

*In the same charism
with responsibility*



n. 3 - 2022

**COMPANY OF SAINT URSULA
SECULAR INSTITUTE OF SAINT ANGELA MERICI
FEDERATION**

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International Convention

in person and live-streamed

«Keep to the ancient way and live a new life»

(7th Counsel, 22)



*Tradition and reform
in the spirituality
and in the life of the
Companies according
to St. Angela Merici*

*Our particular way of
living ecclesial
synodality*

Rome July 28-August 1, 2022

**Istituto Maria Santissima
Bambina
Via Paolo VI, 21 Rome**



Acts

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TO THE READERS

Like clay in the hand of the potter (Jer.18:1-6)

The Word of God at the Eucharistic celebration at the beginning of the convention was commented on by the Assistant to the Federation Council, Bishop Adriano Tessarollo. Now, picking up the proceedings of this convention, I think this same Word could guide our reflection, conversion, the work ahead of us.

The speakers did their part well; all of us were enthusiastic. Then we went back to our Companies and the task became ours. How to go from theory to practice?

Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand...

So each of us, each of our Companies, is precisely this clay in the hands of the Lord. Clay is fragile, but it allows itself to be molded, and if the potter is the Lord, one must truly allow oneself to be molded by his hands.

Whenever the vessel of clay he was making turned out badly in his hand, he tried again, making another vessel of whatever sort he pleased...

Perhaps even for the vessels of our Companies it may happen that they break, that they no longer correspond to the vessel fashioned by St. Angela Merici in the Lord's initial plan for our institution.

What then? Through it all away? Absolutely not!

Even the vessel of the Company can be remade with the same clay, with the same spirituality, with the same charism. Perhaps one still needs to be willing to allow oneself to be molded again, remolded for a new vessel that pleases the Lover of us all today.

It takes a new willingness, first at the personal level and then at the level of the Company, of the federated Institute. We need to be open to newness, without betraying the treasure, the essence, the originality, and the vessel can still become beautiful and new. Let's try to think about it, because St. Angela did not stop us. If we have to do new things, we can: *Keep to the ancient way and live a new life....*

Kate

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONVENTION

Keep to the ancient way, and live a new life

Valeria Broll, President of the Federation



Finally together, united in person and online! This convention has sisters from 17 Companies present: Mary-Cabrini from the Company of Canada, Group of the USA, Maria Helena from Northeast Brazil and Maria Gatelli from Southeast Brazil. Geneviève from France and Marya and Andrea from Slovakia. From Italy, sisters from 12 Companies are present.

And let me affectionately greet the "young" sisters who are attending a Federation convention for the first time: Andrea from Slovakia, Alessandra and Carmela from the Company of Turin, Francesca and Angela from the Company of Palermo. We also greet Nicoletta, who is meeting us for the first time. Welcome to all and welcome to the assistants of the Federation Council and the Assistant of the Company of Caltanissetta.

Other sisters are with us by live-stream, from France, Slovakia, Brazil, Canada, Lydia from Indonesia, Monica from Australia, Voahangy from Madagascar, Angela from Nigeria. Sisters from twelve Italian Companies are with us ... all together as a family around our Mother and Foundress St. Angela. Welcome to all of them!

St. Angela begins her Rule by inviting us to give thanks. We, too, begin this conference with feelings of thanksgiving, to be here together and together to experience the Company: the Companies that *"united among themselves constitute the Federation ... [having] as purpose: to foster growth in sisterly communion ... to enhance the exchange of experiences; to promote conventions for study and for in-depth knowledge of the history of the Company and its proper charism, of Merician spirituality"* (Constitutions 30.1-30.2).

This is what this year's convention aims at: to foster communion, *"a sure sign that we are walking the path right and pleasing to God,"* St. Angela tells us in the Tenth Legacy; it aims to enhance the exchange of experiences, that, *"together like this, they*

might also meet each other as loving sisters, and thus, talking over spiritual matters, rejoice together, and together encourage one another, which will be no small help to them” (8th Legacy 3-6).

This convention aims to study our charism and spirituality; to make personal and Company choices in obedience to today.

This is how the 2022 convention was born: listening to the concerns of every sister and every Company, taking up the challenges that this precise moment in history (Church, world, Institute) present to us.

S. Angela our Mother and Sister tells us, *“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”* (7th Counsel).

Together let us go into this adventure with serenity and gratitude, with patience and charity. And it will be *“a new life.”*

In these days we will hear so much of St. Angela's Word, so much of God's Word, so much of our own life and that of our Companies. In this convention we want to give substance to the words of St. Paul, who said to his Christians in Corinth, *“Let the Word dwell among you abundantly, teaching and admonishing one another.”*

Already this evening we will begin to *teach and admonish one another* by sharing what emerged from the questionnaires that many sisters from many Companies and Groups filled out and sent to the Federation Council a few months ago.

We will listen to your thoughts full of hopes, desires but also labors and fears, we will listen to each of your proposals that launch us forward, because this is what we want to do, to walk, to look ahead and to walk beyond, with the lively faith and foresight that was St. Angela's.

St. Angela's words will be abundantly poured out on our personal and our Company life in the coming days. We will be helped in this by two women, Prof. Rosanna Virgili and Prof. Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli.

Our Assistants, Fr. Rino and Fr. Raymond, will lead us deeper and deeper into our Merician charism and into our Companies to make them conform more and more to St. Angela's original plan.

The speakers we will meet and listen to will be bearers of wisdom. They will serve us the living water of God's Word and St.

Angela's, *"they will make us walk on the heights,"* they will open up avenues of hope, they will hand us keys to open our hearts and minds, they will inspire us with hope and joy, confidence and courage. With them we will draw that living water of God's Word and St. Angela's, give and receive words and personal experiences and the experiences of our Companies, so as to initiate and/or continue processes of personal and Company growth.

We want our lives to become a song of praise, a prayer of thanksgiving, a mission to be accomplished, a conversion to be initiated or continued.

With these shared sentiments, I wish each and every one of you, have a good convention.

Prayer for the Beginning of the Convention

Holy Spirit, Love that unites the Father to the Son,
come among us gathered here together in these days.

Renew our being in you, our being "Company"
united in the Institute of Saint Angela Merici.

Be the inspirer of our thoughts, desires, and plans,
the strength and courage in our choices.

Give us silence for listening to your Word
and the joy of abandoning ourselves to the Father's will
in moments of darkness and searching.

Make us mirrors and witnesses to Christ's love for the Church, his
Bride, and enliven and strengthen the fabric of our Companies.

For our part, we renew our willingness
to allow ourselves to be shaped by you,
so that, as the clay that we are, each in your hands,
we may allow ourselves to be shaped by you

on the model of Christ, who let flow from his Heart the source of Grace
and of the love that heals all selfishness, that reconciles everything
in his peace, and which opens for each one and for our Companies
horizons of communion and hope. Amen

Adriano Tessarollo

First communication on the results of the questionnaire for reconsiderations and proposals for the Companies

Caterina Dalmasso, Councilor of the Federation

As clarified by the president of the Federation in her circulars, already since last year 2021, in the Federation's Council meetings we have been giving ample time for reflection and discussion on some aspects of the charismatic identity that each Company is called to live today (e.g., autonomy, especially in the Italian context, where the members of the Companies are decreasing and their age is high, where it is difficult in some situations to renew their government, and it is difficult to preserve their formation, organizational, and economic autonomy).

We have recognized the appropriate and positive values that characterize our Companies, such as being local, which allows each Company to belong to the local, ecclesial and social reality. However, looking at the current situation reveals the emergence of resistance and fears to open up to new paths and to identify viable ways of sisterly, formative, spiritual help shared with other Companies in a wider territory.

We told ourselves that it is [perhaps] time to start thinking, planning, working together, to help each other live our charism well, multiplying resources and overcoming difficulties.

Discernment and synodality are two tracks on which to run the charism so as not to slip into self-sufficiency or self-referentiality, and to safeguard the Institute's goal, which is ***the perfection of charity; honoring Jesus Christ; serving God and His Reign; and collaborating in the salvation of the world*** (Constitutions.1.5).

In this regard, the Federation Council prepared a questionnaire asking each sister of the federated Companies to fill it out personally so that the rethinking could involve all of them to consider reflections and proposals from the grassroots. We sincerely thank all the sisters who responded, thus directly participating in the service of the Federation. The data were collected and are returned, as a valuable input for a reading of the reality of the worldwide Company, for careful and active reflection and rethinking to ***keep to the ancient way and live a new life.***

Themes of the questionnaire and methodology for processing it

The questionnaires considered five themes:

1. Unity and communion among the Companies and the Federation
 2. Accompaniment and initial and ongoing formation
 3. Autonomy of the companies and enlargement of boundaries
 4. Synodal journey in the Companies
 5. St. Angela's words ...*do something differently*
- A total of 31 Companies and groups responded to the questionnaires: 16 in Italy and 15 outside Italy.
 - A total of 190 questionnaires were filled out personally: 113 in Italy and 77 outside Italy.

In return, in this journal we will first report a simple summary of the various issues with a total of responses for each item from the largest numbers to the smallest.

We will then add graphs showing the totals from Italy and outside Italy with an overall total.

**good sharing
and good reflection**

1. Unity and communion among the Companies in the Federation – How?

	Total
Bulletin “In the same charism”	75
International conventions in person and online	56
Circulars & newsletters from other Companies	40
Personal and prayer for one another	32
Experiences together: sisterhood, meeting, visits	26
Whatsapp group	22
Anniversaries and other recurring events of Companies	19
Regional meetings	15
Formation together in the Federation	15
Spiritual exercises with other Companies	14
Participating/collaborating with the Federation Council	13
Studying St. Angela’s Writings & the Constitutions	11
Formation for leaders, even online	10
Telephone & email	10
Relationships & formation over the internet	8
The Federation is the guarantee of unity	7
When possible, face-to-face meetings are best	6
Getting to know each other personally, become friends	5
Good involvement of all through questionnaire	5
Feeling participation by all in a global family	4
Groups of associates & friends	4
Ordinary and extraordinary assemblies	4
Sharing of spiritual assets	3
Federation website	3
Geography is a challenge and a gift	3
	3

Thanks to the translators	3
Pilgrimages to the places of St. Angela	2
Gratitude for the Federation's financial help	2
Joy over our unity in the same charism	1
Other SIs' newsletters, meetings, & contributions	1
Making our vocation known throughout the world	1
Communion overrides differences of language, culture	1
Feeling ourselves responsible and co-responsible	1
Collaborating & writing about our experiences	1
Google Translator	1
Using synodal methodology	

2. Accompaniment and formation: ideas for initial and ongoing in Groups and Companies

Use new technologies	24	
Collaborate & seek collaboration	17	
Formation: Favor "In the same charism" & international meetings	15	
Formation on the Constitution and St. Angela's Writings	15	
Plan together for inter-Company formation, especially initial (content, dates, format, facilitators)	11	
Have the Federation propose an annual international formation plan to deliver in different situations	9	
Plan conventions and cultural meetings related to the present historical context	8	
Broader formation experiences on various continents (by language & area) line	8	
Getting to know history & culture of Companies throughout the world	8	
Thanks for the Federation's help through formation, meetings, incontri, materiale e viaggi	7	
Build formation teams from Companies or external people	7	

Study secularity & apostolate in the world	6	
Exchange alerts to online materials (other institutes, periodicals, Church teachings)	6	
For initial formation get help from expert sisters	5	
In-person meetings when possible and continuously online	5	
Propose topics for initial and continuing formation	4	
Formation for the formation leaders	4	
Pray together online (Word of God & of St. Angela)	4	
2 or 3 meetings of sisters without expert speakers, besides conventions	4	
Subscribe to secular institutes' periodicals & documents	4	
Translation problems (written, online meetings, conventions)	4	
Think about a fund for formation	4	
Suggest formation courses, also online	3	
Personalized & group formation	3	
Plan interdiocesan formation meetings	3	
Find time & increase time for formation	3	
The Federation has brought about a worldwide institute for us	3	
Lectio Divina strategy connected to our charism (in the magazine or on the website)	2	
Think about a place to offer formation	2	
Intercontinental visits to get acquainted	2	
Translate formation materials for formation leaders too	2	
Visit the places of Saint Angela	2	
Invite young members to study languages	2	
Have a house for gatherings (Africa)	2	
The Federation has taken us back to the original charism	2	
Remember the economic difficulties of members & Companies	2	
Pilgrimages & experiences of sisterhood	2	

Get help from the young people	1
Use simple & affordable methods	1
Study theology and Merician spirituality	1
Unite available strengths for formation	1
Put on love in participating & in sharing	1
Remember situations & demands of the Institute's worldwide reality	1
Formation for the elders	1
Formation about the commitments in a secular institute	1
Maintain relationships with local bishops	1
Document & maintain archives of Groups & Companies	1
Dialogic formation, inductive, not only lectures	1
Overcome tribal distinctions (Africa)... unity & discernment	1
Formation for discernment	1
Formation on being a woman & a consecrated woman	1
Plan for simultaneous translation at conventions	1
Produce a documentary film about Saint Angela	1
Regional vocational and formation meetings	1
Live obedience	1
Let the Federation guarantee the observance of the Constitutions and the Merician charism	1
Psychological formation	1
Ecclesial formation, getting help from the Assistants	1
Bibliography adapted to us; spread it	1
Materials related to St. Angela: books, pictures, medals	1
Summary of formation contents should go out to every sister	1
Use atlases to feel our unity around the world	1

3. **Autonomy of our federated Companies** **...expanding the boundaries...**

	Total
Yes: enlarge, as is already happening for Companies in Italy (inter-regional or nationali)	31
Yes: Territories can be expanded, moved	21
Keep Companies diocesan or interdiocesan	17
Begin to expand to nearby Companies	15
Expanding is advantageous besides being inevitable	14
Difficulties in moving on account of age and other reasons	11
Does this have implications for autonomy?	9
Call upon obedience to the Holy Spirit	9
Take care not to uproot	8
Autonomy is not self-referential, closed, indifferent (overcome these)	8
Non-Italian Companies already expand through nations; if possible on the same continent	7
The Federation guarantees autonomy	7
In case of organizational difficulties, seek help from the Federation	6
Do as priests and bishops, required to retire at a certain age	6
Overcome habits: how we always get to “Yes”	6
Think about informal ways of gathering too	5
Together works better, multiplies resources & energies	5
Don't wait till the end of the Company's life to unite	5
Quickly (22/23) begin an experiment among Companies close in sensibilities or area	5
Rethink autonomy today (responsibility, maturity)	5
Preserve properties	4
Learn to communicate in all the means of communication	4
Lack of people & vocations (more die than enter)	4

Gratitude for the work of the Federation Council	4
Keep local meetings too	3
The vocations outside Italy are ... in expanded Companies	3
Guarantee personal autonomy too; think about the future	3
The Federation should not be substituted; it should help	2
Economic difficulties	2
Involve priests and bishops too	2
Always safeguard the charism	2
Keep the Constitutions in mind	2
Not rigidity, but adaptation	2
Do discernment on this with the assemblies to get agreement	2
Attention to the histories of the Companies	1
Don't be too worried about properties	1
Attention to not take advantage of the same people	1
Don't repeat centralization	1
Attention to the juridical personalities	1
Expanded Companies & one government, autonomous in the Federation	1
Relocation is not only physical, but of the heart, head, & spirit	1
Companies are interconnected, not only autonomous	1
The mentality of staying as we are persists	1
Expand if the Companies are in favor of it	1
Open to the Companies around the world	1
Don't rush the decisions	1

4. Synodal walk in the Companies to expand some boundaries

	Total
Synodal journey is beautiful and indispensable	26
Do discernment	11
Maintain relationships with other secular institutes	5
Don't be afraid of incorporating [other] Companies	5
Participate in national conferences of secular institutes	3
Mergers are possible	2
Willingness to change ways of thinking	2
Become inculturated	2
The Federation Council is aware of and visits all the Companies	2
Maintain relationships with Ursuline religious sisters	2
Personal conversion	2
We don't give enough time to Federation news	1
Maintain a relationship with the Company of Brescia	1
Synodal journey with the local Church too	1
Different from the Order of Virgins and secular institutes	1
Directresses & certain councilors should change their mentality	1
Listen to competent outsiders	1

5. St. Angela... *do something differently...* How to interpret this today

	Total
<i>Prudently and with good advice</i>	23
Think about new solutions, have the courage to change	14
<i>Pray most ardently</i>	9
We struggle over change; St. Angela was not afraid of change	8

Trust the Holy Spirit's creativity about new pathways	6
Expect marvels	5
Maintain unity	4
Maintain identity	3
Inculturate the charism in time & place	3
Think globally, act locally	2
Get back into the game	2
Have a mature faith	1
Be dynamic, energetic, constructive	1
Ask yourself: what would St. Angela do today?	1
Safeguard the Rule and Constitutions	1
Be salt, light & yeast	1
This quotation from St. Angela is for every Company & sister....	1



*Keep to the ancient way
&
lead a new life...*



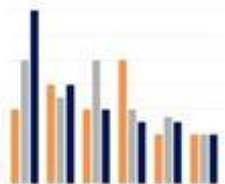
*If, according to times and circumstances,
the need arises to ...
do something differently,
do it prudently and with good advice.*





Data returned

Rome – July 28, 2022-11-08



**Companies and Groups that
replied to the questionnaire:**

31 total

16 in Italy

15 outside Italy

|



Questionnaires compiled

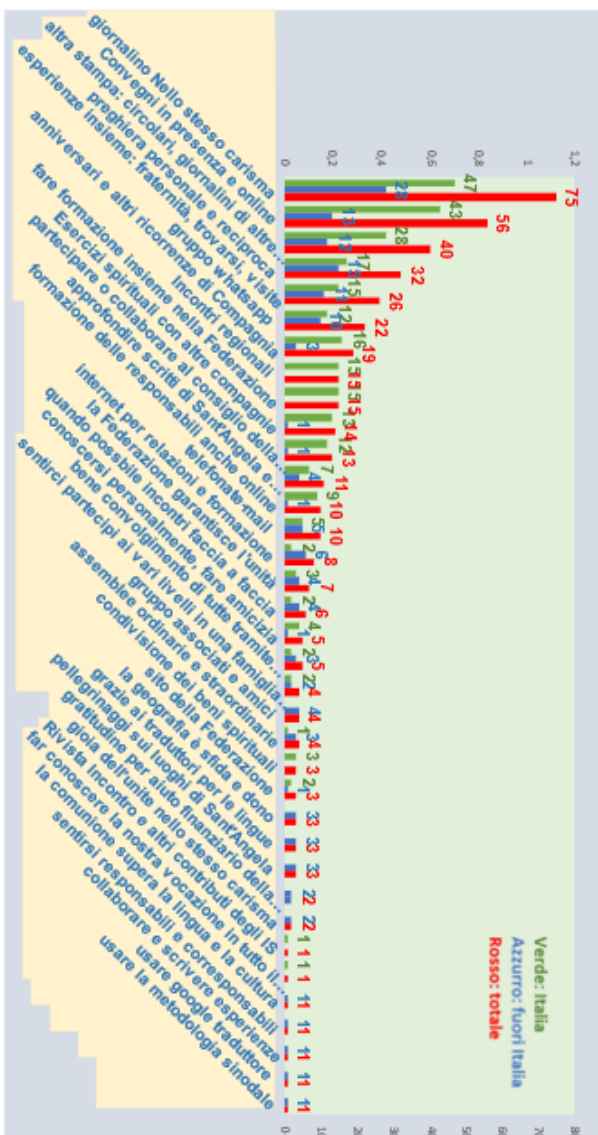
190 total

113 in Italy

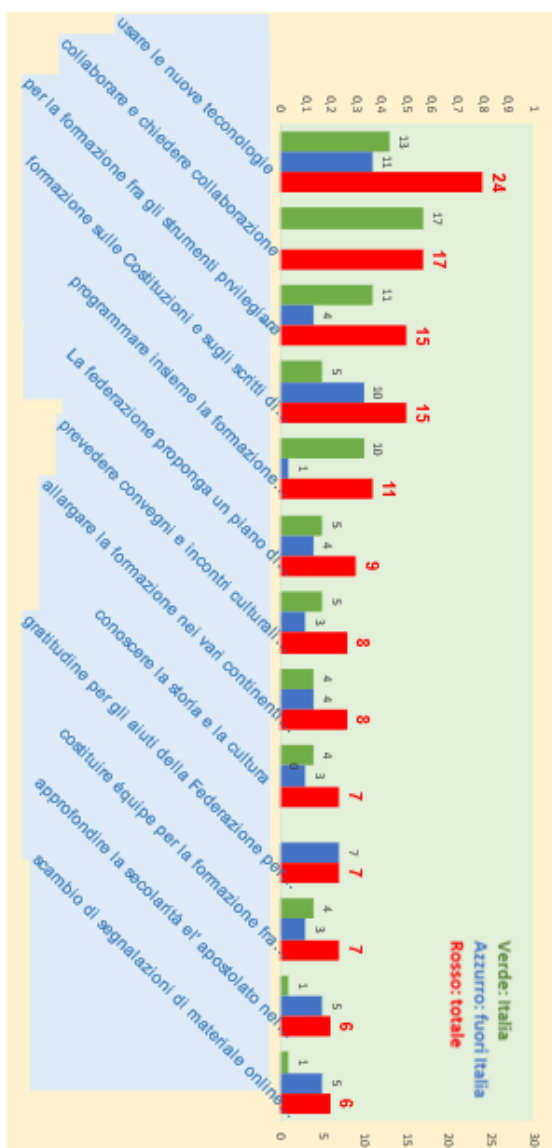
77 outside Italy

The following graphs indicate the number of responses on each topic received from Italy (green) and from other countries (blue) relative to the whole (red).

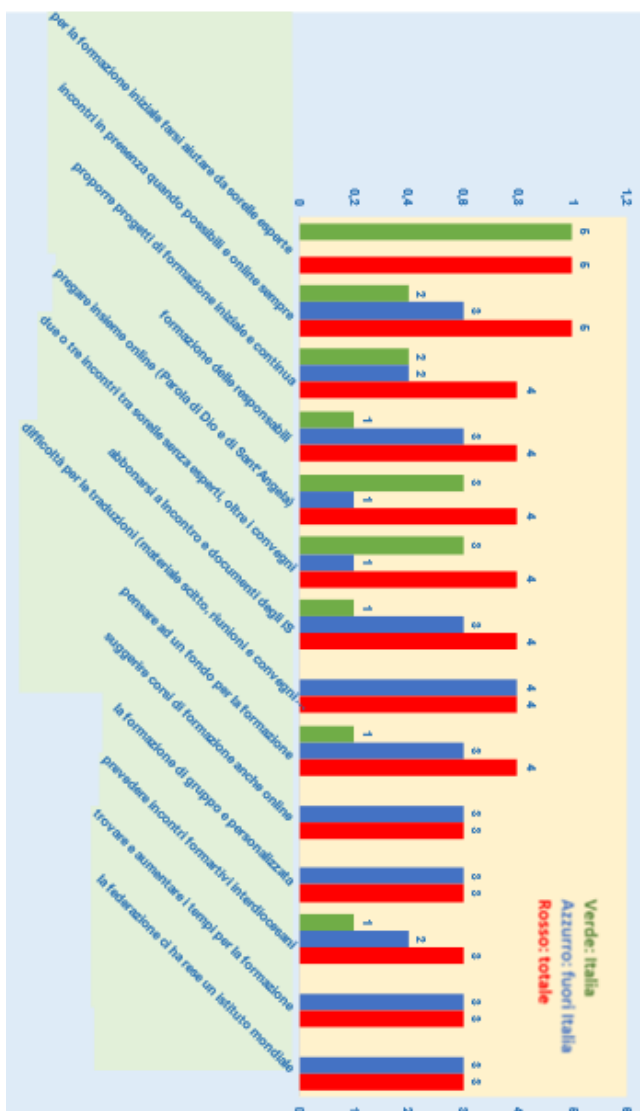
1. unità e comunione tra le Compagnie nella Federazione... come



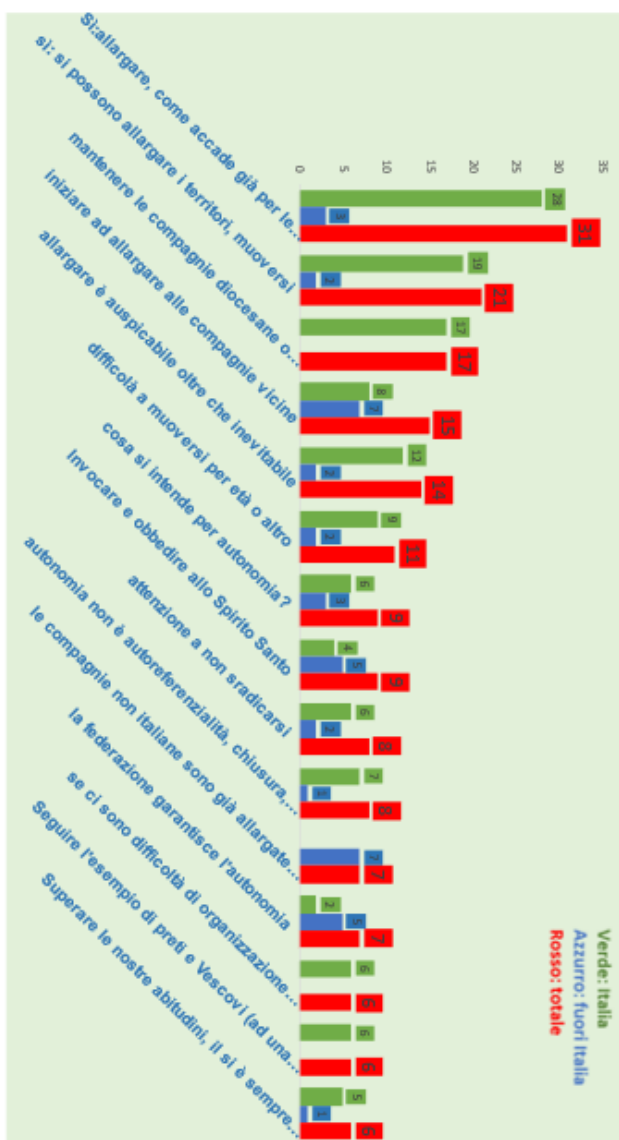
2.1 Accompagnamento e formazione iniziale e continua nei gruppi e nelle compagnie



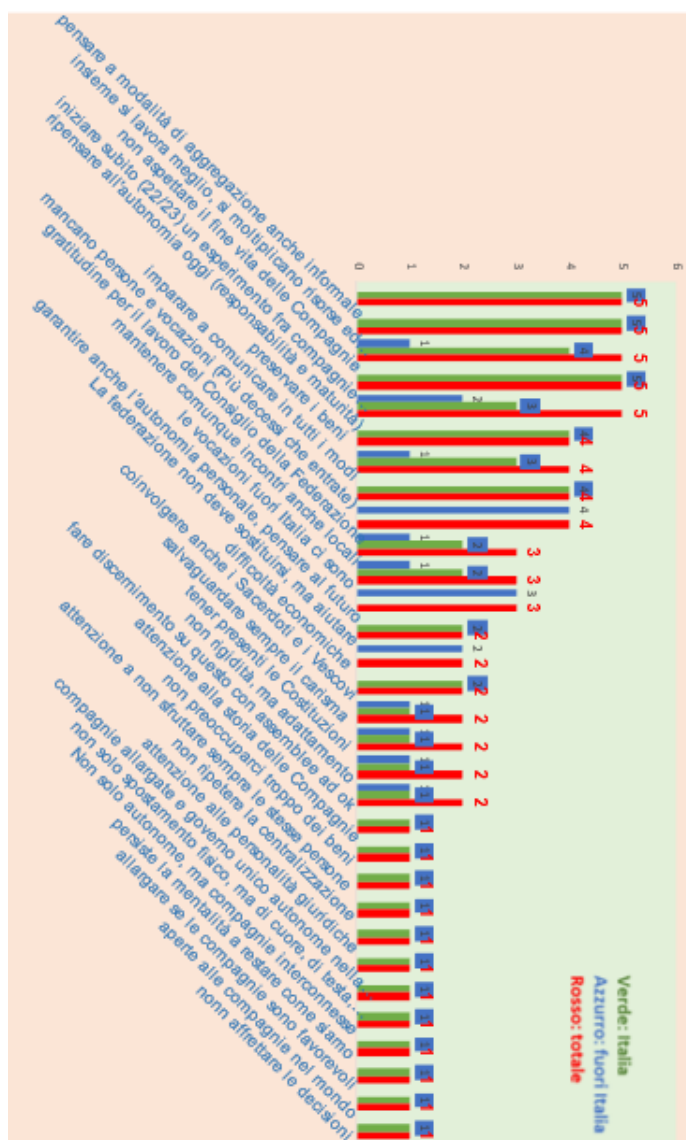
2.2 Accompagnamento e formazione iniziale e continua nei gruppi e nelle compagnie



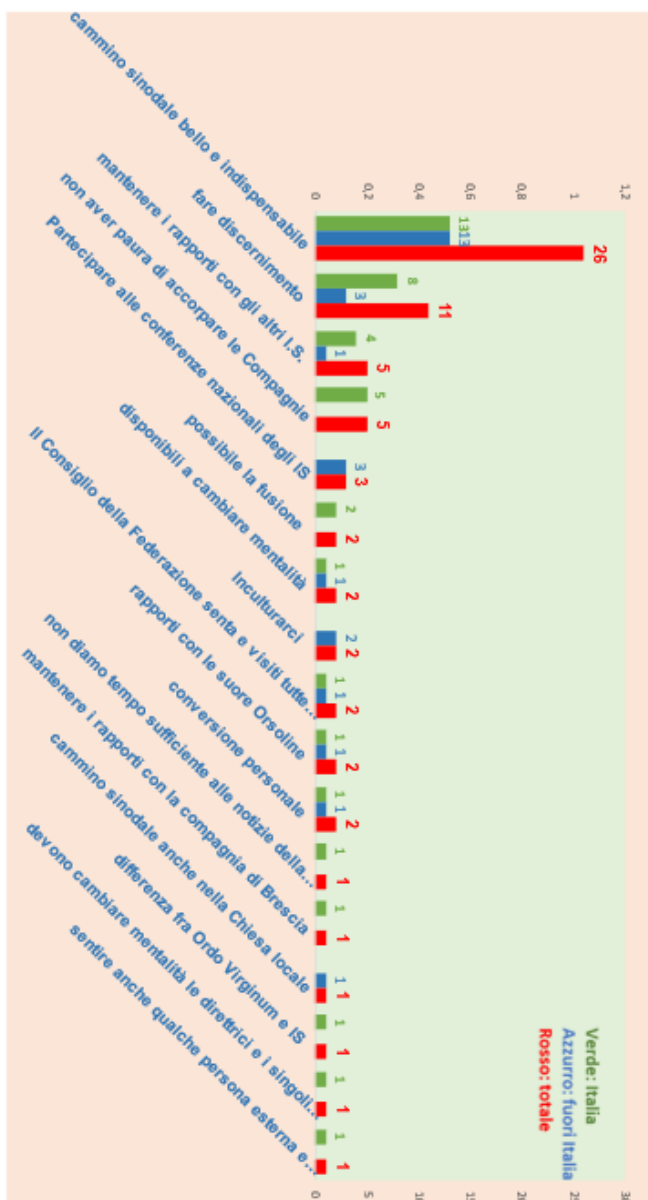
3.1 L'autonomia nelle nostre Compagnie federate ... allargare i confini...



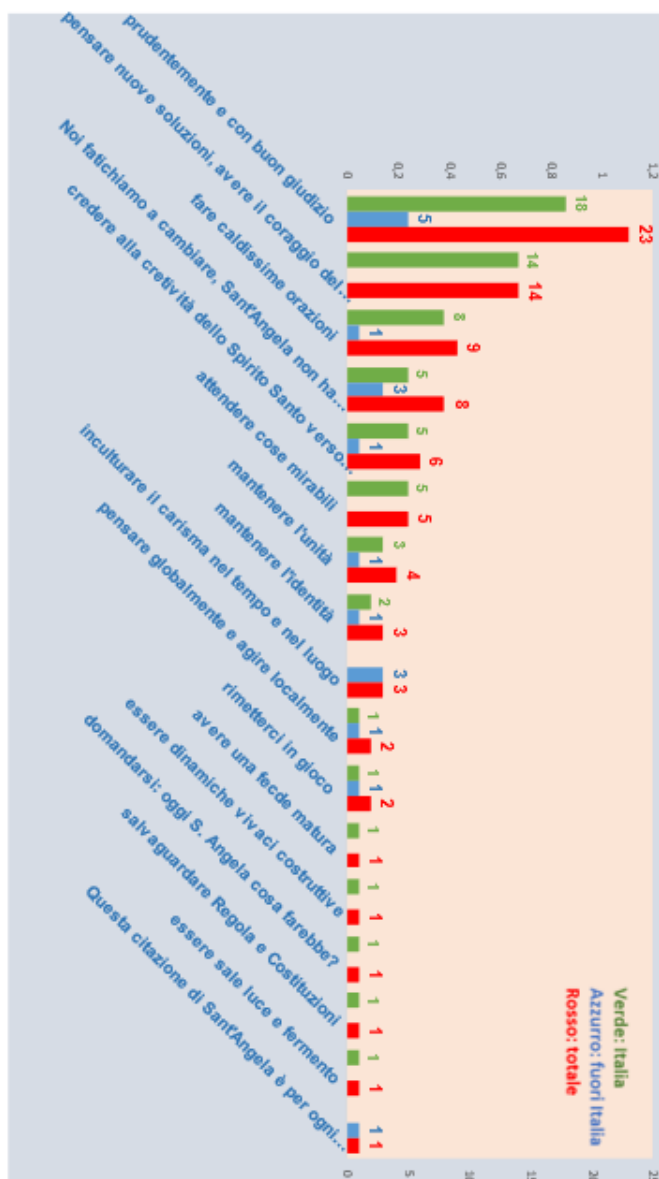
3.2 L'autonomia nelle nostre Compagnie federate ... allargare i confini...



4. Cammino sinodale nelle compagnie per allargare qualche confine ...



5. Sant'Angela... fare diversamente qualche cosa ... come interpretare oggi



II COMMUNICATION:

Wisdom Assessment and Prospects (programmatic)

Emerging from the Responses to the Questionnaires

Valeria Broll, President of the Federation



Introduction:

*To the beloved daughters and sisters of the Company of Saint Ursula ... seek out, and desire all those **means** and **ways** that are necessary to persevere and prosper till the end.... So now, all of you kindly be attentive, with great and longing heart* (Prologue to the Rule 3, 10, 32).

This introduction helps us to focus the goal of our being here: we are in a family and together with St. Angela we are trying in this convention to identify **means** and **ways** to "**persevere and progress.**"

In a family we meet each other and share with each other. In a family we receive and give, we are nourished with food that satisfies, above all, the heart, the mind, the desire, the will, the spirit and the soul.

Now, enlightened and encouraged by these words of St. Angela, let us try to glimpse in the answers to the questionnaire (answers just set forth by Kate) how much our Companies and/or Groups are "good soil" where the seed of vocation has germinated, grows and bears good fruit.

- What are the **means** used and **the ways** identified to "*persevere and progress to the end*"?
- What is **absorbed** in our Companies that molds them to the Madre's heart?
- What **critical issues** have been identified on our walk as Company today? How can these difficulties, become **challenges** to be faced with serene courage?
- What feasible **proposals** have emerged to date regarding the five thematic areas of the questionnaire: 1.Unity, 2.Formation, 3.Autonomy, 4.Synodality, 5.Change.

1. Unity and communion among the Companies and the Federation... how it is achieved

Powerful and shared experiences emerge from the questionnaires.

The **means** used to make concrete this evangelical and Merician dimension of unity and communion is *printed material (the little bulletin "In the same charism with responsibility") that the Federation offers; it is personal and community prayer, sisterhood, exchanges and participation in formative and spiritual experiences that go beyond the confines of the Company (e.g. retreats), it is the use of technological media (internet, cell...) it is the conventions, in person and online meetings.*

There are also difficulties, critical ones, in using some of these media. For example, technology (*they are a gift but also a challenge*). Indeed, they allow you to reach everyone immediately, but there is a risk of experiencing relationships instantly and superficially. You run the risk of filling your day with virtual contacts where you can go from one feeling to another in no time... you share a suffering, a pain, a death, on the same day you get good news, a friendly joke... all in the name of sisterhood, sharing, belonging to the "WhatsApp group"...

The proposal is to improve and perhaps better plan initiatives of common interest (retreats, formal and informal meetings) make better use of WhatsApp, not allowing it to merely tickle curiosity, an emotion, a feeling, but a tool that allows knowledge, conversation, listening, respect and growth in sisterhood.

Wisdom assessment: Let us nourish the gift of unity and communion with the words of the Rule, the Constitutions, and the Church.

Prologue to the Counsels: *Act, move, believe, strive, hope, cry out to him with all your heart.* **Last Counsel:** *See then how important is this union and concord. So, long for it, pursue it, embrace it, hold on to it with all your strength.* **Const 23.1:** *"United together" in the Company, we share the grace of the presence of the Lord among us; we experience sisterhood and find support and assistance for living our vocation and mission.*

John 17: *Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are. When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me ... so that they may share my joy completely ... because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one ... As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world.*

Programmatic assessment:

Prioritize reading and listening to the formative and informational texts of the Company (Federation, Companies). **Give attention** to printed materials, website, formation materials and communications.

Give time to information and formation on our "home" texts.

Give time to relationships and discussion, being present, participating in all possible ways in proposals that unite us. **Nurture** participation and communication around proposals for formation and communication.

Get out of our routines, of our reassuring habits, to put into action all our physical, mental, spiritual and human faculties to foster, experience, and live the Company and in the Company (e.g., in-person and/or online conferences). **Strengthen** the will and desire to be there.

Open ourselves to other formative-spiritual experiences (retreats, spiritual exercises). This attitude helps us to be people who share the grace and gift of being Christians, and consecrated Christians, in the diocesan/interdiocesan Church. **Foster** openness, evangelization, witness, communion and unity.

Collaborate (giving and receiving availability) for a common project.

Goal: Unity and Communion.

The formative, spiritual proposals that follow in this convention offer us insights for personal and communal renewal in this regard. May the Holy Spirit give us the grace to collaborate with him to persevere and progress on the path of communion and unity (*a sure sign that one is walking the path good and pleasing to God*).

2. Formation: Prospectives, methods and resources

We all agree that formation is fundamental, it is necessary, it cannot be lacking in our personal and community life as a Company. From the questionnaires, resources already experienced and resources to be activated are identified. Such as, *for example, technology, having an annual and common formation plan for all, use and exchange material (In the same charism, specific periodicals for secular institutes, study and give more time to formation), having suitable and specific tools available (books, images, films, documentary about St. Angela), having a place, a house to meet (Africa request), lectio divina, praying together also online.*

The methods identified are: *collaborate and ask for collaboration, online resources, one must connect with every sister; enlarged regional meetings, simultaneous translation in conventions, join available forces for giving and receiving formation, study theology and spirituality, pilgrimages also to St. Angela's places and sisterly experiences....*

Proposals for the future: *conventions and cultural meetings related to the current historical context, deepening secularity, learning about the Institute's worldwide reality, meetings for leaders, meetings by language areas, ecclesial, secular, charismatic and psychological formation, fidelity to the charism, formation for discernment, dialogical formation, what belonging to a secular institute entails, formation respectful of all seasons of life...*

Wisdom assessment:

9th Legacy: *“Follow this road and you cannot go wrong.”*

Constitutions: The Constitutions have the basic elements for a formation journey. For example, Ch. 3 says that formation cannot be separated from *attention to the Word of God, liturgical and sacramental life and personal prayer. From experiencing sisterhood, from deepening the identity of secular consecration, from knowing the spirit of the foundress, from experiencing the form of life traced out by St. Angela.* We find this last aspect in the prayerful and wise reading of the Rule.

The Church (Pope Francis): Formation is a journey intended to reach the whole person, so that our every attitude and gesture reveals our full and joyful belonging to Christ; it is a process that aims to form the

heart, mind and life, facilitating the integration of our human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral dimensions.

The Church through the World Conference of Secular Institutes (CMIS) **suggests** some appropriate ways of formation:

- It must be personalized, **adapted to each person**, his or her history, culture, faith journey, age, etc.
- Practical ways of accompaniment must be identified always keeping in mind the local situation and then, also use the formation opportunities that are offered in one's own territory: initiatives organized by local Churches (theology courses, Bible courses, etc.); initiatives organized by the national conferences of secular institutes. Finally, initiate forms of collaboration for formation among secular institutes. Here the Church opens and encourages us in broadening the horizon. Open up, go out, "widen" our boundaries without fear of contamination or scattering. These and other emphases regarding formation can be found on the CMIS website.

Programmatic assessment: (solutions emerged and/or proposed)

Grow in Merician spirituality, in theological knowledge (so that our faith and hope may be more and more evangelical and less and less reactive-emotional). Grow in humanity and in serene obedience to life (secularity).

Nurture relationships and human sisterly communion in the Company. Regularity in the formation program and fidelity in participation. Caring for self-formation.

Openness to form and be formed, to allow oneself to be helped, welcome discernment and choose more formation leaders (Company, Federation, individual and larger meetings, ecclesial, parish, diocesan, social formation meetings...).

In one of his messages of last February 2, **Pope Francis** told us:

*Be inspired, dear members of secular institutes, by the desire to live a “holy secularity”, because you are a lay institution. You are one of the oldest charisms and the Church will always need you. **But your consecration must not be confused with religious life. It is baptism that constitutes the first and most radical form of consecration....***

*You are **hidden within the reality**, just like the seed in the earth and the yeast in the dough.... The seed is the premise of life, the yeast is the essential ingredient for bread to be fragrant. I therefore invite you to deepen the meaning and the way of your presence in the world and to renew in your consecration the beauty and the desire to **participate in the transfiguration of reality**.*

You are like antennas ready to receive the smallest innovations prompted by the Holy Spirit, and you can help the ecclesial community to take on this gaze of goodness and find new and bold ways to reach all peoples.

*Be sentinels looking upwards and forwards, with the Word of God in your hearts and love for your brothers and sisters in your hands. You are in the world to testify that it is loved and blessed by God. You are consecrated for the world, which awaits your witness to a freedom that gives joy, that nourishes hope, that prepares the future. **Be witnesses who attract!***

<p>3. Autonomy of our federated Companies. Can it be considered and put in the context of the reality of our larger territories?</p>

In its concrete territorial and socio-cultural configuration, the Company is a blessing because it is an expression of incarnation, but it must always be inculturated with the charism.

Looking at so many realities of autonomous Companies, especially in Italy, one sees in them so much **history** of holiness, charity, openness and service to the local, particular Church; one sees a generous response to the many social and human and spiritual needs of the territory, but now with the decline in vocations and advancing age, the Company is made up of a few members who struggle to manage their *autonomy in ... formation, organization, and economy* (Const.1.4).

This situation emerges from the questionnaire with hopes but also fears, difficulties and uncertainties about the future.

The proposals that emerged touch above all on the **attitudes** to adopt in the face of the new that is advancing: prudence, trust, willingness to ask for help and to give help, to believe and to be truly

open to the creativity of the Spirit that will guide our steps and lead us to new roads, perhaps steep and stony roads (also the difficulty of leaving ways that were established over time), but certainly paved with the finest gold: the gold of the common good, the gold of mutual support, the gold of pooling one's goods: human, spiritual, physical energies, ... like the first Christian communities... The direction seems clear, if we read history objectively. God incarnating himself in our fragile humanity continues and will continue to do so in our Companies ... our task is willingness to listen and collaborate.

It is fundamental to broaden our horizons for our journey of human and spiritual search and maturity and not to lose the salt [flavor] of the charism that St. Angela has given us.

Other proposals emerged: Experience nearby Companies, gather informally, discern about this in assemblies focused on this specific topic. OK to enlarged companies and single government. Autonomous in the Federation, enlarge if the Companies are in favor....

Wisdom assessment:

Autonomy: its *raison d'être* is unity and communion in the Federation; the way to achieve this is synodality, discernment and inculturation

Prologue to the Counsels: *Do not be afraid of not knowing and not being able to do what is rightly required in such a singular government. Have hope and firm faith in God.... Pray to him, humble yourselves.... Act, move, believe, strive, hope, cry out to him with all your heart, for without doubt you will see marvellous things.*

Const.23.1: *"United together" in the Company, we **share** the grace ... sisterhood ... support and assistance for living our vocation and mission.*

Const. 22.5: *helping our sisters ... and **collaboration** ... for the good of the Company.*

Const. 23.3: *to be **guardians and mothers** of the "spouses of the Most High"*

Pope Francis *may your communities not become museums.*

Programmatic assessment:

The Company is based above all on St. Angela's charism which is well summarized in the Constitutions: love of God first, love of the sisters, love of the Church and of every person. All accomplished with

humility and undivided heart. Taking care of each other and watching over each other's bodily and spiritual well-being... these are the feelings and attitudes that underlie any process that is meant to initiate change.

The Company: **way and means** to *persevere and progress to the end.*

4. Synodal walk

Communion, participation and mission

We need *exchanges, discussions, shared choices...* to multiply resources, cultivate charism and expand mental and geographical boundaries (if necessary).

From the questionnaire emerges a confirmation to make the synodal style our own in belonging to the Company and to the Church, in the local and social realities where we are inserted. The richness of discussion, of listening, of walking together is emphasized, but the fear of the different, of the new, of adjusting one's pace with another's step also emerges. The urgency of opening up more to knowing and participating and collaborating with other secular institutes is also noted. There are those who see the merger of Companies as possible, those who confirm the practice expressed in the Constitutions of merging...

Wisdom assessment:

The image of the journey appears in many passages of the Constitutions. This stands for all the places:

Const. 23.3 *“She will do all she can to lead according to the directions of the Church, so that the Company **may live its own charism in dynamic fidelity.**”*

Programmatic assessment: *Overcoming our habits, our “We’ve always done it this way”; together we work better, multiply resources and energy; rethink autonomy today.*

Attitudes: **responsibility and maturity, gratitude and appreciation.**

5. What is our attitude toward the future?

Walk in time: attitudes and choices

(Last Counsel) Be consoled, and have a lively faith and hope...

The future: our holiness in harmony with our sisters for a holy Church, for a more human world to reach the fullness of communion with Jesus Christ our Bridegroom, Lover, Shepherd, Teacher, Most High God.

As of tomorrow the sowing begins on this soil of ours that is a little good and a little dry. The seed will be sown for us mainly from the full hands of two women, Dr. Virgili and Dr. Bartolomei Romagnoli, and two of our Ecclesiastical Assistants, Fr. Rino and Fr. Raymond. It is up to us to harvest and keep the seed through group work and workshops. That seed will be a **prophecy** of new possibilities. It will be a unique experience of listening to the Holy Spirit who speaks to our hearts and lives and will help us *pave the way for an authentic renewal* (Const. 37.1).

St. Angela encourages us to make the changes we need, after necessary discernment. Our difficulty is to let ourselves be involved in the changes. There is and there will be difficulties, but this is the way that leads us to a great inner freedom where truly Jesus Christ is and will be our only treasure, as he was for St. Angela.





Biblical Meditations

Rosanna Virgili

Author and biblical scholar

Morning Prayers during our convention were accompanied by Rosanna Virgili's profound biblical meditations relevant to our formation as consecrated women.

The Titles of the Meditations:

- + *Primary Concern: Union and Concord (Rachel and Leah, Ruth and Naomi)*
- + *"As Diligent Shepherdesses": Examples of Judith and Esther*
- + *Sisters in Solidarity and Fruitfulness: Elizabeth and Mary*



We do not have the written texts of the meditations.

To return to these themes and go deeper, the speaker recommends some books written by her or in collaboration with other authors:

1. *Le lettere di Paolo*

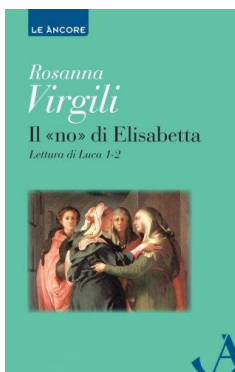
by Rosanna Virgili, Emanuela Buccioni, and others | Ancora



2. *I Vangeli* Translation [to Italian] and commentaries from four biblical scholars by Rosanna Virgili, Rosalba Manes, and others | Ancora

3. *Il «no» di Elisabetta*

Reading of Luke 1-2 by Rosanna Virgili / Ancora



Topics and Problems of Women's Religious Life



Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli
instructor in the history of religious life
and hagiographic and mystical literature

Nuns: Necessary Background

Part I (*)

For many centuries of the long Middle Ages (VI-XII), the only religious role available to women was that of the nun. But access to the monastery was very limited and in practice reserved for maidens of the noble classes. Although the women's houses were nominally under the control of the bishops, in reality they were institutions that almost always had a familial, private character. Their foundation was attributable to the initiative of an aristocratic clan, which provided for the endowment of the monastery, designated the abbess there and sent its daughters there, so that they could be educated there until marriage or remain there permanently as nuns.

Some early medieval abbesses were powerful and listened to women, and some monasteries managed to establish themselves with a significant presence in the territory. At least until the 11th century female foundations remained in a clear minority compared to male foundations, and generally had a small number of nuns.

Female Monasticism: A Minority Reality

Several reasons have been given to explain the great numerical disproportion of female monasteries to male monasteries:

1. They had limited religious and social functions. Excluded from sacramental ministry, the only work of the nuns was prayer.
2. With little autonomy, they needed heavy financial investment to survive. In addition, it was difficult to protect communities in times of serious political and military difficulties.
3. In historical phases of severe population stagnation, women were valuable as wives and as mothers, transmitters of life.

Evangelical Revival of the 12th Century

This situation was to change profoundly in the middle centuries of the Middle Ages, as economic and social conditions improved, city life revived, and the demographic curve rose. These transformations coincided with growing and mature awareness among the faithful, with a desire for active participation in religious life by the laity and women too,



who had remained on the margins, as if mute, for centuries. The life of faith was no longer exclusively for the clergy or the monks, the “prayers” whose task was to pray for the salvation of sinful humanity. There was then a great spiritual fervor, an "evangelical revival" (Chenu) that ran throughout the medieval West, as well as the myth of a return to apostolic origins (the Primitive Church).

A New Monasticism

In the great process of renewing monasticism, women also played an active role. Foundations multiplied, with new and original characters:

1. Double monasteries arose (Fontevraud and the Paraclete).
2. In northern Europe (Flanders and Rhineland) there was an explosion of Cistercian women's monasteries.
3. Mendicant neo-monasticism developed in Italy, which had its main exponent in St. Clare of Assisi, the first woman in Church history to write a rule for women.

The impetuous growth of women's houses, however, put a strain on the male orders, which had to provide the clergy necessary for the spiritual direction and sacramental needs of women, as well as to protect and administer their properties. The Premonstratensians (1198), and then also the Cistercians and the Friars Preachers (1228) forbade the incorporation of women's monasteries into their Orders.

The impact of certain streams of thought in these choices should certainly not be underestimated: the celibate propaganda in the post-Gregorian age, the perception of the risks that closeness could become dangerous for chastity. There is, in this regard, an immense record of

case laws. If the anti-feminist tirades of Bernard of Clairvaux are memorable, not even an "innovator" like Francis of Assisi was immune to these concerns, punctually reflected in his rule. According to Jordan of Saxony, even St. Dominic at the point of death advised his friars to be vigilant, to avoid *suspicious involvements* with women, which would be dangerous to their purity. He himself, while managing to keep his virtue intact, was not insensitive to the charms of young women, preferring conversations with them rather than with old women.

Pretexts

"The wickedness of women is greater than any other wickedness in the world, and the poison of wasps and dragons is easier to cure and less dangerous to men than being around women" (Conrad of Marchtal). "To be continually with a woman without having sexual activity with her is more difficult than raising a dead man. The less arduous of the two is impossible; do you think that I believe you capable of the more arduous?" (Bernard of Clairvaux)

In reality, such considerations often served as a pretext: women's houses represented a considerable burden for the Orders. Therefore, very real and concrete problems lay under them. These problems were indeed destined to become more acute with the new mendicant religious, whose itinerant lifestyle was in blatant contrast to community life and a stable and continuous presence.

Though in the early thirteenth century we see Cistercian Ida of Nivelles going out freely with her companions to work in the fields, just fifty years later this would no longer be possible. How then to ensure the community's survival without a system of financial annuities and possessions, when women could not go out to beg? Like the ancient orders, the female branches of the new mendicant orders of the 13th century could not fully absorb the strong demand for participation in religious life, especially at the lower and less affluent levels of the population. The selectivity of recruitment, caps on numbers, and dowry requirements made it impossible for many women to enter the monastery. Clare of Assisi invoked the "privilege of poverty," but she remained an exception: even she could not break the equation – monasticism = aristocracy.

Some women who desired to consecrate themselves to God in a life of poverty, chastity and prayer did not want to, or could not for social and economic reasons fit into an existing religious order. For them other penitential choices were on the horizon. Generally speaking, these para-regular options were traceable, on the one hand, to a profound need for a solitary life, which resulted in the phenomenon of voluntary recluses, and, on the other hand, to a communal setting such as the northern beguines, Italy's *pinzochere*, or the Spanish *beatas*.

Women's Religious Movement and the Development of Mysticism

However, it would be overly simple to read the penitential phenomenon only in the terms of surplus women, religious women, pushed to the margins by the numeric limitations of monastic institutions. In fact, it was precisely in these environments that, beginning in the thirteenth century, cultural processes of great significance and epochal changes in the religious experience of the Christian people took place. The centrality assigned to the theme of the Incarnation and to the humanity of Christ, the Eucharistic cult and the Marian cult closely interested the female world because of the new attention given to the issue of the body, but also to the sphere of emotions and affectivity.

In this "third world," or third state, practices and devotions destined to endure in Catholic piety were shaped, while the multiplication of cells and beguinages coincided with the very currents of mysticism. In the neutral zone, where pastoral and social responsibilities came to a halt, a new language for "speaking of God" was released, that of ecstasy, of dreaming, of vision. Just images and words, no arguments or polemic against the established order, simply an experience of something else. An echo of these discourses has remained with us in the wonderful texts and poems of Flanders and Brabant, the Rhineland, as well as Umbria and Tuscany.

Female Hermits

The lifestyle of solitary women, anchoresses, was very particular. In the 12th century, in his treatise on voluntary reclusion, Aelred of Rievaulx had defined the anchoress as "one who, renouncing the world, chooses the solitary life, desires to hide herself, never to be

seen, and, “like one dead in the world,” has herself buried in the cave of Christ (*"in spelunca Christi consepeliri"*). For the Cistercian monk Aelred, this was the spiritual essence of reclusion, one of the most radical expressions of the female religious model in the Middle Ages.

In fact, this was not a new reality: the desire for solitude, one of the constitutive and primal structures of the Christian vocation from its origins, could be realized either in isolated or uncultivated places, the desert and the forest, or in narrow and enclosed settings, the cell. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between two models of solitary life, both ordered to a total withdrawal from society: 1) hermetic [hermit] life, with its mobile and open figures (predominantly male), and 2) reclusion, an ascetic practice by a person (mainly a woman) typically settled in enclosed places.

In the Shadow of Monasteries

In ancient times recluses inhabited cells near monasteries, such as the famous Wiborada, who had the gift of foresight and saved the monks of St. Gall by warning them well in advance of a Hungarian raid. In this way they had sufficient time to leave the monastery and get the books to safety. But Wiborada did not leave her cell: the heroic recluse was killed on May 1, 926; in 1047 her cult gained Roman approval.

Hildegard of Bingen, before entering the monastery, began her experience of religious life among a group of recluses and was instructed by Jutta, an essential figure in her formation. Hildegard later became an important abbess, wrote a commentary on the rule of St. Benedict (whose irreplaceable character she reiterated), yet always thought of hermit life as the pinnacle of perfection.

Rules for Recluses

The first great manuals for recluses were written in England, by Goscelin of St. Bertin and Aelred of Rievaulx. These spiritual masters dictated certain rules of behavior, but they also sketched an ideal and a way of life: the little house of the anchoress is a tomb, which nevertheless foreshadows resurrection. The time of expectant waiting must be filled by prayer, contemplation, study.

A very high culture appears, for example, in the famous St. Albans Psalter, which Abbot Gottfried had set up for the anchoress Christina of Markyate (†1161), a manuscript rich in splendid miniatures with scenes from the life of Christ. A few decades later, around 1160, the Cistercian Aelred in his *De Institutis* appears much more radical than Goscelin: he demands absolute segregation and dispossession. At the center of his proposal are the cross of Christ, poverty, and work...



Reclusion and Eucharistic Mysticism

However, the great explosion of the phenomenon occurred in the Thirteenth Century. It came out of Flanders, the epicenter being the Diocese of Liège. And it is not just a matter of more numbers, but a profound transformation. Ecstasies, visions, revelations: the very concept of holiness changed and also the accounts that would express it.

The way was opened by the Life of Mary of Oignies (†1213), a recluse in the Diocese of Liège, a lay woman devoted to poverty, asceticism and contemplation. James of Vitry, her confessor, wrote about her in 1215; he was a progressive theologian and preacher committed to the forefront of the new pastoral program inaugurated by Innocent III and the Fourth Lateran Council. The hagiographer established a close link between life inside the cell and Mary's Eucharistic devotion. She lived in a small room adjacent to the chapel of the canons of Oignies, where she spent many hours in adoration of the sacred species preserved in the golden pyx, "gazing intently at the exposed chalice placed above the altar." But even when she was intent on working with the spindle in her room, the cell window was an ever-open eye in uninterrupted communication. In vigilant anticipation, she sensed in advance the arrival of Jesus at the moment of the consecration: "Although she was not in the church, but prayed in her cell (as she was wont to do with her eyes covered by a snow-white veil) when Christ came down on the altar at the words of the priest, she was admirably transformed by feeling his arrival."

Communion is the gateway to the silent journey of ecstasy, but Mary's Eucharistic devotion also found its focal point in the elevation of

the host, which released her experience of vision, the luminous epiphanies of the Child, images that gave tangible evidence of the mystery denied by the heretics, the reality of a God who became incarnate out of love. The recluse's window was like a large screen that made the invisible visible: her spiritual eyes could see what "really" happens behind the scenes of the liturgical celebration, a spectacle invisible to everyone else.

As Though in the Tomb: The Desert in the City

In the 13th century the phenomenon of reclusion flourished in north-central Italy as well, with particular characteristics. This form of solitude does not require a search for remote and inaccessible places, or even hospitality in a monastery. In a process of internalization, one builds the desert within the city, enclosing oneself within the cell walls, which mark full detachment from the world. As the great Dominican preacher Giordano da Pisa noted, between the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries, urban centers swarmed with "lunatics who closed themselves up in cells." The famous chronicler Salimbene de Adam lamented that simple and uncouth people were recipients of generous bequests, in open competition with religious orders:

"Ignorant laymen, who lack the science of discernment, when they make a will bequeath as much to a little woman living in a hermitage as they leave to a community of thirty priests who almost daily celebrate mass for the living and the dead. See the Lord, and change for the better what is not done well."

Women in Cells in Thirteenth-century Italy

In recent times, archival research on a local basis, through a study of wills and also of statutes, registers of entries and exits of municipalities, reforms and synodal decisions, has made it possible to assess the spread of the phenomenon in the main urban centers of Tuscany and Umbria...

Reclusion was a choice that attracted women belonging to the lower-middle artisan bourgeoisie classes, whose livelihood was provided by the town communities, ensuring their subsistence. Of course, these kinds of documents do not tell us much about the motivations behind these abundant bequests "for healing the soul." But

it is easy to guess them: such conspicuous donations are a sign of the prestige enjoyed by the extreme life-choice made by solitaries, but also recognize a precise function assigned to their prayer. The community expected that in exchange for material sustenance the recluses would give their fellow citizens spiritual support and protection, praying for the community of the living and the dead; by virtue of their holiness protecting the city from misfortunes and enemies. Authoritative intercessors with God, they took upon themselves the sins of souls and atoned for them by their penances and prayers.

Verdiana of Castelfiorentino: the Silent Patron



If the hagiographic sources are of little help in gauging the extent of the phenomenon, they are very important in understanding the high symbolic and influential value that the choice of imprisonment had, and the credit it enjoyed among the town communities. Some cell-dwellers, such as Diana Giuntini, Oringa Menabuoi, and Verdiana of Castelfiorentino, were chosen by their fellow citizens as patrons and advocates, delegated to represent them in at the heavenly tribunal. They are all cell-dwellers under obedience to their bishops, not bound by formal obedience to a religious order, and completely dependent for their livelihood on municipal institutions or private individuals.

Take the case of Verdiana: a figure with uncertain historical data, she was born into a modest family in the Florentine countryside around the 1360s. Having been orphaned at an early age, at the age of 12 she went to earn a living by serving a wealthy family in her native village. After a miracle in which she became the heroine – the multiplication of a basket of broad beans –she left the servant's work and, perhaps in part to escape the devout attention of some fellow-citizens, undertook a pilgrimage, first to Galicia and then to Rome.

Back in Castelfiorentino, she had herself walled up alive by the parish priest in a cell leaning against the little church of St. Anthony Abbot, where she spent thirty-four years in complete solitude, seeing no one and unseen, immersed in silence and prayer. She died there, aged over sixty, on an uncertain date, perhaps – following the most credible

version – in 1242. After her death, heralded by numerous prodigies, her body remained exposed to public devotion for seventeen days. Her metaphorical tomb, the cell, was destined to become, the sacred repository of her precious relics for the devotion of the local people.

The saint of Castelfiorentino was, literally, walled up alive, dead to the world, by her clear choice. She seemed reluctant, at least according to the 14th-century legend, to have a relationship with the outside world, whether counsel and spiritual instruction or miraculous action. Snakes were the companions of her captivity, living with her, feeding on her food.... The woman died to the world, but her sacrifice was an offering that ensured a symbolic interchange, restored balance and stabilized the community.

Umiltà of Faenza: From anchoress to Abbess in Vallombrosa



Verdiana's example illustrates the anchorite model in its purest version, an experience destined to end with the death and sanctification of the recluse, who leaves behind no heirs to continue her lifestyle. It may also happen that a hermit's example is followed by other women, ensuring community and institutional development. This is what happened to Umiltà da Faenza (†1310), who concluded her own complex penitential journey as a revered Vallombrosan abbess.

It is worth dwelling on this *beata* because she is a very interesting figure whose journey of perfection is a paradigm of the problems of women's condition. Belonging to a noble family, she was forced by her parents into an unwanted marriage until she convinced her husband to separate. Having finally obtained her longed-for freedom, she took the veil as a Benedictine at St. Perpetua, a Benedictine monastery in her city. Here she devoted herself with passionate rigor to the practice of the monastic virtues, but despite her efforts she was mocked by the nuns for her lack of culture. Eventually, even the other nuns would recognize her prodigious spiritual intelligence, but this did not lessen her feelings of unease and estrangement from that place.

The Decline of the Phenomenon at the Time of the Observance

But with the advent of the Observance movement, the mystical solitude of incarceration no longer appeared functional for the overall reorganization of ecclesiastical institutions, and was in fact decisively discouraged, as it was considered an unsuitable way of life for women. In the first half of the Fifteenth Century, in the file of hagiographical sources of Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani, the future St. Frances of Rome (†1440), one senses a climate that had profoundly changed by then. Particularly attracted to hermit life, Frances ardently desired a solitary life, which remained an unattainable goal, finally rejected as a true diabolical temptation. Unable to taste the sweet fruit of solitude, the pious Ponziani lady quenched her hunger by building herself little artificial paradises, spaces of interiority: a cavern in the garden was her oasis, and the solarium at the top of her home was the secret site where she could read, contemplate and finally find her freedom...

Then a path opened which, albeit slowly, would lead to a redefinition of women's roles in the early modern age.

But in the new framework, the margins of religious spontaneity would be very narrow. Among the categories of women considered legitimate recipients of church ministry were married women, widows, nuns, and non-cloistered virgins living in their own homes. The bishops at the Council of Trent recognized the dignity of the "fourth state," the value of the service these women rendered to society and the Church, provided, however, that this choice of life remained circumscribed within the spheres of domestic confinement, as the Fathers had taught. The time of the ancient anchoresses, of their free and solitary search for God, was now over.

The Beguines

The term *beguine* is very old and of rather uncertain etymology: the earliest records date from the early 13th Century in Flanders and Brabant. In France these religious women were called *papalarde*; in Italy *humiliate*; in Germany *coquenunne*; in central Italy *bizzoche* or *pinzochere*; in Spain *beatas*. This term was used to designate a woman who had entered the canonical state of a penitential, protected by the Church and enacted by changing her clothes and renouncing the world.

In 1243 the chronicler Matthew Paris attests that the beguine was a religious woman who dressed and behaved like a nun, without, however, having professed within any of the approved monastic rules, and having taken only simple vows.

The diversity of names is also matched by fluidity of lifestyles and practices. The universe of beguines presented itself as a composite and fragmented reality. The characters and developments of the Italian movement were quite different from the Nordic movement, where the religious women demonstrated marked organizational qualities and self-management skills. In Flanders and Brabant, the cradle of this movement, they successfully established large-scale beguinages, true cities of ladies, with their own schools, textile mills, meeting places and communal prayer.

We do not have exact figures, but some statistical approximations confirm the considerable numbers of these vocations in some northern European cities. The 1,000 women living in the three beguinages of Cologne at the beginning of the 14th Century constituted about 15 percent of the city's adult female population; in Strasbourg and Basel they amounted to 2.5 percent of the total population. It is known from a letter from Pope John XXII to the bishop of Strasbourg that in 1321 there were about 200,000 beguines living in West Germany alone. In 1372, there were 1,300 in Brussels, out of a total population of 30,000. It has been estimated that, at the peak of the phenomenon's expansion, about one million beguines lived in Europe, although this figure is an approximate calculation.



A beguinage was an architectural complex usually consisting of a courtyard overlooked by small houses and a church. It was often surrounded by a wall and isolated from the city by one or two gates. Some beguinages also included an infirmary, school, and meeting places where the beguines listened to their *magistra's* (teacher's) lectures. For sacramental care they relied essentially on the friars of the new Mendicant orders, especially the Dominicans.

Although the beguines led a very simple life, their style was not that of paupers. For example, they excluded begging (allowed only for the poorest groups). They supported themselves by their own labor and could freely dispose of and thus administer their earnings. Their specialization, as is well known, was the textile industry, for which the Netherlands was world-famous.

In 1896 there were 1230 beguines in Belgium; in 1960 there were still 600 remaining in 11 beguinages, but by the end of the century they had dwindled to just a few. The last beguine in history, Marcella Pattijn (1920-2013), died on Sunday, April 14, 2013, in Kortrijk in the Sint-Jozef home for the elderly where she had moved after living in the Kortrijk beguinage from 1960 to 2005.

The Beginning of Suspicion

What was the attitude of the hierarchy toward these women's religious communities that were not regulated by precise norms but retained the character of free associations? Quite oscillating positions are recorded. There were great clerics, such as James of Vitry and Thomas of Cantimpré, who from the beginning were particularly sensitive to the demands of this movement and supported it. However, their initiative was always limited and did not ensure its full recognition: the beguines did not belong to the monastic condition of women religious, and at the same time they were not secular, because they were committed to living in chastity and community.

This hybrid situation created numerous problems for them. Although a great intellectual like Robert Grossatesta, Bishop of Lincoln, greatly appreciated this form of life which he considered the highest degree toward attaining Christian perfection, the Parisian secular master William of St. Amour, a diehard opponent of the Mendicants, bitterly fought the new religious movements.

Others sought to make a clear distinction between the lives of "good" beguines whose piety was surely meritorious and those who should be harshly persecuted. According to Nikolaus de Bibra, of Erfurt, there were women who worked at the spindle day and night, were chaste and pious, often went to Mass, fasted, kept vigil and gave charity, while there were some who took advantage of freedom: "under

the false pretense of religion they run around and wander everywhere." They were undisciplined vagabonds like so many monks, clerics and students, he declared.

In order to delegitimize these critics, in the last quarter of the century there was an attempt to develop rules, as in Strasbourg in 1276, where statutes inspired by the Dominican confessor of a beguinage were issued. The purpose was to ensure a certain internal discipline.

This precipitated a crisis, so much so that on the Monday after Pentecost 1310, in a Paris square, a *magistra*, Marguerite Porete, was burned at the stake as a heretic. Wary of teaching, she had nonetheless failed to comply with the requirement of silence. Even after being put in prison, she had refused to bend. Dangerous doctrinal deviations had been noted in her treatise *Mirror of Simple Souls*, a symptom of the spread of a new heresy, called the Free Spirit.

At the beginning of the 14th century, therefore, vigilance about mysticism became more intense. These actions were the first signs of the process of toning down and disciplining religious ideas and behavior; this would be applied more rigorously and consistently later. Some official papal documents speak out against the "false religion" of the beguines and denounce the dangers that lurk in spiritual experiences apart from ecclesiastical magisterium.

The Italian Case: Tertiaries

Partly similar needs are found in the Italian *bizzoche* and *pinzochere*, although here the movement did not give rise to highly evolved and complex microcosms like those formed beyond the Alps, but rather to micro groupings, where religious and spiritual motivations were intertwined with concrete needs for mutual and reciprocal support.

The "holy houses," which flourished in the communal age, were small unconventional families of widows and unmarried girls, where group solidarity represented a valid working response to solve the daily problems of subsistence. These were often women belonging to the most fragile and economically vulnerable strata of the urban population, who were closed out of monastic life and sought to reorganize themselves within more elastic structures than traditional ones.

The soil of our Italian *pinzochere*, fertilized by the pastoral care of Mendicant friars, would see this special connection develop into their becoming Tertiaries. The famous rule of Nicholas IV, *Supra montem* (1289), was intended for those lay men and women who wished to lead a more committed religious life while remaining in their own homes.

The women's movement in Italy was quite different from the northern movement, far less organized and less autonomous. While it is true that the central regions of the Italian peninsula also represent an exceptional space/time of the new female holiness, and great spiritual texts were produced, the Italian mystics, in general, seem more isolated, on the periphery of convents that protected and at the same time controlled them. Their scribes and interpreters walked a difficult and ambiguous tightrope, torn between the thirst for knowledge and the critical whispers of surrounding communities and pressured by superiors they were accountable to. Moreover, while in the northern regions Dominican dominance was overwhelming, in the Italian regions the most prominent figures wore the gray sashes of the penitential Friars Minor...

However, these rules and experiences would open new perspectives especially for the “woman question,” the great late-medieval period of open monasteries: female tertiary communities.

Angela's Choice

Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli

Part II (*)

The Spread of Open Monasteries

During the 15th century Italy witnessed a new type of phenomenon, the communal life of Tertiaries, who organized themselves and became protagonists of **the great new stage of "open monasteries."** They **sprang up in all Italian cities and responded to vital needs of the society of the time. They opened spaces for women of different social classes and broke aristocratic exclusivity.**

A first landmark was the extraordinary increase in women's foundations, in the double sense: both cloistered and tertiary.



The actual consistency of the phenomenon is difficult to measure, because for nuns and sisters we do not have the periodic censuses provided by the male Orders. Yet sample surveys, conducted at the diocesan level and relating to the most important Italian centers, have documented, especially **from the second half of the fifteenth century, an upward expansive curve at least until the Council of Trent.** Compared to the early medieval centuries, the situation was reversed: female "clergy" outnumbered male clergy.

The Tertiary Ideal

Once again, sociological reasons do not seem to be sufficient to explain the success of open monasteries, nor should we underestimate the force of attraction of a proposition that retained a solid lay inspiration. It functioned in the category of the "mixed way" of overcoming the ancient opposition between action and contemplation. From the tertiary matrix had now matured the conditions for a real revolution in the very conception of consecrated life, which implied no longer an escape from the world consummated in the solitude of the cell, but a way of sanctification through works, an active and industrious militia that aspired to an effective presence in history and in society.

Tertiaries were the little heroines of common life, who walked the city's streets and squares to work and support themselves, bringing relief and assistance to the poor and sick. In short, a different ideal/type of religious women emerged, whose identity and codes of behavior referred back to the value of a midpoint, to a measure of discretion far removed from the ascetic excess cultivated by medieval penitents.

In the refectory of the institute of St. Anna in Foligno, around 1451 a local artist frescoed four convivial scenes inspired by the Gospels, spelling out with the force and immediacy of images the **ideology of the Order, as if to offer its manifesto.** One painting in the cycle depicts the two sisters of Lazarus hosting the Lord in their house in Bethany: the typological figures of Martha and Mary are here perceived no longer as opposing identities, but as complementary.

And yet the icon that more than any other sums up the religious experience of the sisters is that of St. Anne. Omnipresent, she is the protective spirit of the house, the guardian who oversees decisive moments. St. Anne is the powerful grandmother and founding mother of the Order, an exemplary model of wise and mature leadership, especially appropriate to express the lofty educational goals that religious women felt called to exercise.

The otherness that Tertiaries assumed was threatened and therefore had to be defended. These institutes operated on the threshold of legality, given **Pope John XXII's explicit prohibition of erecting communities of *bizzochere* in *Sancta Romana* (1317).**

These new-generation foundations responded to the needs of late medieval society; they also opened up spaces for the bourgeois (if not exactly for the most impoverished) segments of the urban population, who had been essentially excluded from a monastic choice.

The Franciscan Tertiaries of Blessed Angelina

Despite the extreme scarcity of sources, the famous and perhaps the best-studied case is that of the earliest Franciscan Tertiaries of Blessed Angelina, who gathered in community in Foligno, choosing to observe the rule *Supra Montem*. In 1403 the countess's monastery obtained from Boniface IX the long-sought approval (*Provenit ex vestre devotionis affectu*). With papal recognition, the monastery was coming out of a situation of illegality. This fact explains, as Sensi has written, the reason why other communities of *bizzochere*, even the pre-existing one at St. Anne's, asked and obtained permission to federate with the Foligno foundation, giving rise to a true congregation. A vast project was emerging: the establishment of a new, unified and centralized order that was to include all the communities of Italian Tertiary sisters.

The Struggle with the Male Branches: The Problem of Enclosure

A leading expression of the renewal of religious life in the 15th century, the experiences of these foundations were difficult and faced opposition. For John of Capestrano, the great ideologue of the Franciscan Observance, the system had to remain binary: the Third Order was appropriate only for those who lived in their own homes.

The question of enclosure was really essential in the claims of the sisters, who strenuously defended their choice of a non-cloistered system, necessary to bring about a precise ideal of life. Colomba wrote very clearly in *Consuetudini*: “Don’t let them force me into a cloister.”

The Superior General and the Right of Visitation

But it was not only about this. As already mentioned, though among the Regulars (those living under the Rule) the congregational structure was an effective tool for implementing the Observant reform, on the female side it proved to be a difficult obstacle to overcome, an impracticable path. This can be seen in the case of the Tertiaries of Foligno. The question of enclosure was not the only problem damaging the sisters’ reputation. So was the concept of strong female power outside men’s control – not only charismatic but also juridically binding – such as that of the superior general, with the right to visit and correct their houses.

Despite the tenacity of the sisters, the Observant Friars eventually won. On January 20, 1521, the bull of Leo X came to definitively replace *Supra montem*, with the imposition of solemn profession of vows and enclosure. On May 29, 1566, Pius V with *Circa pastoralis* would definitively close the circle, imposing enclosure and profession of solemn vows on Tertiaries of all orders.

A Vicious Circle

There were some structural knots in women's religious life for which effective solutions were never found. The ruling perspective was that regular and disciplined, and especially enclosed, life suits women. And men did not give up their prerogatives of supervision and control.

The result was stronger hierarchical ties and dependency and the stifling of the religious women’s drives for autonomy, preventing them from supporting themselves by their own labor. Community management became a difficult burden for the male branches of the Orders to bear. In this vicious circle lurked all the problems and difficulties that have dotted the history of relations between men and women in religious life.

Angela Merici was confronted with this serious issue, and in this context she found a very simple and at the same time very ancient

solution. In fact, Angela went back to her origins, cutting to the root the constraints and impediments placed in the way of women's consecrated life and related directly to the model of the Fathers of the Church.

Epistle to Diognetus

Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. Inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. Christians dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. ...

The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world. The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible.

The Great Invention of the Fourth Century

Thus, in the first communities, Christians lived "in" the world without being "of" the world. They were different but mingled among others.

The monastic choice was the "great invention" of the fourth century. From this period onward we see the phenomenon of men, but also women, leaving the city and going into the desert, seeking the great solitude. New Testament theology had been different. **Christ had had an experience in the desert, but then he had "re-entered." He had lived with others, taught and preached, performed miracles.** The new man, the fourth-century saint, was the monk Abbah Anthony. The era of martyrs ended, and the era of monks, of white martyrdom, began.

Anchoress

The term alludes to *anachoresis*, that is, flight from the city into the desert. Originally it denoted all those who drifted away from society for very diverse reasons (criminals, ordinary delinquents, the unsocial).

Later the word took on a religious connotation, indicating a choice of spiritual life.

From Palladius' account we learn that although the hermit life was considered unsuitable for women, there were also Mothers living in the desert. Some become valued spiritual teachers, such as **Amma Syncletica**, whose spiritual path was very similar to Anthony's. After consecrating herself to virginity, she lived for a time in a cemetery, then went to the desert. She was joined by other anchoresses who were eager to follow her way of life. Syncletica taught them contempt for married life, but also the importance of remaining faithful to one's place.

Equally famous was Amma Sarra, who lived as a recluse in a small cell near the Nile, fighting the demon of fornication for long years, and Amma Theodora, a teacher of humility.

Early Western Experiences

The earliest reports of ascetic forms of life in Italy date from 350. They are to be related to the presence in Rome of the great bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (340-343), fleeing from his adversaries, enemies of Nicene orthodoxy. According to St. Jerome, it was Athanasius who made known the Life of Anthony and the experiences of the desert hermits, the community (*cenobia*) of Pachomius in the area around Thebes, and the ascetic conduct of widows and virgins.

The bishop of Alexandria was thus the first sure bridge of Eastern forms of asceticism to Rome and throughout the West, although he probably found ground already prepared to assimilate these ideals.

So, for the origins of asceticism in the Italian peninsula, we must refer to Eastern models, although in a different historical context monasticism would experience different developments.

Patristic Propaganda

The origins of female monasticism in Italy are little known to us, because of the almost total silence of the sources on the subject. In contrast to this paucity of documentation, we possess numerous texts of the Church Fathers, who mounted an all-out propaganda in favor of consecrated virginity, laying the ideological premises for valuing sexual abstinence. Once the persecutions ceased, renunciation of the world

came to take the form of a kind of bloodless martyrdom (without the martyrs' blood), and in the newly established ranking of merit the prize went to virginity, followed by continence in widowhood and marriage.

The first theoretical writing focused on the exaltation of virginity is from the Greek milieu: the Symposium of Methodius of Olympus (†311), where virgins are considered as a group in their own right within the ecclesial community, endowed with a special dignity. In the West, the two figures most committed to defending the virginal state in their writings were Sts. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, and Jerome.

Propaganda in Favor of Virginity

This was a particularly sensitive issue because the Fathers had to find a middle ground. They had to avoid condemning marriage as did the Encratite movement, but at the same time prevent chastity and married life from being placed on the same plane, as the monk Jovinianus had tried to do. At the end of the fourth century his position attracted the harsh invective of Jerome (*Adversus Iovinianum*). In general, all the Fathers, albeit with different nuances, agreed that marriage still remains a good thing, although chastity is a greater good.

The most extreme in depreciating marriage was Jerome, while Augustine adopted more balanced positions. In fact, he did not focus solely on chastity, but placed humility alongside it, because "humble married men more easily follow the Lamb [...] than proud virgins" (*De sancta virginitate* LI, 52).

St. Ambrose and the Propaganda in Favor of Virginity



St. Ambrose (d. 397) devoted numerous writings to the subject of consecrated virginity. Two treatises are particularly important: *De virginibus*, in three books (PL 16), which the bishop of Milan drafted in 377, three years after his election, and *De virginitate*. The crux of Ambrose's argument appeals both to **the absolute value of virginity, that is, the advantages it adds, and to the disadvantages it subtracts.**

Since sexual attraction is a consequence of the fall – the argument states – the virginal state, in imitating angelic life, leads those who practice it to a privileged

condition that anticipates on earth the bliss of paradise. A woman who chooses to devote herself to God overcomes the weakness of her sex by becoming a *mulier virilis* (manly woman), able to compete in virtue with men. Moreover, the renunciation of physical motherhood frees the virgin from the risks of pregnancy and childbirth, while assuring her a fruitful spiritual motherhood even in an afterlife perspective.

Domestic "Monasticism"

The image of the virgin at home (*virgo intra domum*) as an inescapable feature of women's religious experience is outlined here. "No one should leave her home [...] working in domestic solitude," Ambrose recommends to his sister Marcellina, to whom the treatise is dedicated. Remain at home, awaiting the visits of the angel in the inner chambers; do not even care for companions, but cultivate perfect solitude. On the other hand, how can she be said to be alone who "with so many books, so many archangels, so many prophets?" (St. Ambrose, *De virginibus*, PL 16/2, II, 9, col. 209). Solitude inhabited only by books, archangels, prophets, is the ideal place. Silence (*taciturnitas*), reading, tears, fasting: for the holy bishop of Milan this is the royal road to perfection.

If Ambrose is the institutor of reclusion, Jerome is its cantor: "When she was shut up in a small house," writes the Dalmatian in his eulogy of the beautiful Asella, "she was as comfortable as in paradise. A single strip of earth was the place of her prayer and rest. For her fasting was an enjoyment and abstinence a refreshment. She observed seclusion so well that she never ventured to put out a foot, nor did she ever speak to a man." He concludes, "Her word is silent and her silence cries out." (St. Jerome, *Epistula ad Marcellam* XXI, in PL 22, coll. 427-428).

Ambrose also offers practical recommendations about the virgin's lifestyle, designed to encourage detachment from the world: she should stay home, mostly in her own room, make a sparing use of food, await the coming of the Bridegroom by meditating on the Scriptures day and night. She must also be careful not to draw male gazes on herself, and limit outings, which are justified only for works of charity.

This way of life guarantees not only a reward in heaven but also a special dignity on earth. Ambrose praises the noble and wealthy virgin

who rejected the earthly groom chosen for her by her family, arguing that no man can compete in greatness with the king of heaven.

These arguments were aimed at reinforcing the prestige of the virginal condition even in the eyes of families, who were reluctant to deprive themselves of offspring, and the bishop enumerated all the advantages of having at home a virgin who could care for her parents even in their old age. Ambrose's initiative thus refers not so much to institutionalized monasticism as to ascetics living outside communities, holy virgins (*virgines sacrae*), who continue to live in their own homes. The phenomenon of "house nuns," women consecrated to God, would enjoy a long continuity over time, although it would remain "submerged" and difficult to quantify because it left few traces.

Marcellina and the *Velatio*

On the other hand, Ambrose himself had a virgin in his family: his sister Marcellina (†398), the first person devoted to an ascetic life about whom we are historically informed. On Christmas Day in the year 352-353, the young woman received in St. Peter's from the hands of Pope Liberius (352-366) the consecration to virginity (*velatio* means a wedding canopy) in a ceremony that Ambrose describes in detail. After this liturgical rite she continued to live in her family home with her widowed mother, and only later did she follow her brother to Milan; he secured her livelihood through an annuity. Marcellina strictly applied the advice expressed in Ambrose's treatises, leading a withdrawn life, but remained in contact with women animated by the same ideals, to whom she acted as guide and teacher (*magistra*).

Virgins and Widows

A substantial difference between *virgins* and *widows* remains to be emphasized. While the former could pronounce the promise of chastity (*propositum castitatis*) either privately or as part of a public and solemn *consecration* presided over by the local bishop, for widows no initiation ceremony existed. This distinction can be attributed to the different position of the groups: *virgins* occupied the top rung on the ladder of merit, widows only the second. However, both enjoyed special protection from the church and the bishop.

State Protection

The laws of the state also protected the privileged status of the *virgins*, and it is interesting to note that provisions to this effect are aimed at them rather than at male ascetics. Such attention should be understood in light of the peculiar need of women deprived of the protection of their husbands, and after a certain point in their lives also of their fathers, two guarantors of the elementary function of protection within ancient society. The earliest evidence in our possession is a decree issued by the chancery of Constantius, son of Constantine, which in 343 took into consideration the status of the consecrated virgin (*virgo sacra*), with the Christian emperor's concern for regulating the smooth running of ecclesiastical institutions as a whole, for which he felt directly responsible.

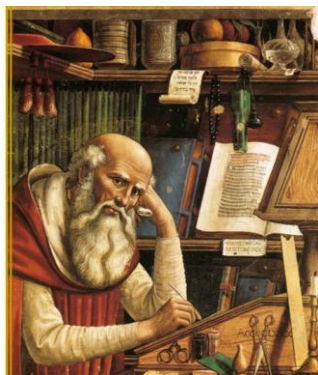
St. Jerome and Female Asceticism in Rome

St. Jerome (d. 420) played an important role in the development of ascetic experiences in Rome during his stay in the city between 382 and 385. Jerome was actually not its initiator, for at the time of his arrival there were already very active groups of women engaged in a life of severe asceticism. Among them, the first and most famous was **Marcella** (†410), from a large patrician family. Widowed after only seven months of marriage, apparently around 355, she rejected second marriages and embraced a life of perpetual continence. She continued to live with her mother Albina in her house on the Aventine, drawing from her own wealth what was necessary to support her and her relatives.

Marcella consumed no meat and drank only limited amounts of wine, wore a simple tunic, and did not cultivate the social relationships typical of her class. She left home only for short pilgrimages to basilicas and shrines, meeting with clergymen and monks, but always in the presence of witnesses. Marcella is the ideal model of the consecrated widow (*vidua sacra*) in Rome in the Fourth Century, and her example attracted many women of aristocratic birth who followed her spiritual teaching.

The Learned Asceticism of Roman Matrons

The special element of this circle of Christian ascetic women was the reading, study and meditation of the Scriptures. It was a true Academy



of biblical studies. These were the premises of the deep relationship of spiritual friendship between Marcella and Jerome, which was destined to last well beyond his departure from Rome (385). Thanks to Jerome's writings we can reconstruct the composition of these circles of *virgins and consecrated widows* that made a decisive contribution to the image of asceticism in Rome until the 6th century.

In addition to Marcella, mention should be made of Paula and her daughters Blesilla and Eustochium, Asella, Fabiola, and Irene, but also married couples who mutually vowed continence, though without joining the community.

In Jerome the women of the Roman senatorial class found a fascinating teacher who could satisfy their desire to know and deepen their knowledge of Sacred Scripture.

Latin Foundations in the Holy Places

Jerome's apostolate to Roman female ascetics did not end after his departure from the city. Some women followed him, starting monastic communities in Palestine. A giant among them is the figure of Paula (†406), to whom Jerome dedicated a famous eulogy (*Epitaphium*). In 385 Paula, accompanied by her daughter Eustochium, reached Jerusalem and visited the Holy Places, then in the company of Jerome went to Egypt to make contact with the life of the anchorites of Nitria. Finally she decided to settle in Bethlehem, where she had two monasteries built at her own expense, one for men and one for women, and a short time later also a hospice for pilgrims. The women's community, consisting of about fifty women, was the largest. Jerome lived apart, completely devoted to study and teaching.

Another Latin community, predating that of Paula and Jerome, had been founded in 372 in Jerusalem by another Roman noblewoman, Melania the Elder (†410), and Rufinus of Aquileia (†410-411). The motives behind the formation of these Latin colonies in the East were very similar: the desire to visit the historical sites of Jesus' life and the

powerful attraction exerted by the Eastern models of perfection known through the *Life of Anthony*. They were the heroes and athletes of the spiritual life in the 4th Century.

Women in the Church:

The New Life of Angela Merici and the Ursulines

Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli



Part III (*)

Virginity

Let each one want to preserve sacred virginity not on account of making a vow through any human urging, but voluntarily making a sacrifice to God of her own heart. Since virginity (as, again, the canonists say) is the sister of all the angels, victory over the appetites, queen of the virtues, possessing all good things (Rule, Chapter. IX).

Virginity as it is taught by the Fathers, is an indispensable feature for Ursulines, the seal of their identity. In Angela's Rule the term recurs 13 times, linked to the **concept of election and dignity**. Ursulines have been chosen to live a condition of the highest privilege.



Espousal

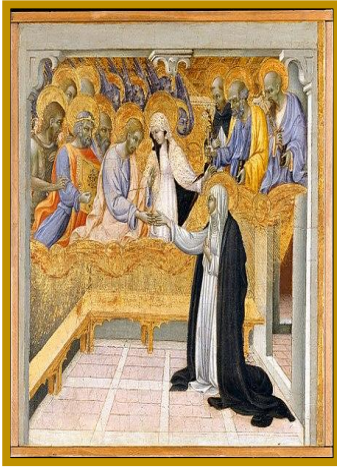
Virginity is not a value in itself, but rather because it is closely connected to divine espousal, to the choice of a life of union: *For this reason, my very own sisters, I call upon you, actually I beg and entreat you all: having been thus chosen to be true and virginal spouses of the Son of God, first, be willing to recognize what such a thing means and what a new and wondrous dignity this is* (Rule, Prologue).

Saint Bernard and the Song of Songs

The theme of women's consecrated life as a mystical marriage with Christ dates back to the 12th century, when, with Bernard of Clairvaux

and William of St. Thierry, a new exegesis of the Song of Songs was proposed, replacing Origen's interpretation of the Book of Solomon as a union between Christ and the Church, his bride.

St. Bernard wrote 86 homilies on the Song between 1135 and his death in 1153, a sign of the importance of this book in his spirituality. He expresses in it the concept that **the bond uniting man and woman is a figure of the mutual love relationship between God and the soul**; with Bernard, the religious scene is transformed into a



love scene. There is a gulf between the finite and the infinite, between man and God, but love overcomes every obstacle. Bernard was addressing an audience of monks, so he was talking about the union between Christ and the soul, but when women take over this discourse, the tone changes: in its female translation, the union of the soul to God now becomes a personal bond.

This is why Cistercian nuns in particular became Bernard's first and great pupils. Preserving virginity thus does not have an ascetic value, it is not domination and control of the impulses of the corrupt and corrupting body, as much as it is the choice to remain faithful to the Bridegroom, the only object of love, a love that is not platonic, but real. The woman is, literally, outside of metaphor, the bride of Christ, body and soul: "Thus Lutgardis was fruitful on account of such a great miracle, that her body and soul exulted in the living God."

In the intentions of the abbot of Clairvaux, commentary on the Canticle was to remain a commodity reserved for a spiritual elite

From the 13th century on the idea of mystical marriage circulated freely outside the cloistered gardens too. **No longer the exclusive prerogative of nuns, the title spouse of Christ (*sponsa Christi*) could also be conferred on widows and redeemed sinners, because virginity is a spiritual condition even before it is a physical one.**

The first account of the celebration of a mystical marriage in hagiographic literature, a script destined for an extraordinary spiritual and artistic posterity, concerns not a nun but a lay woman. In the *Legenda maior* of St. Catherine of Siena († 1380), Friar Raymond of Capua recounts that at carnival time, while those of his household were indulging in revelry and the pleasures of the belly, the consecrated virgin, despising the delights of the flesh (*contemptis delectationibus carnis*), devoted herself to prayer and fasting. It was then that the Lord, to reward her faithfulness, told her that he would make her his bride. He had not finished speaking when the Virgin Mary; St. John the Evangelist; the glorious apostle Paul; and the most holy Dominic, the father of her religious order, appeared. As the prophet David played the harp, the Virgin presented Catherine to her son, who slipped a gold ring with four pearls and a splendid diamond onto her ring finger.

Until the dawn of the modern age, the highly coveted privilege of the gift of the ring would define the artistic images of nuns such as Catherine de' Ricci, Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, and Rose of Lima, all of whom were committed to a holy imitation of Mary, who was considered the divine mother par excellence. But while Catherine of Siena would become a model for many cloistered nuns, in her case the mystical marriage was not a prelude to entering a monastery. On the contrary, for her biographer Raymond the solemn wedding rite was the defining moment that marked the end of her life of solitude and silence in her bedroom and inaugurated her public life. The Bridegroom assigned Catherine a relevant mission, that of working "of the honor of God and the salvation of souls."

Fruitfulness

The theme of mystical marriage is closely related to that of spiritual motherhood and childbirth, which is widely developed in Rhenish mystical circles. Indeed, this type of union is extraordinarily fruitful.

In the early fourteenth century, Meister Eckhart pointed out, "A man who is a virgin bears no fruit: he must become woman," because woman is the noblest name for the soul. In the soul, which is woman, God becomes fruitful, and she gratefully begets the divine Jesus: "A Virgin who is a woman, untied and freed from her personal will, is

always close to God and to herself. She bears many precious fruits, indeed nothing less than God himself."

It happened to Gertrude of Helfta in her famous Christmas vision, when, having received the seal of the Trinity, now totally deified, penetrated to the marrow by God's action, she gave birth to the "tender and fragile" Child and took him in her hands as a splendid and unexpected gift.

Also during a Christmas night – perhaps in 1344 – the Swedish princess Bridget reported that she felt within her body the movements of a living child. This fact brought her immense joy, but also deep disquiet, which led her to seek advice from her spiritual advisers. They could only ascertain the authenticity of the prodigy, while it was the Virgin, in the course of a vision, who gave her an explanation of its meaning. Calling her "daughter-in-law," the Mother of God announced to her that she was the new bride of Christ and the Incarnate Word had entered into her. She had indeed been chosen to announce God's will to the world.

The Sixteenth Century and the End of Prophecy

In the case of Bridget and Catherine, the dignity of spouses of Christ is translated into the highest consciousness of having to carry out an apostolic mission. They were chosen to generate spiritual offspring for the Bridegroom. The ring, invisible to the eyes of others but not to Catherine, is the seal of being chosen and at the same time the heavenly authorization to lead a life different from that of all other women, a life of prophetic and political commitment.

Angela Merici's time was different, and there was no longer room for an action to reform the Church as carried out by the great mothers of the Church of the 14th Century. Angela's work started from the grassroots, with the conversion and transformation of hearts.

Mystical marriage became not only the long-awaited and long-desired objective, the prize granted to the soul who has remained faithful to her Bridegroom in contemplation and asceticism, but the precondition for a spiritual journey yet to be traveled and built. Virginity has value and meaning only if it is not sterile, but spiritually fruitful.

Rule, Chapter X - Poverty

*We call upon each one, finally, 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. And in God, he has all his wealth and outside of God he sees himself impoverished of everything, being a total nothing, and with God possessing everything.*

Rule, Chapter VIII – Obedience

Again, we call upon each one to observe holy obedience, the only true self-denial of one's own will, which is within us like murky hell. But Jesus Christ says: "Non veni facere voluntatem meam, sed eius qui misit me Pater"; that is, I have not come to do my will, but that of the Father who has sent me. Because obedience is in man like a great light which makes every work good and acceptable, and so one reads: "Melius est obedire, quam sacrificare"; that is, obedience is better than sacrifice. And the sacred canons say: "Nullum bonum est extra obedientiam"; that is, it is necessary for everything of ours, if it is supposed to be good, to be done in obedience.

From the Testament: Loving Governance

And among the good and necessary means that God has granted me, you are one of the most important, you, who are found worthy to be true and loving mothers of so noble a family, confided to your hands that you may have for them the same care and guardianship you would have if they had been born from your own body, and even more. Now, on this point I would, a little, like you to open the eye of your mind to consider your great grace and good fortune, that God has deigned to make you mothers of so many virgins, and confided his own spouses to your hands, and entrusted them to your government.

Oh, how much you have to thank him for this, and at the same time to pray to him, that as he has deigned to place you at the head of so noble a flock, so he would deign also to give you such knowledge and capacity that you may be able to do work worthy of praise in his sight, and to put all your zeal and strength into carrying out your duty.

Sacramental Life

Again, let each one go to Mass every day, and see at least one entire [Mass] and attend it with modesty and devoutly, since in the sacred Mass are found all the merits of the passion of our Lord. And the more one attends with attention, faith and contrition, the more one participates in those blessed merits and the greater consolation one receives. Actually, it will be a communion of the spirit.

But remember not to linger too much in churches; rather (if they want to pray longer), let them go into their rooms, and enclosed there, pray in the way and as much as the Spirit and conscience will dictate.

Governance

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, and four mature men who have led upright lives. These virgins should be like teachers and guides in the spiritual life. And the widows should be like mothers, being solicitous about the well-being and usefulness of their spiritual sisters and daughters. And the four men should be like agents, and yet fathers, in the ongoing necessities of the Company.



Asceticism and Fasting

Yet again remember that each one should want to embrace bodily fasting too as something indeed necessary and as a means and way to the true spiritual fasting through which all vices and errors are lopped off from the mind. To this we are invited very clearly by the example of all saintly persons, and above all the life of Jesus Christ, the only way to Heaven.

() The texts of this presentation are drawn from the PowerPoint and have not been reviewed by the author.*

Angela Merici in the Mirror



Professor Querciolo Mazzonis of the University of Teramo provided an evening of appreciation of Angela Merici based on her place in her religious and historical context. She was a woman in touch

with the intellectual and spiritual currents of her time as well as an innovator.

His research has focused on the impact of Battista da Crema (1460-1534). Da Crema spread the spiritual movement of Devotio Moderna in northern Italy through his influence on local leaders who founded companies of devoted Christians. The printing press distributed their thought widely.

Angela's Company exemplified the emphasis on conversion and purification as the avenue to divinization, to becoming one with Christ. This was an era of reform, and Angela promoted reform through interior conversion.

Brescia brought Angela into contact with Renaissance humanism through her friendship with humanists such as Agostino Gallo, Gabriele Cozzano, and Giacomo Chizzola. Brescia was also in the ambit of Venice, where she may also have encountered Battista da Crema's disciple Girolamo Miani.

Equally influential on Angela was the mystical strain that marked medieval feminine spirituality. Girolamo Romanino's painting *The Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria* (with St. Ursula and Angela Merici) illustrates the spousal spirituality that culminates in union with God. Various movements of female devotees (pizzochere, beguines, etc.) and saintly individuals (Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Genoa, etc.) emerged, yet Professor Mazzonis remarked that the Rule of the Company is the only document to call lay women in the world "spouses of Christ."

Along with this medieval heritage, Professor Mazzonis enumerated several modern traits in the Company's structure. It affirms women's authority. Its democratic foundation is based on respect for persons: election of leaders, governance as loving service – always invitational, never controlling, respectful of the members' free will. In discussing modern styles of pedagogy, he pointed out that the word *volere* (will/wish) occurs 62 times in the foundress's Writings, while the word "*dovere*" (should/duty) occurs only three times.

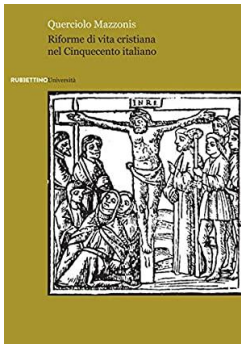
He linked these qualities to the interiority fostered by the Devotio Moderna movement. Angela instructed the Company's leaders not to be judgmental but to respect God's work within each person. She famously promoted obedience "above all" to the Holy Spirit, a direct connection with God that St. Charles Borromeo would later replace with mediation by a priest.

Personal interior conversion had a higher priority for Angela, as for the followers of Battista da Crema, than external signs and institutions, including Church.

Finally, Professor Mazzonis spoke of the Company's intended services to society: spreading peace, giving good example and interceding for relatives and fellow-citizens.

Professor Mazzonis is the author of *Spirituality, Gender and Identity in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of Saint Ursula* (2007) and *Reforms of Christian Life in Sixteenth-Century* (2022).

- Mary-Cabrini Durkin



“Loving each other and living in harmony together – walking the path right and pleasing to God.”

(Testament 10th Legacy, 12).

The “Why” for the Choice to Found a “Company” and Its Permanent Synodal Significance

Don Rino La Delfa
Vice-Assistant for the Council
of the Federation



Part I

An introductory suggestion for understanding how to be part of a Company is to find oneself already on a "synodal" journey.

St. John Chrysostom, for example, writes that Church is «a name that stands for walking together (σύννοδος)» (*Exp. in Psalm.*, 149, 1). The Church in fact - he explains - is the assembly convened to give thanks and praise to God as a choir, a harmonious reality where everything is held (σύστημα), since those who compose it, through their mutual and ordered relationships, come together in love/agape (ἀγάπη: the divine love shared in the Eucharistic gathering) and in harmony ὁμονοία (the same understanding and will).

This assertion about synodality seems to refer directly to the experience of what we in the Church call a "Company": those who comprise it, through their mutual and organized relationships, come together in love (ἀγάπη = *agape*) and harmony (ὁμονοία). This is reminiscent of Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers,” and of Acts 4:32: “The community of believers was of one heart and mind.”

Historical Context in Which the Company of Saint Ursula Arose

Throughout the Middle Ages the West experienced a set of socio-cultural, economic and spiritual changes that gave rise to movements of spiritual renewal that would include women.

The most relevant context for understanding Angela Merici, her Company and her religious thought should be sought in the female religiosity of the late Middle Ages. The Merician proposal has many features in common with the religiosity expressed by women who, from the Middle Ages, lived devout lives outside the convent.

The reason for these changes can be found in the need to overcome the usual exclusion of the laity from religious life. They sought to free themselves from the material aspects of the life into which they were forced because of their lay status.

It was a matter of reconciling a twofold need: to live a consecrated life, with its essential interiority, within a Christian life inserted into everyday life, without feeling excluded from the net work of ecclesial life.

This quest took concrete form in the spread of spiritual renewal movements at every level. The result was to break open the ecclesiastical mentality of the time, especially for women who, for the first time (with very few previous exceptions), could now aspire to consider spiritual reality.

All this, despite the fact that theology and custom considered women to be spiritually and physiologically weak beings. What should be valued, and in some ways considered revolutionary, is that through these renewal movements a current of spirituality came to be created from women and for women, in total autonomy from men. It then became possible for female figures from across the social spectrum, driven by a desire to lead a life of intense spirituality, to pursue it not in the cloistered form – as was socially sanctioned – but rather by remaining fully embedded in cities.

The Company as a Search for Its Own Space, Generating Unprecedented Relationships

The underlying reality that these movements express is the need for a specifically feminine space, created and defined by women themselves: a space that is not domestic nor conventual nor binary (constituted by the male-female relationship).

It is a space that, while women crossed the tight boundaries of the patriarchal kinship system, remained open to the social reality around it, where these women acted with freedom.

In fact, it was a space won precisely by overcoming the social, emotional and cultural barriers within which women were confined by custom. Here they now acted as mediating and life-giving individuals with new forms of relationship of their own, with a right that was precisely theirs as women. This space had decisive symbolic value because it was also intended as a point of reference, that is, as a model for other women.

In fact, this space could better be defined as the relational place where action and contemplation merge together, propelled by the search for union with God without the requirement of being mediated by the clergy.

This aroused understandable suspicion in the hierarchies of the time. Yet precisely their inclusion in the urban context, where women were actively present, was fundamental to and inseparable from their spirituality. In the eyes of all, their presence became the platform for public recognition of their moral authority.

After all, what was initiated by these women – Angela Merici in the lead – can be described as a phenomenon of secularization of religion which opened up a space for spirituality where, as in the case of Angela Merici, society would learn to recognize a special authority. Their spiritual authority extended outside the ecclesiastical enclosure where the clergy monopolized all connection with the divine.

The Company of Saint Ursula

A Model of Permanent Synodal Life in Pursuit of Harmony

The Company of St. Ursula in the early Modern Age, following these earlier experiences that arose in the late Middle Ages, embodies one of the freest experiences of women's life in history.

Secular and religious at the same time, the members lived totally independent of male control – familial and ecclesiastical – and the freedom they enjoyed would become inseparable from the network of relationships they established primarily among themselves, with God (without a mediator) and with the rest of the women and men of the cities where they lived.

The space of freedom they represent situated them "beyond" the established order, overcoming its binary and hierarchical structure. The women adherents of the Company actually generated something new, unforeseen in the culture of the time, something original, because they themselves were at the origin of this experience. What was accomplished figuratively in the concept of the Company, then spread out tangibly into their homes, immersed in the fabric of the city, where they constantly interacted, offering themselves as mediators.

Angela's originality and genius in creating the Company of St. Ursula consists in having proposed to women of all social conditions a form of consecration as an alternative to monasticism, to be lived in their own homes. The Company takes on special importance, as it offered Ursulines the possibility of living beyond the limits imposed on women, offering them a new female identity, a socially and spiritually independent model of life, and an active and public role in society.

But this form of life was also innovative in that it was individual, interior, transcendent, democratic and devoid of institutional elements. What is perhaps most striking about Angela's rule is the absence of the category of "power" and the emphasis on the development of the person as a human being – albeit within a transcendent purpose of existence.

These women had no communal life, no specific activities to perform in the world, but each was free to follow her own will.

The most significant aspect of Angela Merici's Rule is that, like the mystics, she conceived of her relationship with God as personal and

direct, without mediation. This emerges above all in the precept of obedience, in which Angela states that the Ursuline should especially obey the counsels that the Holy Spirit sends directly and continuously to her heart: "And above all, to obey the counsels and inspirations which the Holy Spirit continually sends into the heart, whose voice we will hear all the more clearly the more purified and clean our conscience" (Rule, Chapter VIII, 14-16). This interpretation of the precept of obedience is unusual for a religious rule. Angela leaves it to the Ursulines to evaluate God's counsel. In the Tenth Legacy 7, we read, "And take care especially that they are united and one in will, as we read of the Apostles and other Christians of the early Church: *"Erat autem eorum cor unum"*"; that is, they were all of one heart" (Acts 4:32).

Angela proposed a consecration without a convent, entrance ceremonies and distinctive dress. She replaced these outward aspects with the involvement of interiority (of will, heart and mind) in religious life and detachment from worldly values.

Fundamental to the perspective of interiority, and thus characterizing Angela's vision, is the fact that the will replaced obligation in fulfilling what is prescribed: the precepts are not in the form of an order but in the form of advice, insofar as active and conscious participation was advised.



If we subject the Merician Rule to a linguistic analysis, in fact, it emerges how Angela, when speaking to her daughters, used the verb **"to will"** sixty-two times and the verb **"should"** only three times.

The Last Counsel 1 emphasizes, **"My last word to you, by which I implore you even with my blood, is that you live in harmony, united together, all of one heart and one will."** The Tenth Legacy 12, it is stated, **" And thus, loving each other and living in harmony together are a sure sign that we are walking the path right and pleasing to God,"** suggesting that the distinctive qualities of communion experienced within the Companies did not come from imposed institutional principles but from the free exercise of

interiority and spirituality through "willing": "loving each other and living in harmony together" became a sign of the inner will to walk in the good way.

The Company – as Querciolo Mazzonis, to whom I am indebted for some valid suggestions, seems to suggest – is an "invisible structure," which enables the Ursuline's relationship with God, but does not mediate it. If anything, in its concreteness it makes visible the fruit of each one's inner journey sustained by the Spirit in the desire to share it for everyone's edification and mutual encouragement.

It is indeed evident that the concept of community is important in Angela's writings. The Company is seen as a spiritual family in which the matrons and colonelle are the mothers, the Ursulines the daughters, God the father and Christ the bridegroom. The group had to be united to face the obstacles that would inevitably arise in the face of such an innovative life proposal. To cement the unity of the Company, Angela appealed to the Ursulines' human qualities and in particular to their willingness and affection for one another.

Evidence of this is this point in the Fifth Counsel 19-20 in which she recommends, "And when you visit them, I give you this charge, to greet them, and shake hands with them, also on my behalf. And tell them that they should want to be united and in concord together, all being of one will, remaining under obedience to the Rule, for in this is everything."



The Rule is understood by Angela more as an inner principle than as a behavioral code. Indeed, she seems to say that the Rule is the way to extend affection to one another.

Thus, even in its community dimension, the Company of St. Ursula stands on interpersonal relationships among Ursulines, on the human qualities of individuals, in particular, friendship, love, willingness, tolerance, and mutual respect. Angela, once again, puts the humanity of individuals at the center of the life of the Company.

She is deeply aware of the importance of the relational dimension of an Ursuline, motivated to search for unity and concord. In the Ninth Counsel 10-14 she recalls, "See then how important is this union and concord. So, long for it, pursue it, embrace it, hold on to it with all your strength."

It could be argued that the group, the Company, exists and is important in that it has the function of legitimizing and enabling personal relationships between individual Ursulines and the divine. The group exists because it allows the individual Ursuline to be herself.

Angela Merici proposes an alternative model of religious life based on the appreciation of humanity and the experience of the self. In fact, the organization of the Company (the governing roles, the relationship between "superiors" and Ursulines, the relationships among the "virgins") was based on the gifts and characteristics of persons, on love and friendship, rather than on hierarchies and obedience to a given model.

Undoubtedly, because of all the notions expressed in these brief remarks, the Company qualifies as a path and a school of synodality!



The Relational Realms of Renewal
Formation and Women's Spousal Identity
Governance and Care for Persons
Management and Wealth of Poverty

Don Rino La Delfa
Vice-Assistant for the Council of the Federation

Part II

A Biblical Image at the Origin of the Company's Foundation

Mark 3:13-15: "He went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted and they came to him. He appointed twelve [whom he also named apostles] that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach and to have authority to drive out demons."

Formation and Spousal Identity

Formation for spousal identity is what carries the member's spiritual and relational growth in the Company. The theme of espousal is common to the prologues of all of Angela's writings. The image implies that the beloved be separate in view of the "mystical union" with the Bridegroom and the establishment of an exclusive and permanent relationship with him.



The stakes of the Merician vocation are quite high since it invokes the "mystical" dimension of living, that is, being taken by Christ, by the power of the Spirit, into the embrace with the Father. "Bride," in fact, is not a name to describe a role, a function, but a dynamic relational state in which the chosen one gradually grows toward the inner knowledge of the mystery of Christ by assimilating it into her life again and again.

There is a strong Christological connotation in the Merician vocation to be a "spouse." It concerns much more than the common religious life with the observance of its precepts. Rather, it concerns the possibility of entering into the inner knowledge of God through

prayerful contemplation of the Scriptures, participation in the sacramental life and the purification of one's conscience to know and share God's will. The Ursuline discovers that the only way to access such knowledge is through Christ himself, who offers himself to her by choosing her in love, leading her to the shared vision of the Father.

The first step in this unitive movement consists in the appreciation of being chosen, that is, the person's gradual awareness of being loved and chosen by the Bridegroom, chosen on account of love:

Rule, Prologue 7-8: "For this reason, my very own sisters, I call upon you, actually I beg and entreat you all: having been thus chosen to be true and virginal spouses of the Son of God, first, be willing to recognize what such a thing means and what a new and wondrous dignity this is."

The certainty of having been chosen out of love activates the beloved's readiness to preserve and guard herself in faithfulness.

Rule, Prologue 9-10: "Then strive with all your might to keep yourselves as you have been called by God and seek out, and desire all those means and ways that are necessary to persevere and prosper till the end."

The Ursuline's spousal dimension implies a relationality that expands simultaneously horizontally and vertically. It is at the same time both a contemplative and an experiential "mysticism," the one proposed by the Fathers:

Rule Chapter 9, 6: "In every situation each one ought to conduct herself in such a manner that she not commit either against herself or in the sight of others anything at all that may be unworthy of spouses of the Most High."

The task of "guarding the brides" will bring merit for those who carry it out since they perform a genuine service to God in this way. Here we see the Company's meaning and function to be the space where the beloved is guarded and helped to grow in the deep dimension of her interiority. Addressing the colonelle, Angela poses these exhortations:

Counsels, Prologue 5-8: "And at the same time look forward to the great reward which God has prepared for you if you strive, each one for her part, to be faithful and full of concern for his spouses who have

been entrusted to you, to guard them and watch over them as most vigilant shepherds and good servants. How much, therefore must you pray God to enlighten you, and direct you, and teach you what you have to do for love of him in this task – and there cannot be another more worthy than to be guardians of the spouses of the Most High.”

The exhortation on the Company's commitment to guard the beloved is also developed in the Testament:

Testamento 4,1-3; 7-14: “You must be eager and ardent in putting all your zeal and concern into ensuring that your daughters are adorned with every virtue, and with all regal and refined manners, so that more and more they may please Jesus Christ, their Spouse.... Now one sees temporal mothers putting a great deal of care and effort into attiring, adorning and embellishing their daughters in many different ways, so that they may please their earthly spouses; and the more important and noble these men are, the more the mothers strive with all diligence to make their daughters more and more attractive, especially in what they understand to be more agreeable to them. And they have and place all their contentment in being the mothers of daughters who are so pleasing to such noble spouses, for in this way they also hope, because and by means of their daughters, to have the love and favour of their sons-in-law. How much more must you do this for these heavenly daughters of yours, who are spouses not of earthly husbands, corruptible and ultimately stinking, but of the immortal Son of the eternal God. Oh, what a new beauty and dignity to be lady governors and mothers of the spouses of the King of kings and Lord of lords!”

Formation is synergistic: the individual Ursuline cultivates her own call aided by a Company that guards and promotes the spousal nature of the call. This aspect is very crucial: the Company in helping the individual promotes her ability to live out her vocation to union with Christ. However, it does not replace the individual. In this sense one can affirm the Company's relationship to the Ursuline and to Christ himself.

Second Legacy 1-3: “I beg you that you willingly hold in consideration and have engraved on your mind and heart all your dear daughters, one by one; not only their names, but also their condition, and character, and their every situation and state.”

Formation therefore is not, and cannot be, oriented toward framing the person in the Company, as if this represented the habit to be worn in order to be and appear to be a daughter of St. Angela and spouse of Christ. On the contrary, formation is concerned with assimilation (a gradual process of identification) to Christ. The bride is formed on him, inasmuch as he is the one who initiates and brings to completion in her the bond of spousal love. If the axiom *Sponsae Christus Forma* (Christ, the form of the bride) can help, it could be said that formation to the spousal-mystical-unitive dimension looks to Christ as the principle and form of the bride and her life.

It becomes imperative to ask in this process not so much a generic understanding of the concept of "mysticism," or of the path to realizing it (although this remains important to probe). It is more appropriate to seek what experience of Christ arouses in the Ursuline that love which binds her for life to Christ and leads her to the realization of her interior and exterior being in him.

This is how the theme of virginity should also be read, not as a prior condition for accessing Christ's love and espousal with him. Rather, it should be understood as the confirmation that Christ's love reconfigures the person in the order of the new Creation, realized through his sacrifice on the Cross. In this sense virginity, considered in the old Creation as a condition of rejection and lowliness, appears in the order of salvation as a fruitful instrument of God's power and a definitive sign of the redeemed woman's freedom.

Governance and the Care of Persons

If the axiom *Sponsae Christus Forma* was valid for the formation of the identity of the individual Ursuline, the Spirit's task that is accomplished through the Company's service could be enunciated as follows: The Company is for the Ursuline *Ecclesiae Spiritus Forma* (the Spirit, form of the Church), in the sense that the social and spiritual dimensions of the Company are the concrete work through which the Spirit builds up the Church itself, albeit in its particular form. All of Angela's recommendations about the exercise of governance in the Company should be read in this sense, that is, as actions that respond to the impulses of the Spirit. It is the Spirit of Christ who entrusts to the

Company the task of ensuring, protecting and promoting the growth of the spouses:

Testament, Prologue 14-16: "I would, a little, like you to open the eye of your mind to consider your great grace and good fortune, that God has deigned to make you mothers of so many virgins, and confided his own spouses to your hands, and entrusted them to your government."

The life of the Company and its task is determined by this fundamental purpose. So much so that the main test to be conducted within the Companies will first and foremost concern the exercise of good governance:

Seventh Legacy 1-3: "Seventh: make sure that you all meet with the leaders twice, or at least once a month, and thus confer together, and make a careful examination of the government."

Clearly, if the Company is a form of Church, the Church must constantly examine its ability to fulfill its mission. Meetings are the way to extend to the members those attentions designed to integrate them into the social life of the Company, not in order to put them in a frame them but primarily to get them to enjoy being together and to be confirmed in their journey:

Eighth Legacy 1-5: "You must take care to have your daughters come together from time to time in the place you think best and most convenient. And then (according to whether you have at your disposal a suitable person) have them listen to a short sermon and exhortation, so that, together like this, they might also meet each other as loving sisters, and thus, talking over spiritual matters, rejoice together, and together encourage one another."

The anxiety of governance is shared with the Spirit, and it is the Spirit who fortifies each one so that in the bosom of the Company she contributes her own service in support of the others: "You decide, only among yourselves." This is not an abstract emancipation of the members' creativity; it is the obedience that Angela treats in a wholly original way in her writings.

Ninth Legacy 6-10: "You decide, only among yourselves, according as charity and the Holy Spirit will enlighten and inspire you, directing everything towards the good and spiritual benefit of your dear daughters, as much to urge and move those who are already in [the

Company] to greater love and obligation to do good, as to attract still others to it.”

Management and the Wealth of Poverty

If the Company is the fruit of the work of the Spirit, resembling the Church itself, then each of the daughters, spouses, consecrated women who are united in it represents its primary resource.

The Company’s wealth is counted precisely by the members who belong to it. It is they who extend in all forms, spiritual and material, that support which will keep each sister on the good path. By the same token, the Company counts as its own wealth the poverties, the frailties, the needs of its members.

The following series of quotations from Angela’s writings helps to understand the paradox just enunciated and the urgency of looking at material resources not as a patrimony to be frozen or dispersed or approached shyly, but as the way through which the goods of the Company are placed in the hands of all to flourish in the form of mutual help:

Rule, Chapter 11, 9: [Visit the sisters] “to comfort and help them if they may be involved in some dissension or in any other trouble, of the body just as of the mind.”

Rule, Chapter 11, 25: “If there should be just two sisters who are left alone, without father and mother and other superiors, then in charity let a house be rented (if they do not have one), and let them be assisted in their needs.”

Rule, Chapter 11, 26-27: “But if only one is left alone, then one of the others should want to take her into her home and offer her the assistance which seems right to those who govern.”

Rule, Chapter 11, 28: “However, if she would want to go to be a housekeeper or a maid, those that govern ought to take care of this, so that she may be settled where she can live virtuously and well.”

Rule, Chapter 11, 29: “Should they be so old that they cannot support themselves, they should be graciously willing to be assisted and guided as true spouses of Jesus Christ.”

Rule, Chapter 11, 30: “Finally remember that if any of the sisters is ill, she should be visited and assisted and guided day and night, if she is in need of this.”

Rule, Chapter 11, 22-24: “If by God's will and provision it should happen that some money or other material things would be held in common, remember that good management is needed for them, and they should be dispensed prudently, especially to assist the sisters, and according to each need that arises.”

The best service to poverty is the duty to safeguard the goods entrusted to the Companies, guarding them and redistributing them on the basis of that conviction that Angela expounds in these lucid words: Ninth Legacy 1: “Know that if it were not useful and suitable that this Company have some income, God would not have begun to provide it ... and such income as you have, spend it for the good and the development of the Company, according as discretion and motherly love will suggest to you.”

The Rule does not oblige Ursulines, nor does it sanction rigid rules, but it exemplifies, inspires, exhorts, warns and directs.

The concept of "poverty" exemplifies inner detachment from the possibilities offered by the world, earthly affections and self-love, to make room above all for the:

“true poverty of spirit through which man strips his heart of every affection and hope for created things, and of himself.... and to put all her wealth and love and delight not in material things, not in food and over-eating, not in relatives and friends, not in herself, nor in any of her own attributes and knowledge, but in God alone, and in the kind and ineffable providence that is his alone” (Rule, Chapter 10, 3-5, 9-13).

What remains is the centrality, respect and sacredness of the person (rather than external and institutional structures).

I would like to conclude with these words from Angela: **“Tell them ... that I am continually among them with my Lover, or rather ours, the Lover of us all.... Let them have Jesus Christ for their only treasure, for there also will be love”** (Fifth Counsel 38, 43).

THE PERSON AT THE CENTER OF THE WHOLE MERICIAN PROJECT



**Don Raymond Nkindji Samuangala,
Vice-Assistant of the Council of the Federation**

INTRODUCTION

By express, agreed intention we did not plan to give today's international convention either a theological or an academic slant, but rather primarily the character of a workshop. That is, the intent is for you yourselves to speak, having listened to the mother foundress speaking in her writings, confirmed by the eternal Word and the teaching of the Church.

Where did we start this past year?

- With the course on the inculturation of the Merician charism and the discussion that ensued.
- With the Convention in Rome in 2021
- With the Federation Council's questionnaire to the Companies and Groups
- With the program for Directresses and other leaders in May 2022 and the feedback from what they heard.

From all these instances of dialogue emerged the need for further discussion and discernment together, as a particular way of living ecclesial synodality, as well as a re-appropriation of the ancient and ever-new treasure of the Merician charism found today in the concrete realities of Saint Angela's daughters.

Hence the need to start that series of listening already highlighted last May 1, when we spoke of initiating new processes to welcome the richness of diversity: listening first of all to the Spirit who speaks to us in Sacred Scripture, creates communion and acts as a "Teacher of support," helping us to enter more and more into the depths of the mystery of the one Lover and of the Merician charism; and listening to St. Angela, recovering her brush strokes that illuminate today's convention. We will truly provide time for St. Angela. And we

will leave time for you to tell one another, in serene and respectful listening, what sort of Company you dream of in today's human and socio-cultural context, in absolute fidelity to the Madre's will! She repeats also to you, today, "to seek and desire all those means and ways that are necessary to persevere and progress to the end" (Rule, Prologue, 10). All of this, however, is directed to the growth of every single daughter. All the others, not just those with specific responsibility, should feel like mothers and sisters to each other.

It is therefore a journey to make together, in mutual listening to each other's personal experiences and those of the Companies, adjusting everyone's pace to the pace of those who walk slowly. In this way, what emerges will not be something developed on a worksheet, but a shared synthesis that is as faithful as possible to the Merician charism and faithful to each sister inserted in her concrete Company. This is the track on which I will attempt to join you in listening to the Madre Foundress.

***Identity of the Person in the Company
and Care of the Company in the Concert of Companies:
Autonomy and Welcoming Reciprocity
as Relational Principles***

**Don Raymond Nkindji Samuangala,
Vice-Assistant of the Council of the Federation**



PART 1

I am convinced that the conventions of this institute are also personal encounters, face-to-face. We have experienced this every time we have met. It is not only on account of the joy and beauty of seeing each other, but because, more and more, encounter fosters true relationships within that common identity with you, in which we assistants also collaborate.

As you have already noticed from the titles of the other presentations, these themes came up repeatedly in the various presentations given before mine. I will attempt to discover again why the holy foundress places personal identity as the foundation of relationships in the Company. St. Angela could not ignore Christian anthropology. However, she did not create a treatise on anthropology, but she did speak about the centrality of the person in her work, and she spoke about it in a very unique way.

I will address these three themes:

1. Centrality of the person
2. Responsibility as *taking care of* (within the Company)
3. Autonomy as a welcoming reciprocity

The first two themes, as we will see later, are intertwined in the madre foundress's thoughts and writings, to the point that it does not seem correct to separate them here. Therefore, we will try to understand one by recovering the other and vice versa. Next, we will try to grasp the directions that the Madre proposes to us on the third theme.

I paid attention to Fr. Rino's beautiful reports: St. Angela does not speak of power, but of responsibility, a word that I think best sums up her thought. This way of presenting authority would seem strange, but it is very particular and significant, because, when she speaks to those in charge and what they are called to do, this will bring out the responsibility of the person.

I wondered: how did the saint base this discourse on the centrality of the person?

The answer will help us understand the theme of renewal, which must always retrieve the centrality of the person. Renewal does not happen just for the sake of changing something, but, as the Constitutions demonstrate, renewal happens by putting the person at the center. It becomes a path to helping this person who is determined to persevere and progress in that identity. Everything depends on the person and her well-being.

In the texts I have chosen, St. Angela mainly gives instructions about how those in charge in the Company exercise their office. One can easily discern in the background of these instructions the centrality of the person, the recipient of such care, according to the Madre. This is

the fundamental thing for St. Angela, as can be grasped from the foundation she gives to her vision of the person. Only in this way can one subsequently understand why those in charge must behave in a certain way. Indeed, according to this vision, those with responsibility, then and now, are called to exercise it not so much as power but as care within a relationship of reciprocity, characteristic of the person. In this way, all members of the same Company share the commitment, not just those who take responsibility. What exactly does the foundress say?

When she states that "*that you may have for them the same care and guardianship you would have if they had been born from your own body, and even more*" (Testament, Prologue 13), St. Angela presents her vision of responsibility in the Company. Not a power exercised arbitrarily nor even in an authoritarian way, but *taking care, being a guardian!* These are two typically biblical New Testament expressions. The first echoes the famous parable of the Good Samaritan, who takes care, who becomes a neighbor, while the second refers to the many times when Jesus presents himself as the *good shepherd, guardian of the flock*, the one who is careful not to lose any of those entrusted to him, even at the cost of his own life. Using this logic of Jesus, St. Angela reverses customary human thinking and affirms that responsibility is and must be at the service of the person. Fr. Rino mentioned many of these things: responsibility, structures, organizations, assets and the greatest asset of the Company, which is the person, the greatest treasure. This is how it is in the Lord's eyes. It is about creating that closeness proclaimed so much by Jesus in the Gospels, to care for the person. Basically, the purpose of power becomes the essence and the criterion of how it is to be exercised (if this is really about power), but I repeat: here it is about responsibility.

Centuries after St. Angela, the document *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council would speak of the "integral centrality of the person," specifying that it is about "[the human person] whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will" (No. 3). Terms that Fr. Rino recalled yesterday from St. Angela: "all of one heart, one will." The unity of the person is this person to be cared for. We are confronted with a set of rules that authority cannot easily

handle, and it will take a much more solid foundation to be able to handle it in its Merician uniqueness.

This centrality of the person is grounded by the holy mother in two perspectives.

First, in the relationship that we can call *natural*; the Madre recovers in a special way its dimension of motherhood. The person for whom one is responsible in the Company is not just any person, but one's own daughter. It is a relationship that only a woman (not a man) can understand and develop: any woman, believer or non-believer, of any nature, married or unmarried, even a virgin. Even those who have not had their own children have within them this dimension of motherhood. This is what the saint awakens in the Company's leaders, so that they can exercise it and live it out in relation to their daughters. It is therefore a relationship that only you can understand and develop. Recalling her words "if they had been born from your own body," we hear St. Angela appealing to that motherhood inherent in every woman, which creates a special bond between mother and daughter. This is the model to be lived by those who have responsibility for the other. It is the mother's unique tenderness for the fruit of her womb. Even a woman who has not had or cannot have children of her own is capable of experiencing such tenderness and living it out in a truly maternal relationship. One understands the strong and insistent exhortation that Pope Francis makes to superiors, but also to all consecrated women, to be truly *mothers* and not "*old maids*." It is inscribed in woman's nature to be a mother, because it is woman who primarily welcomes life. In Africa, it is not surprising when a father calls his own little daughter or an unknown girl *maman*: he is calling her "mama." This represents an expression of great respect because it recognizes in that little girl the dimension of motherhood proper to every woman; she is the guardian of life. St. Angela seeks for those in charge to have this way of relating to the members of the Company. She bases it on this *natural* point of view. The believer, however, knows that even what is called *natural* comes from the Creator; the trace of the Creator is always in everything.

Secondly, the holy foundress is aware that humanly a woman can forget about her child, not be moved by the child of her womb (cf. Is 49:15) and can even hate it. Unfortunately, it happens; it is almost a daily

reality. That is why the saint shifts the relationship of responsibility to the highest level, that of God. God alone is the "mother" who never "forgets her child" (cf. Is 49:15), but takes the child in her arms and conveys all the affection and security of a "weaned child on its mother's lap" (Ps. 130:2). Thus "we come to understand more fully God's love, which is both paternal and maternal, like that of a mother who never stops believing in her children and never abandons them" (Pope Francis, 01.01.2019). And it is this kind of love that St. Angela places as the foundation of the relationship between leaders and sisters within the Company. It starts from this foundation when she says that phrase repeated earlier, a call to awaken what you women have naturally and then what the Lord does. This also came out in several passages of Fr. Rino's talks: the leaders' responsibility is not a power they gain even by election or an effective electoral campaign, but it is God who has granted you this ministry. It is God who deigned to make you a mother, you did not choose yourself! God has deigned to make you a mother so that you can take care of those whom he has entrusted to you, and he has not entrusted you with just a creature, a baptized one, he has entrusted you with his treasure, his bride, a virgin. So even though responsibility on the one hand is a privilege for you, on the other hand you cannot exercise it apart from this will of God and everything you have to do for this treasure of the Lord, of the Lover.

The resulting vision of all of St. Angela's daughters is that of being not only God's creatures, nor only his image and likeness, but also "his own spouses." This is a great awareness that you must recall, especially you to whom these daughters are entrusted. Everything is entrusted to you regarding these spouses of his. Therefore, the responsibility comes from God himself and is entrusted by him to those whom he has deigned to make mothers (no longer in natural motherhood, which has its limits) of so many of his virgin spouses to guard them and to watch over them as vigilant shepherds. Following the example of St. Joseph, who was called forth and participated not because of his own will, but because he was drawn in by God himself to collaborate in his plan. It is very important to recover the theological significance of these categories: pastors and ministers, who spend their lives following the example of the Shepherd who came to serve and

give his life. Awareness of this can only lead us to be “watchful and most vigilant, like so many caring shepherdesses, for this heavenly flock.”

All the texts we have help us to recover this basic idea that constitutes the basis, the foundation on which St. Angela rests the centrality of the person in the Company. And the person is the one for whom everything is intended: the means, the authority, the structures, the organizations, everything is to serve the person.

Testament, Prologue, 13: ...that you may have for them the same care and guardianship you would have if they had been born from your own body, and even more.

Testament, Prologue, 15- 16: [to the leaders] God has deigned to make you mothers of so many virgins, and confided his own spouses to your hands, and entrusted them to your government.

Counsels, Prologue, 6: ...who have been entrusted to you, to guard them and watch over them as most vigilant shepherds and good servants.

Tenth Legacy, 1: I beg you with all my heart, please be watchful and most vigilant, like so many caring shepherdesses, for this heavenly flock.

Last Legacy, 6-12: Hold this for certain: that this Rule has been planted directly by his holy hand, and he will never abandon this Company as long as the world lasts. Because, if he has planted it in the first place, who is there who can uproot it? Believe it, do not doubt, have firm faith that it will be so. I know what I am saying.

A COMPANY-FAMILY

It appears in this way that the Company itself is not a rigid structure of authoritarian rule enforcement, but rather a true family that promotes rules as instruments for the protection of persons, for the promotion of their identity within a network of relationships based on faith in Jesus Christ and adherence to the same Merician charism: one heart, one mind. So...always the centrality of the person! The concept of family is how the Second Vatican Council refers to the Church and to all the realities within the Church, therefore also to the Company of St. Ursula – Secular Institute St. Angela Merici – Federation. You may have

noticed that I am constantly talking about the person; I have a hard time using the word *individual*. The individual is the one who is centered on himself, a bit like that man in the parable with all his things, folded in on himself: "my soul eat, drink, make merry ...," because only I exist. This is the individual.

The person, on the other hand, is characterized by being the image of God, that is, a relational being. And the family is the place where relationship is most developed, where we learn to love each other, even to quarrel, but we take responsibility for each other. There is no master, no employer who gives orders and the worker who follows them. In the Company one is bound primarily not by self-interest but by that love which is the foundation of everything.

In my opinion, this category best helps to express being "*Company in the Concert of Companies*." In recognition and respect, of course, for each one's autonomy, it is nevertheless open to a welcoming reciprocity. The family member's identity is not confused with or lost in the family, it is not dissolved; she has her autonomy, but at the same time she is in deep relationship with all the other members of her family. It is welcoming reciprocity! Even mothers can become daughters of their daughters when their daughters take care of them, becoming in a sense mothers of their mothers. These are the relational principles characteristic of the person, as opposed to the individual, and of our Companies and Groups within the Federation.

This concept of family, which already emerged in the Second Vatican Council in relation to the Church-Family of God, has been taken up and happily applied to communities of consecrated men and women by Pope Francis, quoted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, in the circular letter "Rejoice" addressed to Consecrated Men and Women, in the Year of Consecrated Life.

The concept acquires fullness of truth and intensity of content to the extent that it is lived first of all within a Company itself and among the Companies. Beyond personal views and limitations, the Companies are called to "bring the smile of God, and fraternity is the first and most credible gospel we can tell." We are asked to humanize our communities. This is what Pope Francis urges when he calls for

"Build[ing] friendship between yourselves, family life, love among you. May the monastery not be a Purgatory but a family.... Build community life, because in the life of a community it is this way, like a family, and it is the very Holy Spirit who is in the middle of the community. And community life always with a big heart. Let things go, do not brag, be patient with everything, smile from the heart. And a sign of this is joy" (cf. Rejoice, no. 9).

"In these days when fragmentation justifies widespread sterile individualism and when the weakness of relationships breaks up and ruins the care of the human person, we are invited to humanize community relationships, to encourage communion of heart and spirit [we return to St. Angela] in the Gospel sense, because 'there is a communion of life among all those who belong to Christ. It is a communion that is born of faith' that makes 'the Church, in her most profound truth, communion with God, intimacy with God, a communion of love with Christ and with the Father in the Holy Spirit, which extends to brotherly communion'" (no. 9).

In short, it is about living the Company as closeness: internal closeness to other members, closeness among the Federation's Companies, and closeness to the society one is called to inhabit and work in! So the closeness we live among ourselves will also become closeness to the people we meet, in order to lead everyone back to God. We must not forget that "As God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity, so also, 'it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness' (Gaudium et Spes, 32) (Rejoice! 9)."

Therefore, continually connecting every relationship to God, to the charism and to the person, guarantees not only authentic renewal but also that "forever" of the Company of which the holy mother solemnly speaks, and with which we conclude: **"Hold this for certain: that this Rule has been planted directly by his holy hand, and he will never abandon this Company as long as the world lasts. Because, if he has planted it in the first place, who is there who can uproot it? Believe it, do not doubt, have firm faith that it will be so. I know what I am saying"** (Last Legacy 6-12).

This is God's doing, because he is faithful; it is his work. What about us? You? "Believe it," is not simply an intimate refrain, to be treasured and lived in one's heart. Believing means adhering with my whole life and with my whole self so that this may continue to be fulfilled, to make my contribution, to be a guardian of the other: to assume this responsibility to be a guardian, not to be a deserter. "Believe it, do not doubt, have firm faith that it will be so." She is sure: "I know what I am saying," like St. Paul: "I know in whom I have put my trust, my hope."

It helps us to remind ourselves from time to time of these thoughts of the Madre.

FOR AUTHENTIC RENEWAL

"Paving the way for authentic renewal" (Constitutions 37.1).

**The Future of the Company in Its Present:
Tradition, innovation, Conversion**

**D. Raymond Nkindji Samuangala,
Vice-Assistant of the Council of the Federation**

PART 2

The theme of this presentation refers to the Constitutions that ask us to pave the way for genuine renewal. We have to remember what I said in the general introduction to these two presentations: that all this did not fall from the sky but is embedded in a long tradition of conventions, of meetings, of formation, and of conversation for so many years. I also mentioned this in the booklet on inculturation. More recently, we are engaged in the course on inculturation and the conversation that came out of it, the 2021 convention with all that followed:



the training, the questionnaire and all the feedback. All of this is to be kept in mind because it is the unique history that continues to accompany us, which we also contemplate in this convention, and which allows us to renew ourselves always according to St. Angela's thinking. **"Paving the way for authentic renewal"** (Constitutions 37.1). The future of the Company in its present includes tradition, innovation and conversion. You are its present, embedded in a glorious tradition that asks you to put yourselves on the line even in light of the changes taking place in the society where we live. Today you are called to "scrutinize the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.... Hence we can already speak of a true cultural and social transformation, one which has repercussions on man's religious life as well." I am quoting *Gaudium et spes* (GS No. 4), which invites us to scrutinize the signs of the times, to interpret them in the light of the Gospel and, I would add, in the light of the Merician charism, for the good of individuals and of the Company.

The requirement expressed in No. 4 of *Gaudium et spes* reiterates what has always marked the historical journey of the Church: *Ecclesia semper reformanda*. Throughout Church history we find this process going forward, in renewal and fidelity. And in a certain way it recalls to the Secular Institute St. Angela Merici those words of the foundress herself, "And if, according to times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently..." (Last Legacy, 2). These are the times, this particular historical period of the Company. The needs are not primarily material; they involve placing the present daughters of St. Angela in the conditions **"necessary to persevere and progress to the end"** (Rule, Prologue, 10). The saint foresaw that it might happen that something would have to be done differently, it might happen that new ways and instruments would have to be sought, but all this for the greater good. Persevere and progress to the end! It is therefore a matter of creating in today's context the necessary

conditions that will help each daughter of St. Angela and all together to regain the charismatic identity and translate it into the socio-cultural contexts of life and witness today. If that identity is never renewed, one becomes something different.

The Institute's Constitutions, which inspired the theme of this presentation, re-present the path paved by the foundress, the prudent boldness of renewal, a boldness that guided the saint in her day. It was a prudent boldness because she was inspired, guided and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, by the Most Holy Trinity. Therefore she was able to turn certain established patterns upside down. By doing so she made the great treasure that the Spirit always suggests shine forth, at all times and in all places. This was always for the maximum good of the person and of the persons who make up our Companies, as this Merician charism is not static. It is a dynamic reality. This charism can't be static (She asks you to "move"!). It cannot be an expensive museum piece, to be contemplated and that's it. Rather, it is life to be lived, and life also means our limitations and frailties, which may be in character, health, material, and culture – but this is life. It doesn't stop us. We move forward, questioning, discerning, but always guided by the Spirit of truth and the charism of the holy foundress.

A DYNAMIC CHARISM

Rule, Prologue, 10: *Seek out and desire all those means and ways that are necessary to persevere and prosper till the end.*

We do not stop, we go, seeking, scrutinizing, questioning, reading the signs of the times, interpreting them, discerning but always guided by the Special Teaching Assistant, as I like to call the Spirit. We are like those pupils who need the Special Teaching Assistant. It seems to me that even our early ancestors in the faith needed the Teaching Assistant to enlighten their minds, "then they understood, then they remembered..." But since Pentecost, it has been with the coming of the One who leads us to the whole truth. We cannot do all this work with our abilities alone!

IN TRIPLE FIDELITY

(to the Lord, to the charism, to the actual person)

This dynamic charism asks, however, for a threefold fidelity: fidelity to the One who suggested this charism to St. Angela, the One who is ultimately the final destination to which we are all directed, the Lover of you all; fidelity to his Gospel and then to the charism handed down by St. Angela through the centuries, places, cultures and finally to us.

As we said in the previous presentation, if those who are in Brazil live that charism as those who are in Indonesia live it, that means that there is an identity. That identity does not depend on us, we do not define it; we have received it, we welcome it and we have the duty to transmit it. Then there is a third fidelity, to the person, the recipient of this identity, of this charism, of this path that leads her to meet with her Lover really and fully.

So it is a dynamic charism that calls for continuous renewal, but in fidelity, listening to the Holy Spirit. St. Angela says, "If you faithfully carry out these and other similar things, as the Holy Spirit suggests to you." Then we must become "all ears," as the President said, listening to the Spirit speaking to us, instructing us, according to the times and situations. Only then can we say, at the end of our synodal journey of listening and discussion, "It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us" (Acts 15:28), that is, the Holy Spirit and we have found that for these times of ours it is good to act this way, it is right to do things this way. So – the ear – the ear before the mouth speaks, because the ear first of all listens. "Listen, O Israel!" Dr. Virgili reminded us of the biblical and theological significance of listening, taking what the Spirit says to us and then saying it back in our own poor words. But the Spirit also guides us in this poverty. And all this for a dynamic of conversion.

Last Legacy, 2: If, according to times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, do it prudently and with good advice.

Rule, Prologue, 24: Observe this Rule which has been composed to be useful to you, indeed as the path for you to walk by.

Last Legacy, 23: Take care, take care I say, not to lose your fervor.

Counsels, Prologue, 17: Act, move, believe, strive, hope, cry out to him with all your heart.

FOR A DYNAMIC OF CONVERSION

To be sure that I am not saying things that are merely my own thoughts, which do not have great authority, I wanted to retrieve some guidance that the Holy Father Pope Francis gave to you in his Apostolic Letter of November 21, 2014. In that letter he listed some "objectives" that not only remain valid today but also help us to sketch out today and tomorrow the life of the Company and of this Secular Institute in the light of the charismatic originality specific to St. Angela Merici. What does the Pope say? He lists three objectives:

1. To look to the past with gratitude.

“The first of these aims is *to look to the past with gratitude*. All our Institutes are heir to a history rich in charisms. At their origins we see the hand of God who, in his Spirit, calls certain individuals to follow Christ more closely, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church. This initial experience then matured and developed, engaging new members in new geographic and cultural contexts, and giving rise to new ways of exercising the charism, new initiatives and expressions of apostolic charity. Like the seed which becomes a tree, each Institute grew and stretched out its branches.” Each of our institutes comes from a rich charismatic history: and the Company of St. Angela truly has! So a charismatic history that helps us read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith. This helps give rise to new ways of implementing the charism today.”

Telling the story of one's own Company is essential for keeping identity alive, as well as for strengthening the unity of the family. Recounting the history, telling the story: it seems to me that these days this narrative has been continuously heard from the speakers at the convention. As the Pope invites us to do. On the first evening, Kate summarized the contributions from the questionnaire. In the first point she recognized the family unity which is not accomplished by our goodwill or by default, but it is done by recovering what one is, the shared identity, the members' sense of belonging.

The Pope's words refer us back to what we are constantly saying, namely that renewal calls for attention to two aspects: an aspect

that we cannot change, and the aspect that depends on us: our history and our ways of being. On this second aspect we can intervene more easily. So let us recover the vivid family identity, story, and the history of the Company's history, a glorious history.

2. To live the present with passion.

“Grateful remembrance of the past leads us, as we listen attentively to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today, to implement ever more fully the essential aspects of our consecrated life.”

To live the present with passion means passion in the sense of that great love that enables us to engage joyfully in spite of everything. Recounting history is not for the sake of nostalgia, nor even simply the telling of something that belongs to the past, rather it allows us to bring that original – and originating – foundational event deeper into our present day. The Pope says that implementing those fundamental aspects in an ever deeper way – here is the whole of consecrated life. The present cannot be a branch hanging or, worse, cut from the tree. That is why I began by recalling that even our convention is not suspended in air. It is embedded in a long, rich history, a history that has made its contribution in every moment and in every time. The year of consecrated life, Pope Francis continues, questions us about the fidelity to that mission that has been entrusted to us and that is the foundation of our way of life. So he questions and asks us to know whether our ministries, our presence, our services respond to what the Spirit asked of our founders, that is, whether the present corresponds to and expresses what the Spirit suggested to St. Angela. The Pope exhorts and affirms that, for him, to live the present with passion means to become experts in communion (a term he reclaimed from St. John Paul II), it means that communion comes from being family, being mothers to one another, living that relationship of motherhood that finds its root in God. Therefore, narrating our history, and in the light of it, means living intensely today.

3. To embrace the future with hope

Reading these things and looking at the Pope, one can see how faith is a great power that makes you experience even the greatest difficulties with a smile. One can see the joy with which he lives his ministry, the serenity

with which he faces everything; he is writing down the things he lives and believes in.

In the questionnaire and in our statistics, a situation emerges that can be discouraging: failing health, advancing age, declining vocations, especially in the West, and so many difficulties, including material ones in the young Companies. One would be inclined to say that everything here is a misfortune, everything a struggle. The Pope says, "We all know the difficulties which the various forms of consecrated life are currently experiencing: ...relativism and a sense of isolation and social irrelevance... But it is precisely amid these uncertainties, which we share with so many of our contemporaries" (because we are not Martians, we are incarnated like the Lover) that our hope is realized, a hope that is not naiveté nor mere enthusiasm, but a hope that is "the fruit of our faith in the Lord of history." This is why St. Angela continues to insist: believe firmly. Believe, this Company will continue "as long as the world lasts."

"The fruit of our faith in the Lord of history, who continues to tell us: 'Be not afraid... for I am with you' (Jer 1:8)". A faith rooted in the presence of the Risen One who accompanies us and who is the Lord of history. He has overcome the world, but by passing through our humanity and our miseries to the atrocity of the same death that we know. By conquering that death.

"This hope is not based on statistics or accomplishments, but on the One in whom we have put our trust (cf. 2 Tim 1:2), the One for whom 'nothing is impossible' (Lk 1:37)." It means constantly allowing ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, as St. Angela states, "**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). "This is the hope which does not disappoint; it is the hope which enables consecrated life to keep writing its great history well into the future. It is to that future that we must always look, conscious that the Holy Spirit spurs us on so that he can still do great things with us."

In this perspective of hope, the Pope addresses young people, we might say the young members of the Company (remember their contribution to the 2021 convention): "I would especially like to say a word to those of you who are young. You are the present, since you are already taking

active part in the lives of your Institutes, offering all the freshness and generosity of your ‘yes.’ At the same time you are the future, for soon you will be called to take on roles of leadership in the life, formation, service and mission of your communities. This Year should see you actively engaged in dialogue with the previous generation. In [sisterly] communion you will be enriched by their experiences and wisdom, while at the same time inspiring them, by your own energy and enthusiasm, to recapture their original idealism. In this way the entire community can join in finding new ways of living the Gospel [and the charism, in listening to experiences, in the mutual acceptance of the riches that each generation brings and offers] and responding more effectively to the need for witness and proclamation.” Develop new models of living the Gospel, the charism. At the 2021 convention in Rome, the theme of the difficulty in intergenerational relationships emerged. But if we experience the Company as a family, then there will be care for each other, in sisterly communion, at the same time recalling and reinvigorating that flame of initial love in older people too. And the Pope himself never ceases to recall this reality: the family and the presence of so many generations living rooted in love, the only cement that strengthens. So let us return to that foundation. The Pope has delivered some thoughts that I think are very relevant for us. Let us accept them and together make the discernment and synodal journey of seeking the ways and means necessary to help and support each of you on the path of perseverance in your relationship with your Spouse, the Lord Jesus.

What in particular does the Pope expect from consecrated life?

That we do not see sad faces among us, disgruntled and dissatisfied people, because "a gloomy disciple is a disciple of gloom." We too, like all other men and women, experience difficulties, nights of the spirit, disappointments, illnesses and the decline of strength due to old age. It is precisely in this that we should find "perfect joy [and] ... learn to recognize the face of Christ, who became like us in all things, and to rejoice in the knowledge that we are being conformed to him who, out of love of us, did not refuse the sufferings of the cross.”



CONCLUSION

"Paving the way for authentic renewal" (the topic entrusted to me) is tantamount to affirming with conviction that:

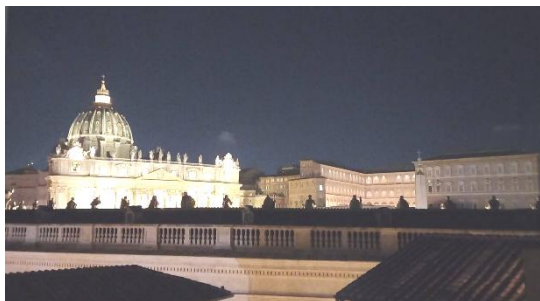
Renewal is necessary because it is, ever and always, part of the Church's historical journey; because St. Angela foresaw it; and because we are immersed in the influences of society's history and of our own characters and our limitations and we are called to reclaim and refocus our lives in the light of the Gospel and the Merician charism.

This renewal is authentic insofar as it is aimed at the greatest good of persons and of the Company: to be convinced of this! It is authentic insofar as it keeps the identity of the Merician charism unchanged. It is authentic insofar as it takes place within a symphony of diversity (character, social, cultural, global). Symphony, not disharmony! Let us think about our worldwide nature! I would really like for us to exhort each other that when we talk, reflect, make discernment and choices, and make decisions, we always have in mind the global nature of the Company, always. If I am in Trent, I cannot reason and discern only in the context of Trent, because whoever is in Canada or Slovakia is my sister, is part of the same identity. So I cannot forget the existence of the others who are my sisters. It is the symphony of the personal and historical diversities of the Company, of its worldwide nature, of the family of families, of the Company of Companies.

So that this renewal does not turn out to be by default – a lack alternatives – it is up to you yourselves, sisters, to become true mothers, all of you, to give birth to this child that you carry within, through the long synodal work of listening, conversation and community discernment! Today this child is called renewal. So give birth to it together, because you are gestating it together, for the greatest good of each.



Keep to the ancient way



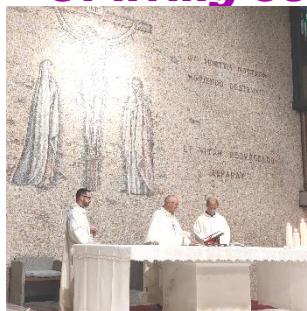
And lead a new life...



Our particular way



Of living ecclesial synodality



for internal use