

Administration calls us to . . .

# 1. Breadth of Vision

Every day, human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. . . . Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.

—Second Vatican Council  
*Gaudium et Spes*, 26

Some jobs invite us to do one thing and do it well. We are only responsible for our own piece of the puzzle and need not worry about the rest. That is someone else's job. We don't often know who that someone else is that takes care of the rest; we only know that it should be done. That it *needs* to be done. What many

fail to realize is that the mysterious someone else stitching together the spaces left between all the other jobs is usually the administrator.

Administrators, like kids, come to know the darnedest things. They know the number of the copy-machine repair company and where the paper clips are kept. They know who will be out of the office on vacation in April and how this will affect the launch date for the new program. They know that the IT department can't move on the installation of updated software as scheduled, because an invalid budget code submitted last month has delayed the process. And they know that the plunger is in the janitor's closet on the third floor, on the right side of the mop.

Administrators possess, more than most, a vision of the whole of an organization—an understanding of how all of the parts fit together and work in relation to one another. Rather than being able to see only from one department's viewpoint, they grasp the interplay of all perspectives, and appreciate how they harmonize or compete. They see how the action of one might impact the others. In this way, administration stretches the intellectual capacities of those who hold positions in this field—helping them to illumine dynamics between the components of institutional life that others would miss.

More important, administration can cultivate spiritual growth—expanding not just one's mind but also

one's heart, to love and desire the common good, the flourishing of all. The breadth of vision that administration fosters can lead to a wideness of spirit—magnanimity—in which administrators learn to sublimate even their own agendas and aspirations to what would best serve the good of the whole. They are moved beyond pettiness and fixation on the details toward the big picture. Aristotle considered magnanimity the crowning virtue in his hierarchy of virtues.

To the degree that administrators are able to hold and carry the big picture of an organization, they participate somehow in the mystery of God, who holds and carries the biggest picture of all. They share in something of God's grand vision and spirit and experience something of how God sees and loves our universe. Administrators become, like the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, "friends of God"—persons who are able to empathize with the challenges God faces in a most particular way and therefore serve as good counsel. They understand better than most why things are the way they are and know there is always more to the story than what nearly everyone thinks. They sympathize with the plight of the Creator to answer for the current state of the planet and to deal with the innumerable requests from every nation on earth to uphold its specific agenda. In return, administrators draw inspiration, consolation, and guidance from a

God who sees and loves the whole from the dawn of creation.

When I consider God as the Divine Administrator, the scripture verses that most come to mind are from the opening chapters of Genesis. I have always found it fascinating that Genesis includes two narratives of the earth's creation. The first one (Gn 1:1–2:3) describes creation as a very well-organized event. In due order, light is separated from darkness, then the water from the dry land. Plants arrive, then animals. God carefully prepares the world step-by-step for the arrival of humanity, so that when the first humans come onto the scene on the sixth day, everything they need and more has already been put into place. The second account (Gn 2:4–25) paints a very different picture: God creates the human first and then suddenly realizes, "Oh, this guy is going to need someplace to live!" After fashioning a garden and many animal companions, God wakes up to the fact, "This isn't quite working; my human creature is lonely!" And the being that was once one becomes two.

I often fancy myself imaging God from the first story—carefully unrolling my new program in an orderly, step-by-step process in which everything proceeds smoothly. In reality, my administration often looks far more like the second account: "Oh, welcome

to the staff! Now, I bet you are going to need an office! And, oh yes, a telephone!”

From whichever account we draw our inspiration, counsel, and guidance, however, we recognize that what both share in common is a Creator who takes great care to establish an environment in which life can blossom. God’s primary work is to set a stage, give a space, and create the conditions in which a diversity of creatures can flourish. The God of Genesis is intimately involved in this space. Indeed, in the second account, God enjoys personally walking through the garden. But one doesn’t get the sense that God is micromanaging here; God has created a place where humans are free to roam and discover with very few prohibitions. When humanity violates the one great prohibition, God does not step in and try to fix everything. God sews the humans some clothes—again, remaining intimately involved with them—but leaves them to work out the consequences of their actions.

Likewise, I have come to understand that the primary task of the administrator involves the creation of an environment in which life can flourish. It has to do with establishing and maintaining the kind of order necessary for human freedom and creativity to function unimpeded. It sounds very simplistic, but if the copy machine is working and the stapler has staples, if people know where to turn when they have a concern

and can find out the protocol for addressing a conflict, then the organization becomes the kind of place where good work can naturally happen. Of course, the administrator need not be the one who is refilling the staplers and purchasing reams of paper, but the administrator creates and facilitates an environment that functions, an environment that is fertile with new possibilities. Furthermore, the administrator does not attempt to micromanage every interaction and is not intimately wrapped up in every problem. He or she supports people in the environment to work through issues on their own as much as possible. Administration that takes its inspiration from the Divine Administrator knows how to remain in relationship with people while still leaving them free and responsible for their own actions.

Companion for the Journey:

**Angela Merici**

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Feast: **January 27**

The year was 1540 and Angela Merici knew that the time had come to give her final counsel to those entrusted with the care of the small community of women she had begun to gather around her five years earlier:

This charge must not be a burden for you; on the contrary, you have to thank God most greatly that he has deigned to see to it that you are among those he wants to spend themselves in governing and safeguarding such a treasure [as] his own. . . . Do not be afraid of not knowing and not being able to do what is rightly required in such a singular government. Do something. Get moving. Be confident. Risk new things. Stick with it. Get on your knees. Then be ready for big surprises!

In her closing words, Angela reflects many of the characteristics we will discuss in this book: trust, courage, humility, hope, and—of course—breadth of vision. For Angela, these were characteristics that emerged not at once but over a long lifetime of diverse experiences.

Angela was born sometime around 1470 and lived the whole of her life in northern Italy on the eve of the Council of Trent. Although a contemporary of Michelangelo, Copernicus, and Christopher Columbus, Angela does not seem to have been concerned or affected so much by the artistic, scientific, or political intrigue of her day as by the struggles of poor Italian families, especially women, left in the wake of endless battles between various independent city-states. This was the hidden underside of Renaissance Europe, far from the spotlights of social intrigue.

Orphaned young, Angela never married, instead affiliating herself with the lay Franciscans, who were representative of a spiritual-renewal movement sweeping through Europe between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. Large numbers of Christian lay people, wanting lives more closely modeled on the gospels, sought to pattern their days around prayer and care of the poor, espousing poverty and celibacy. Some of these laity affiliated themselves with new religious orders, such as the Franciscans or Dominicans. Some, such as the Beguines in northern Europe, were less structured.

For women in particular, the emergence of these new forms of discipleship was often liberating. Previously, European women had only two options available to them: marriage or the monastic cloister. Now they had the possibility of remaining single, engaged in the world, but dedicated to apostolic works. Many families, however, were nervous about what would happen to their daughters without the protection of a husband or a monastery. Church leaders were perplexed as to how to channel the diverse energies of the widespread movement in ways that wouldn't fragment the Church's unity or separate these lay people from official Church structures. As a result, lay initiatives were frequently viewed with suspicion and perceived as potentially dangerous.



Like many women of her time, Angela struggled to figure out the right place for herself in the Church and society. Because a significant part of her life was spent in pilgrimage, she witnessed firsthand various lay movements and gleaned new ideas from them. Yet, she had a difficult time finding a fit for her own situation in Brescia. At one point, she visited Rome, where a friend arranged for her a personal audience with the pope. Asked by the pope himself if she would settle in Rome and take leadership of an existing religious community, she considered the request but realized that this was not God's call for her and so returned north.

Angela's travel and reflection had led her to conceive of a new structure for women wanting to live the Christian life that would honor the impulse to be single and active in the world, while at the same time mitigating some of the fears of concerned family members and Church leaders. In Brescia, at the age of sixty-five, Angela finally organized a group of twenty-eight women to form the Company of St. Ursula—so named for a legendary saint from fourth-century England who gathered fellow women companions to make a pilgrimage that ended in martyrdom.

After making their joint commitment to one another, the women in the Company of St. Ursula did not live together in a convent but rather remained with their families or in small clusters on their own. They

wore simple, ordinary clothes rather than a distinguishing habit. They individually supported themselves by their own labor, though when they died it was expected they would leave something to the company as a gift if they were able. Each committed to a life of personal prayer, which varied depending on whether the member could read or not.

Angela prepared a rule for the Company of St. Ursula to live by—the first religious rule known to have been written by a woman for women. In it she offered concrete guidelines about entrance into the company and about how the women were to relate to the wider society, as well as to their local parishes. She designed a structure for governance of the new company in which four members were elected to serve as spiritual guides—or *collonelles*—for the other women. They were to visit each member of the company every two weeks to see how she was doing and help her work through any challenges she faced. In addition, several older women and men from the town, not members of the company themselves, were elected to help members be able to advocate for themselves within a larger society not used to dealing with single women. These elders or matrons were to get involved if any of the members were being treated poorly by their families, needed legal assistance, or could not find a place to live. Angela was extremely practical about the needs single

women would have when they became ill or were displaced from their homes when family members died, especially given that some company members were as young as twelve.

Angela spent the last five years of her life gathering and tending her fledgling new community, continuing to work on structures that would enable them to live as consecrated single women long after she was gone. In her final months, she dictated two sets of instructions. The first, called Angela's *Counsels*, was for the collonelles of the Company of St. Ursula. The second, called the *Legacies* or *Testament*, was for the matrons. In this document, Angela presciently notes,

These being done, as well as other similar things, which the Holy Spirit will prompt, you to do according to times and circumstances, rejoice. . . . And if, according to the times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, do it prudently and with good advice.

Angela models well the creativity and flexibility of God at the dawn of creation. She was able to see a future for herself and for other women that had not been tried before. With courage, she set about trying to build something with no architectural blueprints to rely upon. She sought to create an environment in which women of the Company of St. Ursula could

flourish—with a light structure that enabled them to live with much freedom and independence, but also a safety net to catch them if they found themselves in trouble. In doing so, Angela provided not only a vision for the company, but also a practical day-to-day means of implementing that vision. Furthermore, she was open to allowing her work to evolve, not insisting that her own ideas be preserved for generations to come. The big picture of what God had planned for her company, she realized, might be larger than what even she could see.

### *For Reflection and Prayer*

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1. How has your experience of administration helped to expand your vision of the whole? In what specific ways has it stretched your heart to love more widely?
2. Can you think of or share the story of a time when you let go of your own agenda or aspiration because you realized, as administrator, that there was a larger common good?
3. Is there a situation in your administrative ministry at present where you may be challenged to take a broader view? What do you want to do about it?

4. What insights does the life of St. Angela offer in your efforts to live with a big-picture vision?

Divine Creator,

May the administrative work that I undertake  
grow within me a greatness of vision,  
enabling me to see the common good more  
clearly.

May it stir within me a greatness of spirit,  
enabling me to love the common good more  
wholeheartedly.

In the weeks ahead, fashion my administrative  
ministry  
to more closely reflect your intimate care for all of  
creation.

God of Eden's garden, show me what it means  
to create an environment where all whom I serve  
can thrive.

Amen.