

Angela insisted any woman entering her company did so of her own free will and because she wants to serve God.

On November 25, 1534, Angela's company was established. The Rule would be the first drawn up for women by a woman in the Western Church. Angela was a Catholic innovator, forming The Company of St. Ursula as an order of religious sisters; not enclosed behind cloistered convents, but sent out into the world for the work of Christian instruction and charitable care for the sick. Angela chose as patron saints St. Ursula, of course, and also St. Paula, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, and two early Brescian martyrs named Faustino and Giovita; because they were all saints who had experience of the world and whose apostolate lay first among their fellow-citizens.

Angela was a firm believer that faith in Christ means obedience to His Church. In Chapter 8 of the Rule, she writes, "Each one of you should first obey the commandments of God... Secondly, obey him who governs Mother Church, because He who is truth has said: *Who hears you, hears me, and who despises you, despises me.* And then in descending order, obedience is to be given to priests, the spiritual director, to mother and father, to the laws, statues and civil authorities."

Angela considered it sufficient to lay down principles rather than regulations, and her Rule contained no stipulations for central government, or for the continuity of the Company after her death. That would all come as the Ursuline order progressed through time and throughout the world. It is unlikely that the first companions had any strict sense of being members of a religious institution. They had joined together united as a band of women so as to be more effective in serving God.

The Rule was formally approved in 1536, four years before Angela's death. Following Angela's death, the company rapidly developed. It moved beyond Brescia to Milan and other Italian cities, and eventually throughout the world. In all, the Ursulines have established schools in over 36 countries.

Socials with the Saints

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Sources include: *Angela Merici* by Philip Caraman



St. Angela Merici *Ursuline Founder*

Born: 21 Mar 1474 at Desenzano, Italy

Died: 27 Jan 1540 in Brescia, Italy

Feast Day: January 27

Canonized: 24 May 1807 by Pope Pius VII

Patronage: of the sick, disabled and physically challenged people and those grieving the loss of parents

In 1474 in the town called Desenzano at Lake Garda in the Brescia province of Italy, a baby girl was born who would grow up to be Catholic leader and innovator.

Her name is Angela Merici, the first foundress of a non-cloistered religious order of women that came to be known as the Ursulines. St. Angela, as is her contemporary, St. Ignatius of Loyola, are credited as being innovators by helping to reform and renew the Catholic Church from within and help repair damage perpetrated against the Church by wars, plagues, and the rise of Protestantism.

Her father possessed books, which was a rarity at the time, and would read to his family. A book of note he owned is the collection of stories on saints called *Legenda Sactorum*. This is the same book that St. Ignatius of Loyola, as a young knight, would read during convalescence of his shattered leg and was the catalyst that ignited his desire to become a great saint. For Angela, this book introduced her to St. Ursula, the 4th century British princess and martyr. The courage of the martyr made such an impression on Angela that she would one day give the name "The Company of St. Ursula" to her religious order. Both St. Angela Merici and St. Ignatius of Loyola were inspired by saints, to become saints.

At the age of 10, Angela became orphaned. She and her older sister went to live with her uncle. During this time, her sister died. Concerned that her sister did not have an opportunity to receive her last sacraments, she feared for her eternal salvation. Angela prayed to God to reveal the state of her

sister's soul. In a vision, she learned her sister was in the communion saints in Heaven. Grateful for His Mercy, Angela vowed to dedicate herself totally to God. She refused any attempts by her family toward marriage. She joined the Third Order of St. Francis, and became known as Sister Angela.

When Angela was 20 years old, her uncle died. She returned to her childhood home in Desenzano, and took over management of her parents' property. Whether at home or when traveling, she wore the rough, wool garment of the Franciscans and a white veil on her head. Living both in the world and as a consecrated woman, Angela traveled through Brescia both selling her farm produce and doing the work of Christian instruction, helping with the sick and harboring peace among the many feuding families of the time. She became well-known. It is said that several women of some leisure, influenced by her spiritual example, joined her in an informal association to assist her.

At a time between her twenties and forties, Angela experienced a vision that would set the course for the mission and purpose of her life. She saw a ladder stretching from the sky to the earth. Down it came angels and maidens in pairs. The maidens sang and the angels accompanied their song with instruments. A voice spoke, giving her to understand she was destined to found a new order of women that would be as numerous as her heavenly visitors, stretching into the future as far as she could see into the clear, midday sky.

At 42, Angela was sent to Brescia by the Order of St. Francis, to accompany and console a recent widow. Angela would not return to her former country life. With continued warring factions among families, and also periods of plague, many women were widowed. Several joined Angela's unofficial association and worked with her, tending to their fellow citizens as needed.

These years would prove to be learning ground for Angela's later structured formation of a religious order. At this time, Angela is said to desire a core group of women who shared her ideals and persistence in pleasing the Lord, but did not insist on it. Any woman that wanted to come help was invited, and could assist as she wanted and leave as she chose.

It was a common practice at the time for European Christians to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land to offer penance and seek God's will. Angela did just that, hoping to receive clarity from God regarding her vision. Strangely, on voyage to the Holy Land, Angela was literally struck blind!

Her blindness would prove temporary, with her sight returning once back in Venice several weeks later. Angela did not despair. Instead, she sensed God was teaching her, saying that when she was led to places that stirred her greatest devotion, she saw these places with the eyes of her soul as if she had seen them with her bodily eyes.

On the return voyage from the Holy Land to Venice, Angela and her companions experienced both pirates and storms. During what became a 9-day storm, those on ship reported that as they huddled in fear below, Angela bravely stood on deck in her Franciscan habit, praying into the winds and rain for God's help. The escape from pirates and tales of Angela's personal holiness were passed around Venice upon their safe—and what many say miraculous—return. Officials, both religious and political, were anxious to meet her in person.

Angela was asked by the Council of Venice to manage the Hospital of Incurables. Confident that her vision directed her to form her company of women in Brescia, she refused their request. She feared her refusal would lead the council to enlist the help of Venice's Patriarch. Knowing that, as a Franciscan Tertiary bound by obedience to the Church, she would not be able to refuse, Angela quickly left Venice.

Thanks to her recent fame, Angela was granted an audience with the pope. She eagerly went, hoping to receive approval of her company. In the Jubilee year of 1525, she spoke to Clement VII of her plans of founding a company of women for the work of Christian instruction of the young and for the charitable assistance of the sick. Angela impressed the pope with her combination of worldly wisdom and remarkable saintliness. He is said to have praised her as a person of the rarest gifts, and revealed that he tried to convince her to stay and take charge of charitable works in Rome, but Angela pleaded with him that her mission lay in Brescia. The pope approved her plan in principle, but stated that a formal approval awaited her Rule.

Angela spent much of the next decade working on the Rule for her company of women. A Rule of a religious order is basically a code of behavior that each member vows to obey. The overriding Rule that Angela formulated was to have a firm intention of serving God, so the applicant must enter gladly and undergo a long period of testing. This was to counter the custom of families sending their less-marriageable daughters into convents in order to increase dowries for their other daughters.