

# Heart • to • Heart

Angela Merici



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*In 2025, the Ursulines of the Roman Union offered a program of spirituality and formation focused on St. Angela. The program, "Together in the Footsteps of Angela," began with a series of online sessions and concluded with an October pilgrimage to Milan, Desenzano, Salo, Brescia, Assisi, and Rome. The 35 participants included Ursuline Sisters and lay colleagues from around the world. For this issue of Heart to Heart, the three participants from the USA – David Gelpi, Kevin Laughlin, and Christy Zurcher – share reflections on the experience and the impact of the program, particularly the pilgrimage to Angela's Italy.*



This year, I walked in the footsteps of saints. I joined pilgrims from around the world on a special trip to Italy. We visited places where St. Angela Merici, St. Francis, and other holy people lived and prayed. We sang, walked, and shared stories. We felt close to God and to each other.

I gained a lot on this journey. I saw how hope can grow in hard times. I learned to be curious, to ask questions, be patient, and to listen more deeply. I practiced something called subsidiarity—helping others in small ways that make a big difference. Making new friends along the way, one-to-one, just like Angela! I also learned to live with paradox, which means holding two things that seem opposite, like joy and sadness, light and darkness, hope and fear, at the same time.

We saw beautiful things: moored boats at Salo, sunrises in Rome, old churches, grape vines, olive trees, and streets made of stone, a hermitage of Francis, the fields Angela cultivated at Le Grelle. These places helped me feel close to God. I call them "thin places"—where heaven and earth feel very near.

I believe God is with us in every moment. In friendship, in nature, in bread and wine, in silence and song. We are now lifelong companions on a journey. Hearts together

that contemplated the questions of life, light, and universal hope. Pilgrimage taught me to slow down, to notice beauty, and to carry hope wherever I go.

I learned.... Pilgrimage cultivates humility, wonder, and spiritual renewal. It invites the soul to journey beyond comfort, embracing mystery and transformation. Through sacred landscapes and communal rituals, pilgrims deepen their connection to the divine, to others, and to their own inner truth. The path fosters patience, gratitude, and reverence—virtues born of walking slowly, listening deeply, and surrendering control. Pilgrimage awakens archetypal wisdom: the Seeker's longing, the Magician's insight, the Orphan's vulnerability. It becomes a living prayer, a rite of passage, and a mirror of the soul's unfolding. In every step, the pilgrim is invited to remember, belong, and be made whole.



*Moored Boats in Salo*

walk with a friend. May we keep walking together, with love and light.

—Kevin Laughlin  
Garden City, ID

On the first full day of the “In the Footsteps of Angela” pilgrimage, I found myself the lone man among a vanful of women bound for Mass at the Duomo in Desenzano. In those quiet moments before we left, I heard a whisper: “Blessed are you among women.” There was no other proclamation—just this grace-filled invitation to pause, listen, and receive. That moment marked a turning point for me. It wasn’t about being male or boundary lines; it was about opening to the blessings poured into my life through these women, these Ursuline Sisters and lay colleagues from all over the world who carry Angela’s spirit into our world.

From Desenzano to Brescia, Assisi, and Rome, as I walked with these Sisters and laywomen, I began to sense what I had not fully named before: the power of prayer, especially communal prayer, to reframe a life. I was reminded that relationships matter—deep, patient, honest relationships that allow grace to manifest in time. Grace does not always come quickly; it often requires years of devoted attention and trust. I was reminded that faith is not a hurried sprint but a steady walk, a rhythm of listening and responding.

Angela’s audacity spoke to me as well. She dared to imagine a world renewed by faith lived in action. Since the pilgrimage I have been trying to cultivate what Sr. Claire Tobin from Ireland calls a “walking ministry”—to be present and intentional, a peace-maker in small moments

as I go about daily life and ministry. I want to model and invite others into a spirituality that blends action with contemplation, urgency with gentleness.

Today I seek a balance: to support the girls at The Ursuline School in New Rochelle, NY, where I minister, in their journeys, while also tending my own spiritual life. I am relearning to “see the value” in paying attention—to the whispers of the Spirit, to the needs of others, and to the quiet prompts that invite me to slow down and walk gently. I strive to help others—especially the younger ones, the Middle School girls—to recognize their own worth and to cultivate a faith that is lived with passion, not tension, and with joy, not fear.

What continues to stir me is this: the call to prayer together, to relationship as a pathway to grace, to the patient, often long, work of living with Angela’s spirit in daily life. I carry with me a resolve to move with intention, to be present to people and to moments, and to practice the audacity of hope in my ministry and in my life.

My hope is that this walking presence—part listening, part action—will grow into a steady rhythm of peace, mercy, and courageous faith, as we keep going gently, with open hearts, toward the horizons of God’s grace, so that I and others may be blessed among women—and men!

—David Gelpi  
New Rochelle, NY



*Pilgrimage Participants at Le Grezze in Desenzano*

*“But as for the seed that fell on rich soil, they are the ones who, when they have heard the word, embrace it with a generous and good heart, and bear fruit through perseverance.” —Luke 8:15*

This is the Bible verse I came across in the 5+ hour bus ride from Brescia to Assisi during the 2025 “Together in the Footsteps of Angela” pilgrimage. This verse, alone, encapsulates for me what it meant to follow in the footsteps of St. Angela Merici. I truly believe I was given the gift of this pilgrimage at the right time in my life. In my role as Director of Mission Integration for Ursuline Academy of New Orleans and throughout this journey, I heard the life and words of St. Angela - embracing each experience with a generous and good heart. Through the perseverance of this pilgrimage, I believe that I have grown and will continue to grow in the spirit and charism of our foundress.

While a large part of any pilgrimage is about the places traveled and the sights seen, the most formative and touching are the relationships made along the way. For several months leading up to the pilgrimage and throughout the journey, I formed lasting relationships with 34 fellow pilgrims from all around the world. And while distance, time zones, and cultures set us apart, our love for St. Angela Merici united us. The genuine care and concern that each pilgrim had for one another was the epitome of what it means to be a follower of Angela - to truly have each one engraved in our hearts. From family-style meals to celebrating Mass in the most intimate settings, singing in front of holy places to walking thousands of steps, the spirit of Angela was alive in our group! The spirit of Angela was alive in each person!

It was while I was sitting in her bedroom at Le Grezze when I heard St. Angela’s words to me, “I am now more alive through you, Christy.” She isn’t more alive in me, but rather through me - through my interactions with



*Kevin, Christy and David in Desenzano*

others, my service, and the work that I do in her name. To physically stand in rooms where she has stood, to feel the same cobblestone under my feet, and to enjoy the same beautiful views she would have enjoyed - those are the moments that have left a lasting impression. It was before the exquisite crucifix at the Duomo in Salo that I sat and read St. Angela’s words. It was here where she stood at the feet of Jesus at what would have been the lowest point in her life. During this time, she was grieving her parents and sister. As I sat and reflected, I imagined the heaviness that she would have felt. It was at that moment that I heard her say, “I am with you.”

Through the journey of this pilgrimage, and every day following, the spirit of St. Angela Merici is now more alive through me and I know that she is with me - for that I am grateful.

*—Christy Zurcher  
New Orleans, LA*

