

## BLESSED ANGELA OF FOLIGNO (1248-1305)

DOMINIC DEVAS, O.F.M.

THE following pages merely give a few glimpses of the spiritual teaching of Blessed Angela of Foligno.<sup>1</sup> Apart from her *Instructions* and *Letters* we owe what we have to a certain friar Arnaldo. He was, it seems, her cousin; and he appears first, in anything but an appreciative mood, on the occasion of Angela's mystical experience in the church of San Francesco at Assisi. Fortunately he was spiritual enough to see beneath the surface, which appeared mere hysteria to others, and to appreciate Angela's genuine holiness. Later on, as director and secretary, he drew from her an account of her spiritual experiences and thoughts, and set them down; but not in the contemporary Tuscan that Angela would have used, but in Latin. His task was no easy one. Much of what Angela spoke must have been hard to grasp in any case—she once told him she could not recognise what he had written down as hers—and everything had to be done rapidly. There was also evidently at one time a great deal of suspicion of Angela and her mysticism on the part of many of the friars, and efforts were even made to prevent Arnaldo from having anything more to do with her. From this it is evident that we must not expect to find here an ordered treatment of the spiritual life such as, for example, Saint Teresa gives us; but we do find passages of such extreme vividness of expression, spiritual depth and insight into human nature as amply to reward our labour and to make up for lack of system. *The Memorial*, as Arnaldo's work is called, with the *Instructions* and the *Letters* have come to form all together the traditional *Book of Blessed Angela of Foligno*.

Apart from what may be gathered from the *Book*, details of Angela's life are sadly lacking. 1248 is approximately

<sup>1</sup> Practically all is drawn from *Le Livre de la Bienheureuse Soeur Angèle de Foligno*, which contains all the original documents translated from the Latin; edited by P. Paul Doncoeur, S.J. (*L'Art Catholique*: Paris, 1926). I wish here to express my thanks for permission to quote at will from P. Doncoeur's book.

the year of her birth, and Foligno was her birth-place and her life-long home. In time she married and had a family and—but this is her own subsequent estimate—led a very gay and worldly and sinful life. In her middle thirties, about 1285, she became a changed woman: it was the *conversion*. Of its manner and of the occasion of it we know nothing; but we have it on Angela's own word that very soon afterwards she found herself alone. Death carried off in quick succession her mother, her husband and her sons. So sudden and sweeping a visitation suggests the plague, but we have no evidence of this. But we have an insight into what it all meant for Angela in an aside casually let slip by her later when recounting her great mystical experience at Assisi and the intense anguish accompanying it: 'It was even worse', she said, 'than what I felt on the death of my mother and my sons'.

In 1290 she joined the Third Order of Saint Francis, and we have a record of at least three—there were probably more—visits to Assisi. The first was in 1291, and is famous as the occasion of the *vision* vouchsafed to Angela on the road between Spello and Assisi, and of the subsequent scene in the church of San Francesco. Indeed she has herself left us a graphic account of all this, and of the indignation of the friars at the tumult she unwittingly caused and of the distressed embarrassment, not to say anger, of her cousin Arnaldo. In the following year Angela appears to have been again at Assisi for the feast of Saint Clare. In 1296 she spent several days there, and was favoured with many appearances of and colloquies with Saint Francis. Angela had by now become a figure of some note, and was living, as acknowledged superior, with a community of Third Order Sisters under the direction of the friars. In 1297 *The Memorial* was finally drawn up and submitted for approval to Cardinal James Colonna. This was soon forthcoming, together with *nihil obstat* of several Franciscan professors and others. Time has abundantly endorsed the official encomiums. P. Doncoeur gives an imposing list of saints and scholars who have approved of Angela's *Book*, including Pope Benedict XIV in his treatise on *Beatification*, and Saint Francis de Sales in his treatise on *The Love of God*.

It was probably in 1289 that Angela met the friar—later to become famous—Ubertino de Casale. The latter was then thirty-nine; and Angela appears to have won him back to a life of fervour and zeal sapped somewhat during his student days at Paris. Ubertino at least pays a generous tribute to Angela later on in his book *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae*;<sup>2</sup> but it is a pity her own quiet and serene persistence in loyalty to the ideals of Saint Francis and to the Church in which they lay framed did not permeate more deeply into that fiery and embittered soul.

Angela died in 1305; and *The Book* contains a touching account of her last *Instructions* and death.

#### THE BLESSED TRINITY AND THE DIVINE INDWELLING

The Blessed Trinity figures frequently in the mystical experiences of B. Angela. Her life of union with God is expressed in terms either of the divine indwelling of the Three Persons in her own soul, or of herself as dwelling in the midst of the Trinity. Spiritual teaching familiar to us and of which the writings of the Fathers contain so much seems to have appeared strange and unfamiliar to at least some devout people in the thirteenth century. We catch a charming glimpse of this in the question Angela's saintly but mystified companion put to her one day. 'Tell me', she asked, 'who really are you?', and then proceeded to recount how three times she had heard a voice saying. *The Holy Spirit is in Lella*.<sup>3</sup> 'If that was what was said to you', Angela answered, 'I am delighted indeed.' Actually, as we shall see, Angela too and even Arnaldo had their difficulties in this question of the divine indwelling.

Her first great mystical experience, so far as we know,

<sup>2</sup> The reference is found in the *First Prologue* to *The First Book* (in the Venice edition of 1485). The language is very laudatory indeed but with a tinge of self-glorification: 'Omnia dona propria', he writes, 'per meam malitiam perdita in immensum multiplicata restituit'; and a little later he says that the change Angela wrought in him was so great: 'ut nullus sane mentis qui me prius cognoverit habeat dubitare quin spiritus Christi in me sit de novo genitus'. I owe the complete extract from Ubertino's book, to Fr Aloysius Kelly, O.F.M., who kindly transcribed it for me from the copy at the Friary, East Bergholt.

<sup>3</sup> The affectionate abbreviation for *Angela*.

is the one already referred to, which began on the way to Assisi. For our present purpose it is enough to recall—from her own very vivid account—how the theme of the divine indwelling is uppermost. ‘I am the Holy Spirit coming to you to give you such consolation as you have never before enjoyed. I shall come with you and within you as far as [the church of] San Francesco . . . I shall not leave you till your second visit to San Francesco. Then, as far as this special consolation is concerned, I shall leave you: but if you love me, never henceforth shall I be absent.’

Later, ‘I am the Holy Spirit who enters within you’, and again: ‘It is I, who was crucified for you; I who was hungry and athirst for you and shed my blood for you, so great was my love’. Finally, at the parting: ‘My daughter, dearer to me than I am to you . . . my temple, my delight . . . you have the ring of my love, my espoused; and henceforth you will never leave me: receive the blessing of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, you and your companion.’

It was some time after this that Arnaldo himself expressed his difficulty to Angela and asked her how it was that at one time the ‘indwelling’ was ascribed to the Holy Spirit, at another to Jesus crucified. Angela did not answer at once but gave herself time for reflection and withdrew into her house. After a while she returned to Arnaldo and told him how the same difficulty had occurred to her and how she had been shown that the truth lay in the fact that the whole Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, had come to her: ‘. . . and it seemed to me I was told that the Trinity is one thing together, assembled but utterly simple’.

Some time, probably before the famous experience at Assisi, and whilst Angela was still in process of distributing her goods to the poor, another very vivid picture emerges from *The Memorial*: ‘Lord, all I am doing’, she says, ‘I do for nothing else but only to find you. Shall I find you when I have done?’ ‘What would you?’ was the answer. ‘Neither gold nor silver’, she replied. ‘And were you to give me all the world I would still want but you.’ ‘Hurry, then’, she was told, ‘for as soon as you have finished what you are about the whole Trinity will be yours.’

The other aspect of the same truth, herself within the Trinity, comes out more than once in *The Memorial*. In a great passage towards the end, on the mystical elements of darkness and light in the perception of God, these words occur: 'And in this Trinity, seen in the midst of the great darkness, I felt myself to be lodging therein'. And again: 'Last Lent I found myself more completely and more effortlessly wrapt in God than ever I had experienced before. And it seemed to me that I was in the midst of the Trinity; and more completely so than I had ever been, judging by the favours that were mine, richer and more continuous than any I had previously enjoyed.'

In a long *Instruction* on *The Loving Soul transformed into Christ*, there is a fine passage on the unifying power of love. 'The power of love transforms the lover into the Beloved and the Beloved into the lover in this sense that the soul inflamed with divine love by the power of love is transformed into God, the Beloved—loved by the soul so sweetly—as the metal thrust into the flame assumes the likeness of fire, its colour and heat, its efficacy and power: in a way it becomes itself fire.' What is this but the old analogy of St Basil, or even the *amatum in voluntate existit* of St Thomas (*Contra Gentiles*, iv, 19)?

#### PRAYER

For Blessed Angela prayer is essentially the gateway to reality; to the knowledge of God and of oneself. 'The more you pray the more will you be enlightened; the greater your light, the deeper and nobler will be your perception of the Sovereign Good, of the Reality that is supreme perfection.' And again: 'By prayer you are enlightened. By prayer you are delivered from temptations. By prayer you are purified. By prayer you are united to God. Prayer in fact opens to us a knowledge of God and of ourselves: and that is the basis of true and perfect humility.'

Her division of prayer is threefold, but we must be careful not to be misled by the names she uses. Firstly comes what she calls corporal prayer. By this she certainly—but not exclusively—means prayer in which words and gestures play their part. She certainly would have agreed fully with

those who recommend the use from time to time of such simple aids to recollection: genuflexion is the gesture she expressly mentions. 'This sort of prayer', she says, 'I shall never relinquish': and then with her delightful candour she acknowledges how on occasion when aspiring to something higher 'I found I was merely being deceived by idleness and sleep, and was wasting my time'. But this form of prayer, that Angela calls *corporal*, plainly comprises also what is generally spoken of as *mental* prayer. It is a stepping stone to something beyond, and demands its own measure of concentration. 'When you say the *Our Father*', she writes, 'think of what you are saying. Don't race on trying to get through a certain number, like a seamstress on piece work.' Her own experience of the value of that prayer was profound. 'One day', she tells us, 'I had gone to the church and was praying for God's grace when, as I prayed, he put into my mind the *Our Father*, with a most vivid understanding of the divine goodness and of my own unworthiness. Each phrase was explained to me inwardly whilst with my lips I recited the words; but very slowly and with such growing knowledge of myself that I wept bitterly at the sight of my sins and unworthiness: and yet I had immense consolation too, and began to taste something of the divine sweetness.'

*Corporal* prayer, then, is to lead the soul forward towards what Angela calls mental prayer. Her description of this, however, seems to suggest that it is really almost equivalent to what St John of the Cross would call the *prayer of loving attention*, or Fr Baker the *prayer of quiet*: readers must judge for themselves. 'Prayer is mental', says Angela, 'wherein the thought of God so completely occupies the mind as to exclude every other thought. Where this is not so, and should thoughts other than that of God find a place, then I would not call such a prayer *mental*. In this form of prayer one is completely tongue-tied; words are out of the question. The whole soul is immersed in God; and so utterly as to be unable to attend to anything else in thought or word but only to God.'

Finally there is what Angela calls *supernatural* prayer. By this she plainly means a state of prayer not merely supernatural, for all prayer is such, but directly infused by God:

‘. . . that wherein the soul is held in the vision of the divine mercy, and drawn onwards as it were out of herself. She apprehends of God more than could be understood by her own unaided powers; she recognises that, but sees too that comprehension is beyond her.’

Despite her own modest disclaimers, *The Memorial* and all we have of Angela’s *Letters* and *Instructions* are redolent of a soul steeped in such *supernatural* prayer. Thus in the *Seventh Step* which forms the concluding section of *The Memorial*, Angela appears as a mystic of great depth and subtlety of thought. After the familiar images of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’, a darkness wherein she sees nothing ‘yet sees all’; after some passages of great interest on the Trinity and on the Judgment of God, on the divine Omnipresence and on the soul’s own aptitude to be God’s dwelling place, we come to a fine description of the innermost sanctuary of the soul ‘into which no joy can enter, no sorrow, no delight in any virtue nor indeed in anything whatsoever, but wherein is found ALL GOOD, so wholly all, there is none other’. We have a glimpse of him who is essentially Being ‘. . . and the *being* of all creatures. And I realise how it is he who empowers me to understand far better than before, when I saw him in that darkness wherein I was wont to rejoice so much. I see myself alone with God . . . all else forgotten.’ She is accorded more light on the Blessed Sacrament; and then we have this description of her ‘supernatural’ prayer: ‘Very often the soul is lifted up by God; no consent is demanded; there is neither longing nor reflection of any kind, but the soul is suddenly caught up by God and held. The world loses all its magic; I seem to be on earth no longer, but in heaven with God.’

God everywhere *and* in the human soul is a theme that appears more than once: ‘. . . He shows himself intimately in my soul. I recognise him there, and I recognise him as present in every creature, in everything that has *being* . . . be it good or bad.’ And then a little later she continues ‘But in another way very special and quite different from the preceding, and carrying a delight quite other to what the former produced, does he come: he gathers me wholly to himself . . . and the soul is filled with a greater knowledge

of God than ever I would have thought possible, with such limpid certitude, such depth of vision as wholly to outpace the soul's capacity to measure and assay. And afterwards it is not possible to reflect intelligibly on anything that passed concerning God except only that it was given by God to the soul to be caught up in him.'

There is a passage in *The Memorial* which recalls the account Saint Gregory gives of a vision accorded to Saint Benedict. 'I would show you somewhat of my power' are the words with which this mystical experience opened. 'And at once', Angela continues, 'the eyes of my soul were opened and I saw a divine plenitude of being wherein the whole world lay open before me, the seas and beyond and above, and the vast spaces of the sea and all things. And yet in all this I could see nothing but only divine power, and that in a manner words cannot express. And in excess of admiration my soul cried out: *This world is big with God*; and I saw the whole world as a little thing, the depths and the sea, and below and beyond; all as a little thing; and God's power abounding and filling everything.'

And here, to end with, is a passage on the soul which reads like something from the *Revelations* of Mother Julian of Norwich: 'One time on the feast of Saint Mary of Candlemas when the blessed candles were being distributed in memory of the Son of God in the Temple, there came to my soul this manifestation of herself: the soul saw herself to be of such nobility and grandeur as to baffle any powers of understanding my mind might possess. I could not conceive how even the souls in heaven could reach such magnificence. . . .'

#### THE PASSION

Like Saint Francis, Angela—face to face with the Passion—is always torn between two moods, sorrow and joy. When, on one occasion, she was watching a representation of the Passion—in an open court, apparently, adjoining the Church of the Portiuncula—she felt she would be constrained to tears; but, on the contrary, 'I was wonderfully carried forward and filled with such overwhelming joy that I lost all power of speech and swooned away. It was after this that I



began to enjoy an ineffable sense of God.' Elsewhere she tells us how sorrow over the Passion became a rare experience and how 'the thought of the Passion has become a highway for me, and a guide showing me how to act'.

The Passion figures very largely indeed in *The Memorial* and in the teaching elsewhere of Blessed Angela. Only a few features of her attitude towards our Lord's sufferings can be noted here. To begin with it is far removed from that intense concentration on the physical sufferings of Christ which is so marked a characteristic of certain later mystics. We find in Angela no harrowing and meticulous elaboration of detail, but much on the *interior* sufferings of Christ. In one of her *Instructions* she outlines the sorrows of Jesus, and they are all *interior*: his divine wisdom and so the knowledge of all that awaited him, his compassion for the human race and for himself as carrying its sorrows, his compassion for his Mother, and for his apostles and disciples. Later she speaks of the five daggers that struck him; the nails as such come last on her list; the others are given as the obstinate unbelief of the Jews, their venomous words, their biting thoughts, their success.

But this must not be thought to imply that her own *compassion* was not very real; indeed it was poignant. 'One Holy Thursday', she recalls, 'I was meditating on the death of the Incarnate Son of God. I was trying to empty my mind of every alien thought that my soul might be wholly wrapt up in the memory of the passion and death of the Son of God. I was busily striving, and anxious how best to rid my mind completely of all else that would fill it, how best to keep the memory of this passion and death of the Son of God, when suddenly, as I was thus busy and alert, a divine voice uttered these words in my soul: *My love for thee was no pastime*. The words seemed to strike me with a mortal wound of sorrow. The eyes of my soul were opened at once, and I saw the truth of the words he uttered. I saw what this love had accomplished, all that the Son of God out of love had done. I saw all that this God and Man—martyred by love unspeakably tender—had suffered in life and in death . . . and in myself I saw how different everything was, how my love for him was all comedy and hollow. This was mortal

pain to me: I felt I must die under it, so intolerable was the grief. And then came more words that only added to my grief . . . *My service of you*, he said, *was no makebelief*; and then: *I felt for you, but not from afar*. At this my mortal pain and grief but grew the greater . . . and whilst I pondered deeply on the words, *I felt for you but not from afar*, he said, *I am more intimately in your soul than is your soul to itself.*'



## POINT OF VIEW

### THE SAINTS OR GOD

**W**HEN at the Last Supper our Lord proclaimed to the first Christian saints, his disciples—and to all mankind, potential saints—‘I am the vine; you the branches’, (John 15, 5), he made clear simply and briefly what is our actual source and quality of being, in that the quality of the vine-root—the source—is also the quality of the branch that comes forth from it, the same life sap, differing in degree but of similar essence; St John puts it this way: ‘In this we know that we abide in him and he in us: because he hath given us of his spirit’. (1 John 4, 13).

Christ also told us what is our basic function and purpose when he said, ‘He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit’; thus, since the fruit is qualified by the nature of its source—in this case the Holy Spirit—it is apparent that we, the branches, are expected to bear much spiritual fruit, as represented by what we express, manifest, and give out in our lives as nourishment for such as partake of it, or are affected by it. St Ambrose describes it neatly in his *Book on Holy Joseph* when—speaking of those lavishly fruit-bearing branches, the saints—he says: ‘The lives of the saints are a model for the lives of the rest of men . . . following in their footsteps we may tread, as it were, that path of innocence which is opened to us by their virtue’.