
CHAPTER 4

REREADING OUR AFRICAN MEMORY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

People often speak of the "real" world and the "ideal" world, that is, the day to day happenings and what should ideally happen. This line of thinking presupposes a knowledge of the past and present contexts and a clear vision of what needs to change, to be added or to be discarded and also the best possible process to bring about this transformation. Information and capacity often has a lot to do with the direction the change will take. Consideration must also be given to ensuring that the suggested changes are genuine requirements for the common good.

For the topic under consideration it is important to rediscover the components of African culture which are compatible with Gospel values. This process could help to promote an African expression of religious life which might enhance the prophetic aspect of consecrated life in South Africa. The principle of inculturation, the process through which this promotion must take place was defined in chapter one. Komonchak, et al. (1996:512) shed more light on the concept of inculturation:

The principle of inculturation is thus rooted in the mystery of the incarnation; it is to be understood and applied in this radical sense, because the action of God in history is paradigmatic for the church's mission. ... the incarnational approach takes seriously the implications of human finitude, flesh, history, creativity, temporality, vulnerability and fallibility.

In other words God uses the ordinary everyday experiences and happenings to enter into the life of a people to make. Amaladoss (1994:30) goes even further when he explains the encounter between culture and the Gospel:

In this process of encounter between the Gospel and a community, culture mediates thrice: the Good News is interpreted and contextualised in a particular culture and situation; the conversion is mediated through a cultural transformation; a new culture, a world view, attitudes and value systems, mediates the life and celebration of the new community.

Amaladoss's quotation highlights the complex nature of the process of inculturation. It is not a one way traffic, the medium, the message, the faith and the receiver are all affected and cannot remain the same as they were before their encounter.

The Companions of St Angela regard themselves as a homogeneous group, not because they are all of the same ethnic tribe, race or clan but simply because they are all African women from within the geographical region of Southern Africa. This categorisation makes it easier to identify, analyse and interpret the spirituality within this specific group and to compare it with the spirituality of St Angela Merici. The obvious tool in this regard is Ubuntu.

4.2 DEFINING UBUNTU

No single definition can do full justice to the concept of ubuntu and because it is not easily definable ubuntu can be subjected to all kinds of interpretations depending on the standpoint of the person expounding it and the purpose for which a particular definition is given. The purpose and context in which the definition is given play a significant role in spite of the fact that African societies are of a holistic nature without a clear delineation between the spiritual and the mundane. Ngubane (2001:1) captures the holistic aspect of African traditional life when she explains:

In a homogeneous society, religious beliefs which are expressed in everyday relations with one another as well as with the mystical forces in the form of ancestral spirits, do not lend themselves to structural demarcation whereby it is readily evident that what people do in their everyday activity is religious or not, as religion is interwoven in the fibre of everyday living.

The foregoing exposition has not deterred African theologians from seeking to structure the belief system of Africans. These theologians have managed to explicate through carefully documented research the active involvement of God, the Supreme Being, All-seeing and All-knowing Creator in the daily experiences of the people. Mbiti (1970:3-16) is undoubtedly one of the most informative African theologians who has written on the Deity in Africa. Setiloane (1976:71) asserts that Africans always had a concept of a supreme being, the various tribes have a name for God. Tlhagale (1997) and Mbiti (1976) are amongst those who have given concrete evidence of devotion to ancestral spirits, spirit possession, diviners, rituals, symbols, sacrifices, values, prayers and religious poems of petition and praise, proverbs and stories, revealing a spirituality submersed in and indistinguishable from everyday life.

Ubuntu is an all encompassing term and is a common phenomenon in the Southern Africa context. It is not an exclusively African attribute, it is universal by nature. The universal aspect of ubuntu is clearly expressed in the following extract:

Ubuntu is not merely positive human qualities, but the very human essence itself, which lures and enables human beings to become ubuntu or humanise beings, living in daily self-expressive works of love and efforts to create harmonious relationships in the community and world beyond (ancestors) (Mnyandu 1997:81).

Ubuntu is a spiritual quality which is expected of every human being, it is human nature directed by the Spirit of God. Even before the advent of the Bible the indigenous people could detect the type of spirit that was ruling a person from the way the person behaved. The person who lacked ubuntu had an evil spirit and one who had ubuntu was directed by a good spirit.

Mokgoro (1998:50) views ubuntu as a common human aspect, at the same time clarifying why it can be regarded as distinctly African:

It would not be true to say that dignity, humaneness, conformity, respect, etc. are foreign to any of South Africa's

cultural systems. It is, however, in respect of methods, approaches, emphasis, attitude etc. that the concept which embraces all of these values is unique to African culture.

Biko (1996:47) elaborates on the contribution ubuntu can make to the world community when he said:

We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationships. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa - giving the world a more human face.

Africans consciously and constantly acknowledge the role and the need for ubuntu in interpersonal relationships. Ideally it is meant to be a way of life, a philosophy of life and the soul of African spirituality, it can be classified as African spirituality. Having said that, it is also important to point out that ubuntu has suffered a severe blow in the African continent by the scenario painted in the following picture:

But so many testimonials reveal that the daily reality of thousands of peasants, youth, and intellectuals is filled with kidnappings, mysterious disappearances, bullet-ridden bodies, summary or disguised executions, and life imprisonment in inhuman conditions - all of this because certain individuals in African societies think that there ought to be another way of looking at things and of managing the affairs of collective existence (Ela 1986:72-73).

The circumstances described in the above extract must have prompted Mokgoro (1998 49-53) to call for the harnessing of the values of ubuntu in shaping the laws governing South African society. The situation emphasises the need to reclaim ubuntu values which would in turn help to develop a spirituality of caring. This need is identified by Ela (1986:74) when he states:

The church, then, must emerge from its exclusive concern with the problems of its clergy and turn an attentive eye on the lot of the African millions. It cannot be silent before summary executions of starving young people sentenced for

stealing, while lofty functionaries guilty of far greater transgressions - black-marketeering or tax or customs fraud - are never brought to justice.

An attempt is made in the following pages to explain the philosophy of ubuntu in greater detail and secondly to relate it and the spirituality of St Angela Merici so as to glean some learnings which would help to enhance the attempts of the Companions of St Angela at inculturation.

4.3 THE PHILOSOPHY OF UBUNTU

Mokgoro (1998:49) maintains that describing concept of Ubuntu in words and from an abstract as opposed to a concrete perspective defies the very essence of the African world-view and may also be particularly elusive. African writers also find it difficult to give a verbal definition of ubuntu which needs to be seen and experienced rather than be explained in form. Having said that, Mokgoro goes on to describe it in the following terms:

In an attempt to define it, *ubuntu* (a Zulu word with *botho* as its Sesotho equivalent) as a concept has generally been described as a world-view of African societies and a determining factor in the formation of perceptions which influence social conduct. It has also been described as a philosophy of life, which in its most fundamental sense represents personhood, humanity, humaneness and morality; a metaphor that describes group solidarity where such group solidarity is central to the survival of communities with a scarcity of resources, a fundamental belief that “a human being is a human being because of other human beings” (1998:49).

Kunene (1996:10) cautions:

... it is not enough to refer to the meaning and profound concept of *ubuntuism* merely as a social ideology. *Ubuntu* is the very quality that guarantees not only a separation between men and women and the beast, but the very fluctuating gradations that determine the relative quality of that essence. It is for that reason that we prefer to call it the potential of being human.

In spite of the cautionary note sounded by Kunene both his and Mokgoro's definitions indicate that there would be no sense of speaking about ubuntu if there were no other human beings. A person's personal fulfilment, self-realisation and worth happens within the context of human relationships, therefore, within the context of a community. It is only in association with other people that a person grows in awareness of his or her rights and responsibilities towards self and other persons. It is a form of social spirituality whose ideals include compassion, respect, co-operation, sharing and hospitality. All of these qualities are directed at building a functional and a just society.

Sebidi (*Sowetan* 2 Dec.1988:9) is of the same opinion as Mokgoro when he explains:

Defining an idea like ubuntu is akin to trying to give a definition of time. Everybody seems to know what time is until they are asked to define it or detail its essential characteristics without which time could not be time. This is based on the notion that ubuntu is something abstract, a non-perceptible quality or attribute of human acts, the presence or absence of which can only be intuited by the human mind.

Hence the aphorism, *ha a na botho*, [has no personhood] heard when someone, whatever nationality behaves in an anti-social manner like being rude, crafty, violent or selfish. Someone who is respectful, honest, peace-loving and generous *ke motho, o na le botho*. [is a person, has the attributes of a person]. These are Setswana expressions but are also used in Nguni, Tsonga and other Sesotho languages.

4.4 THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST ANGELA MERICI AND UBUNTU IN THE LIFE OF THE COMPANIONS OF ST ANGELA

The story of the development of the spirituality of the congregation of the Companions of St Angela emerges from their way of life. Their spirituality is learned from Angela, a woman of spirit whose example and exhortations direct her followers to the source:

And let your principal recourse be to the feet of Jesus Christ, and there, all of you, to offer most fervent prayers. For in this way. Without doubt, Jesus Christ will be in your midst, and as

a true and good master, will enlighten and teach you what you have to do (Stone 1996:231).

The Companions of St Angela inherited the spirituality of St Angela Merici through the Ursulines of the Roman Union. They had to define this spirituality for themselves to make it relevant in their situation. Through a process of discernment and sometimes through the new recruits, who, like the pioneer members were all from the black community, the expression of the charism of St Angela took on an African face. At times the process of inculturation has unfolded, without the conscious effort of the Companions.

The main features of the spirituality of Angela Merici are examined and identified in the life of the Companions of St Angela. This exploration will be combined with an attentiveness to the learnings and rediscovery of ubuntu for the members of the congregation of the Companions of St Angela.

4.4.1 Prayer

Ledochowska (1976:36) observes that Angela's spirit is like a living spring from which we can always draw inspiration. Buser (1990:84) comments on Angela's gift of contemplative love, that her relationship with God was central in her life. It was her core, about which Ledochowska (1976:37) remarked that it gave her total freedom with regard to people, things and events, leaving her completely free to choose the best response to love. Angela desires the same freedom of spirit for her daughters when she writes about prayer:

Let it also be recalled that each one be diligent in prayer, mental as well as vocal. ... And although one needs always to pray in spirit and in mind, given the continuous need one has of God's help... nevertheless we advise frequent vocal prayer ... For this reason, each one will say the Office³⁰ and the seven penitential psalms with devotion and attention (Stone 1996:45-47).

Angela was a woman, who being full of hope herself inspires her followers to have hope and

³⁰ The official prayer of the church composed of psalms, canticles and readings from the Scriptures as well

prayerfulness combined with the challenge of responsibility:

Have hope and firm faith in God, for he [sic] will help you in everything. Pray to God, humble yourself under his great power, because, without doubt, as he has given you this charge, so he will give you also the strength to be able to carry it out, provided you do not fail for your part (Stone 1996:112-113).

In the midst of their daily activities the Companions of St Angela adhere to a set timetable which includes communal prayer times, spiritual reading, meditation, regular confession, monthly days of recollection, faith sharing and an annual retreat of eight full days. Like Angela the Companions believe that prayer leads to total commitment of one's self to serve with love and dedication. Family visits always end with a prayer in which all the family members are present, if the children are playing outside they are always invited into the house to come and join in the prayer and the singing of a hymn.

Reflecting on the place of ubuntu in the prayer life of the Companions gave birth to the awareness that a person with ubuntu cultivates an attitude of prayerfulness, even though they may not be at prayer. Ubuntu is an inner disposition, the lack of which is easily picked up in the person's speech and manner of relating to other people. The person with ubuntu is not only judged by the actions he or she performs but also by his or her whole attitude to life.

4.4.2 Hospitality

Buser (1990:8) has noted some of the elements in the spirituality of Angela Merici. First on the list is hospitality:

All of this reflection about women and Angela one of her outstanding characteristics, openness to others. I believe out of the sense of openness to others comes an understanding of her contemplative love for God and a resulting openness to serve the needs of others. I call it hospitality.

as intercessions and concluding prayer.

In the first community which the Companions established outside the motherhouse the sisters themselves received some practical lessons on this aspect of hospitality. One of the parishioners became aware that the sisters had no access to hot water in the mornings. One cold morning, the sisters were surprised to hear a knock at the door at five o'clock. On opening the door they discovered a 20 litre container full of steaming hot water waiting for them, together with a freshly baked loaf of homemade bread on the door step.

The first school outing was to the zoological gardens in Johannesburg. The teachers and pupils packed their lunch baskets and took some money to spend on ice-cream. The sisters packed their office books and at lunch time when everybody settled down on the grass to eat, the sisters moved to a quiet spot away from the rest of the staff and the learners, unpacked their office books and prayed. One of the senior teachers came up to them to find out why they were not eating, only to discover that they did not bring any food. He went round to all the groups collecting something for the sisters. This incident contributed much to the growth of the sisters.

These practical lessons which the sisters received from the people encouraged them to reread their memory as Africans. They realised that one of the principles of ubuntu was precisely what they were experiencing amongst the people, that is, share the little you have, so that others who have nothing may also have something. Through these and other acts of kindness, the sisters rediscovered, the values of ubuntu, namely, sharing hospitality and compassion.

Ubuntu motivated the sisters in the following incident. On one occasion the police were surprised and touched one cold morning in June 1976 when the sisters called them into their parlour at five and offered them tea and doughnuts because they had been watching the school throughout the night. They did not expect such kindness because the people did not like them and the sisters had always intervened when they had a confrontation with the people. The spirituality of the sisters was enriched by the reflection on hospitality as one of the attributes of ubuntu.

4.4.3 Service

According to her biographers, Angela worked in what would be known as Catholic Charities today. She did hospital work, social services, took care of orphans and generally did the things that needed to be done. In her first *Counsel* Angela recommends that her followers render humble service:

Rather, regard yourselves as ministers and servants, reflecting that you have more need to serve than to be served ... Learn from Our Lord who, while he was still in this world, was a servant (Stone 1996:117-118).

The sisters embarked on the work of renovating the classrooms of the first school in which they worked. With their own hands they filled up the potholes, plastered the floors of six classrooms and proceeded to paint the ceilings, walls and the roof. The painting and repairs were done during the school holidays. Co-operation came from unexpected quarters, the parish priest volunteered to prepare the sisters' meals and the youth sacrificed their holiday time to help with the painting and the plastering. Ubuntu in interpersonal relationships moves an individual to acts of kindness, generosity and caring, ready to give but also being open to receive thus preserving human dignity through interdependence.

Likewise whenever there was a task to be performed around the mission or in the sisters' yard a number of people including the youth came with their own tools, spades, forks, rakes, buckets, brooms and dusters, to lend a helping hand. Sisters would prepare some refreshments for the workers. This reminded the sisters of a key characteristic of ubuntu, known as '*letsema*' in Setswana, translated, 'collective effort.' Nobody has to be so overworked that they do not have any energy left to share story time or quality time with their families. The lesson for the sisters was that they too needed quality time for personal and communal prayer to deepen their relationship with God and Jesus. *Letsema* does for the health of the community what is so beautifully described by Mokgoro (1998:50) in her statement about the social value of ubuntu:

Thus its value has also been viewed as the basis for a morality of co-operation, compassion, community-spiritness and concern for the interests of the collective, for others and

respect for the dignity of personhood; all the time emphasising the virtues of that dignity in social relationships and practices.

4.4.4 Peace and reconciliation

An incident which involves hostel dwellers is related by one of the sisters. After one of the Companions had addressed the hostel dwellers appealing for peace between them and the residents of Kagiso, they all responded that they would heed the appeal because it came from one of the mothers of the people. There was never a repeat of the clash which had left several people dead and some houses gutted by fire.³¹

On a number of occasions the sisters had to step in to prevent violent confrontation between the police and the people. Sometimes in the middle of the night the sisters would be awakened by cries of “help! help! sisters! help!.” Peace had to be restored between husband and wife or between a son or daughter and parents. Young women were often rescued from violent sexual molestation, however, at times the sisters arrived too late on the scene, someone had already been murdered.

South Africans have been dehumanised by their past history of division and violence. There is a great need for the Companions to make the spirit of Angela present in their midst through her compassion and gift for reconciliation. Angela brought peace between husband and wife, parents and children and among Brescian nobles and acted as advisor and counsellor to them. In her last counsel she writes:

My last word to you, by which I implore you with my blood, is that you live in harmony, united, all of one heart and one will. Be bound to one another by the bond of charity, esteeming each other, helping each other, bearing with each other in Jesus Christ (Stone 1996:1670).

In averting further disaster in Kagiso the Companions were being true to the spirit of Angela

³¹ Address was given by Sr Bernard and testimony was given by Sr Christine who was present 1985.

for whom peace and reconciliation were life-giving words which permeated her writings. Peace and reconciliation with self helps the individual to live in harmony with himself or herself. To assist in promoting that the Companions also minister in the healing of memories workshops.

Stein (2003:63) in *Trefoil* magazine reviewing the book by Shutte titled, *Ubuntu: An Ethic for a New South Africa*, helps to clarify why ubuntu is believed to be contributing to the creation of peaceful coexistence within the community for the preservation of the common good:

Forgiveness is the reaching beyond the evil, to the person of the perpetrator, and affirming their humanity as of equal value to one's own ... Ubuntu is the call to find oneself in the other, to see, in the very differences between people and cultures, the same humanity that we find so precious in our own (Stein 2003:63).

Ubuntu correlates with the spirit of Angela Merici as she appeals for harmonious relations, not only within the close group of her daughters, but also within the community of Brescia in which they lived and worked. Although in the African context there was never talk of the devil and hell, lack of ubuntu was labelled as an evil or bad heart, as being ruled by an evil spirit which drives the person to destroy the harmony in the community. This corresponds with what Angela calls the persecutions and deceits of the devil:

See then how important is this union and concord. So, long for it, pursue it, embrace it, hold on to it with all your strength; for I tell you, living all together thus united in heart, you will be like a mighty fortress, or a tower impregnable against adversities and persecutions and deceits of the devil (Stone 1996:169).

4.4.5 Motherhood and community

The community of Kagiso enjoyed the solidarity of an extended family. The people needed mothers like the sisters who would nurture their faith in order to build a strong Christian community to take on the task of changing the repressive structures of the time. They found in the sisters what the people of Brescia found in Angela, friends and companions, an inspiration and mothers. The sisters were very young, but young and old referred to them as mothers. That attribute encompasses a whole range of life-giving qualities in the African context. A mother is a life-giver, for life is a gift from God, blessed by the ancestors as it ensures continuity of the clan. Angela, in a different culture and a different context had creatively and powerfully fostered consecrated life. She was esteemed as a mother in Brescia, lovingly alluded to as 'Madre'. She was a life-giver in the community, a compassionate listener. In retrospect, and putting Angela in the African context we can say that she modelled all the life-giving ubuntu values. The Companions passed the test because in a short space of time they were called mothers and not sisters by the people. The following incident is proof of this change in status. One day two policemen met a couple of sisters as they were going to board a bus in town, one of them asked the sisters to identify themselves by producing their pass³² books. The other one rebuked him and told him not to bother the sisters because "they are our mothers."³³

Drawing from that strong sense of community which existed among the people of Dobsonville, the Companions turned the school into an extended family. Thus the sisters appeared at and took part in family celebrations. In times of sickness and bereavement they were always the first to know and always journeyed with the sick and bereaved during those difficult times.

Where there was a need the sisters became fully responsible for the sick person. They made sure that a healthy meal and proper medical care was provided. The sick person and his or

³² A reference book for identifying blacks prior to 1994, it was a criminal offence if found without it.

³³ Srs Martin and Mary's personal experience in Krugersdorp 1969.

her family were also supported by prayer. These tasks were performed after school hours. Other family problems and joys were freely shared with the sisters. Sometimes there were no answers and at such times silent support, just being present and sometimes crying with the family brought some relief.

The care and concern was reciprocated. It was not only the sisters who gave to the community, the sisters also received care from the people. The father of one of the sisters died. When the news reached the people, some of them came to comfort and pray with the sister. She was understandably heartbroken, nothing anybody said helped. One of the women in the group called her by name and said: “Sister, last month when my son died and I was in deep pain you spoke to me and your words gave me strength and uplifted me in spite of the great sense of loss that I felt at the time. I felt so consoled, why are you shutting us out when we want to reach you and help you in your pain.”

This close connection between the school and the parents community was developed giving concrete form to Mahomed’s statement of the significance of African values:

That maturity expresses itself through a collectivist [emotion] of communal caring and humanism, and of reciprocity and caring (1997:78)

It was that maturity which helped to foster such a strong bond within the school, the broader community and the community of the religious sisters, thus giving a powerful witness to the Gospel value of sharing. This kind of communal caring gives witness to the best of human values - the values of Christ.

4.4.6 Consecrated chastity, poverty and obedience

In contemplating Angela Merici and the three evangelical counsels it is important to keep in mind that Angela and her companions did not pronounce public vows, theirs was a private consecration. They did not belong to a religious congregation, did not live in community but lived at home with their families. Being aware of this helps to understand the depth of the

spirituality of Angela Merici.

According to the teaching of VC 21 the deepest meaning of the evangelical counsels is revealed when they are viewed in relation to the Holy Trinity, the source of holiness. Angela lived by the evangelical counsels. In chapter nine of her rule she wrote about chastity:

Each one should also preserve sacred virginity, not making a vow on account of any human persuasion, but voluntarily to God the sacrifice of her own heart (Stone 1996:79).

Chapter ten is dedicated to poverty and she clearly distinguishes between material poverty and detachment which she expresses as follows:

We exhort you to embrace poverty and not only effective poverty of temporal things, but above all the true poverty of spirit by which the heart is stripped of affection and longing for created things. And in God has all the wealth; and apart from God sees himself [sic] to be completely poor, and a total nothing and with God to have everything (Stone 1996:85-86).

Compared to chastity and poverty, Angela writes meticulously about obedience in chapter eight. She comes across as an astute woman who is well aware of how difficult it is to surrender one's will. She starts with the nature of obedience, after giving it the adjective 'holy' she proceeds to interpret obedience as 'the only true abnegation of self-will' and likens this self-will to 'a dark hell.' Angela shows where her inspiration stems from when she follows the preceding strong words with Jn 5.30 which she prefaces with: "This is why Jesus Christ says" and then gives the text "I have not come to do my will, but that of the Father who sent me." Angela then gives the fruit of obedience followed by the stages which include the various categories of those to be obeyed, God's commandments, the commandments of the church as well as the authority in her Company, in the family, civil laws and finally the Holy Spirit.

The Companions of St Angela on the other hand publicly vow chastity, poverty and obedience in a religious congregation approved by the church. The source which inspired Angela Merici, Jesus, who was poor, chaste and obedient continues to inspire all those in

consecrated life. Linscott (1991:19) concludes her reflection on the vows in these words:

The beauty of the vows is that they express a life that is always growing, not a stasis that does not change. Today's emphasis is not that of yesterday, nor is it tomorrow's. Yet the perennial depth, freshness and life of Christ who inspires them is ever new. That is why, at the end of these reflections, we come back to where we started: Christ himself, the theological richness of vowed consecration. Hopefully, like Eliot: ...at the end of all our exploring (we) arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

Profession of the evangelical counsels is the total giving of oneself to the person of Jesus Christ, a faith response to his call. Chastity is an exceptional gift of the Holy Spirit. It uniquely frees the heart to become more fervent in love for God and for all people PC 12. Chastity is a gift for service, for the building up of the Body of Christ. The Companions of St Angela believe that consecrated celibate chastity does not mean" incapable of love and loving" but rather that the vow itself is a form of love, that it frees them to proclaim the Good News, to serve with love and to love universally C 12. Gambari (1970) looks deeper into the meaning of this Vow:

Vowed chastity is not simply a matter of renouncing physical acts which give pleasure; it is far more than that. It means giving up, for love of God, all human hopes and joys that go with founding of a family, the joy of fatherhood and motherhood. The virtue of chastity - a form of the virtue of temperance - imposes control of the sexual instinct both outside marriage and within it; the counsel has its origin in the desire to belong to God alone. Celibacy for the sake of the kingdom means" the choice of a more intimate and complete relation to the mystery of Christ and the church, for the benefit of all humankind" (Gambari 1970:43).

There are no support systems for celibate chastity in the concept of ubuntu because in the African context there is no life without offspring. From very early in life the girl child is brought up to be a future mother wife and is therefore taught both by word and example how to be a good wife and mother when the time comes. A boy child is prepared to be a good father to his children and a good husband to his wife. The comment made by Shorter

(1998:34) that the vow of celibacy or chastity cannot be lived without extremely strong faith convictions, as well as support from the social structure, must be strongly emphasised. This total giving of self to God in this life, witnesses to the values beyond those that are purely human and of the natural order C 19.

The counsel of poverty has a theological and theocentric content rather than an economic or social function, though the latter also exists; it recalls the true value of material things and their purpose in view of the end (Gambari, 1970:69). For the Companions of St Angela the spirit of poverty is that of the first beatitude and of the apostles who shared all things in common. Poverty is the ability to stand empty before God in trustful dependence. It is sharing in the self-emptying of Christ. He chose to be poor by assuming our human condition C 21. Although there are some helpful elements in the philosophy of ubuntu which may help in the expression of the vow of poverty, for example sharing, attitude toward possessions and availability, being poor by choice is not the norm.

People do obey all kinds of rules and regulations but obedience as understood in consecrated life is different because of its theological basis. The source and motivation of religious obedience is the obedience of Jesus Christ who came to do the will of his Father “even to death on the cross” (Eph 1:5), and whose life was complete testimony to his loving union with his Father’s will. The Companion of St Angela, by her profession of the vow of obedience, dedicates her will to God and in so doing renounces what is most precious to her in order to enter into the saving mission of Christ through his church C 30. The vow of obedience is taken in a spirit of service by all religious.

Some of the practical aspects of the counsel of obedience in the daily life of the Companions include respect for seniority. This respect is shown in community by the use of ‘Ausi’ before calling the name of an older sister. This title means ‘older sister’ and is commonly used to address older sisters in the family and in the community. The use of the title does not mean that the older sister has more privileges, but that she should be respected. Some of the younger sisters exercise authority in communities where there are older sisters. The sisters are sometimes reprimanded for reversing the order as in the following case. A parent of one

of the sisters approached an older sister and the following dialogue ensued.

Parent: “Sister, you people are actually destroying all that we have tried to build as parents”.

Sister: “How are we doing that? Please explain what you mean”.

Parent: “My daughter tells me that you all take turns to cook, that even the prioress general has her turn. That is not good, respect must be given where it is due, you are disregarding your cultural norms. The young ones learn to disrespect older people.

From the exchange between the woman and the sister it is also clear that the difference between a family structure and a religious community needs clarification. The nuclear family is made up of father, mother and children. The parents have a responsibility to give direction and exercise authority over their children. The children show respect for their parents by obeying and in the traditional family, they may not even question, they must do what they are told. When sent to a neighbour’s house, they must sit either on the floor or on the nearest chair before they are allowed to address the people in that house. If they do not do that, they are considered to be disrespectful. When receiving something from an adult a child has to receive it with both hands otherwise they are rebuked for not showing respect. Looking directly into an adult’s eyes when talking to them or when being spoken to is also regarded as a form of disrespect. Children may not join the conversation of adults and may not eat standing. Even for adults sitting is way of showing respect, when a chief or someone in authority addresses people, they show respect by sitting down. It is believed that you cannot be attentive whilst standing and you may not be tower above authority. Another example will help to explain more about respect.

Whilst travelling in the outskirts of Harrismith in Kwa-Zulu Natal one day, a sister could not find her way to the school she was going to. Driving through the village she saw an old man sitting in the shade of a tree in his yard. She stopped the car, ran into the yard, greeted the old man and asked for directions to the school whilst still on her feet. The old man did not respond to the greeting, he looked down for a while then looked up and invited the sister to

have a sit on the bench next to him. He then greeted the sister, asked how she was and how her family was doing, where she came from, whether they had rain in Johannesburg and what her family name was. It was only after that, that he wanted to know how he could be of help to the sister.³⁴

In a religious community there is no father, mother or children. All the members are responsible adults who have all committed themselves to embracing a life of poverty, celibacy and obedience. The superior is the first amongst equals, a certain respect is shown because of the position she holds but she is equally bound by the vows. Respect is mutual. In religious life those in authority have the same responsibility like everybody else to be accountable, power is used to serve and to dialogue with the members, not to control. The vow of obedience unites the members of an institute in the service of one mission, while respecting the diversity of gifts, individual personalities and overcoming all differences of race and origin, language and culture VC 92.

The way of life of the vows moved the father of one of the pioneer sisters to remark: “ My daughters you are like Abraham to us, when God told him to leave his father’s house and go to a land which God would show him. You have taken a new way of life which we do not understand, we will pray for you.”

4.4.7 Pilgrimage spirit

A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey. Byrne (in Downey, 1993:565) has this to say about a spiritual journey:

The spiritual journey is at the heart of human wayfaring. A distinctively human journey is initiated and directed by the dynamism of the human spirit, which is the capacity for a life of communion with the transcendent mystery that pervades all reality. This spiritual journey is, therefore, the distinctively human journey. It is the core of the human adventure.

³⁴ This story is told by Sr Mary and it is her personal experience.

Mystics like Theresa of Avila, Eckhart and Merton are some of the people who have written on the struggles and achievements on this inner spiritual journey. The famous quote: “The longest journey is the journey inwards” is attributed to Hammarskjold (1964:48) in his book *Markings*.

He struggled with his faith but eventually was able to write:

I don't know Who - or what - put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to Someone - or Something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal (Sjoberg & Auden 1964:180).

The term pilgrimage is not only used for the inner spiritual journey but also for another important aspect of spirituality, a physical journey to a holy place or a shrine. Every Muslim has to at least once during his or her lifetime go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Christians go on pilgrimages to the holy places in the Holy Land or any of the places held sacred by their religion. These journeys are usually well planned and include communal and private prayers and rituals. Angela was a pilgrim, she went on pilgrimages to Mantua, the Holy Land, Rome and Varallo visiting holy sites. She prayed at these holy shrines and in contemplation sought to get in touch with God's purpose in her life. She was actually embarking on the twofold journey, the actual movement from place to place and the journey within. The Companions like their patroness have embarked on both journeys, firstly in search of their mission and place in the family of St Angela and striving for authenticity as African religious women in the local church. Secondly they too have travelled on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Rome, Assisi, Brescia, Lourdes and Fatima as well as locally to Shongweni and Ngome praying with other pilgrims and privately on their own.

Sacred spots in the African context are not linked to holiness as understood in Christianity, their importance lie in their being places of the ancestral spirits where the family or the clan goes to when things are not going well. Supplications are made to the ancestors, accompanied by certain rituals for the ancestors to look favourably on the clan and help

mend broken relationships.

4.4.8 Discernment and respectful listening

The Companions of St Angela took to heart the recommendations of their mother, Angela, in settling issues which required discernment and listening:

In speaking, that their words be wise and reserved, not harsh, not rude, but compassionate and leading to concord and charity. And let all their behaviour, their actions and their words be with charity; and let them bear everything with patience (Stone 1996:141).

A community of three sisters, who lived and worked amongst the people in Kagiso were picked up by the police one night and were detained in prison for one year, June 1986 to June 1987. It was during the state of emergency and anybody who was suspected of instigating the people in one way or another was detained without trial. Sr Raphael, one of the three, was released after a while due to ill health and died six months later. She came from a village near Zeerust, her mother and other members of her family were still lived. The family wanted to have the funeral and burial in Zeerust. The moderator general and her council travelled to Zeerust to meet the family and to explain convent procedure to them.

On arrival the sisters were welcomed by a delegation from the family and were led to the sitting room. The sisters were directed to sit on one side of the table while the delegation, males only, sat on the opposite side. After formal introduction of each person present, the leader of the family group explained that they appreciated the effort the sisters have made to come and hear their side of the story. All that they were asking for was that their daughter should come home and be buried with the other members of the clan. The leader indicated that he had finished speaking; it was now the turn of the sisters to speak. The sisters explained that they understood the wish of the family, they too are asking the family to help them follow the customary procedures on the occasion of the death of one of the members of the congregation. They felt that Sr Raphael would surely not want to be separated from her religious community.

The discussion continued for a while. In the end the leader of the family delegation conceded that the sisters had valid reasons for the burial to take place in Krugersdorp. Sr Raphael's mother was brought in to share her feelings and to give the final word. Everything depended on her decision. She said that she had been born into the Seane family and was married into the Molokwane family, and she would not like death to divorce her from the Molokwane family. She agreed that her daughter would be buried with the sisters because that was the life she had chosen. The evening ended in joy. The sisters were given water to wash their hands before having supper, and after eating they travelled back to Krugersdorp. This story illustrates the true spirit of ubuntu where dialogue takes place in a mutually respectful atmosphere of listening, explaining and challenging, all the while being mindful of the rights and dignity of the other person.

In the family big decisions were never taken without corporate discernment and listening. If, for example, a son told his father and mother that he was ready to marry and gives his parents the family name of the woman he would like for a wife, they would never decide alone. Word would go to all the uncles, aunts and grand parents to come to the house for a family meeting. The father would then repeat to the extended family the request of his son. After every few sentences he would check with his wife if he was giving the facts as they were? She would either say yes you are still on the right track or yes except that you forgot to mention that he wants to have the wedding next year. After the information, the family would ask the son questions about the girl and about her family, if they had any reservations either about that family or the intended wife they would express them freely with the intention of warning their son. The meeting always ended with some consensus and the assignment of duties and when everything would be completed.

Africans are ready to accept people and their stories. Time does not matter when someone has a story to tell and needs to be heard. The Companions value listening to people attentively and making themselves available, this is an area in which their spirituality and ubuntu are one. A number of suicides and wrong decisions have been averted through listening. The persons concerned commented that when the crisis was over they felt special

because someone listened to them with respect, and the sense of self-worth which they doubted had been restored. The Companions were being true to 112 of their *Constitutions* (1977) which reads: “We will perform our duties in a spirit of service, and with respect for the dignity of all God’s people.”

They were also in tune with the first *Legacy* of Angela which counsels her daughters to serve the people of God with genuine concern and true love: “...because all your works and actions being rooted in this twofold charity, can bear nothing but good and salutary fruits (Stone, 1996:186). The Companions have consistently supported the development of vibrant and life-giving communities. Visitors have noted how hospitable, welcoming and healing they find the atmosphere in the houses of the Companions.

Placing the spirituality of Angela Merici along side the philosophy of ubuntu proved to be a difficult but rewarding exercise. The difficulty lay in recognising spirituality in the ordinary everyday happenings of life, because that is what had to happen in researching the spiritual qualities of ubuntu. It was rewarding in the discovery of the richness of the insights gained in the awareness that it is through the simple things like listening, discerning, motherhood and service, rain, trees and the rest that we come to the mystery of Divinity.

4.5 THE RULE OF ST AUGUSTINE AND UBUNTU IN THE LIFE OF THE COMPANIONS OF ST ANGELA.

St Augustine (354-430) was born in north Africa in the present day Algeria (McGinn, et al. 1996:84). That St Augustine wrote the *Rule* with the prevailing conditions in the society of his time in mind is demonstrated by the kind of standards he places before the community. His milieu was dominated by status, laxity, excessive wealth in the face of extreme poverty and boastfulness with regard to intellectual powers. The *Rule* puts the chief motivation for sharing life together as living harmoniously united in heart and soul seeking God:

Above all else, dear sisters, we are to love God and then our neighbour, for these are the chief commands that have been given to us. The aim of your coming together is that you may

live intent on one thing, to live united in heart and in the Lord
(*Rule* adapted).

St Augustine seeks to build a new community where love of God and love of neighbour prevail, where the common good and collective ownership are modelled on the first community of believers. Sharing must be done according to the needs of the individual, no hoarding. Care, compassion, humility, prayer, discipline, obedience and simplicity are clearly indicated in the *Rule* as the pattern for life in community

Do not call anything your own, possess everything in common. Food and clothing not on equal basis to all ... For you read in the Acts of the Apostles: “They possessed everything in common...” Live then, all of you, in harmony and concord; honour God mutually in each other; you have become God’s temple. Be assiduous in prayer... subdue your flesh by fasting and abstinence from food and drink (parts from the *Rule of St Augustine*).

The *Rule of St Augustine* is one of the few rules approved by the church for the guidance and inspiration of religious congregations. The Companions of St Angela live by this *Rule*. It was studied in the novitiate and was read every Saturday at lunch time, some of the sisters could recite it off by heart. Tarcisia (1986:449) remarks that the *Rule of St Augustine* is being questioned, that certain parts of the *Rule* do not hold today and the text needs to be adapted for it to have an impact on today’s religious. Some parts may not be appropriate in other cultures but in the African context, particularly in its reference to life in community it is highly compatible with the African concept of community. One example to support this compatibility is explained by Bujo (2001:26), that private ownership of property in Africa does not exist as it is conceived in the West. In Africa the individual administers the property with the community in mind, the extended family and the clan. St Augustine writes “ have all things in common among you, let no one call anything her own.” Again in an African community an individual earns *seriti*, dignity in so far as the individual shows ubuntu in the way he/she behaves and relates to other people.

Harmonious relations, sharing, respect for the other, compassion and honesty are ubuntu traits, these same traits are put forward by St Augustine in his *Rule*.

4.6 CONSCIOUS EFFORTS AT INCULTURATION

Steps have been taken in initial formation towards inculturation, in the spirit of VC 80. This norm encourages religious to enter into dialogue with the values of the culture in which they serve so as to challenge what is unworthy of human nature with the values of Christ. Each candidate comes with a personal history of a family and a particular community in the society, her African name defines her. She can tell her story. A deep-seated appreciation of ritual is part of her legacy. Being careful not to reinforce the fears that sometimes accompany cultural beliefs, the sense of ritual can be a good start for the consolidation of prayer life because the candidate is already familiar with the idea of the sacred. Voiron (1991:30) warns that a sense of the sacred does not presuppose the sense of the God of Jesus Christ, that it may lead to occultism and other misconceptions. He maintains that, that “sacred” must surely be evangelised.

A candidate also comes with a strong sense of community and membership where the different stages of life from birth to death and beyond are celebrated. Exclusion or isolation is deeply felt, division is very painful and requires a solemn ritual to be healed. This is an important basic value which can help to make community life a powerful witness of prayer, reflection, unity and service, which are characteristics of Angela’s spirituality.

Companions include the parents of the candidates in the various stages of formation, from the time an application is received to final commitment. Parents are approached to find out if their daughter had told them of her intention to be a sister. The visit is formal in the same manner as the meeting between families in which a marriage is planned. The meeting starts with a welcome, an introduction of each person present, a prayer and a hymn. The purpose of the meeting is then given. The parents want to hear from their daughter before they give any response to what has been explained to them. If they are in favour of their daughter’s choice they give their blessing

Should the candidate persevere up to the time for perpetual vows, the parents and the sisters together prepare for the day of celebration. Sometimes the parents and other family members do not quite understand, then the sister has to go home to explain. She may ask for help from an older sister if she encounters problems.

GS 58 speaks of culture and the Good News and is a great incentive for the promotion of inculturation within the church and in religious life:” The church has utilised the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ.” For the prophetic witness of religious life, the resources of the receiving culture must be the medium that is used. *Ecclesia in Africa* (=EA 127) teaches that people will better understand the mystery of Christ if it is lived in the concrete and daily experiences of African life. Inculturation is therefore, not an option but an obligation, the only way in which religious can deepen their own sense of commitment to Christ’s way of life as well as their total dedication to the service of the people of God. These sentiments will support religious in the face of the many challenges which confront them today.

4.7 CHALLENGES

An awareness of the signs of the times brings to light many challenges facing our society and religious life in particular. Some of these signs have been with us and are threatening to continue for some time unless a concerted effort is made to address them. Others are stem from within and require a rededication to the ongoing challenge of total commitment to the following of Christ. A few of the signs of the times in our society are worth mentioning.

4.7.1 Empowering women

Religious women, in particular African religious, need to be visible and vocal. With the need for women to be heard within the church and the fragile situation of diocesan women’s congregations Angela’s exhortation does not only inspire hope and prayerfulness it urges women to dynamic action:

Do something, get moving, be confident, risk new things, stick with it, get on your knees, then, be ready for BIG SURPRISES (Stone 1996:113).

Angela is so confident. She gives assurance that comes from personal experience. Indigenous congregations need this kind of inner strength, a belief in the power that is within them to do for themselves and for African women, what Angela did for the women of her time, of all times, all cultures and all countries.

Angela challenges the Companions to respond to the present situation of women in South Africa. Women are subjected to domestic violence and sexual and emotional abuse. Women are often left to carry the responsibility of caring for the children without the financial and emotional support of the fathers and husbands. At a time when this unique life-style for religious women enabled her to raise up the dignity of all women. Despite the rigid social distinctions of her day, women of all ranks in society, felt at home in her company. Within her structures everyone had rights. The Companions equally welcome women from all works of life and invite them into easy and relaxed conversation.

4.7.2 Rebuilding a strong sense of community

In the present time of consumerism and famine, materialism and destitution, wars and countless refugees, corruption and HIV/AIDS people need the values of justice, peace and stability. They long for the Reign of God. The Companions are challenged not only to model that community in the spirit of the *Rule of St Augustine* and as Angela did and as she advises in her ninth *Legacy*, “move those who are already with you to greater love and obligation to do good” to work with others to build communities where human suffering is alleviated, where the environment is protected and where love and justice are promoted. Ubuntu is about right relationships, it is about life-giving values for self and for others, one cannot be comfortable when one’s neighbour is in discomfort. It is also about *metanoia*, a change of heart, conversion, it is therefore compatible with Gospel values.

4.7.3 Enhancing inculturation

The directives for formation in the document *Potissimum Institutioni* (PI 1990) warn against an exaggerated tendency towards inculturation of religious life at a level which depends upon externals and upon folklore, which prejudices some essential evangelical values and in a certain way obscures the universality of the Church. Five years after PI, EA confirms the dynamic nature of inculturation with the following statement:

By respecting, preserving and fostering the particular values and riches of your people's cultural heritage, you will be in a position to lead them to a better understanding of the mystery of Christ, which is to be lived in the concrete and daily experiences of African life. There is no question of changing the word of God or emptying the cross of its power, but rather of bringing into the very centre of African life and of lifting up all African life to Christ (EA 127).

The Companions of St Angela are still in the process of becoming intrinsically African in their religious life, because, conversion is an ongoing process. They acknowledge that they have a powerful and appropriate tool in ubuntu to assist them in nurturing the ethos of their congregation. Ethos as understood in the way Nzobo (1978) describes it is:

the total construct of a people's way of life. It is the fruit of a complex structure of processes - experiencing, reflecting, planning, experimenting, judging, deciding and acting.

Some European writers, for example O'Murchu (1999) as well as some American writers on religious life, like Schneiders (2000) and Chittister (1998) are far advanced in their interpretation of consecrated life, yet the biggest challenge for African sisters is not to try and keep pace or to copy, but to have the sense and the spiritual strength to progress at their own pace and develop their own conceptions of religious life. To do so they need to believe that with God all things are possible.

4.8 CONCLUSION

The definition of the concept ubuntu at the beginning of this chapter helped to focus the

discussion on the spirituality of the Companions of St Angela. In doing some research on ubuntu I was amazed at the extent to which ubuntu had been researched and written about. The richness of the material contributed towards selecting and highlighting the values that are compatible with Gospel values. All those who have given an interpretation of the concept of ubuntu admit that it is impossible to come to grips with it in one word or in a single sentence. One can never exhaust the characteristics of ubuntu. Because it is not something tangible and can only be deduced from human behaviour it is subject to different interpretations. Another important aspect of ubuntu is that it cannot be exclusively claimed by one group of people, in one particular place and one culture; it is a universal concept, its qualities can be embodied in all human beings.

Angela Merici was a woman who was in touch with the life and the needs of the people of her time. Her spirituality reveals a woman who was full of ubuntu. In searching for ways to live the spirituality of Angela as African women the Companions of St Angela came to the realisation of just how relevant Angela is to Africa, in her simplicity, as a mother, as a reconciler, in her prayerfulness, her hospitality and how she accepted all people. She was ubuntu personified and that is what the Companions are aspiring to be and to spread in their ministry.

This chapter also highlights some of the challenges that are faced in consecrated life. Some of these challenges come from issues outside the religious life but they affect their ethos because vocations to consecrated life come from the society and secondly because religious cannot remain passive in the face of human suffering. Other challenges stem from within because religious have constantly to guard against the abuse of power, excessive wealth and moral decadence. Consecrated persons must know how to proclaim, with their lives and with their words, the beauty of poverty of spirit and of chastity of the heart which free one for service to brothers and sisters, and obedience which gives longevity to the fruits of charity (*Starting afresh from Christ* = SAFC 54).

The next and final chapter is the conclusion. Chapter one mapped out how the theme was going to be researched. The last chapter will reflect on the information gathered in the

preceding chapters and then draw some conclusion from the findings.