



**Shouting at the Angels: Visual Experience in Angela of Foligno's  
*Memoriale*<sup>1</sup>**  
**Gritar a los ángeles: Experiencia visual en el *Memoriale* de Ángela de  
Foligno**

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**Abstract:** This article is part of the scholarly revival in Angela of Foligno (c. 1248-c. 1308) studies in relation to images. With the exhibition entitled *Dal visibile all'indicibile. Crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno* (Foligno, October 6th, 2012 – January 6th, 2013) and the publication of the catalogue, relations between Angela's visions and her artistic context have been examined in greater depth. However, despite the excellent essays included in the book, there is still lacking a theoretical basis to explain Angela's devotional relationship with some images and, in particular, her reception of them. The main aim of these pages is therefore to develop that theoretical background and to interpret from such a basis the events that occurred in Assisi in front of the so-called “vetrata degli angeli” (the stained glass window of the angels).

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SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
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**Resumen:** Este artículo se encuadra en la actual ola de estudios sobre Ángela de Foligno (c. 1248-c. 1308) y las imágenes. Después de la exposición titulada *Dal visibile all'indicibile. Crocefissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno* (Foligno, 6 de octubre de 2012 – 6 de enero de 2013) y de la publicación de su catálogo, se han ampliado los vínculos trazados entre sus visiones y su contexto artístico. Sin embargo, a pesar de los excelentes ensayos incluidos en el volumen, aún se echa en falta una base teórica que explique la relación devocional de Ángela con algunas imágenes y, en particular, su recepción de las mismas. Aportar tal trasfondo teórico será uno de los objetivos de estas páginas. El segundo, será interpretar desde la perspectiva desarrollada el suceso ante la “*vetrata degli angeli*”, central en el *Memoriale* y en la vivencia angelana.

**Keywords:** Angela of Foligno – *Memoriale* – Franciscan Art – Devotion – Vision.

**Palabras clave:** Ángela de Foligno – *Memoriale* – Arte franciscano – Devoción – Visión.

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## I. Angela and the *imago* in a devotional context

Et tunc in praedicta secunda vice, statim quando genuflexi in introitu ecclesie et vidi sanctum Franciscum depictum in sinu Christi, dixit mihi: “Ita te astrictam tenebo et multo quam possit considerari oculis corporis. Et modo est hora quod, filia dulcis, templum meum, adimpleo quod dixi tibi quia pro ista consolatione dimitto te, sed te non dimittam unquam se me diliges”.<sup>3</sup>

Then, in this second time, as soon as I had genuflected at the entrance of the church and when I saw a stained-glass window depicting St. Francis being closely held by Christ, I heard him telling me: “Thus I will hold you closely to me and much more closely than can be observed with the eyes of the body. And now the time has come, sweet daughter, my temple, my delight, to fulfill my promise to you. I am about to leave you in the form of this consolation, but I will never leave you if you love me”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> We will quote the Latin *Memoriale* text from the new E. Menestò edition: MENESTÒ, Enrico. *Angela da Foligno. Memoriale*, Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo - SISMEI, 2013, which we will abbreviate as Menestò. In this case we can find the quote in Menestò, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> We will use Paul Lachance’s version for the English translation (LACHANCE, Paul. *Angela of Foligno. Complete Works*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993), which we will abbreviate as Lachance: in this case, Lachance, p. 141. Since he uses Thier-Calufetti’s edition (THIER,



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média*  
*Mulier aut Femina. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media*  
*Mulier aut Femina. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages*

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

The quoted text is one of the highlights of the *Memoriale*, the first “auto hagiography” in Europe<sup>5</sup>, which was dictated in the vernacular by Angela of Foligno, a Franciscan tertiary in 13th century Umbria<sup>6</sup>. Here she is explaining to Brother A., transcriber and translator of her words, the cause of a public scandal that occurred when she arrived in Assisi (c. 1291) and began to shout at the entrance of the Basilica Maggiore, immediately in front of the so-called “*vetrata degli angeli*” (“the stained glass window of the angels”).<sup>7</sup> There, at the very end of a pilgrimage and looking at the figure of Saint Francis *in sinu Christi*, she felt abandoned by a presence which had been invading her throughout her journey. The narration goes on to describe the effects of this departure, coupled with a vision and an anxious question from Brother A.:

“Et tunc quatumcumque esset vebum amarum, tamen tunc in ipso verbo tantam dulcedinem sensi quod fuit valde dulcissimum. Et tunc respexi ut viderem etiam oculis corporis et mentis”. Et cum ego frater hic quererem ab ea et dicerem “quid vidisti?”, ipsa respondit dicens: “Vidi rem plenam, maiestatem immensam quam nescio dicere, sed videbatur michi quod erat omne bonum”<sup>8</sup>.

“Bitter in some ways as these words were for me to hear, I nonetheless experienced them above all as sweet, the sweetest I have ever heard. Then I turned my gaze on the one speaking to me so that I might also see him not only with the eyes of the body but also with those of the spirit”. I, brother scribe, interrupted at this point to ask her: “What did you see?” She replied: “I

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Ludger and CALUFETTI, Abele. *Il libro della beata Angela da Foligno. Edizione critica*. Grottaferrata: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1985), as the basis for his translation this presents minimal variations between Latin and English texts.

<sup>5</sup> The expression «*autohagiografía*» comes from LEONARDI, Claudio. “Agiografia”, in *La produzione del testo* [vol. 1,2 of *Lo spazio letterario del Medioevo 1. Il medioevo latino*, G. Cavallo et al (eds.), Roma: Salerno Editrice, 1993], p. 421-462.

<sup>6</sup> For an introduction to Angela’s historical figure and works: CIRLOT, Victoria and GARÍ, Blanca. *La mirada interior. Escritoras místicas y visionarias en la Edad Media*, Madrid: Siruela, 2008 [1ª ed. 1999], p. 177-205 and GUARNIERI, Romana. “Angela, mistica europea”, in MENESTÒ, Enrico (ed.). *Angela da Foligno, Terziaria Franciscana*, Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo: Spoleto 1992, p. 39-82.

<sup>7</sup> GIUSTO, Egidio M. *Le vetrate di San Francisco in Assisi. Studio iconografico*, Milano: Alfieri e Lacroix, 1911, p. 234-235, where he talks about this particular stained glass window. POULENC, Jerome. “Saint François dans le ‘vitrail des anges’ de l’église supérieure de la basilique d’Assise”, in *Archivium Franciscanum Historicum* 76 (1983), p. 701-713. See too the historical references included at the following site by the Italian “Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche”(CNR):

[http://www.icvbc.cnr.it/bivi/schede/Umbria/Assisi/13sanfrancesco\\_sup.htm](http://www.icvbc.cnr.it/bivi/schede/Umbria/Assisi/13sanfrancesco_sup.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Menestò, p. 26.

saw something full of such immense majesty that I do not know how to describe it, but it seemed to me that it was the All Good”.<sup>9</sup>

Imagem 1



Christ holding Francis and Mary holding Christ (Basilica Superiore, Assisi, c.1275). Foto Gerhard Ruf, Archivio Sacro Convento, Assisi.

<sup>9</sup> Lachance, p. 142.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17* (2013/2)  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

As we know, during this period *Omne Bonum* was one of the names given to God, in particular to the divinity as perceived after death or during a revelation.<sup>10</sup> The relationship between a well-known stained glass window and the visionary status of Angela has been essential to the prominence that scholars have given to inquiries into her relationship with “art”.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, studies devoted to the visuality of the *Memoriale* arrived at a very important point with the exhibition commissioned at Palazzo Trinci in Foligno entitled *Dal visibile all’indicibile. Crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno* (October 6th, 2012 – January 6th, 2013) and with the publication of its catalogue under the same name.<sup>12</sup> In both the exhibition and the book we observe a real search for connections between what Angela “historically saw” and different works of art with Italian origins.

Strangely, however, there is little material in this book that offers a theoretical basis for Angela’s relationship with the images of the period.<sup>13</sup> Some authors manage a vague idea of “iconography” which they draw on in relation to Angela’s experiences in a variety of ways: for instance, they relate some Umbrian representations to her visions, asserting that what she describes was influenced by historical religious artifacts.<sup>14</sup> We will not deny that such a link exists, but we will provide a historical basis for it, trying to understand how such images might have been perceived by a penitent of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

In so doing, we will interpret why Angela shouted in front of Assisi’s angels. What was the importance of this particular image at that critical moment on her *via*? The main aim of this article is to answer this question, interpreting

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<sup>10</sup> See TROTTMANN, Christian. *La vision béatifique. Des disputes scholastiques á sa définition par Benoît XII*. Rome: École Française de Rome, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, NARI, Monica Chiellini, “La contemplazione e le immagini: il ruolo dell’iconografia nel pensiero della beata Angela da Foligno”, in E. Menestò (ed.), *Angela da Foligno. Terziaria Francescana*, Centro italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo, Spoleto 1992, p. 227-250 or the reflections and quoted bibliography in SENSI, Mario. “Foligno all’incrocio delle strade”, in BARONE, Giulia and DALARUN, Jacques (eds.). *Angèle de Foligno. Le dossier*, Rome: École française de Rome, 1999, p. 286-292.

<sup>12</sup> BASSETTI, Massimiliano and TOSCANO, Bruno. *Dal visibile all’indicibile: crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno*, Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps with the only exception of the discussion that we find in TOSCANO, Bruno. “Dieci immagini al tempo di Angela”, in *Dal visibile all’indicibile cit.*, p. 97-116.

<sup>14</sup> SENSI, Mario. “Gli spazi del Liber: Sette luoghi angelani”, in *idem*, p. 45-82.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

this window from Angela's point of view and providing, at the same time, a historical context on the visuality of the Later Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup>

A first step in understanding Angela's perceptive experience would be to broaden in *Memoriale* studies the notion of "iconography" (which isolates single objects) to "visual culture" (which talks about a complex interrelated system of phenomena). For instance, as J. F. Hamburger says in relation to late medieval devotional contexts<sup>16</sup>:

To stress the importance of "visual culture" is not to champion that the notion could exist. Quite the opposite: as I understand the term, it is to insist on the historicity of visual experience –what has since come to be called "visuality"– and the degree to which what and how we see depends on the complex, deeply ingrained protocols, some unconscious, some carefully controlled, still others self-consciously cultivated.

The "protocols" to which Hamburger refers are implied in how images were conceived of during Angela's lifetime: far from being passive objects for looking at, they were handled by the devotees as devices or tools with different functions, and located in a wider system of perception, in which the five external senses had to be complemented with the five internal ones.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, as we read in the first quotation above, Angela *sees* the *Omne Bonum* in a sort of interregnum between the interior and the exterior worlds: "Et tunc

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<sup>15</sup> Much of the theoretical perspectives which we adopt in this article in relation to medieval images are developed in our Ph.D. thesis *Poética de la visibilidad en el Mirouer des simples ames de Marguerite Porete*. Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2009, which is available online via the following link: <http://hdl.handle.net/10803/7448>. For a summary of our points of view on medieval imagination, see our "Images for Deification: Visual Literacy in Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*", in Conner Farris, Aundreta and Pattenden, Frida (eds.). *Exploring Visual Literacies Inside, Outside and Through the Frame*. Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2012, p. 123-132.

<sup>16</sup> HAMBURGER, Jeffrey H. *The Visual and the Visionary*, Nueva York: Zone Books, 1998, p. 28. In general, our points of view about medieval images and devotion are indebted to the works of this art historian, in particular to *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1990 and *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997.

<sup>17</sup> For this "protocols" applied to medieval images in devotional contexts, see RINGBOM, Sixten. *Les images de dévotion. XIIe-XVe siècle*, Paris: Gérard Monfort Éditeur, 1995, p. 18-23. For the medieval Christian tradition on the inner perception, see CIRLOT, Victoria. *Hildegard von Bingen y la tradición visionaria de Occidente*, Barcelona: Herder, 2005.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17* (2013/2)  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

respexi ut viderem etiam oculis corporis et mentis” [“I might also see him not only with the eyes of the body but also with those of the spirit”].<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand and at the same time, this focus on the image as a mediation (as a *medium*) between the Soul and the Divinity presents another dimension which we have to take into account in our analysis: in explicit religious contexts such as that of the *Memoriale*, images always involve a theological aspect. They relate to the construction of a discourse about God: they represent him in a visual manner, helping souls on their journey towards him.

As a consequence of all of this, devotional images from the Low Middle Ages are sometimes presented to us in the texts as unclear objects involving mental, verbal, theological and artistic facets, all of which were previously integrated in the how the term “image” was understood. Again, as J. F. Hamburger has stated<sup>19</sup>:

The ambiguous character of the term *imago* can be a source of consternation for modern readers in search of documentation on medieval art. The word’s range of reference encompasses the material, the immaterial, and almost everything between. What the modern reader seeks to distinguish, however, medieval authors often sought to elide. The equivocal character of the *imago* was ideally suited to the protocols of medieval meditational practice, which were founded on the possibility of a deliberate, if disciplined, transition from the material to the immaterial.

This situation compels us to analyse Angela’s images from a cross-sectional point of view which recognises the diverse planes of meaning that the term implies and which respects its historically determinate use and, above all, its historical responses.<sup>20</sup> In addition, we should give a conceptual turn upon Late Medieval devotional contexts, exchanging the notion of “religious art” for “religious image”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Menestò, p. 26 and Lachance, p. 142, respectively.

<sup>19</sup> *St. John the Divine. The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2002, p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> We can infer this necessity from the points of view expressed in MITCHELL, William J. Thomas. “What Is an Image?”, in *Iconology. Image, Text, Ideology*, London: Chicago University Press, 1986, p. 7-46.

<sup>21</sup> *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Chicago University Press, Londres 1994 [1<sup>a</sup> ed. 1990]



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

In particular, in comprehending certain responses to devotional objects we have to understand that the principal aim of these objects was to affect the viewer through identification. As H. Belting has asserted<sup>22</sup>:

La devozione è un modulo collettivo di religiosità che di fronte alle immagini iniziò un modulo analogo di contemplazione. Dalle immagini ci si attendeva che rispondessero allo stato d'animo del fedele, o meglio, che lo suscitassero. La persona dell'immagine e quella che la guarda erano in relazione mimetica, la seconda cercava di assimilarsi alla prima, volendo ricevere, di ritorno, la vitalità che egli stesso possedeva... Contrariamente alla progressiva perdita dell'immagine materiale e sensoriale proclamata dalla mistica, l'immagine dipinta diventa sempre più corporea, sempre più loquace, permettendo all'individuo di ricercare nel dialogo una conferma di sé.

It seems clear that this affective response is what we find in Angela's case. In fact, there are multiple fragments in the *Memoriale* pointing to her sensitivity to images. This is evident in some of the *passus* in the first series (clearly from the seventh to the fourteenth, at least) where she talks about the cross with all the ambiguity that the concept of *imago* implies: in the physical sense (as a *place* for focusing the meditation) and in the mental one (for example, as an object of the imagination connected with the revival of Christ's passion or as a symbol of the presence of God within).<sup>23</sup>

In other cases she narrates a real interaction with images as devotional objects: we find the moment when she undresses in front of the cross, walking nude and offering herself to the dead Christ<sup>24</sup>, or in the midst of a moment of crisis in which her neighbours thought that she was *indaemoniata* [possessed] when she was unable to stand in front of a depiction of the Passion:

“Et quando videbam passionem Christi pictam, vix poteram sustinere, sed capiebar me febris et infirmabar, unde socia mea abscondebat a me picturas passionis et studebat abscondere”.<sup>25</sup>

“Also, whenever I saw the passion of Christ depicted, I could hardly bear it and I would come down with a fever and fall sick. My companion, as a result, hid paintings of the passion or did her best to keep them out of my sight”.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> BELTING, Hans. *L'arte e il suo pubblico. Funzione e forme delle antiche immagini della passione*, Bologna: Nova Alfa, 1986 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1981], p. 66.

<sup>23</sup> Menestò, p. 6-9 and Lachance, p. 125-128.

<sup>24</sup> Eighth *passus*: Menestò, p. 6 and Lachance, p. 125-126.

<sup>25</sup> Menestò, p. 13.





SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17* (2013/2)  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

These passages are historical clues that help us to locate Angela in a very specific devotional context, in which her quest for God is marked and supported by images. In any case, despite the fact that we can easily link certain images that she used with some iconographic models of her time<sup>27</sup> the only clear historical object which she integrates in the *Memoriale* is the stained glass window of the angels in Assisi: let us try to comprehend what happened there.

## II. The pilgrimage and ascent to Assisi as a symbol

This stained glass window is located in the Basilica Maggiore di San Francesco, where it is the first window on the left of the entrance seen from inside the church. We observe the depiction of Saint Francis embraced by Christ in front of which Angela cried: “Amor incognite, quare et quare et quare?” [“Love still unknown, why? why? why?”].<sup>28</sup>

Before interpreting why it happened exactly at this point in time and in front of this particular image we should remind ourselves of the narrative background in the *Memoriale*:

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<sup>26</sup> Lachance, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> See the multiple examples in BASSETTI, Massimiliano and TOSCANO, Bruno. *Op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Menestò, p. 26 and Lachance, p. 142, respectively.

**Imagem 2**



The stained glass window of the angels (Basilica Superiore, Assisi, c. 1275). Image taken from BASSETTI, Massimiliano and TOSCANO, Bruno. *Dal visibile all'indicibile: crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno*. Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2012, p. 65.

Unde et quando tunc ibat ad Sanctum Franciscum rogabat eum, scilicet beatum Franciscum, quod predictam gratiam ei acquireret a Domino Iesu Christo; et multa alia referebat quod postulabat in illa oratione quam faciebat per illam viam. Et quando ipsa pervenit inter Spellum et viam artam que est ultra Spellum et ascendit sursum versus Assisium, ibi in trivio dictum est ei ita: “Tu rogasti servum meum Franciscum et ego nolui mittere alium nuntium. Et ego



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17* (2013/2)  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

sum Spiritus Sanctus qui veni ad te ut darem tibi consolationem quam nunquam gustasti”.<sup>29</sup>

It was then, when she was on her way to the church of St. Francis that she asked me (that is blessed Francis) that he obtain for her the aforesaid graces from the Lord Jesus Christ. She related many other things which she had asked for in the prayer she was making on her way between Spello and Assisi. At this junction of three roads, on a narrow path that lies between Spello and Assisi, it was said to her: “You prayed to my servant Francis but I did not want to send you any other messenger than myself. I am the Holy Spirit who comes to you to give you a consolation which you have never tasted before”.<sup>30</sup>

As V. Cirlot and B. Garí have asserted about Angela’s biography, we must read every single element of her narration at an ambiguous level, both historical and symbolical.<sup>31</sup> Since she is conscious of her tale as a product that is first to be written down and later read, she necessarily constructs the story with cultural elements to be decoded by others. As such, the words and images that she decides to use are highly significant in a hermeneutical analysis.

For example, as Brother A. relates here, Angela tells us that she is walking on a narrow path (*viam artam*) through the fields of Umbria in pilgrimage towards the tomb of Saint Francis in Assisi (*versus Assisium*) and that, suddenly, at a crossroads of three ways (*trivio*) the Holy Spirit speaks to her from within: neither the place where this occurs, nor the landscape that she depicts for the recipient are gratuitous.

In a geographical sense, Angela is describing the triple crossroads that a pedestrian finds upon leaving Spello (a village between Foligno and Assisi) and heading towards the San Francesco *basilicae*, which are on the top of a mountain.<sup>32</sup> However, in a metaphorical sense, she is depicting a spiritual space based on a very widespread tradition: the image of the *viator* walking

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<sup>29</sup> Menestò, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Lachance, p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>32</sup> See the photographs of and reflections on the space in SENSI, Mario. “Gli spazi del *Liber*: Sette luoghi angelani”, en BASSETTI, Massimiliano and TOSCANO, Bruno. *Dal visibile all'indicibile: crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno*, Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2012, p. 45-82.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

along a path that ultimately leads to God.<sup>33</sup> Mountains are found in the mythologies of multiple religions, where they are one of the most common symbols for expressing the *axis mundi* and the possibility of making contact with the divine. In Christianity, we find innumerable uses of this image in a long-established tradition.

In this narrative, Angela's historical ascent to the temple at the top of the mountain during her pilgrimage turns into a symbolic image, in which her soul tries to get closer to God. The use that she makes of the term *via*, for example, points to this, because in spiritual contexts this term denoted both a physical path and a spiritual way of attaining perfection.<sup>34</sup> In later instances of this diagram, such as the *montecillo* of John of the Cross, we find this triple *via* ascending a mountain towards the divinity where the central path, the *artam* ("narrow"), is the only correct one.<sup>35</sup>

Focusing on the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards and particularly in mendicant circles, the image of the journey is combined with a didactic function in what C. Heck has called *l'échelle céleste*: a diagram of spiritual perfection in textual form or in the form of an artistic image used for teaching, meditative practice and devotion, sometimes combined with the mountain image.<sup>36</sup>

The influence of this *schema* on Angela is clear, since the structure of the *Memoriale* as a whole is based on two of these spatial and gradual diagrams: when she starts to tell her story to Brother A. she tries to divide her experience into thirty steps; however, just before relating the events in Assisi,

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<sup>33</sup> This image is essential in Christian literature, see HARMS, Wolfgang. *Homo viator in Bivio. Studien zur Bildlichkeit des Weges*, München: Wilhelm Fink, 1970. In the mysticism of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, especially among women, the image is developed besides the neoplatonic theme of the "exile" and the necessity of *redditus*, or the return to God. In Angela's particular case this image is mixed with the theme of the pilgrimage and the pilgrim who comes to the Soul, see FAES, Barbara. "Venuta e dimora dell Pellerino nell'anima nel *Memoriale* di Angela da Foligno", in *Il Liber di Angela da Foligno: Temi spirituali e mistici*, ALFONSI, Domenico and VEDOVA, Massimo (eds.). Spoleto: Centro di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2010, p. 37-68.

<sup>34</sup> See our philological analysis in GARCÍA ACOSTA, Pablo. *Op. cit.*, p. 46-53.

<sup>35</sup> SERRA ZAMORA, Anna. "Mappa Animae'. La visione dell'interiorità in san Giovanni della Croce", in ZAMBON, Francesco (ed.), *La Visione*, Milano: Medusa, 2012, págs. 155-178.

<sup>36</sup> See the multiple examples given in HECK, Christian. *L'échelle céleste dans l'art du Moyen Âge: Une histoire de la quête du ciel*, Paris: Flammarion, 1999.

she exchanges it for a model consisting of only seven.<sup>37</sup> The experience which she is recounting here would represent the first step on this second ladder. In short, at this critical point at the beginning of her ascent to Assisi, Angela describes something that her contemporaries knew very well: a Soul which prepares itself for a quest for God, as we can observe, for example, in the diagram found in Ioannes Climacus' *Scala Paradisi*<sup>38</sup>:

Imagem 3



Ioannes Climacus' *Scala Paradisi* (Icon from the Monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai, Egypt, 12<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>37</sup> In Heck's iconographic apparatus there are multiple gradual ascents that we can easily relate to Angela's context, and a variety of textual sources as well. On the one hand, we can assert that Ioannes Climacus' thirty steps model in his *Scala coeli* and its visual representations are related to Angela's initial organisation of her experience (and, as a consequence, of her text); on the other, it is apparent that mystics who are contemporary with Angela, especially women, tend to adopt the model of a ladder with seven steps. The best explanation of why this occurs is in POZZI, Giovanni. *Angela da Foligno. Il libro dell'esperienza*, Milano: Adelphi, 1992 [new revised edition, 2001], p. 84-85.

<sup>38</sup> The best collection and discussion on Climacus' treatise illustration is MARTIN, John R. *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

Perhaps Angela's main point of difference with other symbolic ascensions of that period, if we understand spiritual perfection as the unitive moment, is that this occurs, in Angela's case, at the bottom of the mountain. There she receives her first *allocutione* or the first open communication from the divinity perceived by her from within:

Et ego sum Spiritus Sanctus qui veni ad te ut darem tibi consolationem quam nunquam gustasti; et veniam tecum intus te usque in Sanctum Franciscum et non perpendent aliqui; et volo venire loquendo tecum per viam istam et non dabo finem locutioni et tu non poteris facere aliud quia ego levavi te; et non discedam a te usque quo secunda vice venies in Sanctum Franciscum; et tunc discedam a te secundum istam consolationem, sed a te non discedam de cetero unquam si me diliges".<sup>39</sup>

I am the Holy Spirit who comes to you to give you a consolation which you never tasted before. I will accompany you and then be within you until you reach Saint Francis's church; and no one will notice it. I wish to speak with you on this path and there will be no end to my speaking. You will not be able to do otherwise than listen because I have bound you fast. And I will not leave you until the second time you enter the church of St. Francis. Then this particular consolation will leave you, but I will never leave you if you love me.<sup>40</sup>

If we take into account Angela's relationship with mendicant spirituality and the general tendencies of the feminine mysticism of the time, we will understand this situation in its all plenitude. As B. McGinn has noted, in the mysticism of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the image of the "abyss of Love" becomes the feminine religious symbol *par excellence* for expressing the unitive moment with God.<sup>41</sup> From our perspective, this responds to a general tendency supported by mendicant spirituality in which Humility is seen as first among the Virtues.

In symbolic terms, this affects the entire conceptualization of spatial images, and especially the traditional polarity in which God is considered to be at the top of a schema and the devotee at the bottom. The image-idea of a "fall" as sin (as we observe in Ioannes Climacus icon) or the negative polarities in general become subverted in authors like Marguerite Porete, Methchild of

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<sup>39</sup> Menestò, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Lachance, p. 139.

<sup>41</sup> MCGINN, Bernard. "The Abyss of Love", in *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God: Studies in Honour of J. Leclercq*, E. R. Elder (ed.), Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publication, 1995, p. 95-120.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

Magdeburg and Angela of Foligno.<sup>42</sup> The place of the union is not located at the top of the mountain anymore, but in a lower space: in this case at its very bottom.

Continuing this subversion, the Holy Spirit promises that he will be with Angela during the pilgrimage, but that he will leave her when she arrives at the summit. The words which he pronounces after this express the unitive moment through what P. Ricoeur has called the “nuptial metaphor”<sup>43</sup>:

Et incepit dicere: “Filia mea, dulcis michi, filia mea, delectum meum, templum meum, filia, delectum meum, ama me, quia tu es multum amata a me, multum plus quam tu ames me”. Et sepissime dicebat: “Filia et sponsa, dulcis mihi”. Et dixit: “Ego diligo te multum. Et postquam ego colcavi me in te, modo colca te tu in me. Tu rogasti servum meum Franciscum; et quia servus meus Franciscus multum me dilexit, ideo multum feci sibi. Et si adhuc esset aliqua persona que plus me diligeret, plus facerem ei”<sup>44</sup>.

Then he began to say: “My daughter, my dear and sweet daughter, my delight, my temple, my beloved daughter, love me, because you are very much loved by me; much more than any other woman in the valley of Spoleto. I have found a place to rest in you; now you in turn place yourself and find your own rest on me. You prayed to my servant Francis and because my servant Francis loved me very much, I, therefore, did much for him. And I will do for you what I did for my servant Francis, and more if you love me”<sup>45</sup>.

Angela starts her ascent to Assisi in a loving relationship with God, in which she is called *filia*, *sponsa* and *amata*. This situation will explain, in part, what happened at the top of the mountain.

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<sup>42</sup> CIRLOT, Victoria. “La mística femenina medieval, una tradición olvidada”, in GÓMEZ i OLIVER, Valentí (ed.), *Oculto pero invisible: Voces femeninas*, Barcelona: Publicacions de la residència d’investigadors, 2006, p. 85-95. We develop this idea in relation with the schema of the ascent and fall in Marguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des simples ames* in *op. cit.*, p. 72-89 and in “Ermeneutica dell’immagine ne *Le Mirouer des simples ames di Marguerite Porete*. Il caso dell’aquila di Ezechiele”, in *Atti del Istituto Veneto Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, 168 (2010), p. 219-254.

<sup>43</sup> RICOEUR, Paul and LACOCQUE, André. *Pensar la Biblia: Estudios exegéticos y hermenéuticos*, Barcelona: Herder, 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Menestò, p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> Lachance, 139-140. Variations in the text are due to the fact that he is following the text edited in Thier-Calufetti, p. 180.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

### III. The angels and Saint Francis being embraced by Christ

As we have seen, Angela ascends the mountain towards Assisi in a continuous communication with God and arrives at the main church in this way. As the Holy Spirit had promised, the second time that she penetrates the perimeter of the church he abandons her. In this moment she is staring at the stained glass window which remains today:

The first element that we should note in the composition of the window is the presence of six angels. We know that we should probably understand Angela's name as part of a second "baptism" following the Franciscan tradition, and that, in this sense, it is symbolic.<sup>46</sup> In the medieval hierarchical image of the world, angels were the closest beings to God: they were the creatures for whom continuous contemplation is permitted in eternity.<sup>47</sup>

"Angela" makes reference to the seraphic women who conformed to the image of Francis (and, therefore, of Christ), the human who was penetrated by the divine love-understanding and could communicate it to the rest of the believers. This explains her position as *magistra theologorum* which we can confirm in certain passages of the book.<sup>48</sup> The concept which lies underneath of this absorption of divine knowledge is, again, the union with God which provides her with his wisdom. In this sense, staring at these glass angels, Angela was in front of mimetic images of herself.

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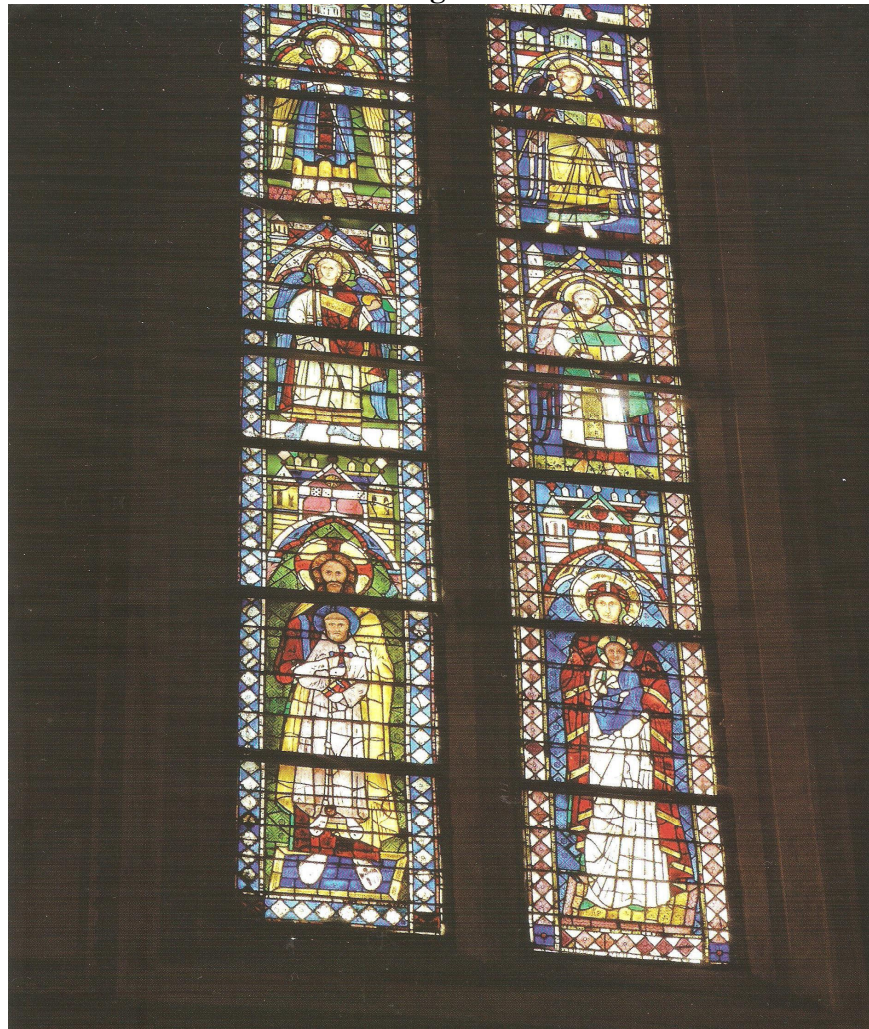
<sup>46</sup> Angelo Clareno (c. 1255-1337), a spiritual franciscan leader contemporary to Angela, is in the same situation (see POTESITÀ, Gian Luca. *Angelo Clareno. Dai poveri eremiti ai fraticelli*. Rome: Istituto Palazzo Borromini, 1990). Angela seems to allude to the symbolic status of her name in Menestò, p. 68: "Et postquam remaneo tantu contenta, tantum angelica...".

<sup>47</sup> See the suggestive structure of the medieval universe described by LEWIS, Clive Staples. *La imagen del mundo*, Barcelona, Antoni Bosch, 1980. On the angeleology of the *Memoriale*, see B. FAES DE MOTTONI, Barbara. "Gli angeli nel Liber", in BARONE, Giulia and DALARUN, Jacques (eds.). *Angèle de Foligno. Le dossier*, Rome: École française de Rome, 1999, p. 185-202.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Menestò, p. 60-61, when Brother A. came to her for answers to delicate questions which he had been discussing with another monk.



Imagem 4



The Angels, Christ, Mary and Francis (Basilica Superiore, Assisi, c. 1275).  
 Image taken from BASSETTI, Massimiliano and TOSCANO, Bruno. *Dal visibile all'indicibile: crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno*. Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2012, p. 44.

On the other hand, as a women-angel, Angela has a body: her visions, revelations and *allocutiones* show a somatic character which underlies the concept of *theosis* or *deificatio*, an oriental doctrine which in similar situations was considered heretical.<sup>49</sup> However, as lover of God, Angela considers

<sup>49</sup> DESPLACES, E. *et al.* "Divinisation", in VILLER, Marcel *et al* (eds.). *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité ascétique et mystique. Doctrine et Histoire*, Beauchesne, Paris 1937, vol. III: c. 1370-1459.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

herself not just as a bride of Christ, but as a woman-Christ, in the sense that the divinity which has invaded her Soul has taken over her entire nature, Will included. Taking all of this into account, the figure of Francis *in sinu Christi* was likely to have been understood by Angela as a depiction of the seventh angel, a human-seraph, in the stained glass.

This interpretation supports the hypothesis of G. Pozzi about the representation of Mary holding a Christ-child on the right, reinforcing the perfect identification of Francis and Christ (“la perfetta conformità di Francesco e Cristo”).<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, the affective link between Mary and her son is clear in the devotional images of the period and earlier<sup>51</sup>; on the other, the parallel between the two images seems to point to the identification of this filiation, this perfect loving union.

Returning to Angela’s point of view, we must remember the words uttered by the divinity in front of the window, because they compose a real hermeneutical approach, giving clues about how Angela understood the window and not just the how but the why of her crisis.

... dixit mihi: “Ita te astrictam tenebo et multo quam possit considerari oculis corporis. Et modo est hora quod, filia dulcis, templum meum, adimpleo quod dixi tibi quia pro ista consolatione dimitto te, sed te non dimittam unquam se me diliges”.<sup>52</sup>

... I heard him telling me: “Thus I will hold you closely to me and much more closely than can be observed with the eyes of the body. And now the time has come, sweet daughter, my temple, my delight, to fulfil my promise to you. I am about to leave you in the form of this consolation, but I will never leave you if you love me”.<sup>53</sup>

As we know, one of the possible senses of the Latin words “te astrictam tenebo” is the image of the embrace, which in the *Memoriale* is always related in erotic and unitive contexts, particularly those in which Angela is developing

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<sup>50</sup> POZZI, Giovanni. *Op. cit.*, p. 102-103.

<sup>51</sup> See FULTON, Rachel. *From Judgement to Passion. Devotion to Christ and Virgin Mary, 800-1200*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 and NEFF, Amy. “The Pain of Compassio: Mary’s Labor at the Foot of the Cross”, in *The Art Bulletin*, 80/2 (1998), p. 254-273.

<sup>52</sup> Menestò, p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Lachance, p. 141.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

her loving relationship with Christ.<sup>54</sup> If we remember that from the beginning of the divine contact at the bottom of the mountain to the second time Angela enters the basilica, the language which the divine voice uses is that of erotic love (“... Filia mea, dulcis michi, filia mea, delectum meum, templum meum, filia, delectum meum, ama me”), we should interpret this moment as a terrible anticlimax for Angela.

Since she is being abandoned by the divinity, her supposed devotional identification with the Francis-being-embraced image can be seen as a Paradise which is disappearing. Of course, the mimetic identification process is due to the devotional characteristics of the image as much as it is to the experiential details of Angela’s particular history: in the text she marks the exact position where she was in the church space (“in introitu ecclesie”), a point which coincides exactly with the stylised vestibule which frames the figure of Christ and Francis.

Another important textual detail for Angela’s interpretation of the stained glass window is the position of Francis with respect to Christ as described by the divine voice. In the *Memoriale* we read that “sanctum Franciscum depictum *in sinu* Christi”. This detail, not translated in P. Lachance’s version, can be expressed in English as either the “chest” or the “breast” of Christ. Both images are connected with an iconography that was widespread in the Late Middle Ages: John the Evangelist resting on the chest of Christ during the Last Supper and the images of breastfeeding related to Christ and the Virgin Mary<sup>55</sup>:

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<sup>54</sup> For the Christian sources of this metaphor, see SENSI, Mario. “Gi spazi del *Liber*” cit., p. 72.

<sup>55</sup> HAMBURGER, Jeffrey F. *St. John the Divine. The Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-Londres: University of California Press, 2002. In addition, BYNUM, Caroline Walker, *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-Londres: UCP, 1982, p. 110-169, has studied the cultural aspects of the image of nursing in the Middle Ages.

Imagem 5



John resting *in sinu Christi* (Antiphonary for St. Katharinental, Upper Rhine, ca. 1300. Vatican Library, Cod. Vat. Lat. 10771, fol. 188v, detail). Image taken from HAMBURGER, Jeffrey F. *St. John the Divine: the Deified Evangelist in Medieval Art and Theology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, Plate 14.

As we know, this is a very common image in the devotional context of the Late Middle Ages. It seems to be the basis of the expression pronounced by the Holy Spirit: “Et postquam ego colcavi me in te, modo colca te tu in me” [“I have found a place to rest in you; now you turn place yourself and find your own rest on me”]<sup>56</sup>, in the unitive moment at the bottom of the mountain.

<sup>56</sup> Menestò, p. 25 and Lachance, p. 139.

This resting, as a physical motif indicating intimate contact, implies not only the loving union of John with Christ, but the possibility of hearing and receiving the divine wisdom from inside him. As we know, the theme was earlier combined with the image of “drinking the divine knowledge”, in particular from the wound of the Savior’s side.<sup>57</sup>

As we can infer from different fragments of Angela’s testimony, she was not unaware of this tradition and some of the experiences that she recounts to Brother A. appear similar to somatic experiences that are common in the Italian feminine mysticism of the period. Consider, for instance, that of Catherina of Siena<sup>58</sup>:

**Imagem 6**



Catherine of Siena embracing Christ (Raymund of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, copied by Elisabeth Warrüssin, 1466, Katharinenkloster, Augsburg – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin- Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, MS 78 A 14, fol. 28r). Image taken from HAMBURGER, Jeffrey F. *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*. New York: Zone Books, 1998, p. 461.

<sup>57</sup> See BYNUM, Caroline Walker. *Op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> We find this image with particular clarity in the “ostentatio vulnerum” in the tenth *passus* (Menestò, p. 7) and in the fourteenth (Menestò, p. 8), where we can read: “Et tunc vocavit me et dixit michi quod ponerem os meum in plagam lateris sui”.

Imagem 7



Catherine of Siena sucking the wound of Christ's side (Raymund of Capua, *Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, copied by Elisabeth Warrüssin, 1466, Katharinenkloster, Augsburg –Staatliche Museen zu Berlin– Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, MS 78 A 14, fol. 43v). Image taken from HAMBURGER, Jeffrey F. *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*. New York: Zone Books, 1998, p. 461.

## Conclusions

By way of conclusion, we have to assert that for a better understanding of Angela's relationship with "images", there exists the real necessity to locate her experiences in a wider and deeper context from the *imago* point of view. In the first place, we must follow the latest critical approaches towards Low Medieval devotion, decoding the artistic objects of the 13<sup>th</sup> century *within* the coordinates of the period.

Our comprehension of these objects as physical, mental and conceptual tools or devices (that is, as *images* in the medieval sense) is an essential first step. In Angela's case, it could explain her sensitivity in front of certain objects and the way in which she explains them in the *Memoriale*.



SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

In particular, putting the visual into context provides us with a background enabling us to understand Angela's response to the stained glass window in Assisi. As we have seen, this is a typical case in which Angela's auto-narrative has to be deciphered both symbolically and literally. She builds her own image as the protagonist in the story she is telling and she does it using traditional materials which the contemporary recipients knew very well.

The example that we have analysed here (the ascent to the mountain as a schema of the search for spiritual perfection) is symptomatic: it relates to both the abundant *scalae coeli* of the period and it involves their subversion. Following these models, Angela seems to plan a plot in which she will recount her path to unity with God (or, at least, a sort of spiritual perfection), but in the end she narrates the very opposite: how she finds God at the bottom of the mountain and how she loses him at the summit. In this sense, the stained glass window at the end of the road plays the role of a catalyst, because it represents what she had and what she is losing at the same time, in a sort of anti-mimetic response.

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SALVADOR GONZÁLEZ, José María (org.). *Mirabilia 17 (2013/2)*  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealismo ou realidade da mulher na Idade Média  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealidad o realidad de la mujer en la Edad Media  
*Mulier aut Femina*. Idealism or reality of women in the Middle Ages

Jul-Dez 2013/ISSN 1676-5818

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