

FEAST DAY: JANUARY 27TH

ST ANGELA MERICI, VIRGIN

(1474-1540)

THOUGH doubtless the bright lights and heavy shades of virtue and vice were undulating all over Italy, as elsewhere, when St Angela Merici was born at Desinzano, a small country town to the south-west of Lake Garda, 21st March, 1474, it is pleasant to think that she was one of the group of holy women who either contemporary with, or just before her, have so powerfully aided to foster the traditional piety of Italian rural society. The very year of Angela's birth, the Blessed Catarina de Palanza was edifying Verese, while St Veronica of Milan was the wonder for sanctity of that great and luxurious city. At Orzinovi, in the diocese of Brescia, the Blessed Stefana Quinzani, and at Mantua, the Blessed Osanna Andreasi, were just reaching womanhood and both were later to have their share in the influencing of St Angela's life.

The father of Angela was Giovanni Tommaso Merici. Her mother's maiden name was Biancosi, but there is, indeed, "a sad dearth" with regard to the family history of the Saint. There were besides Angela four other children, one, an elder Sister to whom she was so dearly attached and three others. One of these was a brother equally dear to Angela, but as no reference is made to the rest, it has been surmised that they were either dead at, or shortly after, the time of Angela's birth. The Merici family seem to have been of the upper middle class, well off, indeed, but not of noble descent, though some branches of the stock afterwards married into the patrician houses of Bertalozzi, the Counts Lanfranchi and the Counts of Tracagno.

In the Merici household the pious custom of family prayers every night was the rule, and not only that, but Angela's father made it his practice to read daily to his children extracts from the *Lives of the Saints*, especially those passages which illustrated the practical aspects of the

piety of holy personages of all ages. Very soon little Angela and her sister, who, as before remarked, was somewhat older than herself, and also, it is said, her little brother, were so fired by these stirring examples of devout heroism in the service of God and our neighbour, that they tried to carry out in their own young lives some of the mortifications and other ascetic practices associated with the wonderful characters whose histories they had heard read. There is, of course, nothing priggish or affected in this. It is part of that innate desire to chastise the body and bring it into subjection, which from the days of St Paul downward forms that ideal of holiness through mortification which presents itself to every Catholic who is really seeking the Kingdom of God and His justice. But midnight vigils, long prayers and fasts are not for children, nor, indeed, for anyone without due authorization, and the reader, therefore, will not be surprised to learn that these ascetic exuberances were soon put a stop to by the wise parents of our Saint. Though Angela was so holy a child, and her father and mother, as we have seen, were persons of uncommon piety, she did not make her first Communion till she was thirteen years of age—a very advanced period of her life, even when all allowances are made for whatever circumstances may have retarded the initial reception of the holy and life-giving Sacrament. Had she lived two centuries later, no doubt this fact would have been ascribed by her biographers to the influence of Jansenism, but whatever the cause may have been, her first Holy Communion was soon followed by two great sorrows—the deaths of her father and her sister. In families united by deep devotion and close affection, such occurrences are always of the nature of calamities, but in this instance the tragedies were heightened by the further consideration that in neither case did the deceased receive the last Sacraments! We at once recall the dramatic lament of the troubled ghost on the battlements of Elsinore at a deprivation so poignant to every Catholic heart,¹ but to Angela these deaths, and that of her sister especially, were almost crushing blows. But like every heroic nature, she refused to let mere grief stand in the way of duty. Besides, there were her widowed mother and young brother and the affairs of the family to attend to, and it was at this crisis that she received the first of the several recorded great spiritual manifestations which were to be vouchsafed her during her life. This was the Vision of Our Lady surrounded by the holy Angels, which appeared to her during the harvest-time near a farmhouse, known as Le Grezze on the Macchetto road, near her home. At the same time, she distinctly heard the words: “Angela, only persevere in the path you are following, and you shall have a share with us in the glory you behold.” This apparition must have greatly fortified the Saint and enabled her to endure her

¹ *Hamlet*: act i., scene iv.

third bereavement, that of her dear mother, which occurred not long afterwards. Angela and her brother were now left alone in the world, and this being the case, their maternal uncle, Biancosi, who lived at Salo, kindly invited his nephew and niece to take up their abode with him and his family at the latter place. It was during the early part of their stay there, that Angela and her brother tried to carry out the idea of a hermit life in the mountainous country around Lake Garda. But the would-be St Scholastica and St Benedict were brought back to their good uncle's house, for other reasons apart, the times were not favourable to a revival of the eremitical life of the early ages. France and Venice were at war, and the troops of Charles VIII were making their presence felt everywhere. Angela's devotion to her brother seems to have been at this time greatly intensified owing to a probable interior admonition of his early death, which occurred not long after the episode just referred to.

When Angela was twenty-two, she returned to her own home at Desinzano, the property of which, meanwhile, had been very carefully managed by her good uncle from Salo. She took with her a young lady of about her own age, and one like her, truly devout. The two were enrolled in the Third Order of St Francis, and though they did not at this time open a school in their house as has been alleged, they did interest themselves greatly in the religious instruction of children of the poorer class. This and the practice of prayer and various austerities became the rule of Angela and her companion for many years, and, indeed, it may be said to have formed the only actual training for what was to be her life-work. Among her neighbours at Desinzano were a gentleman and his wife, Jerome and Caterina Patengoli, who soon conceived a great admiration for the virtues and practical good works of their two young friends. They both belonged to the city of Brescia—the Brixia of the Romans—which had but a few years before been stormed by the French under that much-vaunted pattern of Chivalry, Gaston de Foix, and subjected to one of the most horrible pillages and massacres in history!¹ Yet with the wonderful recuperativeness of the Latin race, the enterprising people of the place were rapidly rebuilding their stricken city. The Patengolis were desirous of having Angela with them to console them for the loss of their own dear children snatched from them by one of those fatal epidemics which follow in the wake of war. With the consent of the Franciscan Superiors of the Third Order, without whose advice she never undertook any work of

¹ Brescia was taken by the French under Gaston de Foix, Feb. 1512, when, it is said, 40,000 of the inhabitants were massacred! The plunder was valued at three millions of crowns. *A History of France to the Fall of the Second Empire*, by W. H. Jervis. (John Murray, 1898.)

importance, Angela, in 1522, went to live in Brescia with her good friends the Patengolis. There she soon became the prime mover of another series of beneficent works, and a pious citizen, named Antonio dei Romani, was so impressed by the good results of her labours, that he offered her a large room in his own house for the meetings of the young persons, especially those of her own sex, who came to her for instruction and spiritual advice. In May, 1524, Angela and her cousin, Bartolemeo Biancosi, went with a large body of pilgrims to the Holy Land, and it was during the progress of the voyage there, from Venice, that the Saint was struck with blindness. Though she had always longed to see the places associated with Our Lord's life and death, she accepted this mysterious affliction with her usual resignation to the divine will. During her stay in Palestine, she was led from place to place, unable to see, but interiorly filled with extraordinary devotion, so that although not being able visibly to behold what she had so long pictured to herself, she *felt*, as it were, the effect of the wondrous sanctity of each sacred shrine in a way not comprehended by ordinary visitors. In the course of the return voyage, Angela and the pilgrims, including Monsignor Paola della Puglea, one of the Pope's chamberlains, visited a Church at Canea, in the island of Candia, containing a miraculous crucifix. Angela and the company prayed fervently there that sight might be restored to her, if such was God's will, when, to the amazement of all, she cried out that she could see! This wonderful cure took place on 4th October, 1524, a few weeks before the party landed at Venice. After reaching the city-queen of the Adriatic, Angela was offered by Prince Guistiniani and the Senators of the Doge, the post of general superintendent of several charitable institutions in the city, but she declined the offer, convinced that her mission was to found an institute of religious women devoted to the education of girls. So uppermost did this conviction become, that, next year, she journeyed to Rome to lay her intention before the Pope. Clement VII, who had already heard of her eminent holiness and many spiritual favours from Monsignor della Puglea and others, received her with marks of great distinction and was even anxious that she should stay in Rome and pursue her good works there, but Angela assured the Pontiff that her mission lay elsewhere. The Holy Father dismissed her with his blessing and words of encouragement, and it is well that the future foundress of the Ursulines did not stay in Rome, for within two years took place the awful sack of the city by the Constable de Bourbon and his army, or rabble rather, of German Lutherans and Italian and Spanish renegades, when, for the space of nine months, bloodshed, licentiousness and pillage ran riot in the Capital of Christendom.¹

¹ The Constable de Bourbon was slain by a shot from an arquebus just as his ruffianly followers entered Rome. Benvenuto Cellini has claimed the honour of firing the shot in question,

For nearly five years longer, the horrifying struggle between Charles V and Francis continued. To it, and to it alone, must be ascribed most of the terrible moral and other evils which thirty-years later called for the utmost efforts of St Charles Borromeo and the other apostolic leaders of the Counter-Reformation to remove. Until peace had been established and ratified by the Coronation of the Emperor by the Pope at Bologna, 1530, it was useless to think of setting up a new religious order or institute, however useful or well conceived. Meanwhile, Angela had not been idle. She had gathered around her a band of twelve maidens all actuated like herself by the idea of the systematic religious education of the rising generation as the best, nay, only hope of preserving, amidst the demoralization caused by the Franco-German-Italian conflict, that ideal of Christian family life without which the advent of paganism is never very far off.¹

The names of "the first twelve maidens" of the future Ursuline Order were: Simona Borni, Catherine and Dominica Dolce, Dorosilla Zinelli, Pelligrina Casali, Clara Gaffuri, Paula and Laura Peschieri, Barbara Fontana, Clara Martinengo, Margaret dell 'Olmo and Maria Bartolletti. A pious widow of noble rank, Elizabeth Prato, gave the community a hall in one of her houses in the Plaza del Duomo of Brescia, for the training of their rapidly growing numbers in piety and the works of education and charity. The sisterhood attended the Church of St Afra, a building full of the relics of the martyrs and rich in memories of devotion and self-sacrifice. Finally, on 25th November, 1535, the Feast of St Catharine, the Virgin-Philosopher and Martyr of Alexandria, the solemn canonical institution of the company of St Ursula took place in the Oratory of the Plaza del Duomo, "in the presence of the proper authorities and their invited friends." The chief of these "proper authorities" was, of course, Cardinal Cornaro, Bishop of Brescia. Twenty-eight took the vows by which they bound themselves to the Company and to each other. The new institute was called by the Foundress "the Company of St Ursula," because ever since her martyrdom and that of her maiden band by the Huns at Cologne (A.D. 383 ?), the famous British Princess, St Ursula, has

a casualty which really proved to be a great calamity to the Romans, since it removed the only man who was capable of restraining the dreadful horde of international villains whose outrages and orgies were to "stagger humanity!"

¹ This idea of solid religious education as a cure for social ills, was also that of Henry VI, when founding Eton College—"The College of the Blessed Mary of Eton beside Windsor," 1440. The holy King intended the place to become a nursery of saintly prelates, wise statesmen and worthy men of the world, whose influence would gradually save this country from the menace of the fierce feudal aristocracy whose only method of solving political problems was by the sword. The terrible Wars of The Roses, which commenced fifteen years later, show how well grounded were the fears of the pious King!

been generally regarded as the ideal type of Christian virginity.¹ St Ursula was early chosen by the authorities of the Sorbonne as the protectress of professors and students, and the *cultus* of the holy Martyr was, or rather is, widespread over Germany, France, and the north of Italy.²

The "Company of St Ursula" was, of course, not "an Order" in the ecclesiastical sense. That distinction was not to come till 1612. The members were not even enclosed, nor bound by the vow of chastity. It was simply a pious sisterhood of devout women living in the world, who bound themselves to sanctify their own lives, instruct young girls, and nurse the sick. The members were to hear Mass daily, communicate every Friday, and on the last Sunday of the month to assemble in the Oratory to hear the Rule read. A plain dress of dark material, with a cloak for rainy weather, was adopted, though the present habit, which is black and similar to that of most other Nuns, but distinguished by a leathern girdle, was not introduced till much later.

From the first the Ursulines increased rapidly. St Charles established them at Milan in 1568. In France—where the Society had been introduced since 1594—the Institute was raised to the status of an Order, strictly enclosed and under solemn vows, through the exertions of the pious Madame de St Beuve, who obtained a Bull from Paul V for that purpose. A branch of the French Order was settled in Canada, 1639, when the first Convent was built at Quebec. The body of the heroic Marquis de Montcalm, the opponent of the British hero, General Wolfe (1759), lies buried in the Chapel. The Irish Ursuline Convent was established at Cork by the famous Miss Nano Nagle, a kinswoman of the illustrious Edmund Burke, 1771, and in addition to the very many houses of St Angela's holy Foundation, to be found in every part of the world, there are some fifteen convents of the same in the United Kingdom, all successfully engaged in the principal work designed by the holy Foundress—the education of girls.

Pope Paul III in 1544, confirmed the "Company of St Ursula" as instituted by Angela, but by that time the holy Foundress had passed to her eternal reward. As early as 1532, she had chosen the place of her burial in the Church of St Afra, and when seized with what was to be her last illness she assured her sorrowing sisters and friends that her end was at hand. Having received the last rites with extraordinary devotion, and given her final instructions to the Community, she caused herself to be clothed in the habit of the Third Order of St Francis, and in that

¹ The exact date of St Ursula's martyrdom is unknown. The years stated vary from A.D. 238 to 451. The date assigned in the text, 383, is the one generally given in most accounts of the Saint.

² In 1490, a female orphanage was opened at Venice under the patronage of St Ursula.

venerated garb she calmly expired at about six o'clock on Tuesday, 27th January, 1540. A marble sepulchre, probably the work of Moretto and his pupils, long enshrined the sacred remains of Angela Merici, in the crypt of St Afra's, until 1777, when another and more beautiful tomb of marble and gilt bronze received the body of the holy Foundress. The conspicuous virtues and many miracles of this wonderful woman having been carefully investigated over a period of many years, Pope Clement XIII, on 30th April, 1768, decreed her Beatification. In a decree, dated 16th July, 1777, Pope Pius VI declared the virtues practised by the *Beata* to have been "heroic each in its kind." Finally, on 24th May, 1807, Pius VII, accorded her the supreme honours of Canonization, together with St Coletta, the reformer of the French Poor, Clares, St Hyacinth Mariscotti of Viterbo, St Francis Caracciolo (†1603), and St Benedict of San Philadelphio, "the light of Sicily" (†1589). Apart from her work for the Catholic world at large, St Angela must be regarded as one of the eminent preservers of the Faith in the North of Italy. In the year of her death, 1540, it was estimated that at least half the town of Brescia was Lutheran or Calvinist, and that of the other half many were disposed to heresy! The insane Franco-Imperialist wars already mentioned, had not only undermined religion and morals, but had introduced into the country great numbers of "reformers" from Germany and Switzerland, whose emissaries—often disguised as priests and friars—were busy assailing the religion of the simple and ignorant. The schools of the Ursulines did their share in strengthening and extending Catholicism and in safeguarding the homeland of the Church from that welter of heretical confusion which not only largely originated, but which so powerfully aids that unlovely thing—"modern unbelief!"

[*St Angela Merici and the Ursulines*, by the Rev. Bernard O'Reilly (London: Burns & Oates, 1880), is a very full biography, but its usefulness is somewhat impaired by its extreme discursiveness. A detailed *Life* in Italian, by the Abate Salvatori, appeared at Rome, 1807, the year of the Canonization.]