

27. January 2022

Saint Angela Merici and true love

1 Pet 4:7b-11

Reading for the memorial of St. Angela Merici

Keep your minds calm and sober for prayer. Above all preserve an intense love for each other, since love covers over many a sin. Welcome each other into your houses without grumbling. Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all these varied graces of God, put it at the service of others. If anyone is a speaker, let it be as the words of God, if anyone serves, let it be as in strength granted by God; so that in everything God may receive the glory, through Jesus Christ, since to him alone belong all glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

Love is rightly a recurring theme, for it is the essence of our existence. Without God's love we would not live at all, and this same love that called us into existence also redeems and sanctifies us.

St. Angela Merici made this love the foundation of her service in education. On 25 November 1535 she founded the "Company of St. Ursula", which can be called the first secular institute in the Church. Its members were to live in their families without religious habit, following the evangelical counsels and devoting themselves to the education of female youth. Thus, a new flower was born in the garden of the Church: a community with a more secular way of life, without, however, neglecting the discipline of a religious order. St. Angela took special care of girls from the lower classes. To her sisters in community she addressed these beautiful words:

"I beg you to strive to win over your girls with love. Lead them with a gentle and sweet hand, not with imperiousness or harshness. This is what it means to set souls free: when the weak and timid are encouraged, when they are corrected with love, when all are preached to by example and told of the great bliss that awaits them up there."

Love is an attitude of benevolence; that is, one wants the best for the other person. However, good will is not enough; we must also know how to distinguish what is really best for them.

St. Angela had understood that girls from the poorest social strata were often treated harshly and that they lacked precisely that love which is so important for them to be able to truly live. Through the love that the sisters gave them, the girls were to

encounter the goodness of God and certainly also to heal some wounds.

One gladly allows oneself to be guided by a gentle and sweet hand, and if this is true on a general level, it is all the more true for the delicate souls of the girls. Such an upbringing, permeated by gentleness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, will deeply mark the soul. Harshness, on the other hand, which is not to be equated with firmness, always runs the risk of arousing fear in the other person, so that it does not give rise to the freedom of a soul such as St. Angela wanted to awaken.

When she speaks of "encouraging the weak and timid", these words of Sacred Scripture come to mind: *"Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees and say to the faint-hearted, 'Be strong! Do not be afraid. Here is your God...'" (Is 35:3-4a).*

It is also very important that, in the phrase quoted above, Saint Angela refers both to her own example and to the happiness that awaits us in eternity. She wanted the lives of the Sisters to reflect what they proclaimed. In fact, the example of their lives is reliable and represents a kind of "first evangelisation", even without words. The vision of eternity and of the joy that awaits us there, which St. Angela wanted to insert into her work of education, also gives the strength to better endure the tribulations of earthly life.

"Above all preserve an intense love for each other ", the Apostle Peter tells us. Not infrequently we have to struggle to remain in this love, especially when our neighbour has certain peculiarities that are not agreeable to us. In such a situation, it helps to remember that it is a love of benevolence and not necessarily a feeling. This love of benevolence wants salvation for the other person, whatever is truly good for him or her. One can decide for it with the will, and examine before the Lord what is right in the given situation.

It will be easier to acquire this attitude of benevolence towards the other person when our heart has been purified, when the Holy Spirit has taken the reins, so to speak, and leads us again and again towards the good. Even when our will has decided for the good, we need the concrete guidance of the Holy Spirit to show us what this good consists of in each situation, and his strength to put it into practice.

The Apostle's statement that "love covers a multitude of sins" is comforting. We can apply this in relation to the other person, in that love will lead us not to focus on their sins and not to hold against them those for which they have already repented. But we can also apply it in relation to our own sins. In the "Message of God the Father" to Sister Eugenia Ravasio, He tells us these consoling words:

"My children, let us make a comparison, and you will be assured of My love. For

Me, your sins are like iron, and your acts of love like gold. If you gave Me a thousand pounds of iron, it would not be like giving Me just ten pounds of gold! In other words, with just a little love, great iniquities can be expiated."

If we strive for true love, we will have embarked on the best path...