Heart • to • Heart

Angela Merici Living Legacy

Vol. 7, No. 14 September 2022

At the center of Italian life is the piazza – a crossroads in every community where people gather to engage in commerce, political activity and prayer. Whether early in the morning when vendors set up for market or late in the afternoon when families enjoy chatting during their 'passeggiata,' the piazza is always alive with activity.

No doubt St. Angela found herself at the heart of a piazza every day. As a woman dedicated to the well-being of her community, she would have embraced the opportunity to engage in conversation with neighbors, to welcome visitors and to listen with authentic openness to a wide variety of thoughts and experiences.

This image of St. Angela in the piazza, open to all, listening compassionately, and engaging with the world thoughtfully, guides our theme for Heart to Heart this year: ***An Angela Response to the Reality of Our Times****. Like St. Angela in the piazza, we hope to provide a forum to exchange ideas and to ponder a wide array of current day challenges. In an increasingly complex educational, social, religious, and political landscape, listening and openness are powerful tools to forward St. Angela's mission. We are hopeful for a rich exchange during the year ahead, and we begin this exchange in Ukraine as we hear firsthand accounts from those directly affected by the war and from those who welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their midst. It is a longer issue than usual, but we felt it important to include all that we received.*

Sr. Wioletta Adamczak, an Ursuline Sister, was living and serving in Ukraine during the first months of the war. She shared the following reflection shortly before moving from Ukraine to Poland:

"My mission in Ukraine is coming to an end. I never thought that I would come to live in a country engulfed in war. However, looking back, I am convinced that this time was a gift from God to me. I am a spiritual daughter of St. Angela; but when the war broke out, I did not think about what Angela would have done in this situation. I did not even think about her specifically, but some things were just obvious. When crowds of people were fleeing to Poland or other countries, for me it was clear that I should stay, no matter what price I would pay for it. And the price could have been life. And maybe it's a bit pathetic, but to this day I believe that our departure at that critical moment for everyone would have been tantamount to the Church abandoning the people here. We didn't do anything spectacular, but for the first time in my life I appreciated how important a simple witness of presence and a smile could be in a situation similar to everyone else. I had read about it, heard about it in conferences, but it was only here that I experienced it. Another thing that was very important to me was the feeling, the belief, that I live in the hands of God, that God is the God of life and death, not Putin. And another thing: our Ursuline spirit of *INSIEME*. We received a great deal of emails and text messages from our sisters from all over the world with assurances, above all, of prayer and spiritual connection. Never before had I experienced so much of our Ursuline family and its strength. The sisters weren't here physically, but their support and concern were my strength and joy. I leave Ukraine with immense gratitude in my heart, gratitude to God and to people for the unexpected gift of being here."

Sr. Iwona Skorupa, an Ursuline Sister in Poland, speaks of the solidarity she experienced as the people of Poland welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their hearts and their homes:

"First of all, I am very grateful for all the signs of solidarity with the Ukrainian people and with us. It is a very challenging situation as we don't know how long it will last and what methods the Russian army will use in order to destroy people. As I come to reflect with Angela and bring this suffering people to God, I feel that we can be an instrument of reconciliation and hope for those who are experiencing war. I try to encourage our sisters who are in Ukraine by calling them and sending a daily message to each of them. The words of Angela are very much present in me and help me to see a light in this dark time. With Angela, I believe that light will conquer the darkness, and truth with peace will find a place in Ukraine, too. Pray with us for peace, please. Thank you. May God find a home in our hearts."

> "Have hope and firm faith that God will help you in everything."
> (St. Angela)

Ursuline Sisters in Slovakia also offered hospitality and resources to Ukrainian refugees. Sr. Maria-Rita Ziakova shares their experience:

"After the initial shock of the outbreak of war, we knew there was room for concrete acts of love, so characteristic of St. Angela. The next day, we welcomed a mother and her two sons at our convent closest to the border, in Košice. From February to April, we used this home for short-term accommodations for refugees who were just passing through to other states or further west. These were mostly Ukrainian mothers with children, but there were also foreign students who were studying in Ukraine and fleeing the war. In those days we learned what embodied grief, pain, and fear look like.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Slovakia, we were preparing our convents in Sucha, Modra and Trnava for longer-term accommodations. Some sisters moved out of their rooms to make suitable space. We bought beds, obtained a washing machine, and felt a great deal of solidarity. Everyone tried to help as best they could. Since the outbreak of the war, we have housed approximately 90 people short-term and 30 long-term.

Like Angela, we live our daily lives and serve others, whether it is shopping, cooking, laundry, cleaning and preparing rooms for the new "pilgrims," or arranging documents, transportation, longer-term accommodations. Mostly we try to create a peaceful and safe environment where they can live without the fear and horrors of war. Angela's spirit has certainly helped us as we try to comfort and encourage people who are fleeing death. Some were initially hopeful that it would be over quickly and they would be back in Ukraine by summer. Sadly, it didn't happen that way. The main thing now is to show faithfulness and perseverance in providing aid. The first great wave of solidarity among the people has already gone – many have exhausted their human and financial resources. And even in this, we experience moments of sisterhood and unity when funds come to our account for the Ukrainian people from Ursulines and their friends throughout the world. Thank you for helping us to help. We don't know what lies ahead. However, we firmly believe that God's goodness will take care of us."

The following comments are from Ukrainian refugees staying with the Ursuline Sisters in Slovakia:

"We have left the most precious things we have - our relatives, our loved ones, our friends. We did all this to save our lives. At this time the front line is passing through my hometown. However we are not left alone with our misfortune. In Slovakia they are helping us a lot. We are living in a convent of sisters. All our problems are solved thanks to the help and support of the Ursuline Sisters. They are kind and prompt. They have not only helped us by providing housing; they also help us with food, hygiene, clothing. Sister Katarína even helped us to complete our university studies remotely by providing us with a laptop and the necessary internet. We are grateful to Slovakia and to God to have met such people on our journey!"

—Natalija and Kateryna

"We express our sincere gratitude for the shelter provided, for the care, for the warmth. Thank you for your determination to take a step towards change. After all, your life and ours are different now. Our life is changed by fear, our condition is forced, and your life is changed by compassion, which we greatly appreciate. We were afraid of the unknown when we went abroad, but when we encountered the boundless kindness of each Ursuline Sister, we received long-awaited peace, balance, and confidence. Our relatives who stayed at home see that we are safe and cared for. We admire your patience, your wisdom, your courage."

—Tatiana and Svitlana

Sr. Marie-Anna Linhartova, an Ursuline Sister from the province of Czecho-Moravia, reflects on their experience of welcoming Ukrainian refugees:

"Saint Angela knew how to respond to the needs of the times as the Holy Spirit led her. We were led by the Holy Spirit to first 'map' the situation and monetarily support Caritas and other organizations that have been organizing aid to people fleeing war-torn Ukraine since the beginning of the war or other provinces that were right in the thick of it. Then we asked what we ourselves could do specifically, and God's answer was that we should also open our homes. Suddenly what had been "impossible for many years" was possible, for example, to reduce the size of the cloistered places so that one entire wing of the building could be occupied by families from Ukraine for a few months. They needed some help, but most of all they needed a sense of security, listening hearts, and great spiritual support. Suddenly our Ursuline communities became more connected, we were in contact more often (also because of the joint help), and our hearts opened more and more. We realized that we had so much that we didn't even deserve, and we were taking it for granted! We were and are looking for new ways to help. We are also starting to look, with different eyes, at the people on the street, our co-workers and employees and construction workers. Many of them are from Ukraine. Some have been living here for a few years but still have family there. They worry about them and help them as much as they can. And we're in it with them, not only by prayer but far more often now by talking to them and asking how they are, and what their relatives are doing. Many friendships have been formed. I think part of St. Angela's charism is a listening and open heart to all, and God is certainly teaching us more of that in these times."

For Reflection

How do the above reflections touch me, draw me into prayer and/or action?

"…the unexpected gift of being here." When in my own life has an experience become an unexpected gift?