

I. Opening Remarks

II. Today's Feast

- a. October 21st is the traditional feast of St. Ursula. High school days: Junior ring day.
- b. In 1969 when the Church revised the calendar of saints for liturgical celebrations, Ursula was omitted, along with St. Christopher & a number of other saintly folks who just didn't have enough factual evidence to justify their existence. So out they went, although they remain in the Roman Martyrology.
- c. Facts about Ursula which surface most consistently: loved God above all things & desired to give herself to God by living the life of a consecrated virgin; when faced with having to choose between a marriage arranged by her father or living her life as a consecrated virgin, she gathered other female companions to embark on a pilgrimage to speak about spiritual things & encouraged them to live a Christian life; martyred in Cologne by the Huns. Eventually a cult sprang up around her; the Basilica of St. Ursula in Cologne was built on top of an ancient cemetery in which it was said that Ursula and her companions were buried; St. Hildegard of Bingen, 12th c. German mystic, visionary & Benedictine abbess composed a number of chants in her honor.
- d. *[Share relic & story.]* From a "head" point of view, I know this can't be authentic. But in my heart, I claim it as sacred. Why? Because I believe that Ursula represents a deep connection to our founding story. Factual evidence to the contrary, Ursula and her companions were very real for people in the high & late Middle Ages. Ursula played a key role in the imagination & spirituality of Angela Merici. Angela was captivated by the legend of St. Ursula & her companions. She knew Ursula to be a woman who trusted her dreams & gave birth to her images; as a woman completely in love with God, leading others to Christ; and an

independent woman who saw her Christian life as a pilgrimage. It's my suspicion that Angela recognized herself in Ursula and desired that her daughters be known by these same qualities.

- e. Angela had a deep devotion to the virgin-martyrs. Sought to pray at their tombs; painted their likenesses on the wall of the oratory where first daughters gathered. She founded the *Company of St. Ursula* on Nov. 25, 1535 the feast of St. Catherine of Alexandria.

- f. The young women who became the first members of the *Company of St. Ursula* weren't required to know how to read or write, but they needed to firmly believe that God had "set them apart" (spiritually, not physically / monastery) to be "*the true and virginal spouses of the Son of God.*" Up until this time, people thought that the only spouses of the Son of God were in monasteries. And that's why, I think, Angela emphasized in her 7th Counsel that her daughters:
 - "*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, #22]

- g. In other words, they were to be faithful daughters of the Church in their thinking, customs & traditions. But **how** they lived that out would be brand new and unheard of at that time. Angela was doing something risky, and called her daughters to be risk-takers as well.

III. What's a Charism?

- a. My topic: *The charism of St. Angela and its meaning for us today* begs the question: What exactly IS a charism? I'd like to start to answer the question by telling a story.

- b. Story: *The Wise Woman's Stone* [see pg. 8]
 - i. A charism is a gift from the Holy Spirit. It's given in response to a particular need, at a particular moment in history. It's given to an individual for the sake of the Church. [M. Teresa = care for the destitute.]

 - ii. For the Wise Woman, noticing the precious stone was the beginning of unleashing her charism into the world. Something

catches her eye as she walks. She stops, picks it up, probably examines it, admires it, and places it in her pilgrim bag. You can say *it becomes part of her*. But when the hungry traveler asks her for it, she doesn't hesitate to give it away. The gift of the precious stone has already entered her. The stone itself has no real use for her except as a way to share the underlying gift: *that of living with open hands, of living with her eyes fixed on the One True Prize, of trusting in Divine Providence, or however you would describe it; knowing that the most precious gift of all is not an object but Jesus Christ*. I think Angela's way of saying that is "Have Jesus Christ for your one and only treasure." The hungry traveler eventually recognizes the same thing: it's not the stone that's precious, but something much more powerful, that cannot be seen.

- iii. It's hard to pinpoint a charisma nice and neat in one word. The charisma of a religious community generally shows itself in their life of prayer, their spirituality, their communal life & their apostolic works. Those who possess a sensitivity / openness to that same charisma are somehow drawn to it, just as the hungry traveler was drawn to return to the wise woman for more of what she possessed and shared so freely.
- iv. I invite you to think about your ministry at school. Perhaps you first started there because it was A JOB. But when you reflect on why you STAY, I'd like to suggest that it's because you resonate with something of Angela's charisma and the Ursuline spirit. Each of us in this room is drawn to Angela's charisma / possesses some small piece of her charisma, whether we recognize it or not, or else we wouldn't be here. And when we combine the pieces, something amazing happens, or as Angela says, "we see marvelous things."
- v. Dynamic nature of charisma (never static/dies). "And if, according to times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, do it prudently and with good advice."
[Last Legacy, #1]

IV. Angela's Times: Her Gift & Response

- i. "Charism is given in response to a particular need at a particular moment in history." So what was the particular need in Angela's time that God chose her to address?
- ii. Let's take a quick look at Angela's moment in history: **war**; **corruption** in civil & Church arenas; **immorality**; & very strict **division of the sexes** where women's lives were laid out for them by their male protectors (father, uncle, husband, brother, bishop, etc.) from the day they were born. **Two choices for women**: an arranged marriage vs. life behind cloister walls.
- iii. Angela's life experience leads her to *question the status quo*. As a young adult she had a vision (Brudazzo) which, although she could never really put it into words, left her with a clear conviction that God had chosen her for a mission that was not yet clear, but that it would be for God's glory.
- iv. As I reflect on Angela at this point in her life, what comes to mind is a piece of a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke: "*You must give birth to your images. They are the future waiting to be born. Fear not the strangeness you feel. For the future must enter you long before it happens.*"
- v. Angela's vision entered her as a young adult and became the foundation and lens through which she saw life from that moment forward. She didn't fear the strangeness she felt, even though it took another 40 years or so before she could bring it to birth.
- vi. Angela (young woman) moves to Brescia as a lay Franciscan to comfort a woman who lost husband & sons in the war. As she gets involved in ministry, she begins to be privy to the lives of women, married & single. A consciousness is dawning in women of the time and a growing desire for integration of the interior life with the exterior life; action & contemplation.
- vii. Angela recognizes that women don't need to be protected from the world: either by a man (marriage) or in a monastery. On the contrary, *women have something important and unique to offer the world*. I think **this** was the particular need at her particular

moment in history. God gave Angela the charism to live a new life: to live a life fully consecrated to God while being fully engaged in the world.

- viii. In her daily activities Angela crossed paths with young women who had that same desire. They didn't feel called to monastic life or married life. At that time, another option did not yet exist.
- ix. I think that people (women, men, single, married, wealthy, struggling) recognized something new in Angela & the integrity of her life, and wanted what she had. [*hungry traveler*] Angela had been living the charism, "giving birth to the images", unleashing it into the world, without knowing it. God was using her to show the world something new. Finally she begins to understand the meaning of the vision she had so long ago. Then she courageously took the risk to make it happen.
- x. Poem: *A Gift* by Denise Levertov [see pg. 8]
- xi. In essence, this is what Angela has already been doing. Forty years have passed since her vision in Brudazzo. I'm sure there were moments when she felt like a "*flimsy web of questions.*" But in return for trusting in God over the long haul & reaching out to others, she'd been "*given the questions of others to hold in the emptiness of her hands*" and in time they became the answer to "*all she asked.*" Specifically, in regard to the meaning of that vision / seed experience so long ago.
- xii. So, what I would say is Angela's charism can be summed up in 5 words: *to live a new life. New in what way?* Engaging with the world, reflecting on what is experienced in the light of the Gospel, & adapting to the needs of the times; recognizing & affirming the needs of the individual; learning to balance contemplation and action while living in the world. All of this implies deep listening to the world and to one's heart and constant recourse to the Holy Spirit. Angela didn't do new things for the novelty of it, or the notoriety. Her times demanded something new. And so do ours.

V. Our Times, Our Response

- a. I don't think that our times are all that different from Angela's. We still see war, corruption, poverty, disease, immorality, and sexism. People still yearn for God. We want to know how to discern God's voice in our own hearts & in the world around us.
- b. In my own experience with teens and college students, I hear a deep desire for meaning, for help to discern God's voice within them, for mentoring in how to live their faith in an authentic, meaningful way. They seek to live in such a way that their inner and outer lives match. "Service" has become another "sacrament."
- c. People look to you & your colleagues for a "new way", an educational environment where it's not "business as usual." Students & adults come to our schools hoping for "something more," hungry for a place that offers them a different vision than "the world" gives. They want "*what you have within you that enables you to give away the stone.*"
- d. In your dealings with young people, parents, faculty, staff you are privy to the deep desires and longings that are sometimes spoken, and often not. *What are you hearing? What light or challenge might Angela's charism shed on their deepest longings? How do we live Angela's charism in our particular contexts, and how do we continue to translate it for and transmit it to the generations we serve?*
- e. Ursuline schools are known around the world for educational excellence. *What would being known for "spiritual" excellence (Angela's charism) look like? We already HAVE Angela's charism. It's alive all over the world. How are we adapting it for our times, and in the complex circumstances in which we live and minister? Angela's times required something new and so does ours. How do we go about living a new life and offering that choice to others?*
- f. I don't have the answers to these questions. None of us do individually. But when we work together ~ that's when we'll see marvelous things. What I do know is that living a new life means never being able to settle, or rest on our laurels. It demands that we remain fully engaged with the world as it is, while always keeping our fingers on the pulse of the Holy Spirit.

VI. Conclusion

- a. What might a 16th-c. Italian woman who didn't go to school & couldn't even write want this gathering of UES to know?
- b. *“Understand that now I am more alive than I was when I lived on earth, and I see better and hold more dear and pleasing the good things which I see you constantly doing, and now, even more, I want and am able to help you and do you good in every way.”* [Prologue to the Counsels, #23-25]
- c. *“Act, move, believe, strive, hope, cry out to God with all your heart for without doubt you will see marvelous things, if you direct everything to the praise and glory of God’s Majesty and the good of souls.”* [Prologue to the Counsels, #17]
- d. *“So, persevere faithfully and joyfully in the work you have begun.”* [Last Legacy, #22]
- e. *“Now I am going, and you, in the meantime, do what has to be done. But first I embrace you, and to you all I give the kiss of peace, begging God to bless you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”* [Last Legacy #25-28]

The Wise Woman's Stone

From *The Best of Bits & Pieces*

A wise woman who was travelling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation.

The traveler left rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime.

But, a few days later, he came back to return the stone to the wise woman. "I've been thinking," he said. "I know how valuable this stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone."

A Gift

Denise Levertov

Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given
the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.