

**Homily for the transfer of the relics of Saint Angela Merici to the Church of Saint Faustino
Luciano Monari, Bishop of Brescia
Basilica of Saints Faustino and Giovita – Brescia, February 13, 2010**

The tamarisk is a sad tree; it grows all alone in deserted places and, being so thorny, seems to want to keep at a distance anyone who desires to rest in its shadow. For Jeremiah it is the image of people who deliberately cut every link with God and concentrate all their hope on the things that human beings are and can have: riches or strength or power. Isolation, aridity, sterility are the inevitable effects of this foolish choice, which voluntarily separates one from that which is, by definition, the highest good, a choice which would proclaim self-sufficient that which is merely flesh, that is to say, life – fragile, limited in time and poor in quality.

Imagine, instead, says the prophet, planting a tree close to water; the roots reach deep down to search out the vein of water, to enjoy the amazing potential of life. You will then see that tree grow green and put forth flowers; the summer's heat does not dry it up, and thirst does not frighten it, because it can reach a perennial source of water; its fruits do not diminish. Just so, says the prophet, are those who place all their security and trust in God; they remain small and limited, with highs and lows, with uncertainties. But their hearts are firmly rooted in God, and in God they find an ever-fresh spring of life, of desire, of love.

So to speak, you have before you two roads: one is that of self-sufficiency, of entrusting yourself to the world's logic; the other is that of faith, of opening yourself to God. If you bind your life solely to the flesh, you will perish with the flesh, because flesh, by its nature, is subject to corruption and death; if you bind your life to God, you will reign with God because God is life that never grows old, love that will regenerate. Christ, Saint Paul told us, has risen as the first fruits of those who have died. He has risen for us, therefore, to give to whoever lives in him a hope that does not wither and does not die.

Listening again to these words, I thought about what an extraordinary figure Saint Angela Merici was. A surprising figure as a woman in her time: she followed a lofty ideal of Christian perfection but at the same time continued to live in the world, in the ordinary conditions of life. Hers was an extremely fruitful life, not only because over four hundred years later there are "daughters of Saint Angela" all over the world who interpret and live their lives in the light of their experience of her; but above all because recalling Saint Angela has given to these women a strong sense of their dignity, a lively appreciation of the value of their own lives, a strong desire to spend themselves in love of God and of the Church.

There is no need to restate that Saint Angela's secret was her faith, her love for God, her unreserved trust in God. This spring alone kept her courageous and vital in the midst of difficulty and lack of understanding that were certainly not lacking. Difficulty and lack of understanding are not hard to understand, since Saint Angela was so much ahead of her time. Today everyone recognizes that Saint Angela anticipated the form of Christian life that is proper to secular institutes – institutes that propose a path of holiness and of consecration within the context of lay life in the world, not in a convent, not in a religious community. This form of life was recognized by the Church in 1947, but Saint Angela had imagined and practiced it centuries earlier!

This is why we are enthusiastic, as Brescians, about having Saint Angela as our patron and would like to be worthy of her, to learn from her how to live fully the vocation that is inscribed in our baptism. The Council reminded us that holiness is the calling of all in the Church, and John Paul II, leading us into the third millennium, wrote, "It is time to put before all

once again, with conviction, this lofty measure of ordinary Christian life.” This is exactly what Saint Angela understood and sought to bring to life in her Company. Holiness, in fact, consists essentially in shaping daily life according to the good news, the beatitudes, the Our Father, the entire Gospel. This is the meaning of the expression (not particularly smooth), “the common priesthood” that belongs to all the baptized, excluding no one. It is this priesthood that Saint Angela practiced and taught through her example and her words. And isn’t this what we need so urgently today?

Paul VI held that the gravest problem of the Church today is the separation that has developed between faith and life: two ways of thinking and of acting that follow parallel tracks, do not meet, do not fertilize one another for the sake of life. The faith that is not enfolded in consistent deeds remains a pure idea in the stars or a sterile desire. The life that does not assimilate the form of faith remains pagan, worldly, incapable of manifesting the Gospel. Saint Angela taught how to unite faith and life and how to unite them outside monasteries, even in the midst of the world. How much we need women like her! When I say “women like Saint Angela” I do not mean women who live exteriorly as Saint Angela did. Times have changed, and they are changing at a dizzying pace; I would be foolish to think of stopping time and paralyzing behaviors. Instead, I mean Christian women who know how to live today as Saint Angela did over four centuries ago: facing the cultural challenges of today’s world, being present in the normal places of work and of life, and carrying everywhere the spirit of the Gospel in wisdom, responsibility, and love.

Naturally this is the task of all baptized Christians – men and women. But can I say that the conversation becomes particularly urgent for women? It has always been women who make men, not only in the sense that they bring them into the world, but in the sense that women transmit to them the fundamental perceptions about the values that guide daily choices. The changes in women’s lives is perhaps the most profound of the revolutions that we have witnessed; it is one of the “signs of the times” that we must scrutinize to recognize correctly God’s design in history. It can surely be the occasion of human growth, but it is indispensable that women succeed in giving a Christian form to their way of life even with all the transformations that their life is undergoing.

There is a risk that the transformation may come too rapidly and not permit the development of a critical awareness about how much is happening; that choices may be made under the pressure of self-interest and ideology and not through lucid reflection or an authentic growth in liberty. For example, a masculinized image of woman would not be sufficient; on the contrary, it would be useless because males already exist. An auto-referential image of woman would be inadequate, constructed on the desire for autonomous self-affirmation, as if woman should exist only for herself. Gender differences – male and female – speak of both incompleteness and complementarity at the same time, therefore of difference and relationship in a rich reciprocity. If these dimensions become operative in the experience of women and men today, the travail that we are living through will bear good fruit. There is more: gender difference stands at the origin and root of all the differences that characterize human experience: ways of thinking and of living gender identity also determine the way of perceiving and of living all the other differences that exist among us. This is decisive, then: that the differences appear not as motives for separation from the other but as positive occasions for relationship and complementarity.

No one is in a situation to anticipate the future. But, if Jeremiah is right, we will be able to construct it wisely if we are firmly rooted in God. The last words of the Sermon on the Mount

in Matthew come to mind: “Those who heed my words and put them into practice will be like a wise man who builds his house on rock.” Certainly, the word of God does not solve the particular problems that from time to time confront us. God does not wish to be substituted for our intelligence and our conscience. But God’s word does offer us a rich horizon of meaning within which all our particular choices find their place. To know that we are not in the world by accident, but are called by God’s personal, loving will; to know that we do not exist for death but that Christ’s resurrection has opened for us too a path beyond death; to know that the others among whom we live are not enemies on principle but that, on the contrary, we are called to become brothers and sisters as children of the same God.... To know all this does not, as I said, solve individual political or cultural problems. But it permits us to face them with trust, to get up again after our mistakes, to control our more egoistic instincts, to subject to critical judgment so many habits that take hold only because they are popular. Saint Angela, our patron, help us. Obtain for us the necessary clarity of thought and wisdom about life.