

Heartbeats



The Company of St. Angela in the 21st Century

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During October we continue to reflect on Angela's pilgrim spirit, focusing on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land and on the risk-taking this and her other pilgrimages required. This month we also celebrate the feast of St. Ursula, chosen by Angela Merici as the patron of the Company of St. Ursula. She, too, was a pilgrim wishing to go to both Rome and the Holy Land.

Both of these women pilgrims were risk-takers as they chose to undertake these dangerous and uncertain journeys. On her pilgrimage Ursula and her companions paid the ultimate price of martyrdom. During her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Angela experienced blindness making her unable to see the holy places with her eyes.

We are blessed to have a sharing by Mary Jacqueline Pratt, o.s.u. on her experience of sightlessness. Her reflection certainly gives us a deeper insight into Angela's experience of blindness, but also shows how we can choose to focus on the blessings and grow through challenges.



INSIGHTLESS

The invitation to reflect with you about my experience of blindness has led me to question Angela about hers: "Did you have any warning this was going to happen? What did you feel when you realized you were just beginning the journey of a lifetime with such a limitation? Did you think this blindness would be forever? How did you handle your disappointment and reliance on others?"

After being with Angela and those questions to her, I realized they are questions I ask myself, in one way or another, quite often! At the many stages of development in my journey with genetic glaucoma, my responses have been quite different.

Now, as I reflect on my experience of sightlessness, I am clearer about how being sightless can lead to greater insight, as well as deep appreciation for other senses. While in some graduate courses for my last bit of studying for certification in spiritual direction, a professor asked at the end of a paper written on loss: "What is the blessing in the loss?" Initially, my thought was that the professor was not serious – how could he be in the face of such loss? Many years later and many insights later, I do find blessing in the loss and I choose to focus on the blessings.

When I am with someone in a direction session, or at any other time, it is blessing not to be distracted by how a person looks, what one might be wearing, or even body language. Listening more intently to someone gives that person freedom to tell his/her story.

We were reminded in last month's issue about Angela's Pilgrim Staff or walking stick. I, too, have a walking stick and it is very functional. With that stick I can know if there is anything in my path for the next two steps, so I proceed just two steps at a time! That experience has taught me important lessons about life and discernment. It is truly a blessing to realize that I don't have to know too far ahead of time what is before me. Not only am I still learning to trust that stick, but, also, to trust others as they sometimes lead me from place to place. Everyone does it differently, so I'm learning to trust the person guiding me.

Taste and touch are much appreciated senses, too. In an unfamiliar place, the stick doesn't tell me exactly what is there, but touching and feeling guide me through identifying furniture and doorways. Taste often provides some humor. Let another fill

your plate, tell you approximately where things are, then eat from that plate. Frequently, the fork or spoon doesn't quite hit the mark, so it's a guessing game as to what I'm eating. And, a good thing – taste helps me avoid those dreaded mushrooms!

Then, there is the sense of smell. My olfactory glands are well-developed. Sometimes, that is nearly as good a guide as my stick. When walking through a store, it is easy to identify the department we're in simply by smell. Another blessing!

Above all, the most important thing I've learned is what Angela shared with Agostino Gallo in speaking of her journey to the Holy Land, "being guided from one to another of these Holy Places, she saw them always with the eyes of the soul, just as if she had seen them with her bodily eyes." Yes, for Angela, for me, and for so many others, being sightless blesses us with another way of seeing.



Photo: Tamino Petelinsek

Mosaic, Chapel of the Ursuline Convent in Ljubljana, Slovenia, Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik and Centro Aletti (2009)

Angela Merici is shown here on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land when she experienced blindness. She is shown with her pilgrim's staff and is accompanied by Mary, the Mother of God. In a homily at the Mass of Thanksgiving when the mosaic was completed, the main artist, Fr. Marko Rupnik, said, "And it is just at this time that she [Angela] had the clearest knowledge of the will of God for herself and the women who followed her. It is good... to remember that Angela received this knowledge just at a time when she was blind. God speaks in a different way than we would imagine: not according to our logic and human way, but in the depth of faith and love for God."

For Pondering:

1. What speaks to me now regarding the experience of blindness—Angela's and/or Mary Jacqueline's?
2. What are the situations in my life now in which I feel called to focus on the blessings and grow through the challenges?

Seeing Darkly

*What was it there
On Candia, Angela,
That took your sight,
That sent you blind
Upon your pilgrimage?*

*Perhaps it was the vegetation,
The pollen in the Cretan air,
Perhaps some well-wisher
Served you a Cretan delicacy
That sent your body
Into warfare, blinding you.*

*If I had been there,
I would certainly have sought out the cause.
What a devastating thing,
That sightlessness!
Just when you had come to see!*

*I find my own situation
Not unlike yours.
Indeed, all my knowing
Seems to come that way.*

*Always being on pilgrimage,
And being blind, and groping
To rely on inner sight—
Being led from one place to the next,
Only sensing unfamiliar shapes
In shrouded light—and---
Not seeing clearly,
Following the lead of strangers,
Unknown guides, along the way.*

*Unlike your blindness,
Mine persists.
When I shall see truly,
I'll know I have arrived
In the New Jerusalem!*

Vivienne Armstead, osu
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