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HSWS 380: Saints, Sinners, and Harlots

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Saint Angela of Foligno: Secular Widow to Divine Spouse

Somatic penitence as imitation of Christ's own suffering was a common practice for many medieval holy women. In a largely male dominated domain, religious females were discouraged from display of their bodily connection to Christ as they were deemed the "morally weaker sex"<sup>1</sup>. Practices adopted by these women ranged from fasting, flogging, and other various acts of self-harm to the realm of mysticism and visions. This female phenomenon employed the body as a vessel for physical portrayal of the spiritual transformation which took place inside the minds, and presumably, the souls of these women. It is imaginable then, that each woman's journey unfolded in variable ways depending upon what needed "cleansing" within them- a cleansing believed necessary for the consummation of their ultimate religious conversion. A notion of sin that could have resulted, in part at least, from the "general suspicion of the female character"<sup>2</sup> imposed by males at the time. For these reasons, the upbringing, social class, familial context, and sexual experience of each woman synergized the shape of the path upon which their spiritual journey would unfold. Saint Angela of Foligno's conversion, consisting of immense mysticism in visions and her unapologetic display of emotion and desire to become physically near to Christ, is a particularly fascinating voyage to study from her quasi-autobiographical, *Memoriale*.

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 86.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

It is worth emphasizing the *quasi*-autobiographical nature of what we know of Angela's life, both secular and pious. Angela, likely legibly capable but unable to write<sup>3</sup>, dictated her story to her confessor, the man speculated to be either her uncle or cousin, between 1292 and 1296<sup>4</sup>. It is largely through the lens this man known as "Friar A", a Franciscan friar, that we know Angela. The collaborative biography, originally titled *Il Libro della Beata Angela da Foligno*, underwent further bowdlerization by the Franciscan order after Angela's death- eventually evolving into what we know today as her *Memoriale*. The censorship enacted by Brother Arnaldo, once humiliated by and ashamed of her, and by other religious men, with intention to prevent radical inspiration and unrest within her cult following- namely women, is undeniable. Despite the male sieve through which Angela's words were transmitted, medieval scholar, Dino S. Cervigni, re-ascribes faith in the text we have today. Cervigni argues that "an element characteristic of every mystical experience is the mystic's radical passivity"<sup>5</sup>; Meaning that "God is always the principal agent, while the creature [Angela in this case] assumes a secondary role"<sup>6</sup>. It is with this sentiment, that we envision Saint Angela as a "teacher and mother who [put] spiritual food into the mouth of her pupil son [Friar A]"<sup>7</sup>, with faith that the information we have today is both illustrative and factual.

Born in 1248 in the Umbrian commune of Foligno, Italy, Angela was raised in an affluent family. She enjoyed an indulgent lifestyle and is thought to have taken full advantage of this life of abundance until about 1285, the year in which she embarked upon what scholars have labeled

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<sup>3</sup> Sasha Snowden, "Deconstructing Dualisms: The Unifying Nature of Emotional and Physical Suffering in Angela of Foligno's Memorial", *Magistra* 20(2): (2014), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Dino S. Cervigni, "Angela da Foligno's Memoriale: The Male Scribe, the Female Voice, and the Other", *Italica* 82(3-4): (2005), 339.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 340.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 340.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 343.

an “extensive and progressive conversion”<sup>8</sup>. Angela at this time is noted to have become “astutely aware”<sup>9</sup> of the sin within her life of indulgence and began to seek consolation and forgiveness. Geographically displaced only miles from Assisi, the Franciscan capital of all of Italy, Angela confessed and prayed to Saint Francis. By 1288, it seemed that her request to commence upon a penitential journey to conversion had been officially granted<sup>10</sup>: Angela’s husband, sons, and mother had all suddenly died. What most today would deem an immense trauma, Angela saw as God-given. Up until this time, Angela was a wife, mother, and caretaker of her own mother; She now had been granted the divine freedom to pursue the life of religious devotion that she had been craving. In 1291, Angela entered the Third Order of Franciscan Penance<sup>11</sup>, marking the dawn of her conversion.

Angela’s path was one “full of grief... penitence, and progressive adoption of a life of poverty”<sup>12</sup>, as was the Franciscan way. Most notable, however, were her ascetic practices- largely founded upon the notion of *suffering*. The self-imposed suffering that Angela underwent paralleled that of Christ as God incarnated and St. Francis’s own personally afflicted tribulation. Both figures served as the male muses whom inspired the suffering that she would inflict upon herself in order to attain a certain physical proximity to Christ. Furthermore, images of the Passion of Christ and a suffering Francis would further stimulate the visions which frequented Angela as a highly receptive and mystical woman. Saint Angela’s most notable physically-motivated ascetic practices and moments of mysticism included her bodily ingestion of filth and

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<sup>8</sup> Snowden, “Deconstructing Dualisms”, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Emily A. Holmes, *Flesh Made Word: Medieval Women Mystics, Writing, and the Incarnation* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2013), 90.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 7.

her male oriented and often highly sexualized, visions respectively. The latter tendency presented itself most acutely during her “fit” in Assisi.

Angela’s “scandalous and vociferous ecstasy at the entrance of St. Francis’ Basilica in Assisi”<sup>13</sup>, as Brother Arnaldo recorded it, is archetypal support for our knowledge of her sensitivity to suffering images of her male role models: Upon her encounter with a stained glass window in the lower basilica of San Francesco, portraying a suffering St. Francis supported by Christ himself (see figure 1), Angela broke into an unapologetic and equally hysteric screaming fit. During the pilgrimage prior to her arrival in Assisi, Angela is known to have been arguably “primed” in a variety of ways for such an experience of intense emotion. Physiologically, Angela, by this time a participant in the practice of penitential fasting, endeavored a long day’s travel in the heat of the central Italian summer with little to likely no food. Psychologically, Angela is also noted to have experienced a “wooing by the Holy Spirit”<sup>14</sup> in the form of a voice speaking to her during the pilgrimage prior to her arrival in Assisi. Historical and cultural anthropologist, Monique Scheer, would attribute this combination of physical and emotional factors to such a mental break. The scholar’s case for what she labels, a self-induced “emotional practice”<sup>15</sup>, involves the theory that the presence of the sin for which Angela sought to rid herself of on the inside, made tangible appearances in the physical world. Such appearances would present themselves in the form of Angela’s physical suffering and in this case, obvious emotional stress. Furthermore, Scheer argues that Angela’s emotional and physical suffering developed a

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<sup>13</sup> Cervigni, “Angela da Foligno’s Memoriale”, 341.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth A. Petroff, *Body & Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Snowden, “Deconstructing Dualisms”, 8.

cyclic relationship where the intensity of one form of asceticism would induce a bout of the other.

For Angela, “to be near the discomfort and pain of the diseased and ill was to be near Christ and [in turn] partake in his suffering”<sup>16</sup>. We know from her *Memoriale* that Angela especially sought for Christ and His suffering within those in need: “‘Let’s go’, I told [my companion], ‘to the hospital and perhaps we will be able to find Christ there among the poor, the suffering, and the afflicted.’”<sup>17</sup> Angela’s hunger for vicinity to the sick eventually crossed bounds into radical nearness upon her adoption of the repulsive (by most standards) practice of ingesting bodily filth. Angela narrates an anecdote of such an “[administration] to herself a type of communion in which the filth of disease from a leper’s body becomes her Eucharistic meal”<sup>18</sup>: She and her female companion, Masazuola, visited a leprosarium, just outside the walls of Foligno, where Angela tended to a specific unnamed male leper<sup>19</sup>. Their afternoon of charitable care would conclude with the ingestion of the bloody wash water used to bathe the male leper and was polished off with Angela’s willful consumption of the scab from his wounds, all the while drawing bizarre parallels between him and Christ:

“Then we drank the very water with which we had washed him. And the drink was so sweet that, all the way home, we tasted its sweetness and it was as if we had received Holy Communion. As a small scale of the leper’s sores was stuck in my throat, I tried to

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<sup>16</sup> Molly Morrison, “Ingesting Bodily Filth: Defilement in the Spirituality of Angela of Foligno”, *Romance Quarterly* 50(30): 204-216, (2003), 204.

<sup>17</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Il libro della Beata Angela & Foligno*, (Rome: Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1985), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Morrison, “Ingesting Bodily Filth”, 204-205.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

swallow it. My conscience would not let me spit it out, just as if I had received Holy Communion.<sup>20</sup>

It is possible to postulate Angela's underlying psychological stimulus for adopting such a practice due to what is known regarding the stigmas which condemned lepers during the Middle Ages. Leprosy was associated with "moral defilement, depravity, and perversion"<sup>21</sup>. Additionally, "medieval thought understood it as divine punishment for sinfulness"<sup>22</sup>. The sins for which lepers were punished by their condition were like the personal sin which Angela began to detest while still immersed in her once indulgent lifestyle. Angela's charitable and, more notably, her abnormal Eucharistic association with the lepers, served to align herself with the sinful. It is clear that her motivation for doing so likely stemmed from a psychological space not full of pride or confidence of any sort, but from one brimming with images of low self-worth, even of self-loathing:

"... the more a soul is laid low, abased, impoverished, and thoroughly humiliated, the more it is prepared, purged, and purified for a greater elevation. For the extent of the soul's elevation corresponds to the extent of its humiliation and abasement..."<sup>23</sup>

She aligned herself with the culmination of identities which loomed from her previously secular and indulgent lifestyle. The branded wickedness of such habits was bolstered by male criticism of the time as women like Angela were often reminded of the virile theory that the "sins or lapses of women attributed to their inner faults"<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Il libro*, 163.

<sup>21</sup> Morrison, "Ingesting Bodily Filth", 206.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 206.

<sup>23</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Il libro*, 202.

<sup>24</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 86.

Perhaps more compelling than Angela's unmistakable low sense of self was her overarching motivation for abusing herself in these ways. Angela was a young woman, married at age twenty, who was raised to remain in a time in history when both secularly and religiously male-imposed judgment upon females was unavoidable. It is understandable, then, the considerable male presence which followed Angela down her path to piety. She undoubtedly had a somatic spiritual experience distinct from that of her sisters, particularly from those never married. Angela's words and intentions as stated in her even censored *Memoriale*, are difficult to overlook for their, at times, overwhelmingly graphic and sexual orientation. Angela's additional commentary upon the emotional and visceral sensation which she experienced upon ingestion of the residual leprous material provides incite to this notion:

“It seemed to me that I saw and drank the blood, which was freshly flowing from his side. His intention was to make me understand that by this blood he would cleanse me. And at this I began to experience a great joy”<sup>25</sup>.

The “he” from whose side Angela drank and whose intention to “cleanse” her which sent her into a moment of immense pleasure, is, of course, Jesus Christ. Whether consciously or subconsciously driven, Angela's unmistakably sexual insinuations are apparent in other realms of her path to purity. Further insight to this carnality of her psyche is apparent within Angela's description of her ascetic practice of giving up food as a “temptation”<sup>26</sup>. The evident sexual worldliness that Angela attained while partaking in the pleasures of sharing a marriage bed undoubtedly influenced and arguably *drove* the means to the end which she sought through a life of religious devotion: a marriage with Christ.

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<sup>25</sup> Angela of Foligno, *Il libro*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 86.

Like most prominent religious or spiritual figures within history, the climactic moment of one's spiritual pilgrimage results at the time of obtainment of comprehensive purification, enlightenment, summation of good works, etc., Similar in theory was the case for Angela. However, her most sacred moment was the summation of her numerous attempts to physically connect with Christ- all of which resulted in her ultimate "marital union" with Him. When Angela received vision of her death, she witnessed her "soul washed in the blood of Christ"<sup>27</sup>. Christ, as her "divine spouse... compared her to a bride in preparation for her wedding". Christ, too, as reported by Angela, and as the "External Word... touched and entered her own body"<sup>28</sup>. In her deathbed marital vision, God told Angela that the Jesus is the "Word who wished to incarnate himself for [her]" and that "the Word came to [her] and went all through [her], touched all of [her], and embraced [her]"<sup>29</sup>. To Angela, no such image was as pleasing. In this moment, every effort which she made to become physically connected with Christ had been sanctified- noticed and approved by her divine Beloved and they would finally wed.

Each instance of suffering within Angela's own body was a step made closer to God. Christ as representative of the "union of word and flesh"<sup>30</sup> bridged the gap of the unknowability of the deity to which she had committed her life: Jesus' suffering became Angela's. It was a suffering that she so intensely believed had been gifted to her as the salvation of her own soul, a soul which she so clearly deemed as wretched. This channeling of Christ through "self-vilification and debasement"<sup>31</sup> constituted the connection between Angela and Christ that eventually led to their "marriage" at her death. Angela "physically" united with Christ through

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<sup>27</sup> Holmes, *Flesh Made Word*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 87-88.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Holmes, *Flesh Made Word*, 90.

<sup>31</sup> Morrison, "Ingesting Bodily Filth", 204.



injury to her own body the way that Christ was Eucharistically broken and consumed. As she walked this path of penitential asceticism, the status of her relationship to Christ was affirmed by the content of her visions. When Angela received the vision of her “death/bridal bed”<sup>32</sup>, she knew that her “intense desire to unite herself physically with Christ”<sup>33</sup> had finally been fulfilled. By 1309, blessed Angela had transcended a secular marriage, attained a marital union with Christ, and had officially entered the kingdom of God- partaking in the most divine matrimony in death. In 2013, blessed Angela was canonized as Saint Angela, “teacher of theologians”, by Papa Francesco who is likely the first powerful male religious figure to recognize the piety of her efforts and the ultimate humanity of her path.

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<sup>32</sup> Holmes, *Flesh Made Word*, 88.

<sup>33</sup> Morrison, “Ingesting Bodily Filth”, 204.

Figures

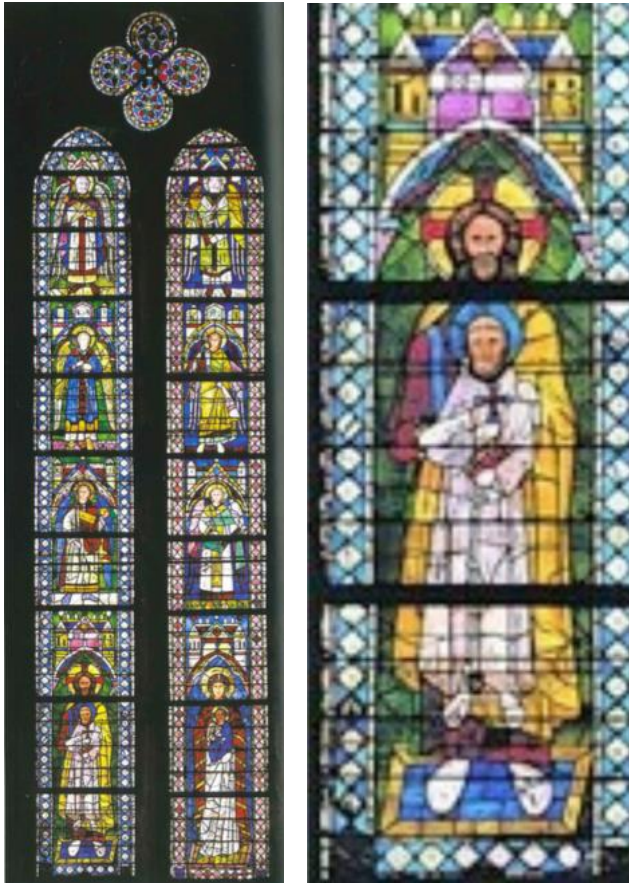


Figure 1: Angel Stained Glass Window, 1270s, Upper Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi.  
(Source: Professor Adrian Hoch)

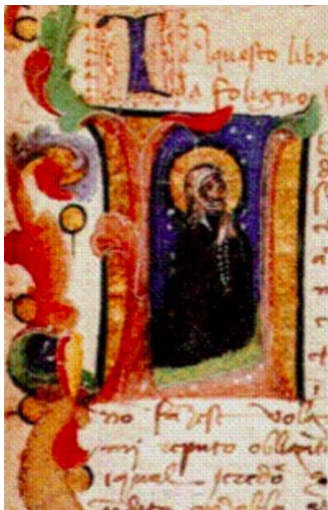


Figure 2 (Angela): Illuminated manuscript, St. Angela of Foligno kneeling in prayer, *late 14th-early 15th century*  
(Source: Professor Adrian Hoch)

## References

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