

Why November 25th?

Imagine my surprise and delight when I came upon this beautiful painting of Saint Catherine of Alexandria by the great Renaissance painter Raphael while strolling through the National Gallery in London last year!! Such images have the power to conjure up so many associations ... none, in this case, more meaningful than those related to Saint Angela and the founding of her Company on November 25, 1535. Like the mythical Saint Ursula after whom Angela named her innovative group of women, Saint Catherine's life and death are likewise shrouded in mystery, although, unlike Saint Ursula, her November 25th Feast - "optional" though it be! - has survived into modern times!



Raphael (1483-1520)
Saint Catherine of Alexandria,
about 1507.
Photo by Jean Ann

Angela's choice of the Feast of Saint Catherine as the day for the official launch of her Company would have been readily understood in her time, as Catherine's cult was popular throughout the Middle Ages and into Renaissance times. That she was so frequently a subject for painters in the period underscores this. It is even thought that Romanino, a Brescian artist and likely friend of Angela's, was commissioned to do his famous "Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine" to honor the founding of the Company, as Angela herself appears in that painting, along with a tribute to St. Ursula. That picture hangs in a gallery in Memphis, of all places!!! Check it out at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeJJ6Y6JM7U>

Specifically, and significantly for Angela and her companions, Catherine was, like Saint Ursula - the patron she chose for the Company - a woman Saint, and in particular, a patron of teaching and learning, a model for all women, especially single women who devoted themselves to God and the works of charity. In the language of her time, Angel's Rule and Testament are sprinkled with references to her companions, her daughters, as "spouses of the Most High". In that context her choice of Saint Catherine's Feast as the Company's inaugural day is all the more understandable, signaling as it does her dual focus on fostering a lifelong relationship with the Divine and an attentiveness to the needs around her.

Angela's deliberate choices of Ursula and Catherine to anchor her new Company emphasize her awareness of the plight of the women of her era, and their urgent need for personal development and education, and for their right to self-determination and independence. And so she sought out strong, faith filled role-models like Ursula and Catherine. These were women who had paid the ultimate price - their very lives - for their insistence on such things, doing so in the face of the most violent expressions of patriarchy, and the most severe forms of persecution in early Christian times. In war ravaged 16th century Italy and within a church and monastic system then rife with corruption, Angela knew her first companions would need the example, inspiration and comfort that devotion to such holy fore-mothers could bring. Ever the wise Mother, she saw to it that her daughters were in good company.

May the indomitable spirit of Angela, her companions and holy patrons and protectors be ever with us!

Happy Anniversary ... 484th!!!

Jean Ann Ledwell, osu

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Girolamo Romanino, The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine, c. 1535