

## ANGELA MERICI AND THE ORIGINAL COMPANY OF ST. URSULA (1535-1540) QUERCIOLO MAZZONIS

Angela Merici, like other mystic women such as Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena, was considered a “santa viva”, a living saint. Angela’s social recognition derives from her mysticism, sacred knowledge, and participation to civic life. Angela’s originality and genius, however, reside, above all, in the foundation of the Company of St. Ursula, because there she put her theology into practice, she translated her spiritual ideas and experience into a defined model of religious life for other women. The Company proposed a form of consecration for women outside the convent, in the midst of the secular world, as an alternative to monasticism. Merici’s form of religious life was innovative also because it was individualistic, inward-looking, a-institutional and transcendent.

From a ‘women’s history’ perspective, Angela’s Company had important consequences: in a society in which women were expected to choose between marriage and the convent, the Ursuline was an anomaly, the prototype of the lay single woman. Furthermore, Merici’s model for religious life gave women independence at both spiritual and social levels: the Ursuline was free to shape her relationship with the divine and gained public visibility; the Company was a self-sufficient organization, entirely composed and managed by women. And, in Angela’s rule, the Ursuline was respected as an individual and considered a full human being, with intellect, will and emotions.

The essay argues that the most significant context for understanding Angela Merici, her company, and her religious thought is that of the experience of late medieval religious women. Angela’s way of perceiving the relationship with the “sacred” exhibits significant continuities with that expressed by late medieval spiritual women who lived outside conventual institutions, namely the beguines, the tertiaries, the pinzochere, and the recluses. Angela’s most original contribution to the history of female religiosity is that for the first time she codified its most radical traits into a religious rule.

Angela’s rule, however, also shows many aspects in common with contemporary religious milieus and individuals which promoted a spiritual model which was more interior and individual and which did not give much importance to institutional and exterior aspects (like the *devotio moderna*, Battista da Crema, the Barnabites, etc.). Such spiritual model emerged within a cultural context in which the notion of the “self” was being reshaped. By promoting such spirituality, Merici allows the Ursulines to have a profound experience of their “selves” and humanity within the religious sphere.

