

Heartbeats

The Company of St. Angela in the 21st Century

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September 2019

In the northern hemisphere, we are beginning the journey from summer into fall. Schools are back in session, and we begin another series of Heartbeats, reflecting for the next few months on St. Angela as Risk-Taker, and on how we are called to live the risk-taking facet of her spirit and charism in our own lives.

St. Angela Merici, Risk-Taker

At the heart of risk-taking is a willingness to move beyond the safety and security of the familiar into the unknown. Reflecting on risk in Angela's life, we see that sometimes the invitation to risk came from people, situations, and forces outside of her. At other times, the call to risk came from inside, from the Spirit speaking in the depths of her own heart and urging her forward. Either way, we see her as a risk-taker in her willingness – again and again – to make that journey from the familiar to the unknown:

- As an adolescent, leaving her home in Desenzano and all that was dear and familiar, moving to Salo to live with relatives after the deaths of her sister and parents;
- As a young woman, returning to Desenzano, opening herself to a vision and a call from God to found a company of consecrated women, a vision and a call that came without roadmaps or strategic plans as to when and where and how she was to do this;
- In her 40's, leaving Desenzano for Brescia, a new city, to go and minister to a grieving widow and mother in need of comfort and assistance;
- In Brescia, opening herself to the realities of war, poverty and need, and to the unexpected ways people began approaching her for guidance, counsel, and reconciliation;
- Setting out on pilgrimage time and again, facing the dangers of travel, sickness, and war that were all part of the pilgrimage experience in Angela's time.



Perhaps, though, where we see Angela as the ultimate risk-taker is in the foundation of her Company of St. Ursula. For in that act, she moved far beyond what was the expected and accepted place of women in both the society and the Church of her time – marriage or the cloister. She envisioned a new kind of consecrated life for women, founding a company whose members were to live “in the world” and serve in whatever ways they were most needed. If we can imagine ourselves in Angela's 16th century Church and world, we can truly appreciate the risk it was for her to even conceive of this vision of consecrated life, let alone bring it to reality. Because she risked, we are here today, sharing her spirit, called in our own lives to be risk-takers.

We must always take risks. That is our destiny.

—T.S. Eliot

Risk-Takers in the Spirit of St. Angela

Throughout these next months, we hope to highlight some followers of Angela who have taken her spirit of risk-taking to heart. This month, with the help of Emily Clark's *Masterless Mistresses**, we revisit the story of the "intrepid" (Clark's word) women who brought Ursuline life and ministry to New Orleans in 1727.



"In August 1727, twelve French Ursuline nuns disembarked the ship that had carried them across a treacherous Atlantic, dodging pirates and sandbars to land them safely on the southern coast of the colony of Louisiana. Driven by missionary enthusiasm, they had made the voyage to establish a convent in the capital of the French colony of Louisiana. Life aboard the oceangoing *Gironde* had been uncomfortable, but now the women encountered the novel adversities and dangers of colonial life. Shallow, rough-hewn pirogues waited to carry them from the mouth of the Mississippi to the settlement of New Orleans, small boats dwarfed by the mighty, muddy torrent that spread out before them. Hiking up heavy black serge habits, they scrambled onto precariously balanced mounds of luggage and bedding and commenced a steamy six-day paddle upriver...The palisades successfully deflected the alligators and snakes that roamed the hot, damp Louisiana nights, but the subtler perils of the swamp took their toll. Summer torrents and swarming insects mocked the limitation of the nuns' strange New World cells, and they passed sleepless nights of tormented swatting and scratching in sodden habits. The women caught cold, their mosquito bites festered, their faces and legs swelled. Marie Hachard's youthful candor overrode religious solemnity when she reported to her father that 'these little troubles bothered us at the time,' but she recaptured the proper missionary spirit when she averred that 'the ardent desire that we had to arrive at this promised land made us endure our trials with joy' (*From Rouen to Louisiana: The Voyage of an Ursuline in 1727*). The women embraced the dangers and discomfort of colonial Louisiana as the missionary's due, a welcome signal that their longed-for colonial adventure in the name of God had finally begun."



**MASTERLESS MISTRESSES: THE NEW ORLEANS URSULINES AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW WORLD SOCIETY, 1727-1834* by Emily Clark.
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A Prayer of Risk*

Tamara Lebak

Holy One who has given us the breath of life,

Today we remember

To breathe deeply

To rest

To take in

To pause before we act...

And then to take in another deep breath
poised on the edge

And risk jumping in

Risk taking action

Risk speaking up

Risk using the gifts we have been given

So that at the end of our life we can say
with absolute clarity

That no part of our existence was wasted
in fear of failure or fear of success.

Hold us;

Prepare us the way to begin to offer the gift
of our awakened presence,

Full of love and light today.

These and the prayers of our hearts
we lift up now in the silence...Amen.

*Used with permission.

For Pondering

In the spirit of Angela, how am I being called today
to move beyond the safety and security of the familiar
into the unknown, to be a risk-taker?