

Heartbeats

The Company of St. Angela in the 21st Century

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Keeping Faith and Hope Alive

As *Heartbeats* continues to explore “St. Angela Merici, A Woman of Faith and Hope,” we are guided by Angela’s words in the Prologue to her Counsels, “Have hope and firm faith in God who will help you in everything.” First responders have had a unique challenge during the pandemic to find ways to keep faith and hope alive. We invited alumnae from several of our Ursuline schools to share their stories. We are happy to share what we received. We also wish all of our readers a Happy Feast of St. Ursula on October 21! We honor her as a woman who was for St. Angela a living witness of “hope and firm faith in God.”

Emily Merten (Ursuline Academy, St. Louis ‘15) was just ten weeks into her orientation as a new ICU nurse when her first COVID-19 patient was admitted. Emily “looked around the unit that day, seeing patient after patient coming in with the same symptoms needing to be intubated and realized our lives had changed.” Her orientation period quickly came to an end and she began caring for patients on her own. In the months that have followed, Emily has seen more loss and loneliness than she could ever imagine. One of the hardest moments was when her first patient died. This patient was young and relatively healthy but unfortunately, after weeks of being intubated, the patient did not make it. This was especially hard for Emily because this particular patient was a “healthier” person compared to some of the other patients who survived and this person had been so fearful moments before being intubated. Emily and her colleagues frequently question why this patient did not make it. “Trusting that God has a plan, even if it does not make sense, is one of the only ways to make it through those tough days. Knowing you are the last person to comfort patients before they are intubated and

sedated, or even being the only person with them as they pass away, is a true gift, even if it is difficult.” For Emily the faith and hope to persevere are fostered by the gratitude



Emily Merten

she experiences from family members. It gives her peace of mind to know she is making a difference. As Emily reflects on her Ursuline education and how to keep St. Angela’s words of faith and hope central in her life, she believes, “Ursuline taught me the importance of *Serviam* and I could not think of a better way to serve the world during such an uncertain time. With faith and the support of friends and family, I have had an immeasurable amount of growth during this difficult time and learned more than I could have ever imagined about faith and hope during challenging times.”

Prayer in Honor of Healthcare Workers

Healing God, conscious that caregivers reflect your compassion, we honor them and pray for them in a special way today. We ask you to hold them in your tenderness, give them an assurance of your spirit of strength as they minister to your people, and be for them a sign and source of hope. Amen.

(Catholic Hospital Association. Used with permission.)

Anne Cerniglia (Ursuline Academy, New Orleans '08), a nurse at a Catholic hospital in Baton Rouge, LA, was in the first group of volunteers to move to the COVID unit when the pandemic began. She credits her time at Ursuline with instilling in her a strong belief in *Serviam*, "I will serve," that when the need was presented to her she knew she must help. Working in the COVID ICU has challenged Anne in multiple ways: watching patients die every day and knowing there was nothing more she could do yet struggling with the belief she didn't do enough; living in isolation and keeping hope alive even in the face of PTSD from all she was experiencing; and working to keep her faith



Anne Cerniglia

greater than her fear and anxiety. Anne has a "pep talk" from God each day as she walks into work which reminds her that "God's got this" and to "let go and let God." As she enters and exits the unit, she passes the "COVID-19 Conquerors" wall where a cross represents every person who has survived COVID-19. This reminder, that she is part of helping so many people (almost 1000 as of the writing of this article), has helped her keep hope alive. She prays the "Our Father" for her patients as she leaves their rooms and washes her hands not only to remind her to wash for 20 seconds but to continue her conversation with God and pray for the patient she was just serving. This communication with God gives her the right words to say to patients when they are at their lowest and need the motivation to keep living, to the family of a patient when they are only able to say good-bye virtually to their loved one, and even to a fellow nurse who may be in a particularly low place. Anne has followed St. Angela's words by keeping faith and hope alive even in these most challenging times.

Rachel Essmyer (Ursuline Academy, St. Louis '14) is the activities director at a senior living center in St. Charles, Missouri. For Rachel, her faith was formed as she grew up in a family that valued Catholic education. It is through this family influence that she feels she grows closer to Christ. Rachel calls on this relationship with Christ to keep her faith and hope alive in these challenging times. Her faith has given her the ability to realize she must give over her worries and anxieties to God. That trust has kept her grounded and allowed her to better care for herself and the residents she serves. "My goal each day is to bring a smile to their faces (even under their masks). I will do whatever it takes to make that happen. When I walk in each day, it's not about me. It's about making their day special and that's enough motivation for me!" Rachel works to keep hope alive



Rachel Essmyer with Nita, who is the niece of Sr. Eugene Brewer, OSU

even in the hardest days. "There was a day when a man passed away (natural causes, not COVID-related) and I just broke down. Thinking about how he had not had a hug in the past three months broke my heart. Family members cannot come into the community, so who knows when he last saw them. It really made me think that this virus isn't the only danger right now, but overall isolation can have a detrimental impact on these people." Instead of focusing on that negative thought, Rachel keeps faith and hope alive by remembering that she is one of the few people that is allowed contact with the residents at this time and it is up to her to make a difference while she is there. While her Ursuline education taught her the value of *Serviam*, Rachel now realizes, "serving others and God is the purpose of my life and in my field, I am so grateful that I can do this every single day."

Questions for Reflection

How has your faith carried you through these challenging and uncertain times?

What helps you keep hope alive?