paid taxes and ordered that one should give to God what belongs to God and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

Q: Are there any no particular reasons why we should be closely attached to Napoleon I, our Emperor?

A: Yes, because in difficult situations God inspired him to be able to restore the public cult of the holy religion of our fathers and to be its

protector. With his profound wisdom, he re-established and maintained public order. He strongly protects the state and because he was consecrated by the Pope, he has become the anointed one of God. Being an Emperor, he is also the head of the Universal Church, and by means of his Excellency the Cardinal Bishop of Milan, he became King of Italy.

Q: What should we think of those who fail to do their duty towards the Emperor?

A: According to St. Paul, they go against the orders of God Himself and deserve eternal damnation.

I do not think any comments are necessary. Above all, this text will help us understand some of the passages of the Bull of Canonisation of St. Angela Merici.

## **The suppression of the “traditional” Religious Orders**

Although the French Concordat of 1801 did not mention anything about the Religious Orders, we find the continuous scheming of the Consul – Emperor who on one part continued to suppress<sup>33</sup> and on the other approved what was beneficial to the state. Examples of this are nuns working in hospitals or the Foreign Ministries because they were needed in the French colonies and members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul teaching in the seminaries. Even this was a blessing because it gave a new identity to religious life. Members of Religious Orders were (thus) not only associated with enclosed monastic

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<sup>33</sup> The Fathers of the Faith, whose order was tolerated in 1802 but suppressed in 1807; the Sulplezian Society suppressed in 1810 and the Trappist Monks who were disbanded in 1811 after they were protected on condition that they would welcome the soldiers who happened to be on their way to their convents, and also help the soldiers who were being transferred from on battalion to another

life but also with the love and well being of others; with being of service to the humble and with the intellectual and catechistic formation of individuals. That is what Pius VII meant by the words “a wealth for the Company of St. Ursula”; it was like a prophetic intuition of St. Angela.

It is worth noting that after defeating the Fifth Coalition and capturing Vienna in 1809, Napoleon was at the height of his glory. On the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1809, he divorced his wife Giuseppina and married the Austrian Emperor’s daughter Marie Louise with the approval of the French clergy. On the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1811, Marie Louise would give birth to Napoleon 11 (20<sup>th</sup> March 1811) heir to the throne and King of Rome.

In his delirious state of omnipotence, he expected to Pope to hand over the canonical establishment to the bishops he had chosen and entrusted some bishops, led by Giovanni Battista Montecuccoli Caprara, Archbishop of Milan, to present his request.

The Pope firmly refused<sup>34</sup> and on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1810, the Emperor angrily reacted by declaring the Pope a simple citizen although allowing him a few privileges<sup>35</sup>.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1810, the French took over the control of all the religious orders, except those who took care of the hospitals and charitable institutions. This was a very hard blow for the Catholic Church because this applied to the orders taken over

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<sup>34</sup> The reply to Cardinal Caprara, whom the Emperor had ordered to intervene can be read in CARLO CASTIGLIONI *Napoleone e la Chiesa Milanese (dal 1783 al 1818)*, A.R.A. Milano 1933,223-225

<sup>35</sup> On the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1810, Napoleon imposed the *Senatusconsulto*, depriving the Pope of his existing authority. As a result, the heir to the French throne would be given the title of “King of Rome”. The Pope would be allowed to make use of two palaces, one in Rome, the other in Paris and would receive the sum of two million Francs. On his election, he had to pledge acceptance of the French Princes. The Pope could not nominate any Bishop but still retained the authority to rule over them (canonical institution)

in all the countries forming part of the Empire. In Spain, under the rule of Joseph Bonaparte, a third of the existing convents were taken over and it was also prohibited to accept new novices until the number of existing religious orders was decreased by a third. The same Joseph Bonaparte suppressed 265 convents in the Kingdom of Naples and his successor and brother in law Joachim Murat closed 1,250.

However, we know that some contemplative orders managed to survive as a result of ingenious imagination; some by changing their name or by voluntarily becoming charitable institutions. For example, the nuns of the Carmelite Cloister changed the name to *Sisters of St. Theresa* and that sufficed for their order not to be suppressed. Now it was necessary to try to find new ways of consecrating oneself wholly to the love of God and fellow men.

The testimony of St. Angela Merici was what was needed. One could love and serve God through fellow men without the stereotype patterns and discipline of the Religious Orders. It is important to note that the discipline of “cloistral”, “separation” and detachment from the world was only imposed with such severity and austerity because of a noted period of decadence and after the Council of Trent

One must also remember that earlier on, Joseph II of the Habsburg Empire (1741 – 1790) also declared himself the head of the church in all his states and, in a similar manner, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic oppression brought about the curtailment of the Church’s temporal powers and a new charismatic privilege. The latter had earlier been redeemed and given back to consecrated life by the Council of Trent. However, it had also brought out a significant separate form of consecration pleasing to the Lord. This was not so clearly understood at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but would become absolutely clear during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Pius VII, enlightened by the Light that guides Popes, perceived this and proposed the form of consecration modelled by Angela Merici with enthusiasm. She had found a form of privileged charismatic consecration and with her testimony, shown another way of belonging wholly to God that was already bearing fruit. This could be seen through the “80 young women and 5 widows” who had joined Angela Merici in the first year she founded the Company which “would live forever” as predicted by St. Angela on her deathbed. This was also repeated by Pius VII in the Bull <sup>36</sup> as if to remind Ursulines in the XIX century that they would be present in every century.

## **FOR WHOM DOES POPE PIUS VII CANONISE?**

### **THE TEACHINGS OF PIUS VII**

We have now come to answer the third question which I put at the very beginning and which I have divided in two parts.

Pius VII certainly had a project in mind of which the canonizations held in May 1807 formed part.

Their “exemplary life” was aimed at whom? For whose sake was it? Here we must probe Pope Pius VII’s pastoral project, his pontificate not from the political or social point of view but from the religious and pastoral perspectives. In order to keep to the point, I will quote from the Bull of canonization the pastoral themes that the Pope highlighted, feeling that these were important and which he intended to propose to the Church of his time and of the future.

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<sup>36</sup> Bull n.9

## **The importance that should be given to the Formation of Youths.**

As can be noticed from the Bull of Canonisation, Pius VII stressed on the importance that should be given to the character formation of boys and girls.

Educating or better still teaching youngsters was not expected in either the times of Angela Merici or those of Pope Pius VII. Above all, teaching young women was given no importance whatsoever, because of the poverty that existed and which increased rapidly after the industrial revolution.

This poverty was also strongly felt in Religion; the verbal teaching of catechism was, as we say today “in crisis” because of the insufficient traditional textbooks and because of the difficulties to write new ones.

In the first case one must remember that the catechism of Roberto Bellarmino<sup>37</sup> in Italy and that of Pietro Canisio for the German area<sup>38</sup> were inadequate for the new requirements of the time and the dischristianization of masses brought about by the revolution.<sup>39</sup>

In assessing the difficulties to write new books, one can recall the friction that was created in Milan between Archbishop Pozzobonelli and the Imperial Viennese Government when the Archbishop of Milan refused the jurisdictional catechism of Pietro Tamburini and Giuseppe Zola and Maria Teresa prohibited the use of that of Bellarmino. Similarly, we may remember the text by the Bishop of Mondovi, Michele Casati

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<sup>37</sup> Who, ordered by Pope Clement V111, composed his *Dottrina Crisiana breve da impararsi a mente* in 1597, and in 1597 followed *Dichiarazione piu' copiosa della Dottrina Cristiana* addressed to catechists

<sup>38</sup> The Italian translation appeared in 1563. The first German edition was made in Vienna in 1554 with the title *Summa Doctrinae Christianae*

<sup>39</sup> With regards to catechisms used during the XV111 century ii is still valid the study of FRANCESCO GUSTA, *Sui Catechismi moderni. Saggion critico-teologico*, Ferrara, 1788

<sup>40</sup>, published in 1765, but which was not made much use of because it was not based on the *Catechism* of Pius X. The same thing happened to the *Catechism based on the ideas of Antonio Rosmini*.<sup>41</sup>

One must also keep in mind the tragedy of the *Imperial* or *Napoleonic Catechism*. The enforcement of its use was as devastating as the disorder that followed its rapid failure and which accentuated the seriousness of the problem; the difficulty of presenting the Christian faith in a way that was “fitting for the times and for the future”.

It might be interesting to note that Cardinal Caprara decreed the publication of the *Imperial Catechism* in October 1806 a few months before the canonization of Angela Merici. If we keep in mind that Pope Pius VII strongly opposed the Archbishop of Milan, we can say that when the Pope insisted on the importance of verbal teaching of catechism, he was also worried because the church had given in to political powers and the naïve if not incorrect experiments that followed.

Yet Pius VII immediately understood the importance of education and character formation in general. (This is quite evident) As could also be seen in his encyclical published when he was still on the island of St. George in Venice on the 15th March 1800.

In this encyclical, the Pope had appealed greatly to the bishops to promote formation and verbal teaching of catechism especially to young people willingly.

“ *It is necessary that you “give a shepherd’s care to the flock of God that is entrusted to you”*”

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<sup>40</sup> PIETRO STELLA, Casati Michele, IN Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani 21 (1978) 262-265; MICHELE CASATI, Compendio della Dottrina Cristiana, Mondovi’, Baldassarre Rossi, 1765

<sup>41</sup> ANTONIO ROSMINI-SERVATI, *Catechismo* disposto secondo l’ordine delle idee, Dalmazzo, Torino 1863, V11. One can also see the recent edition of ENRICO CASTELLI in *Opere* edited ed inedited XVI, Padova 1973, 1-129 with a lot of bibliography



(1Pt. 5,2); but above all children and youths beg for our constant zealous vigilant paternal love and care. Those children and youths were warmly recommended to us by Jesus Christ so that we could guide them by our words and example (Mt. 19; Mk. 10; Lk. 18). Those children and youths whose hearts and minds many tried to poison and corrupt by scheming, working hard to destroy public and private institutions and to curb their divine and human right. It is in this grave undertaking that they put all their hopes. We are also aware that young children and youths resemble soft wax which is easily be given form and shape and once this shape hardens it is not easy for them to acquire another as they refuse all else.

Quoting the saying taken from the scriptures “*Give a lad a training suitable to his character, and even when old, he will not go back on it.*” (Prov. 22. 6) Venerable brothers, let us not then allow that “*the children of this world are more astute in dealing with their own kind than are the children of light*”. (Lk. 16,8)

Watch carefully over those to whose care children and youth are entrusted in seminaries and colleges, follow the kind of teaching they are given, which teachers are chosen to teach in high schools and what kind of lessons are delivered; follow carefully, question and investigate every single thing, refuse and drive off the “*fierce wolves that will invade you and will have no mercy on the flock*”. (Acts 20,29)

and if by chance they manage to creep in, drive them out.”<sup>42</sup>

A careful reading of this encyclical brings to mind concepts and words that are found in the Bull of Canonization of St. Angela. This was therefore one of the urgent, pressing, precious value which Pius VII attributed to the new saint and I am sure he was aiming at this solicitude. An urgency that never failed.

### **A spirituality that is not Jansenistic, but aimed to recover one’s serenity**

A second aspect found in the Bull of Canonisation is the way the saint was praised for instilling serenity, faith and encouragement in others. This is important due to the stern spirituality in the times of Angela Merici.

This was something unexpected during the times of St. Angela and during the period of the canonization. We all know that the 18<sup>th</sup> century was particularly dominated by the phenomenon of spiritual *Jansenism* which strictly tended to favour pessimism. It must be made clear that I wrote “denominated” not “characteristic” of the 18<sup>th</sup> century because a healthy spirituality for God’s chosen people was very important.

The best way to give an idea of the Jansenistic spirituality and teaching would be by quoting the imaginary “Prayer of the Jansenistic Priest”, written by Arturo Carlo Jemolo:

“Lord, I lead a small flock, this was Your will; you gave only to a few persons the gift of perseverance, You have really selected the chosen few; many refused to give in to Your laws. They were held back by a sinful desire, a

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<sup>42</sup> Encyclical *Diu satis*, 15th May 1800. Taken from :UGO BELLOCCHI, *Tutte le encicliche e i principali documenti pontifici emanate dal 1740*, 2 Citta’ del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994,334-340:337

greed that made them want to understand more of the mysteries than that which You wanted to revealed to them; they did not want to bow down to Your mysterious justice. A covetousness that did not allow them to give in to Your Laws.

Today, the world is full of tempters who distort Your words praising man's pride by saying that to reach You one must walk a simple, wide path, making it easier to serve You and Mammon. All this made it easier for me to let go of those who once belonged to my flock and are now lost.

The few I am offering You are the just, they are those who have fervently loved You every day of their life, surpassing all the lust and greed. They have managed to break away from all that is desirous, flattering and binding to human affection; then they fell again into temptation because no one is perfect. But they have atoned painfully for their failure, grieved for their mistakes, every time they failed they rose again because Your mercy was greater than their sins and Your love drove away all lust.

Father, since You have shown mercy to a few, You can receive them in Your Kingdom, because they are just and pure as any man can be.”<sup>43</sup>

Knowing that St. Angela's spirituality is so diverse, I am going to quote a few expressions from her *Spiritual Testament*:

“Let us treat God gently! My most loving mothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, strive with

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<sup>43</sup> ARTURO CARLO JEMOLO, *Il giansenismo in Italia prima della Rivoluzione*, Laterza, Bari 1928, 93-98

the help of God to grasp and keep in yourselves such conviction and good sentiment. Listen to Jesus Christ who counsels; “For I am gentle and humble in heart” (Mt 11,29); and one reads about God “to govern the world in holiness and saving justice” (Ws. 8, 1) and again Jesus said: “Yes my yoke is easy and my burden light. (Mt. 11,30) So you must strive to use all possible gentleness”.

I believe that the difference is clear to see. Pius VII insisted on this point of goodness as we already saw in the historic part that precedes his election as Pope. Then, he recommended; “Be good enough Christians and you will also be democratic.” To him, there was no incompatibility between striving hard in worldly things and Christian coherence.

What was important to Pius VII was to be consistently faithful, to give testimony with conviction by the way of life you lead and not by etiquette, uniforms, veils or habits. To be recognised by your actions that you were a Christian was to lead with conviction a life based on the teaching of the gospels. He saw all this in the spirituality of St. Angela Merici and perhaps it was even for this that he wanted her to be canonized. The Pope did not want us to fear God but to love Him in such a way as to be able to deal with the challenges of the new world that was approaching; a world full of optimism and promise for a better future, as would actually happen later on.

### **The innovative value of Religious Orders**

I have also to recall a third element that justifies a current hope that Pius VII set before the church when he proposed the figure of St. Angela. This is closely connected to the shocking suppressions of Religious Orders during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which went on until the fall of communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To a certain extent, these are still carried out

today in an underhanded manner by efforts to destroy the dignity of a consecrated person. This is carried out in a sad and mean way through articles published in the media to protect the interests of powerful persons.

Unfortunately, this is an old habit. Pius VII hoped for a renewal in consecrated lives, which would surpass the rigid forms of the past and on the other hand escape the stifling controls of the systems of agreements between the church and the state, an old phrase that today would be defined as Totalitarian rule

I have already mentioned this point. The canonisation of Angela Merici could have been an indication of a new way of life for those young women who strongly desired to consecrate themselves to God but were hindered by the strict, rigid, civil rules or by the perception that the time for traditional religious lives was over.

They were girls and young women who desired to belong wholly to God, as there will always be; because the church ontologically and theologically needs both consecrated men and women. If it were not possible to consecrate one's life to God, if consecrated life had no meaning, this would imply that God was not "all" and that He did not want to be "all" for men, "all" for me.

It is always necessary that there is at least one consecrated man or woman who can state with conviction and sincerity that God is all he/she needs and that nothing else matters. It is only if this consecrated person exists that one can sustain that God has created us for Himself and that He is the goal human beings must aim.

This prophesy was entrusted by Pius VII to the disciples of Angela Merici, so that, by the singularity of their life in the world yet engulfed in the love of God, they can guard this essential need of the church and of God. Yes even of God

because He needs to help man understand that He is his all and it is only through God that man's worried mind can find peace. So let the daughters of Angela Merici never forget that happiness and the salvation of the world; justice and peace, human respect which today is oppressed by the western culture threatening death and blinded by the refusal of God depends on them.

The words of Pius VII to Napoleon are still fitting for the present time as they were then:

“Even if they were to cut me to pieces or skin me alive, be sure that in spite of all my suffering the church will never die”.

They are the same words (expressed by) of the modern prophet, Oscar Romero, in his interview with the Dominican friar Juan Carmelo Garcia on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 1980, 15 days before his death:

“I was often threatened by death. Still as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection; if I am killed, I will rise again. If they manage to kill me, I will bless and forgive them. I only wish to convince them that they are only wasting their time! A Bishop will die, but the Church of God, that is, the people, will never perish.”

These are inexhaustible words, true even today, which perhaps we may have to repeat soon with the courage of martyrs.

### **Summing up**

To sum up the spiritual project of Pius VII, the canonization of Angela Merici recalls the words from the first letter of St. John, the apostle of love, goodness, and brotherhood which focuses on youths:

“I have written to you, young people, because you are strong and God’s word remains in you, and you have overcome the evil one”. (1 Jn. 2,14)

This is the “word” that the young people of the time of Pius VII had to acknowledge.

John addresses the adults, both men and women who “have come to know the one who has existed since the beginning” (1 Jn. 2,14) and are very familiar with the beloved face as well as the new and old commandment: “Anyone who loves his brother remains in light and there is in him nothing to make him fall away (1 Jn. 2,10)

This is what Pius VII wished for when he proposed St. Angela as an example; that her followers would inspire everyone towards charity, encourage love to all humanity, now and in the future

### **The fruits of the Canonization; the new Institutes**

There remains only one final point to contemplate; I will only briefly touch upon it to bring out its significance, relevant methodology and the wish to encourage a new current and future point of reference and research.

It all began by observing some dates, and the increasing number of religious orders that existed in the 19th century; these were already premonitory signs during the French Revolution.

Let us take the Nuns of Charity of St. Joan Antide Thouret (1765 – 1826) who distinguished themselves for being a charitable and teaching institution and for caring for the people on the fringe of society. If we give this some thought, we can see the similarity between this and the *Spiritual Testament* of Saint Angela:

“It is only Jesus Christ that we have followed everywhere. We only look at Him; we only think of Him; we only offer ourselves to Him. At the

feet of Jesus Christ, I draw all the strength I need.

I have put all my trust in Him.”

It was this woman who, at the height of the French Revolution and at the same time that Pius VII was a prisoner at Landeron in Rue de Matelots, opened a free school on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 1799. Close to the school that was soon full of girls, she also opened a small pharmacy and a dispensary for the poor clearly demonstrating that charity does not only limit itself to what is necessary.

Similar to the nuns of Joan Antide even in name were The Daughters of Charity or Helpers of the Poor, later named Canossiane (1808).

It was only the beginning and since only God knows the number of Religious orders (perhaps, not even He does), I will only mention a few I got to know of as a priest of St. Ambrose. I recall the *Ursulines of St. Charles* whose rules were reconstructed by Cardinal Gasiruck in 1824 in Milan to have the specific function of working with girls and thus differentiating them from the order founded before by St. Charles that had more “normal” characteristics.

I recall the *Nuns of the Child Mary* or *Sisters of Charity* (1832) that Fr. John Bosio, urged by Bartolomea Capitanio and Vincenza Gerosa, encouraged to take care of the girls without bothering with habits or monastic life. They were to dress simply and with dignity unlike the nuns of that time and, most of all, they had to sleep close to the girls to act as their mothers. This was “revolutionary”; it might have seem “worldly” but, like the other congregations, had a stunning effect. Finally, women had found a modern way of being in love with God and their fellow men.

Following the same lines we can mention the *Sisters of Saint Joseph* (Turin, in charge of prisoners 1833); the *Nuns of St. Anne* (Turin) founded by he Marquees Barolo (1834); the *Nuns of St. Marcella* called *Marcelline* (1838), founded by



Mons Luigi Biraghi who originally intended to found them according to the rule of the Daughters of St. Angela and it is not by chance (that the *Marcelline* were originally) they were called *Ursulines of St. Marcellina*.

A story or better still an inspiration, that extends all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I remember the *Nuns of the Precious Blood* in Monza (1876) founded by the Venerable Maria Bucchi, as a teaching institution for girls who managed to put together the original idea of the institution of the order and that of the Canossiane to lead a Mercian community life.

I remember the nuns of Reparation founded by Carlo Salerio in Milan who also wore simple, honest clothes as worn by the ladies of the time, that sufficed to win them respect as nuns; their original name in fact was the *Pius Ladies submissive to the Reparation*.

The list is sufficient as a conclusion.

The numerous orders of Consecrated Life, a term I prefer to use instead of Religious orders, make me ponder. Consecrated Life is characterised by a threefold charismatic strain (missionary, charitable, formative) and by a threefold spiritual characteristic; Marian (or familiar to see to the spiritual needs of the family), of intercession (for the devotion of the Sacred Heart or the Most Precious Blood) and Eucharistic (for primary importance given to the Holy Sacrament).

This all started at the beginning of the century of which it became a characteristic. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a woman was canonized; this seemed to bring about something that in the years to come; many other women and men adopted and put into practice.

This is what Pius VII had hoped for when he was convinced that holiness was “an example” to others, that the saints are given to us for us to follow their example. In proposing figures of heroic holiness, he, the Pope, would urge others and many a generous person to follow (in their footsteps) on their track

which (in reality) means following in the footsteps of Chris who had called them, (as He is calling us today) and today He is calling us to learn from Him, as St. Angela Merici did, He who is” gentle and humble of heart”. It was surely not by chance that she often repeated the phrase in the *Spiritual Testament* she left to her daughters.

There is no other way to obey the Lord other than to love our fellow brothers and sisters. There is no other way that “your joy may be complete” (Jn.15,11), (something)which was promised to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, unless we put into practice what He commanded “This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn 15,12).

## **Roma, Basilica of Saint Peter, May 24, 2007**

### ***Opening greeting from the President***

Two hundred years ago, on May 24, 1807, the Holy Father Pius VII, “following the wishes of all, on the Feast of the Holy Trinity ... decreed and established that ... Angela Merici, whose outstanding innocence of life, heroic virtue and miracles were already recognized by all, would be inscribed among the virgin saints and be honored and venerated by all the faithful of Christ with a religious cult...”

These are some expressions contained in the Bull of Canonization of “Blessed Angela Merici – Foundress of the Company of Saint Ursula.”

With a spirit grateful to Holy Mother Church, we desire to commemorate this event, knowing how to interpret the sentiments of immense filial gratitude of so many “daughters”, in secular life and religious life, who in Saint Angela recognize their Mother and who, in the course of the centuries, have lived the Merician charism with fidelity and creativity.

Present for today’s Eucharistic liturgy are Daughters of Saint Angela, secular and religious, coming from Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Malta; from Congo, Cameroun, Madagascar, Canada, the United States, Brazil, Indonesia, Singapore, India; members of the faithful, Associates, Priests, Ecclesiastical Assistants and Friends.

I am thankful that so many are participating in this ceremony and for all those who can follow it through television.

Heartfelt thanks to His Excellency the Very Reverend Bishop Comastri, who has joyfully welcomed our desire and

who is presiding at this Eucharistic celebration, and to Bishop Simon of the Archdiocese of Gitega in Burundi.

**Eucharistic Celebration**  
**held at the main altar of St. Peter's Basilica**  
**presided by His Eminence Mons. Angelo Comastri**  
**the Pope's Vicar General for the Vatican City**

**The Welcoming speech and homily**

**The welcoming speech**

I welcome you all in St. Peter's Basilica, the heart of the Catholic Church, you who have come to bless the Lord who, through the teachings of a humble lady, have lit up and still warm the hearts of many people.....

Remembering the saints does not mean unveiling a plaque in their memory. Remembering the saints has a deeper meaning; that of putting them as role models and imitating them. We do not always do so, so let us humbly ask forgiveness!

**Homily**

1. The life of St. Angela Merici, a simple and humble lady is a fulfilment of Christ's words: "*I bless you Father, the Lord of heaven and earth for hiding these things*" (the important things with regards to the works of God) "*from the learned and the clever*" (those who are proud and self sufficient) "*and revealing them to little children (.....)*". (Mt. 11, 25-26). God works great things with little children, (that is) persons who are

not full of pride. Our Lady is the first and the greatest example of how God works and prompted by the words Elizabeth said to her she replied: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord (she acknowledges the greatness of God) and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour because He has looked upon the humbleness of his servant.*” This is how God works!!

In his first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul also says: *“God chose those who by human standards are weak to shame the strong: those who by human standards are common and compatible – indeed those who count for nothing”* (1 Co. 1 26 – 27).

These are God’s ways: He works great things through humble persons. St. Angela Merici is a moving, convincing and evident proof of this.

2. First, blessed by the knowledge which comes from allowing the Holy Spirit to fill one’s heart, Angela Merici understood that God was in favour of “the company” that is convergency of the hearts and the closeness (unity) of the persons. Christ was clear in His statement *“In truth I tell you once again, if two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them.* “(Mt 18, 19-20).

God, the Indivisible Trinity does not like individualism: individualists are sterile when it comes to pastoral care!!

Angela Merici wanted the Company, and she named it after St. Ursula. Why? Most probably, she was influenced by her Christian upbringing; at home, she had heard her father Giovanni relating the story of St. Ursula; how she had managed to bring together 11,000 young women and how together they

defended virginity and were witnesses of their faith. This influenced Angela Merici a lot because a little light is enough to show the right path to follow to those who have faith..

3. What is the meaning of Angela Merici's story to us today? A story which happened so long ago yet is actual and modern.

Today we live in a society which seems to exclude God altogether; and, from the look of things, we can understand that we are moving away from secularization and the teachings of Christ's Gospels. In his letter "*Novo millennio ineunte*" John Paul II firmly and clearly declared: "*Today, even in countries who have been converted to Christianity many years ago people, as a result of all their weaknesses, do not turn to God and the Evangelic values to change their lives.*"(n.40).

Today we do not live anymore in Christian countries!!

Therefore, think how important it is today in these circumstances to find persons having deep rooted Evangelic values living among people who do not believe or do not yet know Christ and His teaching rather than closed up in a convent.

In the secularised cities, it is necessary that the Evangelic yeast is thrown in with the dough of the world and that the light of Christ moves closer to darkness to enlighten it.

Today priests need lay people to pave the way for them, persons who by their way of living, their silent speech and their example, pre evangelise and draw others towards Christ and the teaching of the Gospels.

Without knowing, St. Angela Merici paved the way to an apostolic mission which took its course through time and, surprisingly, is still actual. Be aware of this responsibility and make sure your lamp is lit, a lamp which was handed down to you through faith from one generation to another.

4. St. Angela has something beautiful today with regards to living your virginity in the world, in the secular life, close to the families who need to re discover the meaning and main source of love.

Virginity only confirms that God is the primary love of life. He is the love from which we can draw every other form of love, the source from which we show affection towards others.

Even this is an extraordinary statement; if we want to hear how to love we have only one teacher to up to, God! Because God is Love! That is why the saints are real and great protagonists of love. Who loved his neighbours more than St. Francis of Assisi? Who was as generous as St. Vincent De Paul? Who has shown more love for others than Mother Theresa of Calcutta? And I repeat: Why? Because they were virgins and their heart was full of God and God is the only teacher of Love.

Therefore, when we pray to God we are not wasting our time, instead we find the light, the warmth, which allows us the time to find our bearing and make our life worthy to be filled with love.

Virginity reminds us that we all need a “virginal space” in our life: that is we need to reserve a place for God in our life..... to learn from Him how to Love.

Virginity also seriously calls us to take seriously the value of purity. Purity that is very often made fun of and literally fought against because it is considered an impediment to love.

It is not true; this is a very big lie!! Purity in fact allows us to love, to love truly.

This can be easily shown: if we are not masters of the situation and of our feelings we cannot give ourselves to anyone, but we make use of others to satisfy our egoism; that is all! It is purity that makes us capable of loving others! Because it makes us capable of giving ourselves to others. Today, love is at stake because purity is at stake.

Ghandi, who was not a Christian, wrote in his biography “Without purity we are like beasts: our sentiments become mud drains.”

And again “Purity gave me the strength to give my whole life for my people”.

These statements make us think.

Today, young people do not get married because they do not know how to love.

Or they get married but marriages do not last, not because love ceases but because love never existed in the first place. And it never existed because many young people do not know how to love. And they do not know how to love because they are not pure!



Your testimony today therefore is of the utmost importance to give love back to a society that risks losing it completely. St. Angel Merici, a strong and simple woman, will guide you to be faithful to your Charism.

# **ANGELA MERICI: A SANCTITY FOR TODAY**

**By Alberto Margoni\***

## **Introduction**

Celebrating the bi centenary of the canonization of Angela Merici is not only a remembrance of the decision taken by the highest Ecclesiastical authority of that time, to proclaim a woman who lived 250 years ago and with many revolutionary ideas, a saint and furthermore to be venerated by the faithful. It is a celebration to help us understand better the sequence of the events of Christ's life that she lived as her own. Her canonization is set as an example to us and at the same time stresses the importance of her charism today. Above all, it establishes that the Merician insight today is not only significant for the church and the world but moreover it offers a way of life to the Christian woman, no matter where she lives or works, to reach sanctity by uniting herself spiritually and intimately with Christ her spouse.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. The Christian is called to sanctity**

By being baptised, we are all called to sanctity as we are reminded in the *Lumen Gentium* No. 39. Yet, the word sanctity today seems to frighten many people, not only those who proclaim themselves Christians and Catholic and who lead their lives following various examples taken from the New Testament, but also among those who form part of our community. Maybe even those who formed part of the crowd in St. Peter's Square shouting: "Proclaim him Saint immediately" when God's humble servant Pope John Paul II passed away. When each one was invited to become holy, they showed little interest in pledging themselves fully to attain holiness and kept themselves apart. This estrangement to

sanctity can be attributed to the oleo graphic and stereotype image, which a few years ago was presented to the faithful and which made holiness unattainable and unpractical. In this way, only fearless and unblemished super heroes could attain holiness and such characters were hardly considered human. Moreover, today the person who really wants to become holy is still challenged with the ideas that holiness is hardly unattainable because one cannot compromise to live with his own surroundings, with the world around him and with his own history.

So many consider saints and those persons who have chosen to live apart from the world “spiritual escapists”, thus rendering themselves less human and Christian or uncomfortable people who are living in a world of their own away from the reality which surrounds them , intolerant and contradictory and unable to enjoy the pleasures of life.

But at the same time, in our un paradoxical and contradictory society there is a renewed interest in Saints. (Persons who are coming from other countries have to understand and keep in mind that I am basing and limiting this on my experiences because Italy is where I live and work). I am referring to a renewed interest, for example, in publications about the lives of saints, editorial serials, work supplements in magazines, even holy picture albums and collections of holy pictures of all times.

Once again, holiness cannot be considered as a static condition but as a dynamic reality; we are not born saints but we gradually learn to become so, thanks first of all to the graces received at our baptism, but also in answering to our call.

We have to keep in mind that holiness, even before being considered as a personal undertaking by the faithful and moreover by consecrated persons, is solely a gift from God and

is not given to us on our merits. He who calls us to become “as holy as He is holy” offers us sufficient graces to become Holy. So, on our part to become Holy, we have to reach out to the gifts which God is continually offering us in the church through the Sacraments to sustain our weakness.

## **2. Saints in the world and for the world**

In his first encyclical, “Deus Caritas est”, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us of an important truth: “He who moves closer to God, does not move away from men but instead grows even closer to them (n.42).” In truth, this can be really said of Angela Merici, who has changed secular life into an evident element of innovation and revolution and a desired operative ultimate aim of the company of St. Ursula.

Here is the first principle that leads us to say that St. Angela’s farsightedness and charism to live a consecrated life dedicated to God in the world not in a cloister, is still valid today as a means of becoming holy. It is far from a form of escapism from the world but a pledge to live the Gospels and to put God first and foremost in all we do every day for as long as we live, no matter who we are, whether lay or consecrated. This farsighted idea of St. Angela is found in the 3rd chapter of her rule “On the manner of behaving in public” which she modelled on the great mystery of the Incarnation while binding herself totally to the Word that was made Flesh, the Son of God, who became our brother and carried our human frailty by redeeming us by dying on the cross and rising triumphantly from death. What an absolute nearness! The ultimate solidarity with humanity! Moreover, the women belonging to the Company do not even wear a habit common to all, a distinctive sign of their total virginal congregation to the Spouse; this however does not mean that they are less bound to be “the yeast” in the society and in the church throughout the ages.

The way they eagerly care and are full of attention for others, without expecting anything in return and their gentle manners are a sign that by being spouses of Christ, they have found the treasure of God's love, which frees, urges and fulfils human nature.

Secular life is therefore not only a special characteristic of the Company but is moreover a theological cause. This was mentioned by Pope Benedict VXI on the 3rd February in his speech to the participants of the world conference for Secular Institutes <sup>2</sup> 60 years after the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Provvida Mater Ecclesia* by Pope Pius XI in which the Secular Institutes were given a theological juridical configuration.

“The Mystery of the Incarnation”, said Pope Ratzinger,” changes your participation in what happens to other human beings into a theological cause. In order to help a person gain salvation, one has to live with him in his difficulties, not fight against him”. Human nature shapes our lives, urges us for apostolic work and leads us on to what the Pope defines as “the journey towards holiness”. This has an itinerary with specific references: “the consecrated offering for the plan of salvation as revealed in the gospels; the acceptance of the way of life God has in store for us, seeking to accept God's will, believing that whatever happens to us is providential .

Speaking about providence to man today is meaningless to the sceptical lay persons who believe that they can temper with matters of science, technology and economy and with every aspect of human nature. However, this is only presumption, as can be frequently seen when man exploits and misuses nature, thus rendering it inhospitable to man himself and making him lose control of what he originally owned. Therefore, today we have to re discover God's providence because, notwithstanding

man's exploitation, it is only God who controls the world and works in silence for our well-being.

In our world, where all things come to an end all we need is God, but God has become part of the world, yet remaining a Supreme Being. Christ's life is a total battle against evil in the world, yet at the same time, He has made Himself one with the realities of life. It is therefore necessary to look for the face of God in the deepest parts of the world, which are the only ways and means of obtaining holiness; yet in becoming part of the world we are not lost but will "shine like stars in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Phil. 2:16). In other words, we must avoid being indifferent and lost in the world, or by looking at the positive side, we must bind ourselves to Martha and Mary to be contemplative and active.

### **3. The characteristics of the secular mission**

What are the characteristics of the secular mission? They are first of all the evidence of human virtues, of which the Merician writings are full. The most significant is "maternal love".

During our times, maternity is being considered in many cases as a right, not as a gift, as a desire to be fulfilled at all costs, and economically more importance is given to a woman's career. We might consider calling motherhood by the name of "substitute maternity" and surrogate mothers can easily be found. The daughters of St. Angela are called also to live the charism of maternal love, a charism that the founders of the Company marked with a sign of particular importance. In fact, Divo Barsotti <sup>3</sup> described her as "The greatest Italian saint to recognise the importance of the charism of maternal love".

A maternal love which is a vocation, chosen out of one's own free will, spiritual yet at the same time still bound to women's natural instincts (through contact, advice and actions). It aims

to help the person to reach interior maturity, to be fulfilled and see herself as the image and likeness of God; in answer to her call she becomes holy and is redeemed in the Risen Christ. A maternal love, which St. Angela defines as tender and caring but at the same time, firm and authoritative in admonishing and advising to avoid evil.

Today, when it seems that man has lost the ability to distinguish good from evil <sup>4</sup>, this has become a necessary task, and which Pope Benedict XVI often reminds us of. Where does the charism of maternal love come from? It comes from the love that exists between Christ and His spouses; a love which leads us to love one another. A person who occupies a post of authority and responsibility must not be authoritarian but must show respect and hold those under his care with esteem (in the Company, at work, in every day life). So even in correction, one must be moved solely by charity and by the sole zeal for soul. <sup>5</sup>

The life and behaviour of the leader must be a model to the daughters, this is maternal love.<sup>6</sup> It is in fact very difficult to expect others to do what the Leader does not do herself. This does not mean that she is superior to others or expects praise. In following them closely, she will help them in such a way that they may stir and spur themselves to virtuous living. Therefore, the leader must even have faith in those who seem to be less capable. <sup>7</sup>

If spiritual maternal love is considered the most important Merician Charism, this helps us to identify specific characteristics of the secular mission, like justice, peace and a happiness that follows after making Christ the centre of our life.

Besides, if your way of life justifies your good conduct you are an example to others and help to move them closer to Christ. As a result, human beings must be treated with dignity and

respect and not as objects in the fields of politics, economy, education, public health and scientific research, from the first instant of conception until natural death. During the February meeting, Pope Benedict XVI said, "You should involve yourselves in the suffering and in justice of others, likewise in the search for truth, beauty and kindness; not because you can solve all the problems, but because the different circumstances in which man lives and dies, offer you an opportunity to be witnesses of God's plan of Salvation".

#### **4. Living in the city: A pledge for testimony**

We will now discuss the importance of giving first preference to our testimony. Never before was it so important for a Christian or even more a consecrated person to feel the need of being called to live in the city and be the yeast that has the power to change, regenerate and lead persons to Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI said, "Your apostolic work should reach all mankind (.....) Be it in the Christian or the civil community, you must strive to do good, to communicate with all and be witness by your Christian behaviour to give sense to a disorientated and confused society, because of its multicultural and multi religious members."

And what a better place to draw a study of human nature than from the writings of Angela Merici, where a person is really the centre of importance because it is only through Christ and in our relation with others that our existence really finds meaning.

This is the real meaning of living in the city. There, where we find good and evil, holiness and sin, a reality that is confusing if not ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is in the city where man is privileged enough to meet God. It is built, inhabited, sanctified, consoled, made cheerful and saved by the Lord. Yet in it, we find human pride, confusion, idolatry, sin and misery.



In the very heart of the city, a Christian finds himself struggling to please God against evil. The lay consecrated person has to fight suffocating erotic deeds, the greed for money and the quest for power, with poverty, humility and purity (even if not bound by the vow of chastity). No monastery will help you pray better, nature will not give you serenity, and the walls of the cloister will not safeguard your virtues.<sup>8</sup>

The city that puts you to the test, purifies and sanctifies you. However, it is also a city where one can live, practise evangelic charity, and be a witness of Christian hope, which is so urgently needed by the world today. Even if it is true to say that St. Angela did not specify particular Apostolic and social pledges, the consecrated person who lives in the world like any other Christian is still called to generate hope in the places where she lives by her way of life and to practice Christ's charity. In the meeting which the church held in Verona on the 4th October, the Pope, in one of his early speeches, said, " We know it is not easy to hang on to our faith and to follow Christ, on the contrary it is a continuous battle. The church is therefore still a sign of contradiction in following Christ's footsteps. However, we must not lose hope, on the contrary we should always be ready with an answer when asked about our hope (....) We must answer "with courtesy, respect and with a clear conscience" (1Pt 3, 15 – 16), with that gentle strength which comes from our union with Christ. This must be shown by our thoughts, words, actions and behaviour."

Our testimony is given by all we do in our daily life; at home, at work, in the church, during festivities, in all that concerns our culture and citizenship. It is only by means of these various testimonies in the world that one can understand Christ's love for humanity when He gave in to His Father. In a similar way, the testimonies can be a proof of your saying yes to God's will. This yes involves man's freedom and

intelligence, his will and faith. Moreover, once we freely chose to say yes to consecrated life, we are able to give ourselves fully to God, and by having faith in Him we can bring joy to others in the world.

## **5. A project for life to be made known**

I have already quoted the Pope about public testimony. This helps me to touch on a last point and which helps me to go deeper into the theme I was asked to talk about, which is of utmost importance today, Communication. It is not my intention to be a sociologist or a mass media reporter. However, having had some limited experience when I assisted the Company of St. Ursula in the town where I live (This will be my starting point) helped me to consider and go deeper in the subject and come up with more mature ideas which I am now pointing out to you. I start by quoting the title of the article in a magazine that dealt deeply with the various aspects of religious life.<sup>9</sup> You will be right in stating that it does not concern you. However, I will touch briefly on this subject as an introduction. One of the articles was “A world out of this world”<sup>10</sup> and a paragraph discussed the theme “A world that is slightly known, distant and strange”. This referred to all religious and consecrated institutions, to the fact that they were recognised only by their habits, their structural organisation and the way they communicated with the media, only by means of reports in magazines. Therefore, I wonder what is said today about secular institutions where members are not recognised by their habits, do not live in a community and where communication with the media is still lacking although this is of fundamental importance. If you are not seen, you are non-existent.

Let us put aside the question of the habit, which is not important for secular institutions (even if it is only a question

of wearing a belt).<sup>11</sup> The same can be said of living in community. However, let us question what is being done today to make people aware of 1) our existence, 2) who we really are and 3) what is our charism.

Once a seminarist, a student of theology, referred to his aunt, a daughter of St. Angela, as “my aunt, the nun”. This I could not contradict because of my limited experience. If a student of theology thought this of his aunt, imagine what ideas the priests of the diocese had! If they are aware of their existence, how many people still think of the daughters of St. Angela as nuns or lay nuns, or consecrated persons whose duty it is to teach, to be catechists or to be a help to the clergy in their parish or as housekeepers to the priests. If this is what a great number of priests think, I dare not imagine the confused ideas of the lay people. So I ask, besides having contacts with many people, besides the importance of being the invisible yeast which is absorbed in the pastry yet gives it shape (it is the only ingredient which makes the dough rise not the sugar, nor the flour), are you known to the clergy and lay people? Are you mentioned in the weekly Catholic periodicals? Do the Catholic radio stations talk about you? What are you doing to make yourselves and your special charism known? I am aware that these are stupid questions. Nevertheless, how can a person think about your charism, your project for life, if he does not even know that you exist? Now, do not think of invading the mass media. Just consider the most effective way of communication as your primary objective; this is a pressing necessity for all religious and secular institutions, movements, associations and even the parishes. Besides being informative, this communication can also help to increase vocations. As for myself, prior to my ordination, were it not for the publication of my testimony in the periodical of which I am now editor, I would not have taken a deeper interest in the life of St. Angela. Thanks to the support and help of the Federation (to which I

am eternally grateful), I am sure I would not be here with you today (even if some of you might think you are better off without me). Joking apart, I will be presumptuous to the very end, knowing that you will forgive me. If Angela were to repeat to her daughters, the words “Take action, move, believe, try hard, hope, and shout out to the Lord ....) I think she would not mind the necessary communication, because this does not invade one’s privacy but can also serve as an announcement for vocations. Remember the words of Christ “The sons of darkness are smarter than those of the light”.

## **Conclusion**

We still ought to be grateful to the Lord today for the way St. Angela founded the Company and the secular institute for consecrated life, her life two centuries ago and her canonisation by the church made her a model for all Christians to follow. She opened the way to holiness and through her, even today, we follow the path of holiness and therefore every woman who lives in the world finds her fulfilment. Let me mention Elisa Tarolli and many others with her.

Their testimony and your daily testimony tell us that Angela Merici’s life has the power even today to lead women to answer to God’s call for holiness.

\* Born in Desenzano (Brescia), the birth place of St. Angela Merici; he is a priest in the diocese of Verona. A journalist and the director of the weekly periodical Verona Fedele since 1st October 2006. He also writes in the daily paper Avvenire and L’Osservatore Romano. He is the author of the book *Angela Merici, L’Intuizione della spiritualita’ secolare* (Soveria Mannelli, 2000). For three years he was the archbishop’s delegate for the Company of St. Ursula – Daughters of St. Angela Merici of Verona.

1. “..... having been thus chosen to be the true and virginal spouses of the Son of God”. (Rule Pro. 7). Taken from the text: St. Angela Merici, Writings, Rule, Counsels, Testament...., (by L. Mariani – E. Tarolli), Brescia 2001 2 .
- 2 L’Osservatore Romano, 4th February, 2007, p.4
- 3 D. Barsotti, The Spirituality of St. Angela Merici. Mother surrounded by her family. Brescia 1980. p. 111
- 4 Councils 11, 1 – 2
- 5 Legacy 111, 13 - 15
- 6 Councils 6, 1 – 2
- 7 Legacy 8, 3
- 8 Fraternita’ Monastiche di Gerusalemme, Monaci nella citta’. Libro di vita, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2005 6 ,pp. 115 ss.
- 9 Credere Oggi. N. 157 (2007)
- 10 Ibidem pp. 22 - 36
- 11 Rule. 11,5.

**THE HOLINESS OF ANGELA MERICI  
AS SEEN BY A MEMBER O  
F A SECULAR INSTITUTE  
(Rome, May 25, 2007)**

**Maria Rosa Zamboni - Former President of the CIIS**

**Introduction**

I am a Brescian, and so the figure of Saint Angela Merici has always been one of interest and curiosity to me. I have heard her spoken of since I was a baby, but in the way she was presented to me, she did not always seem likeable and attractive, and I did not manage to understand the depth of her message. In my circle the expression “half-way sisters” circulated, referring to the Daughters of Saint Angela, and the expression “half-way,” especially, did not encourage a closer encounter.

Only many years later, after having chosen to become part of a secular institute, did I grow closer to her, and I sought to deepen my knowledge of her and to understand from a closer vantage point the originality of her charism and her work.

The difficulties that she encountered, having perceived the possibility of a consecrated life completely in the world, did not bury her inspiration, which made a path for itself in history and reemerged when the believing community and the society were ready to receive it. Thus Saint Angela wrote a fundamental page in the story of the Church, which still waits to be read and interpreted.

Now it is my pleasure to be with you in the moment in which you “remember” her. I think that “remembering” may be

a very important aspect of the life of each person and also of each institution. In fact, remembrance becomes celebration, but also becomes plan.

I will limit myself to sharing with you how much the reading of Saint Angela's texts has encouraged me and the questions that I have posed for myself: I have noticed many harmonies that span all secular institutes and many intuitions that are extremely contemporary even today.

### **What sort of holiness?**

When I think of Saint Angela, I think of some characteristics of her holiness: it appears to me to be a holiness that is generative and a holiness that calls.

First of all, it is a holiness that is generative: it is a holiness that gives life and that sheds light upon how to live.

And it is a holiness that calls: it has called and is calling you, who spontaneously reinterpret its message every day, and it calls each member of a secular institute, committed to proclaim its prophetic intuition in the fabric of every day.

I think of some characteristics that then-Cardinal Ratzinger, speaking at the 1994 Synod, listed as typical of a prophet:

- living in friendship with God, in friendly dialogue with Him that results in discernment of His will, so as to see the history of God, so as to see God in history;
- proclaiming this will fearlessly in one's own historic moment, accepting the consequences, among which is being considered an inconvenient person, but also knowing how to intercede between God and human beings;
- returning always to Christ, to the mystery of His cross and resurrection.

They seem to me the characteristics of Saint Angela. They should be the characteristics of each one of us.

The context in which Saint Angela lived, the 1500s, was a very limited context for women, constrained to choose between marriage and the convent. With the foundation of the Company, she proposed to women of her time—and not only then—the possibility of a new mode of existence in the Church and in society. Saint Angela, acting as a spokesperson for the situation of her time, traced out a new course: the virgins of the Company were not nuns, were not dependent upon a men’s order, were not simply associated with a pious, devotional confraternity, did not express public vows, did not live in cloister, did not conduct a common life in the canonical sense, did not don common clothing.

The Company of Saint Ursula, in fact, was born as a secular institution that stood for the promotion of women, claiming for their single status the dignity of a recognized state of life. It was a project that ruptured the values in force at the time and that would achieve full juridical recognition only four centuries later.

Within this intuition is another just as significant: *“In order to govern said Company it is provided that four of the most capable virgins of the Company ought to be elected, and at least four widowed matrons, prudent and of honorable life”*: there are women who guide other women, with an authority that has a maternal character. It is a maternity in the sphere of vocation, with the goal of assisting the person to bring to life what she is called to be; a maternity rooted in God’s tenderness, a maternity which should always be expressed. *“Live and behave in such a way that your daughters may see in you a model. And what you want them to do, do it yourselves first”* (6<sup>th</sup> Counsel, 1-2).

It is the intuition of “care” among women and the invitation to weave together authentic relationships.



It is a reform of the Church in terms of a return to origins. But it would be a long and tiring road for the Church and for society to understand fully Saint Angela's prophecy.

Another significant element of Saint Angela's "prophecy" is her relationship with the world, seen as a place of encounter for the consecrated person. It is the place where she decided to live.

The *Rule* calls one to be, in the midst of others, a living sacrament of God. As women, we are called to manifest this primacy of God, to proclaim that He is the center of our lives and the only true meaning of the existence of every person. For this purpose, we put the visibility of our humanity at the service of the God who is silent, invisible, hidden, of the God who is "weak," in the sense that once again, among the men and women of our time, we can make visible Christ's fraternal love and God's parenthood, mercy, tenderness, pardon, and hope.

For many people, we are the "visibility of God." Thanks to us, secular consecrated women, they will grasp (or will not) something of God and of the meaning of their uncertain wandering through life.

Profoundly rooted in the world, in our socio-cultural context, profoundly rooted in Christ, we understand that adherence to the recommendations for following him is the very structure of our existence. We seize the opportunity to proclaim that Gospel living according to the Beatitudes can be realized in the ordinary circumstances of daily life. In this daily life, Saint Angela invites us to discover the fruitfulness of the evangelical counsels, their significance for full availability and therefore for the realization of more authentic joy.

Now, confronted with the secularization of our time leading toward an ever-more-dramatic separation between faith and life—which tends to relegate faith to the private sanctuary of conscience, resulting in a faith that is hard to cultivate—we

understand the urgency of Saint Angela's intuition about the necessity of being apostles of the daily, able to weave a harmonious synthesis of faith and life, of the truths believed and the decisions that are their necessary consequences for us, so that the Gospel may become the source and inspiration of our actions.

It is the invitation to carry consecration to the very center of secular reality, in the heart of the world and of life, understanding and unveiling the positive elements of creation, overturning the theory that "flight from the world" is the only way of becoming holy, thus making of the world the "theological place" (as Paul VI would say) of our vocation.

The significance of woman and of presence in the world: these are values that have traveled from Saint Angela to today, but values still not fully explored, so often perceived with skepticism, still seeking fulfillment. These values are expressed in today's secular institutes, which carry their own original and different emphases in spirituality and in practice.

### **Terms of holiness**

Saint Angela's holiness seems to me to express the experience of a well-integrated person.

And the well-integrated person is one who suppresses nothing, but makes all the vital impulses and all the components of her own existence turn around a living center. In all that she perceives within herself, in her actions and her plans, she constantly searches to return to the center.

It is Angela's experience that composes a prayer involving the whole person, including the senses and the body, from vocal prayer to mental prayer, in such a way that the person may be a "praying person," united to her Spouse, and engaged in multiple activities (cf. Rule, Ch. V).

It is a holiness that is presented as the continual effort of synthesizing the Gospel and culture, absolute values and daily experience, love for God and love for human history.

Among all the aspects of Merician holiness, I have chosen one aspect that is certainly not the most striking, but which appears to me a perspective that that is a key to interpretation, a point of view through which to read so many other aspects. It is like a point of “style” that allows one to distinguish other aspects, typical of every Christian life and characteristic of secular consecration. I have taken it from the letter to the Colossians (3:3): “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

This aspect is the “hidden life,” not a life that suddenly displays itself, but a life chosen for the mysterious light that dwells in it, for the secret place to which it returns.

It is a holiness in “chiaroscuro.” Chiaroscuro indicates a situation of transition, where the contours and the colors are no longer sharp, where it is necessary to adjust one’s vision, where it is necessary to be alert and to sharpen one’s attention. It is a “hiddenness” that bears fruit, it is the knowledge of how to point to the future so as to illuminate it, and the attitude of one who knows how to be an “initiator” but leaves her work in God’s hands.

This holiness has some characteristics that I consider extremely contemporary.

- Openness to the action of the Spirit

“May the strength and the true consolation of the Holy Spirit be in you all” (*Counsels, Prologue, 3*).

Our spiritual journey occurs in obedience, in openness to accept that it is not for us to imprint the direction upon our life, but only to entrust ourselves to the Spirit.

In this way we accept the point of view according to which the Lord has the lordship over our life and we, as children and as creatures, accept our dependence.

This commits us to make obedience prevail over a starring role, trust in the Spirit prevail over the desire to decide autonomously, self-giving prevail over self-serving, self-absorption and self-promotion.

- A sense of interiority

A sense of interiority is the call to a life capable of recollection, of silence, of depth, rich in motivation, in the capacity for trust, in fidelity to a great, ideal plan in life's rather simple and lowly situations.

Precisely confronting today's outward focus, superficiality and "consumption" of experiences, interiority calls for us to know how to choose what is essential, the simplicity and interiority that permit us to find again, in the private places within, the road of communion with the Lord.

It seems to me that it could be said that today the world delivers to us a kind of overload of people's personal experiences, a messy mixture of inner and outer spheres. People live as though they were always "in the piazza," shamelessly exhibiting what belongs inside, spilling it out onto others.

In other terms, it seems to me that there is a certain schizophrenia: at times only the outer is valued, living always outside the self; at times there can also be a spiritual emphasis. Precisely because often interiority is compressed, removed, withdrawn into a private terrain, precisely because of this, when it is rediscovered, it is often exhibited, shamelessly publicized.

Today there prevails an excessive display of one's interior world, of one's own sentiments and emotions. The television studio has been substituted for the confessional and also for the

psychiatrist's office. Treatment and care for spiritual discomfort consist of putting it into the public square. But this continual overexposure of private matters results in a disoriented person, who can no longer find herself, because she has entrusted herself to light words, to indiscreet stares, to shameless declarations, and in the end she has no one who could receive and keep her confidences and could allow her to recognize herself. Recognition of oneself, in fact, requires discretion in authentic and safe relationships, requires the confidentiality of a loving gaze, requires roots that are hidden because they are deep.

I do not know whether Saint Angela would be an introvert or an extravert. But I have not found unseemly traits in her, excessive deeds or too many words. I have seen composure and reserve, which are expressive precisely because of what they are. So to say: that which is not seen, attracts. The invitation of Jesus to be light and salt does not mean being spilled out or making oneself seen, but suggests to us a hidden luminosity (transparency), like salt, which is not seen. Interiority is not an unseen thing; rather it is something that shapes and forges exterior attitudes.

It is necessary to learn from Saint Angela to read behind and inside history's lines, as if every life and every event went back to a further, deeper root, which makes it fascinating because it keeps a secret that is not quickly understood.

- Daily life

We should know how to live daily life with largeness of spirit—the most ordinary, burdensome and repetitive time of life.

To say “daily life” does not mean to say that it is a time of lesser commitment, in a minor key, but that it requires the capacity to live every instant and every situation with great spirit, with great love. It means to give dignity to every

moment and to bear witness that every instant of life is redeemed.

- Solitude

Solitude is seen here as the common and typical condition of a layperson's commitment and witness, such as in the family, at work, in politics and in confronting difficult choices; one can consult only one's own conscience, which the recommendations of the Christian community and the requests of one's own institute have contributed to form.

We are called to live the grand and terrible experience of Christian freedom: a grand experience which corresponds to the dignity and value of the human conscience, and at the same time a terrible experience because it makes us vulnerable to anxiety in the face of risk, because there is no protection from the possibility of defeat.

- Feet on the ground

We should always start out from life's level ground; we should start out from actual situations, to establish a relationship with reality face to face, to put up with looks from those who walk next to us and to accept the changeability of others toward us.

Experience demonstrates how much women have their feet on the ground and only with difficulty lose contact with daily reality, which must continually be taken into account. And at the same time, they dream and risk utopian projects. The dream reveals its constructive power, for the benefit of all.

I think that we will all be able to agree that our world, wherever we find ourselves, is really "thirsty" for spirituality, for a spirituality characterized by the Incarnation, not remote from history, but able to permeate concrete situations with the norms of the Incarnation.

Intense inquiry confronts the lack of meaning experienced by humanity today, the ethical games, the search for religious expression, all of which we are called to reply to, seeking something new to offer: a liberating and demanding evangelical spirituality.

- The spirit of communion

The spirit of communion seems to me a very strong characteristic of Saint Angela's spirituality: *"Be bound to one another by the bond of charity, esteeming each other, helping each other, bearing with each other in Jesus Christ.... for I tell you, living all together thus united in heart, you will be like a mighty fortress, or a tower impregnable against all adversities"* (Last Counsel).

I speak of communion in our groups, in our institutes, in our parishes, in the areas where we live, because communion is a law that does not admit of exceptions. If we want communion, we must want it always. Then we will succeed partially, but it should be a constant intention, wherever we are.

We should build bridges among people, we should be experts in dialogue in all directions.

We should be seekers of persons.

*In the logic of the Incarnation, entering into the mystery of God who has willed to share human nature to the point of giving himself totally, we cannot not take on this specific dimension of the spirituality that has been given to us; and therefore, on a concrete level, the art of dialogue is called for, the unconditional acceptance of the other, exchanges of experiences, conflict without wounding.*

If we look hard at our histories and our experiences, we will notice the richness that we have received and will see that we have also been capable of giving enthusiastically and generously. But, besides this, we will see how much separation, how many prejudices have impeded us from

concretely walking a bit of the road with a brother or a sister, even with one who was closest to us!

Rather, this is a more urgent and necessary step to a higher level: to give witness that “speaks” about the joy of having discovered one’s calling and of having accepted a plan of love that was always awaiting us, to construct a “family” able to look confidently at its future, rather than being closed up in its memories.

- The presence of the other

Our spirituality should teach us to use words such as: agree ... share ... descend ... stop ... waste time ... support ... endure.... Therefore, not a spirituality made of “showcase deeds,” not a spirituality made up of words without deeds, but each word should be a revelation of a history, of an action, of a dream.

The consequence of all this is to accept a “normal” spirituality, and to accept that it transforms us. It is to accept and to live this “normality,” above all in our relationships, where the primary qualities should be tenderness, lively joy, compassion and trust in others; and to live this “normality” in service and in prayer, as an expression of friendship with God and of a search for God’s will, not so much for our plans.

From contemplation to action, from action to contemplation: a constant return marks the itinerary of our spirituality and of Saint Angela’s spirituality.

Our time is profoundly in need of spirituality, in its enthusiasm for “here, now,” in its desperation after failure and its general desire for omnipotence.

The ability to look at the Other—beyond one’s immediate surroundings—without ignoring him or climbing over him, encourages us to find solutions for a quality of life more consistent with the vocation of brotherhood and sisterhood and with the solidarity that is inscribed within humanity itself.



One is not then drawn to search for answers and solutions outside of one's own life, not to recreate a religion of the "temple" in which now and then to put actions and thoughts, as though searching for a tonic for survival. Rather, one is drawn to travel through experience to its depth, in the vast range of opportunity that it will reveal, certain that it is inhabited by a Presence that can orient our life. The sacred is within existence, is hidden in its deepest folds, like the treasure in the field.

This sacred dimension confers authority and strength on our commitment, pushes us to search out and to make the most of the instruments and occasions that come, presented to us by history itself. Ministers of God in history, ministers of a liturgy that is fulfilled in the daily actions of relationships, work, feelings; proclaimers and servants of joy because we are custodians of the secret that constantly motivates our actions and choices and that overcomes moments of discouragement with awareness of a project that embraces us and all humanity.

### **Following Christ...**

Following Christ in the heart of the world, inside the real texture of relationships and the conditions common to one's companions on the journey, means, for us secular consecrated women, to learn to link consecration and secularity. We will discover that these are not antithetical, that it is the reality of every day to hold infinite invitations. We will learn to travel through reality in the company of its Author, understanding how to recognize its surprising creativity in the school of his Son, who has become the "Thou" with whom we face and interpret existence.

We will discover that our life, like all people's lives, can be marked with joy. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

The words of John's Gospel make words such as "joy," "life," "courage," "promised from all eternity" reecho in our

ears. They are words linked to foundational images like bread, water, friendship.

This is the hollow place in which Jesus' disciple is moved, called to share experience in the whole range of its happy and sad events. Above all she embraces a specific logic of gift and service, a dimension that certainly does not kill but rather exalts human potential.

These images, rich and joyful, seem contrary to the sense of renunciation and of mortification to which Christian experience too often tends to limit itself, especially among those who commit themselves through sacred bonds to live the evangelical counsels. These are images that foster a viewpoint of joy, of life, of the abundance that permeates the experience of one who has encountered the Christian way in her own existence and has discovered how to travel in solidarity with the women and men of her time.

The first stage is encountering the God of incarnation, the God who for love of humanity willed to dwell in the world, who sought to live in the heart of every human being.

This encounter profoundly transfigures existence, teaching us to read with new eyes how much is unrolled under our gaze.

This logic of incarnation is a Christian's strength, but is also the specific quality of a secular consecration that emerges precisely from the conviction that the "sacred" is not outside experience, that it permeates all experience, exalts it, lifts and nourishes all its possibilities.

To stake one's life does not mean to be estranged from society, to live in a garden enclosed with one's own devotion, nor does it mean to cut out a little corner made to one's measure, right in the middle of the world.

Saint Angela did not seek so much to adapt ascetic practices to different situations of life, but rather to discover

the value that virginity, poverty and obedience can assume within concrete experience.

To live in virginity, poverty and obedience has its meaning as a continual testimony to the totality of dedication, expressed (before it is expressed in action) in the absoluteness of a relationship that gives sense to one's life, one in which the Church sees the spousal relationship of God with humanity.

And spousal with Christ is one of the fundamental kernels of Merician spirituality. (Cf. *Rule*, Prologue, 7.)

It is a key-word that colors and energizes the other aspects, which seem repetitions of this foundational concept. In fact, every great idea is unique and captivating and is continually taken up and reshaped.

I asked myself the question, "What does this intuition say to us? How can it be conveyed today? Is it a utopian ideal, that warms the heart but deceives the mind, or does it have the power to penetrate relationships?"

Besides the commitment to live in virginity and in the radical practice of the evangelical counsels, it implies a life of intimacy with Christ-Spouse, an edifying witness for one's neighbor, an apostolic dimension given to prayer and penance and the commitment to an "apostolate" aiming to spread the ideal of consecration.

The ultimate goal is to attain a communion of love with Christ. The goal of consecration is contemplative: nuptial union with Christ. Nuptial love is the highest expression of human love, as it engages the will, demanding free consent. And only in nuptial love does the person live the real gift of self. In fact, in love the lover leaves the self to live ever more in the beloved.

### **... in obedience**

I find it interesting that in the *Rule* the chapter on obedience comes at the beginning: obedience is above all the

call to our vocation. “*Obedience is better than sacrifice*” (Rule VIII, 5). “*And above all, to obey the counsels and inspirations which the Holy Spirit continually sends into the heart*” (Rule VIII, 14).

“He learned obedience from the things he suffered....”

Even for Jesus, as for each one of us, the life of obedience is a journey to be completed. In his earthly life, day after day, something would be traced that signified “to do the will of the Father.” From the wedding at Cana, where his mother sought him out to manifest God’s providential action for the couple who were her friends, to the contact with people who devoured him with their requests for salvation; from constant availability, to listening to his marginalized and excluded neighbors; from sharing with the apostles, to the final events of Gethsemani and Golgotha—there is only one trajectory: “My food is to do the will of the Father” (cf. *Rule VIII*, 3). One demanding will, that is transformed into a new life for oneself and for others.

The Christological content of the commitment of obedience, the will to live the following of the obedient Christ, distinguishes this counsel from simple assent or a pious practice of renouncing one’s own will. On the contrary, to live obedience is a constant attitude of attentive and active collaboration, a full and total involvement.

Therefore, Jesus’ obedience and that which is expected of his disciples is not a passive attitude, limited to following explicit commands with more or less conviction. This obedience comes from within things and events. It comes from a progressive assimilation of the “mentality” of Christ.

To stop on the road with the Samaritan woman, to enter Zachaeus’s house, to travel for miles and risk danger to get to Bethany because his friend has died, to let a sinful woman wash his feet, to wash the apostles’ feet—all are unforeseeable

deeds that resulted not from a command but from love, and love gave them their creative character.

This is the road traced out by the Son of God for those who wish to follow him more closely.

One more time the secret is to make ourselves his close companions, to the point of assimilating his sentiments, as He has done with his Father. It is not easy to refine such a synthesis, to be guided by these lines that carry the guidance that the Word points out to us and that the community helps us to decipher.

The believing community and the community of sharing are privileged places for this discernment. But for us secular consecrated women, the demands of obedience do not come from there, or, at least, rarely so. Our life plays out in the context of family, work, society, church. Here we must discover how we are prepared to construct God's design. Obedience becomes, therefore, a requirement for developing sensitivity and availability to the Spirit, as do fidelity to prayer, listening to the Word, and renewal. So do competence in our work, the capacity for searching out adequate tools, respecting the autonomy of the temporal realm (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*). Once again, initiative creates an opening to search out new and spontaneous relationships.

Therefore, obedience is to persons, to profound values that live within them and that only an attentive person, accustomed to listening, in constant dialogue with the Other, can take in.

### **... in virginity**

“First of all, remember how each one who will be entering or be admitted into this Company ought to be a virgin and should have the firm intention of serving God in this sort of life. Then, she should enter it happily and of her own will” (Rule, I, 1-4).

“The essential thing for chastity is not the renunciation of pleasure, but the complete orientation of life to a goal. When this is lacking, chastity decays inevitably into something ridiculous. Chastity is the prerequisite for deep and serious thought” (D. Bonhoeffer).

I picked up this thought from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian of the German Confessing Church, who knew how to make his life a gift and how to bear witness with his death to having cultivated a profound sense of the Christian logic, to having indeed oriented his whole existence to one goal: love of others to the point of sacrificing his life. In this affirmation, germinated during his imprisonment in a concentration camp, when certainly the conditions were not very suitable for meditation, contemplation or good thoughts, somehow we find the substance of much that I have read in the *Rule* of Saint Angela in Chapter IX, dedicated to virginity.

Here Saint Angela affirms, in a concrete way, the necessity of not being envious or malicious, and of staying far away from discord and suspicion, but above all she invites us to charity, to the fullness of love. Virginity renders one free and helps one not be jealous, envious or resentful in making comparisons with sisters and brothers. Precisely because a spouse loves those whom her spouse loves, the bond between virginity and charity is strong.

Virginity is represented by the image of the “undivided heart,” a free, transparent heart; persons virginal, free and joyous.

In Saint Angela’s epoch, an epoch of forced entries into monasteries, her insistence on the freedom of this choice and on the sacred dimension of virginity is striking. “*Voluntarily making a sacrifice to God of her own heart*” (Rule IX, 2).

For Angela, virginity is indeed sacred, as it is a gift that comes from God, a grace, and can still be lost if the person does not commit herself to preserve it.

Virginity without love is downright “ridiculous”; it conveys an image of people rigidly closed in on themselves, closing out all understanding with others, bearing witness, in their lives, to sterility and suspicion.

Even though this has always been true, it becomes still more evident in an epoch like ours, when there has been a rediscovery of the value of bodiliness and when the affective life has been highlighted, to the point of involving misunderstandings.

It is on the affective level that the very destination of one’s existence is played out, thus the purposefulness of a proper life-choice. The strength of chastity lies in its very orientation of one’s life, to the Lord Jesus. The choice not to marry belongs to the same logic that we discover in the parables about the pearl and about the treasure hidden in the field: to orient one’s whole life toward some truly precious discovery.

Naturally, just not marrying is not enough to live virginity. The choice requires a dimension of espousal and of dialogue that embraces one’s whole existence and directs one’s resources to please one’s spouse. In this case that means the Lord’s intention for humanity, in which the consecrated person participates in a particular way. The image of John resting his head on the heart of Jesus (John 13:25), sharing with Him the drama of the tragic moment of the Passion, is an eloquent icon of the disciple’s intimate relationship with the Lord.

This strong dynamic of communion, of sharing, of contemplation seeps through what is most precious and essential to a person: the life of relationship. There one attempts to live out the commandment of love. To be consecrated to God, then, signifies the desire to live all

relationships fully, without the prerequisite of the other having to be changed, quick to lay down one's own existence for anyone, just as the Son of God did.

It is an ambitious project, that crashes into limitations and deadends, failures and infidelity, but remains the horizon for anyone who has made this adventure her own.

The result of having a free heart is joy, or rather happiness (cf. *Rule IX*, 11) it is an intimate, spiritual, profound sentiment that accompanies the discovery of the "treasure hidden in the field."

### **... in poverty**

*"We call upon each one ... to embrace poverty, not only that of temporal things but above all true poverty of spirit through which man strips his heart of every affection and hope for created things, and of himself" (Rule X, 1-5).*

Slave, emptied, handed over (cf. *Philippians 2*). Thus the pages of Scripture lead us to consider the Son of Man in the days of his passion. They show us an extreme poverty that gives away strength, dreams, every sort of human power. However these same pages lead us to contemplate a man who is the "master" of his own life and who does not avoid his responsibility but continues to play it out, faithful to its rules of play unto the very end.

This light also illuminates the significance of our poverty, which makes no sense if it does not draw its life first of all from the profound value of gift, of charity.

Procuring honestly the resources necessary for living with dignity, rejoicing in beauty and in the gifts that the Creator himself has wanted for his sons and daughters, these are part of the human vocation. Especially in the West, belief has been contaminated with suggestions and achievements that have not exalted the mission of humanity. The rediscovery of



human centrality in the universe has sometimes put humanity's powerful capacities at cross-purposes, transforming human beings from stewards of resources into dominators or even usurpers, who injure other members of their human family and animals and nature. In an historic moment like this, the human capacity to guide and administer has been misinterpreted as a manifestation of God's benevolence to us and has led people to justify their deviant behavior and strange ideologies.

The secular consecrated person wishes to conform herself to the poor Christ and to live out her relationship with goods from this perspective. Nevertheless, she is not led for his sake to renounce the power of possessing and administering. In fact, even the Company can have possessions: "*they should be dispensed prudently, especially to assist the sisters, and according to each need that arises*" (Rule XI, 22-24).

To live side by side with others; to have a salary and family belongings, at least, to administer; to carry on an enterprise or hold political and social jobs: these functions certainly require a way of living poverty that is different from the traditional way, but they also offer the occasion to pursue a style of life that can be understood by and proposed to others too.

It is worth considering nowadays how utopian Hebrew legislation points out that the earth does not belong to the one who possesses it, but to God; that human beings are simply administrators of earth and cannot transform their duty of stewardship into jealous possessiveness.

The secular consecrated person is particularly advised to be familiar with the norms that regulate social life, to embrace the autonomy of temporal reality that *Gaudium et Spes* pointed out to the laity. So the road for living poverty is laid out not only in renunciation, even if that road does pass through renunciation too. One more time: she is not attracted by ascetic renunciation of one or another possession so much

as by deep agreement with the logic of the Kingdom, a logic of sharing and communion, of justice and brotherhood/sisterhood.

Criteria exist for both doing the accounts and ripening a dedicated life that becomes completely fulfilled for oneself and for others. Such a life, first of all, responds to the desire of being ever more like Jesus, who made himself poor for love of humanity.

### **In conclusion**

Just as at the time of Saint Angela (even if for different motives and conditions), we secular consecrated persons of today can develop a role that is fundamental for the community, if we make ourselves examine the same questions that today's person feels, if we do not hide behind the presumption of already having the answer. In this historic moment, fidelity to the entire cost of standing with reality and the assumption of civic and ecclesial responsibility in concrete structures, with their advantages and limits, are the ways of translating the commitment to follow; they are the key to still being able to speak to our companions on the journey.

By way of conclusion, I select some signal points, which seem to me to emerge from Saint Angela's teaching.

- First is the necessity of developing a mature attitude of dialogue, of communion, that knows how to propose projects and values, facts and systems, without an inferiority complex.
- Learning to "think big" (Rosmini), without pretending to have a monopoly on truth, and with distrust of ambiguous suggestions that make us sound "prophetic" when we are not gathering agreement and are not very understandable.
- Willingness to bear witness to "weak" values, such as the primacy of the person over success, of being over

having and over appearances. Because it is precisely in the weakness of these values within society that we could be a prophecy for all.

- Beginning to be present with all the richness of our radical Gospel living, able to bridge the need for affectivity and for harmony that today's reality brings to light. And to do this with the humility of one who has really learned to count on the "*blessed and undivided Trinity*" (*Rule*, Prologue).
- Manifesting a culture and an ecclesiology of communion that empower us for personal action by exploding prejudices and refusals to collaborate, and therefore enable us to offer strategies for small steps.
- Being consecrated women who are uniquely new, not through obstinate adherence to a current ideology, but much rather through attention to the Word of God and to the signs of the times. Able, more than calling for miracles, rather to make them happen.
- It is up to us, consecrated women, to cure the narcissistic wound of today's people and to open it up to hope, which should not be confused with a optimistic view of life, but which is the faith that knows how to create trust where there no longer seems to be room for it.
- To be reserved and composed, as a result of making the glory of the Father visible.
- But, above all, we should be women of communion, because "*Loving one another and living in harmony together are a sure sign that we are walking the path right and pleasing to God*" (Tenth Legacy, 12).

And if, as consecrated women, we know how to take up the proposal of Saint Angela, we will succeed in making the Church's face more beautiful and, perhaps, the face of our society too.

## May 25th, 2007. Eucharistic Celebration in the parish of S. Angela Merici in Rome

### Beginning salutation of the President

We are here today to thank the Lord for the gift of Angela Merici's sanctity.

We acknowledged her as Mother and chose her as special Friend and travelling Companion in the sequel of Christ the Bridegroom. Remembering her sanctity in the canonization bicentenary is to us an occasion for meditation and a spur to *"...keep the ancient way of the Church... and live a new life"*.

Bishop Luciano often says that the Lord can do great things even using poor instruments as we all are. So he did through his servant Angela Merici, a simple illiterate girl who became, as Divo Barsotti puts it, "the Mother of a whole city". He can do so with any of us.

Together our thanking God, we ask Him to make all St. Angela's Daughters, both Secular and Regular, credible witnesses **today** to His love among men.

We thank the parish priest, Mgr. David, and his parish community that received us.

To Bishop and Father Luciano, who consented to preside over this Eucharistic Celebration according to our wish, we assure our prayers and ask his praying memory, as we thank him from the heart.

**Homily by Mgr. Luciano Monari**  
**Bishop of Piacenza – Bobbio and vice president of the**  
**Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI)**

Of course you know St. Angela's life and spiritual experience... I can't teach you much about this. Therefore, I prefer to take what lies in the heart of sanctity experience from the Gospel we have just listened to. I believe this can help understand St. Angela's experience, but also your vocation and your mission.

Let's start from that word Jesus said to Peter: "*Follow me*" [John 21, 19b].

In the Last Supper, the day before his death, Jesus had told his disciples the moment of parting was near, and he had said: "*Where I am going, you cannot follow me*" [John 13, 36], you cannot come. And Peter had rebelled. He wanted to follow Jesus, why couldn't he? The reply was: "*you cannot follow me now, though you will follow later*" [John, 13, 36]. So Peter, vehement as he was: "*Master, why can't I follow you now, I will lay down my life for you*" [John 13, 37]. Jesus' answer: "*Will you lay down your life for me? Amen, Amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times*" [John 13, 38].

Peter couldn't follow Jesus before, but now Jesus himself tells him "*follow me*". [John, 21, 19b]. What has changed? Why couldn't he before, and now, on the contrary, he is asked to do it? Let's read the preceding words. Jesus tells Peter: "*Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God*" [John 21, 18 – 19a].

The question is: what does following Jesus mean?

If following Jesus would mean to do miracles as He did, Peter would have succeeded. If following Jesus would mean to conquer the world through one's strength and will, maybe Peter would have done it. But following Jesus means to accept the path of suffering and death, the path of weakness. There is a moment in our faith in which you are strong: when we are young, when we have all in our hands, we are able to do things, we want to do a lot, we are almost under the impression of omnipotence. But sooner or later in life, comes the experience of weakness, of frailty. As time goes by, we become old and therefore we can't run as fast as when we were young... we are no longer able to do many things we used to. Our future plans are not so great any more, they become smaller and smaller. This is what the experience of weakness means. Going back to the words Jesus told Peter, I say: man must take this weakness from the hands of God and transform it into obedience. Through weakness, and finally through death, the disciple glorifies God because he follows Jesus. Jesus passed through weakness.

This is what Peter didn't know, and for this reason he couldn't follow Jesus. When he saw Jesus weak, Peter said he didn't know that man Jesus, Jesus was a stranger to him. He knew another Jesus, he knew the miracle man. And when he saw Him in chains, led to trial and pain, he lost his head then, and wasn't able to follow the Lord.

But now, now he can. Why can he? What has changed in Peter? Well, nothing has changed in Peter himself, he is the same poor devil as before, with all his weaknesses, but one thing did change: Peter has seen his Lord live his passion and death and, since Peter loves that Lord, as a result passion and death also change their meaning. Passion and death take a different meaning. If in that cross there is the occasion to be friends with the Lord, than also the test of humiliation, weakness and death becomes bearable.

For this reason, all lies in that first dialogue of the Gospel we listened to: “*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’*” [John 21, 15a]. And this question is repeated three times because it’s crucial, all lies in this. Peter being able to follow Jesus in agony and death will depend entirely on his love for Jesus. If he loves Him with all his heart, with all his soul and all of his strength, he will be no longer afraid of death. And then even situations of weaknesses and death can be integrated into, included in Peters’s experience of life.

### **Sanctity is living in the sequel of Jesus.**

Sanctity, then, is falling in love with the Lord. I don’t know whether you like the words “falling in love” or not, you can change them in case, but they mean that the Lord becomes the centre of one’s life, that one wishes to love Him with all one’s heart, with all one’s strength. Then the experience of weakness too – “*someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go*” -, the lack of autonomy, the loss of self-sufficiency which upsets, are accepted. All this is transformed into love and can tell the Lord its devotion and its obedience.

I’ll add one more thing: the relationship with Jesus must be personal, intimate, loving. But the question arises: is it possible to have such a relationship with Jesus of Nazareth? Jesus lived a long time ago, in the Holy Land, we can’t see him directly. Is it possible to have a real attitude of friendship towards Him or is it something our mind worked out, something imaginary? Of course, if Jesus was a man of the past, it wouldn’t be possible. I am perfectly aware I hold in high esteem dear, great Socrates, but I can’t be friends with him, he belongs to another world, to another experience. But about Jesus, I must say He has risen, therefore he is living, he doesn’t belong to the past, he belongs to my world. And when

we say Jesus has risen, we mean that all his words have risen in his Resurrection. So His word is word for today, it is the word of the One who lives.

When we are friends with someone, friendship grows in dialogue. I listen to his, or her, words, I remember them as precious to me in the secret of my memory. I cherish them with love, because they are secret words showing communion. Jesus' words are such. **You must learn to love Jesus' words**, to know them, to remember them in your hearts, you must caress them because they are words of true love. Through these words the living Lord creates a relationship with you and makes you feel his love, these words mirror His wishes, His plans, and in His words you make your plans and wishes coincident with His.

And what is true about His words, it is about His gestures. It's the gesture which touches my heart and tells me: "*Be clean!*". It is not a gesture from the past, it is the living gesture of the Risen One, and therefore it stands eternally. That hand of the Lord that touches your heart is the hand that touches your life too, your body and everything else. In short, how can we die if Jesus has risen and is alive? It is possible thanks to His words, cherishing the memory of his gestures in your hearts. Most of all, it is possible in the Eucharist.

I think sanctity comes from there. St. Angela's sanctity doesn't derive from her belonging to a special human race, it comes from her touching the flesh of the Lord, from her meeting Jesus and, in Jesus, God's love. This is the very reason which made her new creature, and her thoughts became the Lord's thoughts, and her plans were turned upside down by the plans and the will of the Lord. Such are the saints. They are cast in the same mould as we are, but they have touched the Lord. "*Follow me!*" is the invitation to any path to sanctity.



My best wishes! I wish you, of course, that what we listened to will revive, and what you know so well about St. Angela will occur in your lives. The Lord tells you too the word: “*Follow me!*”. Don’t be afraid to follow the Lord because of weakness and because of the cross you have to bear, because Jesus’ love is stronger. “*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*”. We can answer as Peter did the third time: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you” [John 21, 17]. This suffices: the fact that God knows your love, and your longing to go to Him.

*(taken from the recorded homily and not revised by the Author)*

## TESTIMONY FROM BURUNDI

### The “Bene Anjela” from Burundi

At the Bicentennial Meeting we had the pleasure to receive the Archbishop of Gitega – Burundi. In “*IN THE SAME CHARISMA*” (**Responsabilità 1 / 2007**) we already presented the “Bene Anjela” group, which had been visited by sisters from Trent and by Janne from the french Company in August 2006. Luckily, we are now able to convey to all Bene Anjela the mind and ideas of their Archbishop, as he presented them at the Rome meeting in May.

We express our best wishes to the sisters, Daughters of St. Angela from Burundi. Together we pray to find soon a way, legal as well, to include them to the full in the worldwide Company of St. Ursula.

#### 1. Introduction

The man who is now putting forward the testimony of the “Daughters of St. Angela Merici from Burundi” is simply the brother of about 300 women who chose St. Angela as Mother and Teacher for themselves, in order to live their christian faith in day to day life. This life is similar to Christ’s own, it is apostolic and committed to the weaker and more deprived neighbour, in the name of Christ himself.

The man who is talking to you is also a father, and a shepherd to the same 300 sisters and daughters who held on to their faith in anonymity. These sisters are waiting for a structured organization, the acknowledgement of their identity, officially as well, and a true manifestation to the world and the Church itself.

So, what is the situation of the Burundi “Bene Anjela” Group?

## **2. Founding date**

The group was born as a consecrated form of life on St. Lucy's day, 1956, although the sisters were active in their parishes well before. Among them, some are over 75, with quite a long experience in the group. One meets them in the earliest parishes of Burundi, such as Buhonga (1902), Kanyiaya (1905), and Rugary (1909). My aunt Epiphany lived in the last mentioned, and she thought of herself as part of the group in the sixties.

## **3. Who founded them?**

It was Father Peter Nkundwa from the diocesan clergy of Gitega. He took care of them and accompanied them until his last breath in May, 2006. How did this priest happen to know St. Angela Merici? Could he possibly have had a link with some missionary priest from Brescia, in order to draw water from the first source? This has still to be looked into.

*What is their name?*

“Bene-Anjela”, this is their name. I couldn't say to what extent they know St. Angela Merici. A deeper analysis would be needed here. But they do know the essential, because they want consecration in the world.

## **4. Their life**

a very difficult life,

- in a culture refusing childless unmarried women;
- in a Church which has almost favoured community consecrated life, made quite visible by external signs;
- in a sensual world which doesn't promote the values of virginity and purity, even though our tradition does know women consecrated to Imana, the God of ancestors, who served in different moments of traditional liturgies;

- lastly, in a culture which acknowledges the right to inherit to male children and denies it to female

It is easily understandable this group has lived like a bright light in the darkness of this whole context, surrounded also by evil and selfishness. These Bene Anjela live their vocation and faith experience in a world just coming out of a mentality which is generally hostile to their charisma and form of vocation. They often show themselves busy in parish pastoral activities, in serving basic ecclesial communities, that is, in the nucleus of christian life as it is lived in every parish in Burundi, where one shares the Word of God and tries to live it in common, as Church. They especially devote themselves to charity towards the deprived, such as orphans and widows.

I will recall two moments in their testimony:

The first is the terrible period of State persecutions against the Church, from 1977 to 1987. State authorities expelled foreign missionaries, shut down churches, reduced praying time and prevented the faithful to cooperate with their parishes. These Bene Anjela showed their courage and some were imprisoned, like Natalia.

The second period takes us back to the ethnical and political war, when even neighbours didn't want to meet any longer. A lot of Bene Anjela received orphans and people in a state of distress to save them from death. Their testimony was so great that it attracted even young men to the same vocation. What are we going to do with them, since you are a women's institute? The [Bene Anjela] offered the Bishop of Sibega to become guides to the communities nobody wanted to join out of fear.

## **5. The sign of their consecration**

Private vows in the hands of the priest who takes care of them and accompanies them.

## **6. Urgent problems**

According to Burundi regulations, these Daughters of St. Angela must have a civil legal structure. They need to be canonically erected. They need a governing structure. They must have a well-formed first training. Just now we are in need of training personnel and teaching equipment. Of course, union and solidarity with other merician Companies would be useful to their vocational growth and they would be given a definite name.

For this reason, I am asking in their name to examine how to aggregate this group to your Federation.

23.5.2007

+ Simone Ntanuvana  
Archibishop of Gitega  
Operation centre of  
“Bene Anjela”

**AFTER THE CONVENTION**  
**We have received... and happily share**

Vatican City, May 25, 2007

VICARIATE OF  
VATICAN CITY  
N. 1324 V/06/4

*Dear Miss Razza,*

*...in expressing to you my earnest gratitude, I extend my wishes that the experience of a celebration close to the Tomb of the Apostle may have been spiritually fruitful and may have reinforced ever more, in those who participated, sentiments of filial union with his successor.*

*Mentre invoco, per intercessione di Maria, la benedizione del Signore su di Lei e su tutti i Membri di codesta Federazione, mi valgo volentieri della circostanza per porgerLe il mio ossequio cordiale*

*As I invoke, through the intercession of Mary, the blessing of the Lord upon you and all the members of this Federation, I avail myself of the opportunity to extend to you my cordial respect.*

*Most devotedly yours*  
*In Christ,*  
*+Angelo Comastri*  
*Archpriest of the Vatican Basilica*  
*Vicar General of His Holiness*  
*for Vatican City*

**PRESEMINARY OF ST. PIUS X**

VICOLO DEL PERUGINO

TEL. 06 698-71416 FAX 06 698-84305

**00120 VATICAN CITY**

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR

S.C.V. May 24, 2007

*... May St. Angela Merici continue from Heaven her protection and support to her beloved Daughters in their invaluable Christian witness. And to us all the joy of being of service to our neighbor in God's love.*

*Thanks!*

*A fervent remembrance in prayer for all the great family of Ursulines.*

*With my most cordial greetings.*

*Sac. Enrico Radice*

TELEPACE

00193 ROMA

Via del Mascherino, 69

Go out to all the world  
and preach the Gospel to every creature.

(Mk 16,15)

Rome, May 29, 2007

*...Telepace has always been united to the "angelines", always in so much gratitude.*

*I seek for all the "Company" the support of prayer, our strength and our life.*

*Courage! And many blessings.*

Father Guido Todeschini



OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE

FIRST SECTION: STATE AFFAIRS

The Vatican, 15th June 2007

N. 66.298

Madam,

In your letter of the 24th May, on behalf of the secular Institute, you have paid your respects to the Holy Father on the occasion of the bicentenary of the Canonisation of St. Angela Merici.

The Holy Father has accepted this sign of unity and Christian solidarity and expresses his thanks for your kind thoughts. He asks the Lord to bless and comfort you and your sisters in your zealous renewal undertaking of holiness. He heartily sends you and all his dear daughters His Apostolic Blessing.

I take the occasion to confirm that I am,

Your devoted servant in the Lord,

Mons. Gabriele Caccia

Assessor

---

Ms. MARIA RAZZA  
President  
Federation Companies of Saint Ursula  
Secular Institute of Saint Angela Merici  
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