
CHAPTER 3

COMPANIONS OF ST ANGELA

Angela Merici, as explained in the previous chapter, was introduced to the South African church and context in 1895 by the Ursuline Sisters of Sittard, Holland. These Sisters later joined the Roman Union in 1921. It is important to note that from its conception in 1954, the congregation of the Companions of St Angela had links with the Ursulines of the Roman Union. The beginnings and historical progress of this link will emerge as we look at the story of the foundation of the Companions.

3.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE COMPANIONS OF ST ANGELA

Hay (1998:63), commenting on the section of his book dealing with an overview of the history of South Africa, observes that this section cannot claim to have all the historical facts. What it proposed to do was to establish a background to help understand the context of the topic. Hay's observation seems an appropriate introduction to the present topic as it also seeks to place the Companions of St Angela in their context. A few short paragraphs cannot do justice to three hundred years of history. Fifty years would require a whole book.

The Companions of St Angela were founded during the apartheid era. In using the term apartheid the following needs to be borne in mind:

It would be foolish to think that human rights abuses in South Africa only began in 1948 with the rise to power of the Afrikaner nationalists. It could be said that they legally entrenched what was already there before, but in more subtle ways. As Mamphela Ramphele notes, ... "it is important to recognise that human rights abuses did not start in South Africa in 1948, they have been with us for 300 years. Afrikaners may have many monopolies but the monopoly on human rights abuses is not one of them" (Hay 1998:21).

Focussing on the years from 1948 to the present is not meant to minimise the part played by colonialism in the repression of the indigenous people of South Africa and their culture. The reason for this particular focus lies in the impact those years had on the present subject. The second half of the twentieth century was the milieu which created the Companions of St Angela and is therefore relevant to this chapter. The policy of apartheid which discriminated against black people was written into the laws of South Africa after 1948, when repressive laws were put in place to uphold the system. Prozesky (1990:126) writes:

Apartheid is the legalised injustice which whites who identify strongly with Christianity have imposed by force on blacks in South Africa, the majority of whom are their fellow Christians.

The policy was ruthlessly enforced in the 1950s. Between 1949 and 1962 many Acts were promulgated for the subjugation of black people. The movement of blacks in their own country were restricted by pass laws and the permit system. The Population Registration Act in 1950 clearly defined and differentiated between the various races in the country. Through the Group Areas Act whole villages were forcefully uprooted from what were referred to as 'black spots' in white areas. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 deprived all mission schools of government subsidy and stopped the payment of salaries to the teachers in these schools, forcing many of them to close down. The Catholic mission schools continued to operate under very difficult financial conditions. The words of Archbishop Tutu (in Stubbs, 1996:v) describe the devastation caused by the tyranny of the apartheid era:

You see the most awful aspect of oppression was not the untold suffering visited on its victims and survivors, ghastly as that turned out to be, as the testimony we have been hearing attests. No, it was the fact that apartheid could, through its treatment of God's children, actually make many of them doubt whether they were indeed God's children. That I have described as almost the ultimate blasphemy.

Manas Buthelezi, a bishop of the Lutheran Church in South Africa, felt that Christianity needed to be rescued from a distorted interpretation and praxis which had the potential to endanger its survival in the country. To prevent this from happening he wrote:

For the sake of the survival of the faith it is urgently necessary that the blacks step in to save the situation. They should now cease playing the passive role of the white's victim. It is now time for the black to evangelise and humanise the white. The realization of this will not depend on white approval but solely on the blacks' love for the whites. From the blacks' side this will mean the retrieval of Christian love from the limitations of white economic and political institutions (Buthelezi, 1976:Thesis no 3).

These were lofty ideals, but obviously Buthelezi was almost two decades ahead of his time because black people were not yet ready for a theology of reconstruction. Ela (1986:28) throws some light on why people were not yet ready:

The praxis of the Christians struggling in the situations of injustice must be reckoned with in any effort to understand the living faith. We must reflect on this activity, bring it into confrontation with the gospel, and make explicit the theological intent it expresses.

The historical situation and the experiences of the time were a direct contradiction of the gospel message so the theological intent of the evangelisers was blurred by the situation of injustice. The period in question called for and demanded a theology of liberation, an Exodus experience, what Ela (1986:31) alludes to in the following passage:

The central event through which God is revealed by intervening in a people's history is the exodus. God utters the divine being definitely in the action by which God snatches the people from the servitude of Egypt, and leads them, with mighty hand and outstretched arm, to the very land of Canaan, the land of the promise Abraham had received.

South Africans needed an encounter capable of moving the heart to sing the Magnificat, Mary's song in Lk 1:46-55. McBride (1982:30) points out why:

If the magnificat praises God for his [sic] concern and testifies to his continuing fidelity, it is equally clear about God's attitude to those who are involved in oppression: they are "scattered", "put down", "sent empty away".

God's intervention was not yet felt in South Africa, therefore Buthelezi's challenge to the South African blacks came when people could not hear it. People could not hear for they were reeling under oppressive structures. Humans touch God and each other's lives through social systems, structures and institutions, therefore, unjust systems, structures and institutions call for a spirituality that would bring about systemic as well as structural and institutional transformation (Steidl-Meier, 1984:134-135).

Resistance against this repressive system arose from within the church and from the liberation movements as well as from some sections of civil society. Many South Africans made the supreme sacrifice in their attempts to restore some sanity to a system which robbed people of their humanity. The church challenged the theological justification for apartheid but it succumbed in the issues of separate schools, separate houses of worship and in the segregation of training centres for future ministers of religion. Some South Africans were fearless in their fight against apartheid; amongst others we have such names as B Naude, D Hurley, N Mandela, D Tutu and S Biko.

In February 1977 the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) issued a strong *Declaration of Commitment*, which committed the bishops to the following actions:

1. To strive for the elimination of terms which of themselves or in their South African context, are derogatory even insulting...;
2. To eradicate all differentiation on purely racial grounds in the treatment of persons at presbyteries, convents, other church institutions and private homes;
3. To suppress the custom still lingering in some places of having different sections of churches appropriate to

different race groups and to ensure that church halls and similar premises in any area are available to all (SACBC 1977:3).

This declaration helped to heighten awareness to a general situation where these anomalies had become the accepted way of life in a society in which the majority of the population professed Christianity. The statement was a call to conscience though it was regarded as not going far enough in some quarters. The SACBC's pastoral letter of 1986 was acclaimed for its poignancy in stating that apartheid had created hate, it had done too much damage through its satanic work thereby casting doubt on the future welfare of the country (SACBC, 1986:2.6). In taking this decisive stand the bishops were being prophetic and were also touching the heart of the matter, while, at the same time affirming Nyerere's standpoint when he said:

It (the church) must lead men and women to holiness by joining them in their struggle with injustice. ... Its members ought to behave as servants of the world, willing to share their knowledge and talents with those they acknowledge as their brothers and sisters (Ela, 1986:99).

Bosch (1987:3) captured the same theme when he addressed a gathering of concerned ministers of religion in Pietermaritzburg in September 1987. He expounded the conflict in this simple but profound manner, saying:

If we communicate only that part of the Gospel which corresponds to people's felt needs and personal problems, example: Are you lonely? Do you feel that you have failed? Do you need a friend? Then come to Jesus, while remaining silent on their relationship to their fellow persons, on racism, exploitation and blatant injustice, we do not proclaim the Gospel."

The candidates who joined the Companions of St Angela from 1955 onwards were products of that dehumanising history. Of the pioneer postulants, Margaret, Esther, Pauline and Mabel were from Sophiatown, where their families and the rest of the people were forcefully removed. Elizabeth came from White City, which is now one of the townships in Soweto. Agnes was from Mofolo, also now part of Soweto. Bernadette was

a product of St Mary's Mission, Munsieville. Hilda and Mary came from Potchefstroom where their families were relocated to Ikageng.

The terms Natives, Bantu, European also belong to that period in the history of our country. There is today a greater awareness of the inappropriateness of referring to white South Africans as Europeans and of the unacceptable historical overtones of calling black people 'Natives' or 'Bantu' in South Africa.

In 1955, the same year that the congregation of the Companions of St Angela opened its doors to the first members, the *Freedom Charter*¹⁷ was adopted by a number of organizations led by the African National Congress. That ceremony took place in Kliptown, near Johannesburg.

The struggle for liberation continued to intensify, with demonstrations, protests and defiance campaigns from the people, countered by the government with increased repression, the doctrine of total onslaught, the institution of detention without trial and the proclamation of a state of emergency.

3.2 ST MARY'S MISSION

However, at that time, 1955, it was not surprising that bishop Whelan chose St Mary's Mission for the foundation of the new congregation. The mission had a vibrant parish, with a primary school and boarding facilities for girls. Whelan (1989:3) is quite accurate in his description of St Mary's when he comments:

... St Mary's began to grow. The Ursuline Sisters established a school and such was the zeal and dedication of the priests and sisters that Munsieville became 75% Catholic.

¹⁷ A document outlining the rights and duties of all the people in the future non-racial democratic South Africa.

The Eucharist was celebrated daily with Benediction every Sunday after the Eucharist and every Thursday afternoon. May and October being special months in the calendar of the church, it was customary at St Mary's Mission to have benediction and rosary every afternoon at five. The people were summoned by the magnificent sounds of the big church bell which could be heard from afar, at six in the morning, twelve noon and at six in the evening, reminding Catholics to pray the Angelus.¹⁸ A group of devout men worked with the parish priest, Jean Verot, to prepare the liturgy for Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost and Christmas as well as for other solemnities in the liturgical cycle. Stations of the Cross were a prayerful reflection every Friday afternoon during Lent. Fr Jean Verot with the help of Mother Antoinette, who was the principal of the school before being appointed Novice Mistress, produced plays, the most popular being the Passion Play which was staged every year during Lent. Holy week liturgies were very moving. The story of the passion of Jesus Christ was sung on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday. Easter vigil heralded new life with the singing of the Exultet¹⁹ and culminated with the joyous Easter morning service of praise and thanksgiving. From Ascension Thursday to Pentecost Sunday St Mary's Mission joined the whole church in nine days of prayer invoking the Holy Spirit for Christian unity.

A big grotto with a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes,²⁰ was erected on one side of the church building in the novitiate yard. What came to be referred to as "Calvary" was the spot on which stood a big crucifix, a statue of Mary Magdalene and one of St John the Apostle. This Calvary faced the main entrance to the mission premises. St Mary's was a people's place. They came at all hours during the course of the day seeking either personal, family or spiritual help. The candidates for the new foundation arrived and became fully immersed in this atmosphere which was alive with learning, prayer, and spiritual and social activity. They fell in with the rest, adding even more to what was

¹⁸ The Angelus is the Angel Gabriel's greeting and announcement to Mary that she was to be the Mother of Jesus, interrupted by the common prayer 'Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with you...'

¹⁹ The Easter Proclamation in which all creation is invited to sing and exult with joy and thanksgiving because Christ Jesus, our king is risen from the dead.

²⁰ A town in France where it is believed that Mary appeared to Bernadette, many have testified to being miraculously cured of their ailments after being dipped in water at the grotto in Lourdes.

already happening at the mission.

3.3 THE FOUNDATION OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE COMPANIONS OF ST ANGELA

The story begins with the visitation from England of the South African Mission Provincial Superior of the Ursulines in 1950. Bishop Whelan alludes to that in a letter dated 14 January 1954. This letter was addressed to Mother Gertrude Moran, who was the local superior of the Ursuline African Mission. In it he wrote:

Some time ago, when your Mother Provincial²¹ was on Visitation in the Transvaal, you will remember that we had a discussion about the possibility of my being able to found a Native Diocesan Congregation of Sisters under the direction of the Ursuline Sisters (1954 letter in the archives).

The bishop made a written application to The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith whose headquarters are in Rome asking for permission to start a congregation. This was subsequently granted on 18 June 1952. The official letter giving the go ahead came from Cardinal Fumatomi Biondi, who was prefect of the Sacred Congregation.

On May 12, 1954 at St Mary's Mission in Munsieville, Bishop W P Whelan blessed and laid the foundation stone of the novitiate of the new congregation. The official decree for the foundation was issued by the bishop on 7 August 1954, and on the 15 August the new building was blessed and opened. The preparations for the reception of the first candidates on 5 January 1955, began in earnest. The Ursuline congregation released two Sisters, namely, Mother Gertrude Moran for the office of Moderator General, and Mother Antoinette Carroll as the Mistress of Novices. Nine aspirants, all from the geographical area within the Diocese of Johannesburg, applied and were accepted. Mother Gertrude graphically and exuberantly describes the day and ceremony of reception:

²¹ Head of a province in which there are a number of houses belonging to the congregation.

The eve of Epiphany 1955 marked a decided achievement in the history of St Mary's African Mission, Krugersdorp. This was the date fixed for the entry of the first candidates to the newly-founded "Congregation of the Companions of St Angela" for African nuns. From 9am until 1pm they arrived in little groups. Those from a distance were brought by their respective Parish Priests. The nine aspirants smartly attired in their grey postulants frocks and veils created a distinct atmosphere of solemn and joyous awe as they filed into the church with a dignified recollection for the reception ceremony. After the singing of the *Veni Creator Spiritus*²² they recited together the Acts of Consecration to Our Lady and to St Angela. The chaplain Rev Jean Verot OMI addressed the Postulants in Tswana. The ceremony concluded with Benediction²³ of the Blessed Sacrament and a hymn to Our Lady. A tenth candidate who awaited the results of her JC²⁴ arrived Monday 10 January - not too late to join the original group. The reception ceremony was repeated with her companions-to-be forming the audience and the choir (Report in the archives 1955).

She concluded her report with the following words:

All ten are now being initiated into the first steps of the Religious Life. We beg the prayers of all our readers for the perseverance of these first members of a Congregation destined by Providence to play a great part in the evangelisation of the Bantu People when European Nuns will no longer be allowed to teach in African Schools (Mother Gertrude's Report 1955).

Attention is drawn to the segregationist policy of the government in Mother Gertrude's report where she indicates that there was a possibility that European nuns may be barred from teaching in African schools. This was not an idle threat seeing that the discriminatory laws were being increasingly refined to bring about the total division of the races in the country. St Mary's Mission, described by Whelan (1986:14) as 'a shrine,

²² Latin translated into English reads Come Creator Spirit.

²³ Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is a liturgical celebration in which the sign of the cross is made with the consecrated host (either in the monstrance or in a ciborium) over assembled believers (Komonchak, et al. 1996:86).

²⁴ JC stands for Junior Certificate received at the end of secondary school, standard eight.

a monument to faith, courage and endurance,' was later to disappear under the same repressive laws. It was levelled to the ground in October 1986 because the role it played as a bridge between black and white South Africans did not serve the purpose of the government. The spot on which the mission stood was transformed into a road separating black and white.

After six months one of the postulants had returned home and the remaining nine were ready to begin their novitiate. They were given new names the day before reception into the novitiate. The name-giving took place in the community room. Mother Gertrude addressed each of the prospective novices in the following manner, starting from the senior and going down in rank: "In the world you were known as ... from today you will be called ... as a sign of your new state in life." The new names were:

Margaret Mogosi	= Sister Mary Peter	CSA ²⁵
Esther Gqoloda	= Sister Mary Paul	CSA
Elizabeth Nkolongwane	= Sister Mary Anne	CSA
Agnes Kakulubela	= Sister Mary Angela	CSA
Zellie Ncube	= Sister Mary Bernard	CSA
Hilda Shembe	= Sister Mary Philomena	CSA
Veronica Mangqangwane	= Sister Mary Bernadette	CSA
Pauline Mogosi	= Sister Mary John	CSA
Mary Modise	= Sister Mary Joseph	CSA

Reasons for the name change appear in the *Constitution of the Companions of St Angela*:

102. A change of name is of biblical origin. When God called a person for special mission, He sometimes gave that person a new name, a new identity.
103. The novice may take the name of a saint, who will be a special patron or model. The new name will also indicate the sister's response to God's call to a new way of life, and a special mission. "I will give a new name, known to none but the one that received it" (Rev. 2:17) (:43).

Later on a new clause was added to the constitution allowing the novice to choose either to retain or change her baptismal name. Name-giving is special in most African

²⁵ CSA an abbreviation for Companions of St Angela

communities. Nasimiyu-Wasike (1992:49) indicates that some Africans acquire new names at different stages in life or when they acquire new status in society. Naming, then, as it is done in religious life is not only biblical but it corresponds with African cultural practices. The ritual of the giving of new names is like a rite of passage from postulancy to novitiate.

In addition to the many devotions already present at the mission the group of novices had the monthly days of recollection, morning and evening meditation, spiritual reading in private as well as in community, instructions and the Psalms as the official prayer of the church. Individually each novice received spiritual direction, prayed the rosary, made use of examination of conscience every evening before night prayer, and prayed their own private devotions, for example, daily stations of the cross, the litany of Mary and of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and silence. They also made an annual retreat of eight full days in July and three days in December. The novitiate went on for two years, at the end of which the novices applied to the moderator general for acceptance to profession of vows. If found suitable and they on their part still had the desire to continue they proceeded to the first vows. It is proper to let Mother Gertrude's pen relate the story of that memorable day of the first professions in the congregation:

July 10th 1957 records another historic event of great importance in the annals of St Mary's African Mission, Krugersdorp. Two years ago, nine African girls were clothed in the habit of the new Congregation of the Companions of St Angela founded by His Grace Archbishop W P Whelan OMI and confided the training of its members to the Ursulines. By God's grace, these young girls have persevered, and now at the completion of their novitiate pronounced their first temporary vows; and one new member was clothed in the Religious Habit, in the presence of His Lordship Bishop O'Leary OMI. Very Rev. J Verot assisted His Lordship. Present in the sanctuary was His Grace Archbishop Gotthardt OMI of Windhoek. Interested spectators were twenty-six priests from all parts of the Diocese. Long before the ceremony commenced parents, relatives and friends of the Sisters from missions along the Reef, and from places as far afield as Potchefstroom began to arrive. Numerous groups of the St

Annes and Sacred Heart Sodality lent colour to the occasion. At 9.30 am the procession entered the Church singing “*O Gloriosa Virginum.*” The impressive ceremony followed during which the Postulant changed her bridal frock for the Religious Habit, and the Novices changed their white veils for black ones. Holy Mass followed. The most inspiring moment arrived, when His Lordship held the Sacred Host²⁶ raised, while each sister read aloud the formula of her Vows. His Lordship preached an inspiring Sermon, on the sublimity of the religious life, and the great work destined for them amongst their own African People. He congratulated the sisters, and paid warm tribute to the generosity of the parents who permitted their daughters to follow their vocation. Rev.G Martin OMI translated the sermon into Tswana. The ceremony ended with the *Te Deum*²⁷ (1957)

There was very good reason for the enthusiasm. This day had historical significance for the local church, particularly for the diocese of Johannesburg, because with the pioneer members pronouncing their first vows in the congregation, the Companions of St Angela were firmly established as a religious congregation in the local church. The impact of the presence of African sisters on the local people was powerfully articulated by one young man on a bicycle. When he saw two of the sisters in Johannesburg just a month after the day of profession, he smiled broadly and flung both arms wide open and shouted in Afrikaans: “Kyk, onse susters, apartheid gaan weg!” [Look, our sisters, this heralds the demise of apartheid!]. It seems that people had been waiting with eager longing for the advent of local sisters. The presence of black sisters in the diocese ushered in a new era not only in the church but also in the history of the country.

3.4 ANGELA MERICI'S CHARISM AND THE COMPANIONS OF ST ANGELA

Founders of congregations share their charism by word and example with their followers. Ledochowska (1968 & 1976), Mariani, et al. (1980) and Buser (1990) all agree that

²⁶ The consecrated wafer used in the Eucharist which Catholics believe is the real presence of Christ.

²⁷ *Te Deum* is a Latin hymn of thanksgiving usually sung at the end of important religious celebrations.

Angela's charism was multifaceted, that she was influential in more than one area as she worked to meet the various needs of her society. Some of her teachings are still effective and relevant even today in the 21st century. For the Ursulines of the Roman Union, Ledochowska (1976) holds that Angela Merici was the beginning, the place where the earthly destiny of the great Ursuline family had its starting-point. The Ursulines seek their religious identity not only in Angela's spirit and her charism, but also in the whole of their tradition and in the evolution of Angela's work. We saw in the previous chapter that the Ursulines of the Roman Union honed the charism of Angela down to '*INSIEME*,' which means unity. The Companions of St Angela must also travel that long and arduous journey of searching for Angela's charism. They cannot simply look at the Ursulines, because that was what Bishop Whelan, the founder of the Companions had stipulated. When the first members arrived in January 1955, Bishop Whelan was already six months out of the diocese of Johannesburg having been appointed Metropolitan Archbishop of Bloemfontein in July 1954. Before he left to take up his new post, he had shared his vision in his communication with the two Ursuline sisters, Mother Gertrude and Mother Antoinette. It was left to them to actualise the founder's vision in the new congregation.

What was that vision? He wanted a diocesan congregation, under the special patronage of St Angela Merici, endowed with the spirit and long established tradition of the Ursulines. In entrusting the formation of the new congregation to the Ursuline sisters, was the bishop suggesting that the Companions of St Angela follow the charism of Angela Merici? According to Mother Antoinette, the bishop had a great admiration and love of Angela and often said that St Angela was right for this period of the church. Was the bishop bestowing the charism of Angela Merici on the Companions of St Angela? In the letter accompanying the decree for the establishment of the congregation which he wrote to Mother Gertrude in August 1954, he articulated her role:

It will be your function to take all practical steps to launch this little Congregation on its providential way under the special patronage of Saint Angela. ... Be sure that this work entrusted to your care comes to you from the hands of God, Who has permitted all human agencies to be set aside so

that He might purify it and bless and prosper it for His own
Infinitely Wise Designs. *Laus Deo Semper*.²⁸

What did the bishop mean by ‘take all practical steps to launch this Congregation’? There are no written questions to the bishop from either Mother Gertrude or Mother Antoinette. They seem to have known what was required of them. Like most of the founders of religious congregations, the bishop has not once used the word ‘charism’ in his communications. No one really did until modern times, to be more specific until after Vatican II because in the old Canon Law all religious were thought to be the same. His closeness to the way of life of the Ursulines, his knowledge of the writings of Angela Merici and his expressed desire that the Companions of St Angela inherit the long standing spirit and tradition of the Ursulines are what has sealed the link between the Companions of St Angela and the Ursulines. Neither Mother Gertrude nor Mother Antoinette ever spoke of the charism of Angela but they taught the Companions about Angela Merici through the reading of her life-story, through her writings and by the example of their own deep and personal love for her. They never used the word charism. They lived it.

The founder knew exactly which direction he wanted the new congregation to take:

The primary aim of the congregation is not to have teachers, nurses, etc, at our disposal, but that its members devote themselves to the complete service of God. And their ultimate aim is to have an intimate union with Almighty God (*Southern Cross* 26 May, 1954:1).

Nearly fifty years later, similar thoughts were expressed by John Paul II (3 May 2001) in his letter to the triennial assembly in Rome of the prioresses general of women congregations:

How many times has it been said these days that there is a need not so much for teachers as for witnesses! Be, therefore, witnesses to the Gospel, faithful to God and faithful to humankind (*Bulletin* No.116:9-10).

²⁸ *Laus Deo Semper* translated God be praised forever.

Both stress the importance of the quality of the presence of religious amongst the faithful. Their being was much more powerful than their doing. The part the members were to play in the local church was also made known on the day the bishop laid and blessed the foundation stone of the novitiate:

To propagate the Catholic Faith by works of Education, teaching, the formation of youth through the lay apostolate, visiting locations or by other works which according to the judgement of superiors are useful to the church (*Southern Cross* 26 May 1954:1).

St Angela Merici did not only focus on one particular need, she met the many and varied needs which presented themselves in her path. Ledochowska (1976:36) reveals this attentiveness in Angela:

Her spirit was one of openness to the call of God continually heard in her heart, an openness which made her life the wonderful adventure that we know of. All her powers were concentrated on giving the most perfect response to the God of love who called her to a love that is twofold but one. Everything was looked at from this point of view: does it, or does it not, help me to give the best reply to the call? This attitude gave her total freedom with regard to people, things and events, leaving her completely free to choose the best response to love. Her life of prayer and service makes one think of an arrow shot at a single target with the dynamic force of love.

Bishop Whelan wanted the same openness and availability for the Companions of St Angela. He listed some of the needs which stood out for him at the time but kept the list open. Like Angela the bishop was aware that change was bound to affect the congregation in the future and that the Sisters needed to be able to read the signs of the times. In her farewell address to the members of the Company of St Ursula Angela stated that should the need arise or should the times and circumstances require new rules or doing something differently, she would urge her daughters to do it prudently and with good advice (Stone, 1996:231). Bishop Whelan also cautions the Companions of St Angela to be prudent when he speaks of other works which according to the judgement of superiors, are deemed useful to the church.

Another aspect of similarity between Bishop Whelan and Angela Merici was on the point of unity. Angela counsels her daughters to live in harmony, united together, all of one heart and one will. She exhorts them to be bound to one another by the bond of charity. Bishop Whelan chose as his coat of arms Ephesians 4:3 “Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together.”²⁹

In the prologue to her *Counsels* Angela entreats her followers to pray, to humble themselves under God’s great power because ‘as he has given you this charge, so will he give you also the strength to carry it out’ (Stone, 1996:112). Bishop Whelan also encourages the pioneer novices to redouble their prayers, acts of charity and acts of penance to call down the Divine blessing on this work. Heaven must be stormed, he appeals. Be sure that God will give the vocations (extract from letter in the archives).

Though centuries apart they seem to be of one mind and heart and guided by the same spirit. As the Companions look at Angela, they can actually detect a connection between her and their founder. The Companions are aware that they are well positioned with regard to Angela as their mentor through her writings, and as their role model by her way of life. They know that as religious they are:

... to follow Christ, to imitate Christ, to be moulded to the image and likeness of Christ, to have the mind and heart of Christ, to be other Christs, to radiate Christ, to take up the mission of Christ, to do the work of Christ, to be witnesses to Christ (Barr, 1995:2).

As human beings they need to see and be encouraged by the example of other human beings who have successfully lived out this radical following of Christ.

²⁹ 1977. *The Good News New Testament*. Fourth edition. New York: American Bible Society.

3.5 STEPS TOWARDS SELF- REALISATION AS AFRICAN SISTERS IN THE FAMILY OF ANGELA MERICI

Mother Gertrude continued as Moderator General for sixteen years, from January 1955 until her sudden death on 13 April 1972, in Munsieville, at the age of 83. She had been totally committed, and served faithfully, and the Companions mourned her passing from this life. At that time there were already twenty qualified teachers, six of whom had left the congregation between 1961 and 1971. The remaining fourteen taught in three Catholic Primary Schools. Four were at St Angela's in Dobsonville, one being the principal. Five taught at St Peter's school in Lewisham, Kagiso, and five were on the staff of St Mary's which by then had been relocated to Kagiso. The Sisters lived in three communities, Kagiso, Dobsonville and Munsieville.

Mother Gertrude's death caused consternation in these communities, the concern being uncertainty about what was going to happen. Bishop Hugh Boyle appointed Mother Antoinette to take over as Moderator General for three years. In December 1976 Mother Antoinette retired and went to live and work in Westgate England where she died in July 1997 at the age of 88.

The death of Mother Gertrude and the retirement of Mother Antoinette prefaced a new epoch in the history of the Companions of St Angela. To begin with, after Mother Antoinette's retirement Bishop J Fitzgerald OMI appointed Monsignor A Kelly interim Moderator General to oversee the preparation for the first general chapter to held in 1977. This included renewal of the congregation with a comprehensive programme touching all the elements in the life of the congregation. The programme started on 13 December 1976 and continued until the end of the chapter and the election of the new Moderator General and four councillors from amongst the Companions on 11 July 1977. [This programme together with other relevant documentation appears in the Appendix].

Choosing new leadership amongst their own ranks was a significant moment in the life of the congregation. A New Constitution was also accepted at this chapter. It contained

clear guidelines regarding the nature and mission of the congregation, consecration, spiritual life, community life, apostolate, formation and governance. The Companions had to stand on their own two feet. They were able to do that because of the depth of the experience of the past six months of intensive preparation and the formation they received from the Ursulines. It was like a fresh start, a time of grace and renewal of commitment in the service of God and neighbour. Working closely together helped to make Angela's words a reality in the lives of the Sisters, there was a feeling of solidarity: "For I tell you, living all together thus united in heart, you will be like a mighty fortress, or a tower impregnable" (Stone, 1996:169).

Hope was rekindled and the Companions were able to look away from themselves to the needs of the people and pledged themselves to be effective apostles in constant touch with the fast changing world in which they lived, and to adapt with prudence under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They also engaged in various forms of education not only teaching in schools but also in other forms of informal education. They undertook their duties in the spirit of Angela who encouraged her first companions to have confidence and strong faith that God will assist in everything. Number 110 of the new Constitution reads:

Following the teaching of Christ "Blessed are the peacemakers" and the example of St Angela, we will direct our apostolate to the promotion of peace and understanding among all people, by sowing love where there is hatred, and forgiveness where there is injury (Cons. 1977:45).

The members were renewed because each one participated fully in the whole process of renewal from beginning to end. The charism statement produced after a three day workshop in June 1977 highlighted the main characteristics of the spirituality and the charism of Angela, namely: union with God, prayer, faith and love, service, reconciliation, education and unity. Would the animated Companions of St Angela do for their people what Angela did for the people of Brescia? That remains to be seen. Chapter Four will show how the Companions live the charism and spirit of Angela Merici in their day to day activities as African religious women. .

3.5 CONCLUSION

It was necessary to start this chapter by giving the historical realities of the climate in which the Congregation of the Companions of St Angela was founded. The role these historical factors have played in the slow and sometimes turbulent development of the congregation cannot be overestimated. This part will be appreciated in Chapter Four when we look at how the Companions journeyed with the people in their striving for social justice in this country. Their courage and resilience belied and confounded the crippling effects of their repressive historical background. They seemed to grow into the awareness that they were called to manifest the Good News, to spread hope so that God's people may have life. Their ability to connect spirituality with social justice demonstrated the depth of their commitment.

The sequence of events leading to the actual foundation of the congregation of the Companions of St Angela makes interesting reading and reveals the mysterious workings of grace. From the seed that was planted in Brescia, in 1535, there grew a giant tree with many branches which spread across time and space, reaching South Africa and sprouting a new shoot, the Companions of St Angela. This growth and development of Angela's Company can be seen as a big part of the 'marvellous things' predicted by Angela in the prologue to her *Counsels*:

Act, move, believe, hope, cry out to him with all your heart, for without doubt you will see marvellous things, if you direct everything to the praise and glory of his Majesty and the good of souls (Stone 1996:113).

The zeal and faith of the pioneer women who travelled across land and sea inspired by the vision and spirit of Angela Merici, manifests the power of the spirit which led them. They believed, prayed, acted and risked by venturing into unknown lands, arriving in South Africa in 1895. Skinner-Keller (1993:8) seems to be talking about these Ursuline women, to whom the Companions owe so much, when she writes:

... the contagion of “shared fire” would bring meaning, dignity and empowerment to the women who served, as they came to value their own lives as well as those whom they served.

The founder of the Companions of St Angela, Bishop W P Whelan, chose Angela Merici’s spirituality because of its relevance to the South African situation. As in Angela’s time there is a need for the education and support for young girls, and again Angela’s exhortation to her companions for togetherness, and communion concurs with the strong sense of community in Africa.

The charism of the Companions of St Angela will evolve with time as the vocational vision of the members matures. They will continue to grow in the realisation that they are called to follow in the biblical prophetic tradition as they concretely reflect Jesus’ way of acting, of his love for every person without distinction or qualification (CIVCSVA:7). They will try to reclaim Ubuntu as a form of African spirituality which is compatible with the spirituality of the New Testament by which Angela lived and served. Chapter four shows how the Companions serve in the local church.