

7. Angela of Foligno

The profundity of Angela's mystical life, the extraordinary phenomena she experienced, her penetrating intelligence, her exceptional descriptive skill, the interaction of her visionary and apostolic mysticism, and her far-reaching influence during her lifetime right down to the present day account for her being called the apotheosis, even "another evangelist," of the Christian mystical tradition - as significant for mysticism as Dante is for poetry. Angela of Foligno is paradigmatic of what Bernard McGinn, the scholar of the western mystical tradition, calls the "new mysticism." Although in line with the earlier monastic mysticism, the new mysticism arose in part because of the "conversation" between men and women, the dialogue between Latin and the vernacular, and a new attitude toward cloister and the world.

I. Introduction and Biography

In God, therefore, do I understand and possess all truth that is in heaven and earth and hell and in all creatures; and so great is the truth and the certainty that were the whole world to declare the contrary, I would not believe it, yes, I should mock at it. - Angela of Foligno, *An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 281.

Angela of Foligno: Called the apotheosis of the Christian mystical tradition. Paradigmatic of the "new mysticism." Conversation between men and women, the dialogue between Latin and the vernacular, and a new attitude toward cloister and the world. Violent ecstasies and excessive asceticism. Embodied visionary and non-visionary experiences. Passionate, and often highly erotic, love of God and Christ. Mysticism in the courtly mode. Mystical annihilation and the mutual yearning of both the soul and God in a union of indistinct identity. Expressed in hagiographies and auto-hagiographies.

Brief Biography: Born into wealth, married, had children. Ashamed of her imperfect Christian life. Conversion due to a dream involving Francis of Assisi. Prayed for the death of her husband, sons, and mother. Became a member of Third Order of Franciscans. A bit-by-bit mystic.

II. Her Works: Angela's two-part work, *Liber de Vere Fidelium Experientia*: She claimed that her message came directly from God. One of the earliest, longest, and most complex of auto-hagiographies. The premier text of all Franciscan women mystics. Highly erotic language. Angela has been portrayed as a "swooning, bedded mystic." Her thirty-stage schema of mystical ascent both unusual and confusing. First sixteen stages are primarily purgative and emphasize going naked to the cross. The next six stages are experiences of union.

The remaining seven focus on a union beyond expression, (i) Describes three transformations.

III. Her Mysticism: She viewed and reinterpreted the traditional western mystical tradition in light of Francis of Assisi. Assured by Jesus that she would receive both the cross and God's love within her. Jesus appears to her and emphasizes that he came to serve her. Jesus then revealed Francis to her and said "I want him to serve you." Remarkable Christocentric mysticism. Sacramental confession and the Eucharist often sparked visions. Christ revealed to her that he suffered and died especially for her. Christ assures her that she will feel his presence. Christ gave her a ring of mystical betrothal. Numerous times she felt her soul entering into Christ's pierced side. Holy Saturday experience of intimacy with Christ. During one Sunday Mass, Angela ecstatically felt herself absorbed "into the fathomless depths of God." Angela's crucifixion with the crucified Christ, deified and christified her, an experience that became a "continuous and uninterrupted" state.

On three separate occasions, Angela found herself "standing or lying in the Trinity" and saw the "all good" in darkness. This darkness drew her out of everything, including her devotion to Jesus. However, when this experience ceased, she saw Christ who sometimes said to her: "you are I and I am you."

IV. Later Mysticism: Newer visions: "I am in the God-Man much more than in the other vision of seeing God with darkness. I am in the God-Man almost continually." - Angela of Foligno: Complete Works, trans. Paul Lachance, OFM (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 205.

She came to understand not only how God dwells in the soul but also how God is present in all creatures. Experienced the triune immanence as a permanent state and attaining, apatheia, the psychosomatic wholeness extolled by the Desert Fathers. God then drew her totally into the Trinitarian "abyss" and bestowed upon her "that good which the saints enjoy in eternal life." Given "thousands of times."

She claimed to know how the scriptures came to be written. In her view, however, the least saint in heaven has more of what can be given to any soul before death. Concomitant with this experience, she discovered in her soul "a chamber into which there enters [only] that greatest good. Emphasis that "nothing at all can be said or babbled" about the ineffable wonders the Trinity produced in her soul. The resurrection of past vices - some that she never knew existed. Paradoxically, countervailing virtues were also given that bestowed psychological impeccability.

Bouts of angry rage, demonic assault, self-flagellation, horrifying darkness, and temptations to despair tormented her. Most bitter of all, however, was the pain of God's absence. Her rich and nuanced descriptions of the dark night of the spirit have resonated right down to the present day.

V. Summary: Angela enjoyed a wide reputation as a spiritual director and teacher. The guiding light for a large group of people in Italy and elsewhere. Designated "teacher of theologians" by the many theologians and priests who sought her advice. Converted the brilliant Umberto da Casale.

Although her spirituality and mysticism are distinctively Franciscan, her emphasis on the Trinity, her powerful apophaticism, and her view of both God and the soul as an abyss depart from this tradition. Rightly remembered as the "nightingale of the ineffable." God had been correct when he told her: "my love for you has not been a hoax." Angela of Foligno in Harvey D. Egan, *Soundings in the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 140.

Reflection Questions

1. What is significant about the Christocentric nature of Angela of Foligno's mysticism?
2. From the prayer for the death of her family members to the erotic nature of her writing, some find Angela of Foligno difficult or even troubling. At the same time, she was referred to as a "teacher of theologians." What do you make of this often paradoxical individual?